

INDYCAR

## Auto Pilots

Look for predictable unpredictability in 2017

**AFTER A FIVE-MONTH** off-season the Verizon IndyCar Series is set to hit the road again. This year's 17-race campaign, which rolls off with the Firestone Grand Prix of St. Petersburg on March 12, promises a gridful of old faces in new places. But look for familiar rivalries to continue and new stars to rise. Here's a look at some story lines worth flagging. —Andrew Lawrence



When **Alexander Rossi** came to IndyCar, in 2016, it was a detour on the way to Formula 1, where the 25-year-old Andretti standout is still on retainer as a reserve for the Manor team. But after becoming the first U.S. rookie to win the Indy 500, Rossi is in no hurry to get back to F1. "Over there," he said last May, "it's a lot more politics. Over here, it's fun."

Last year Rossi was one of five rookies on the IndyCar circuit. This season there will be one—**Ed Jones** (*top*), a 21-year-old Dubai-born Brit who won the 2016 Indy Lights title. His reward: a promotion to Dale Coyne Racing, a Honda-powered outfit that prides itself on punching above its curb weight. With four-time champion Sébastien Bourdais for a teammate and canny strategist Coyne calling the shots, Jones could find himself grabbing a few podium finishes in '17.

Six years ago **J.R. Hildebrand** nearly won Indy on his first try before slamming the

wall on the final lap. The road back to the winner's circle has been rough for Hildebrand, 29, who deferred admission to M.I.T. in 2010 and lectured at Stanford after his full-time ride fell through in '16. But after two injury-relief appearances for Ed Carpenter Racing last season, Hildebrand is back in the cockpit and in position to join IndyCar's top tier.

Team Penske, **IndyCar's** überfranchise, does not suffer underachieving pilots long—career records be damned. Just ask Juan Pablo Montoya, a two-time Indy 500 winner and 2015 series champion runner-up who lost his full-time seat to upstart Josef Newgarden after winning just once last season (at St. Pete). The same could happen to Penske stalwart **Hélio Castroneves** (*below*, with team owner Roger Penske), a three-time 500 winner who hasn't claimed a checkered flag since June 2014.



Since IndyCar changed its rules on aerodynamics two years ago, Honda has lagged far behind rival manufacturer Chevrolet, winning just eight races out of 32. In the off-season IndyCar instituted a freeze on aero development to give Honda a chance to close the gap. For the best indicator of progress look no further than **Chip Ganassi Racing** (*below*), which is transitioning from Chevy power to Honda this season. Among the drivers in its stable is four-time series champion Scott Dixon.



It's the end of the road for **KV Racing Technology**. The Indianapolis-based team, a joint operation between Aussie venture capitalist Kevin Kalkhoven and 1996 series champion Jimmy Vasser, pulled out of IndyCar last month. After 14 years on the circuit, KV leaves quite a mark. The peak was Tony Kanaan's victory in the 2013 500. Its legacy is the slew of drivers the team launched to glory—Bourdais, Penske's Will Power and Andretti's Takuma Sato. "Unfortunately, that's racing," said Kanaan. "It's everybody's reality. From the bottom of my heart, I didn't want to see it go." □