

Two-time Indy 500 winner Sato gets better with age

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

The last time I wrote about IndyCar driver Takuma Sato, he had just become the first Asian driver to win the Indy 500, back in 2017. It was only his second career IndyCar victory in eight years, and his career has since taken off. In August of this year, he returned to the winner's circle at an unusual Indy 500, taking his second checkered flag at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in a race delayed three months and held in front of empty stands, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to 2017, Sato had underachieved on the IndyCar circuit, with one victory, 12 top-5 finishes, and 32 top-10 finishes in 118 starts. But in the two seasons since his first Indy 500 win, he's made 34 starts and collected three wins, along with eight finishes in the top 5 and 15 in the top 10. Last season, he established a career high with 200 laps led, more than he'd led in the past five seasons combined.

Some of this improvement came after Sato changed teams. One season after switching to Andretti Autosport in 2017, Sato left Andretti for Rahal Letterman Lanigan (RLL). He'd last raced with RLL in 2012, the same year he almost won his first Indy 500 but crashed trying to overtake Dario Franchitti on the final lap.

Speaking after Sato's recent victory, RLL co-owner Bobby Rahal said that in the 2012 Indy 500, Sato "was doing something with a car that should not have been able to be done." Rahal said that car "was not anywhere near as good as the car we had today," but Sato had made an "unbelievable pass on [Scott] Dixon"



earlier in the race that he later tried to replicate against Franchitti before crashing.

Despite the crash, Rahal called the pass emblematic of Sato's approach to racing. "He's all fight. He's not a guy that's going to give up." Sato's aggressiveness, however, was his Achilles heel in his early career, when he only finished 38 of his first 68 IndyCar races. He had to learn to get his blazing speed under control.

Sato finally seemed to get that control starting in 2017, when he won the Indy 500, but he really started to put it all together when he moved back to RLL. His timing was perfect because RLL was also entering a new phase. That year, Sato became the team's second full-time driver, and RLL brought on new talent in their engineering and marketing departments.

Those moves paid off, as RLL's other driver — Bobby Rahal's son Graham — matched his career high of 12 top-10 finishes in 2018, while Sato won his third IndyCar race and finished third at the Iowa 300. Sato gave the team both of its podium finishes that season and set a career high with eight top-10 finishes.

In 2019, Sato won twice, secured two pole positions, and had four top-5 finishes for the third straight year. He finished in ninth place overall, his second-best finish ever, and notched a win in his third straight season. For his part, Graham Rahal ended 2019 in the circuit's top 10 drivers for the fifth straight year, collecting four top-5 finishes and 11 top-10 finishes.

Everything seemed to be coming together for RLL and Sato. Heading into

DETERMINED DRIVER. Takuma Sato of Japan celebrates after winning the Indianapolis 500 auto race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, on August 23, 2020 in Indianapolis. (AP Photo/Michael Conroy)

2020's coronavirus-delayed Indy 500, Sato had five top-10 finishes in his first seven races. And the Indy 500 showed the patient driver Sato has become, as he allowed Scott Dixon to lead for much of the race, lurking right behind him for his chance to strike.

Sato found his opportunity on lap 157 and zoomed ahead of Dixon to take the lead. The two kept battling for almost 40 more laps, balancing speed with fuel efficiency, with Sato trying to avoid a pit stop before the checkered flag.

And then, on lap 196, RLL teammate Spencer Pigot lost control coming out of Turn 4. His car spun around backwards, scraping the outside wall before spinning violently into the barrier entering pit road.

Debris was scattered across the track, and Pigot needed to be extracted and given medical attention, presenting race officials with a tough choice. They could wave a yellow flag, allowing the race to continue behind a pace car with no passing permitted. This would allow safe cleanup but effectively end the race four laps early.

Or they could order a red flag, which would stop the race completely for a cleanup. This would be followed by a green flag restart and a mad five-lap dash to the finish, allowing almost anyone near the front to win the race. While this seems more competitive, officials rarely call a green flag so late in a race.

And so the officials waved a yellow flag, giving Sato the victory but frustrating Dixon's team, who didn't think Sato had

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Mariota, Winston hope backup stints revive them

By Josh Dubow

The Associated Press

Marcus Mariota and Jameis Winston should be entering the primes of their careers right now.

The top two picks in the 2015 draft were expected to be the faces of the franchise in Tennessee and Tampa Bay, and the star quarterbacks.

Instead they are entering their sixth seasons in the National Football League (NFL) as backups in Las Vegas and New Orleans, with many questioning whether they can ever get back on the track they were expected to take when drafted.

"Can they get back? Of course," said former NFL quarterback and ESPN analyst Dan Orlovsky. "Will they get back is all about, to be honest with you, getting lucky. They have to get on the field. ... Their stories aren't written yet. But they need to continue to stay impatiently patient, meaning they have to keep on their grind and know or hope, fingers crossed, that that opportunity will present itself. And when it does, strike."

Being cast aside by their original team is not usual for quarterbacks (QBs) taken so high in the draft. Of the 27 QBs drafted in the top two before Mariota and Winston since the 1970 merger, 17 began their sixth season in the NFL on the same franchise they had been on for their entire careers, including John Elway and Eli Manning, who were traded during their drafts.

Four of those quarterbacks — Rick Norton, Ryan Leaf, Tim Couch, and JaMarcus Russell — never played again after their fifth seasons.

Mariota and Winston join six others who changed teams, along with players like David Carr, Rick Mirer, and Robert Griffin III, who never became consistent starters in their new homes, and others such as Jeff George and Sam Bradford that bounced around various spots.

The one success story in that group is Jim Plunkett, the No. 1 overall pick by New England in 1971, who revived his career with the Raiders in 1980.

Plunkett was mostly mediocre in his five seasons with the Patriots and found little success in two seasons with San Francisco. Then, after spending the 1979 season as a backup in Oakland, Plunkett regained the starting role midway through the next season — and led the Raiders to two Super Bowl title in four seasons.

Mariota and Winston now want to follow that path.

"I'd say the biggest thing for both of them right now is they can learn playing the position, and learn playing the position at a high level without having the pressure of you have to go win us football games," Orlovsky said. "I've said that for a long time. That is so hard on young quarterbacks: 'Hey man. You've got to not only learn this playbook, but then you have to go execute on the field, and learn the defensive playbook and execute it against what they're doing in three seconds — really well, 65 straight times. And also you have the pressure of winning the football game because if you don't, you're going to get handled in the media and by the fans. That's a lot to sink in.'"

Winston is trying to resurrect his career in New Orleans, where he can learn from one of the game's most respected offensive coaches in Sean Payton. And see firsthand how a proven passer like Drew Brees approaches everything from practice to how he dissects certain coverages.

His tenure in Tampa was up and down, with a three-game suspension in 2018 for allegedly making unwanted sexual advances on an Uber driver and his 30 interceptions last season the low points.

But Winston also threw 33 TD passes and led the league with 5,109 yards passing last season, a sign that talent isn't the issue when it comes to his career.



"You have to be a student of the game," he said earlier this offseason. "So, now I actually get a chance to dive into that more and I actually have a (presumptive) Hall of Fame quarterback that I'm learning from as opposed to trying to learn by myself or use Google."

Mariota lost his starting job last year in Tennessee to a former, discarded first-round pick in Ryan Tannehill. While

Pandemic casts pall over Muharram in Kashmir

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inside an old shrine in downtown Srinagar and wailed in mourning. Black banners, some calligraphed with Islamic slogans, were draped on buildings and hung across streets.

Some residents believe that even if they fall sick, a Muharram mourning will cure them.

A few large outdoor processions still occurred and morphed into protests, with mourners calling for an end to Indian rule.

Government forces fired tear gas in the outskirts of Srinagar to chase away members of a procession who chanted "We want freedom" and "Oppressors, leave our Kashmir."

A day earlier, police charged at least seven people under an anti-terror law for raising anti-India slogans during another religious procession. Officials said at least 200 people were detained in Srinagar for

HOPEFUL FUTURE. Quarterback Marcus Mariota (#8) of the Las Vegas Raiders drops back for a pass during a National Football League training camp practice last month in Henderson, Nevada. (AP Photo/John Locher, Pool)

Winston's problems were being too careless, Mariota might have been too careful.

He was sacked on a league-worst 11%-plus of his dropbacks the past two seasons as he sometimes appeared too hesitant to get rid of the ball.

Now he gets to play behind a quarterback who is one of the fastest to throw in Derek Carr, and learn from an accomplished offensive coach like Jon Gruden.

"He's interesting," Gruden said recently. "He took off a couple times today and it really fired me up. He's been hurt, but looks like the ankle really turned a corner. He's a dazzling playmaker with his feet and that's the key to his game. I saw glimpses of that today, it's exciting."

participating in Muharram processions.

Conditions have worsened in Kashmir since August last year, when New Delhi stripped the region of its statehood and semi-autonomy, setting off widespread anger and economic ruin under a harsh security clampdown.

Amid a communications blockade, authorities disallowed worshippers to pray at some mosques and limited devotees visiting revered shrines for months.

Such restrictions have largely been lifted, but authorities have cited the virus lockdown as a reason for banning this year's general Muharram gatherings.

Hussain, the business executive, said Muharram constantly reminds humanity "not to compromise with tyrants and tyranny."

"It teaches us what Imam Hossein said: no to humiliation," he said.