

INDYCAR: Carpenter Riding High, Looking Ahead After Fontana Win

After scoring a popular win last weekend at Fontana, Ed Carpenter tells SPEED.com he's basking in the victory while looking ahead at how to improve in 2013.

Marshall Pruett | Posted September 19, 2012



With the 2012 IZOD IndyCar Series championship on the line, the winner of Saturday night's MAVTV 500 at Auto Club Speedway was always going to take a backseat to the title celebrations, but that shouldn't diminish the accomplishment of Ed Carpenter and his first-year team.

Carpenter's new Ed Carpenter Racing outfit made its debut at St. Petersburg with Derrick Walker helping to oversee a trusty group of top-tier IndyCar veterans like general manager Tim Broyles, engineer Matt Barnes, driver coach Lee Bentham and a collection of talented mechanics, but the team saved its best for the 500 miler last weekend.

Looking like a genuine threat to win from the first lap, Carpenter crossed the line ahead of Target Chip Ganassi Racing's Dario Franchitti to finish in front of the Scot for the second consecutive season-ending race, but says it took a few minutes after leaping out of his Fuzzy's Vodka Chevy to realize he was also the winning team owner.

"To be honest, I didn't even really think about the owner-driver element of it until somebody mentioned it to me after the race," Carpenter told SPEED.com. "I really want to be on the racetrack; I really don't think of myself as an owner. I just try to continue to do my same routine—you're always trying to better yourself and do things to get better but, I'm really there as a driver. I try to keep the owner stuff to the weekdays when we're not at the racetrack and I hadn't thought of it that way."

With Walker in Virginia for an ALMS race, Carpenter relied on his stepfather, Tony George, and Broyles to look after ECR while he concentrated on finding Victory Lane.

"I was really focused when we got out front, just not making any mistakes," he said. "That's usually the key to 500 mile races that I've been a part of it is executing and not making mistakes, and usually people that do that come out on top. That was the big thing going into the night; we just wanted to have a solid execution all night and we knew we had a good car."

Carpenter's prowess on ovals has never been questioned, and after his second career victory following the win at Kentucky he claimed for Sarah Fisher Racing, the well-liked Hoosier said he was met with plenty of congratulations from his fellow drivers...for the most part.

"Yeah, definitely...I haven't talked to a lot of guys but Justin [Wilson] and Dario both tweeted me last night – obviously I talked to Dario and Scott [Dixon] in victory lane, although I remember Dario being a little bit more happy for me last year in Kentucky I think," he said with a laugh.

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"After this one he was a little less happy for me and a little more disappointed. But, like I said before, I love racing with Dario in those situations because that's one you don't have to get nervous that he's going to do something to take either one of you out, you can just race hard and clean. I also talked to Ryan [Hunter-Reay] last night, we were congratulating each other."

Fontana confirmed ECR's capabilities on ovals, and despite a few missteps on road and street courses this season, Carpenter believes he's progressed enough in 2012 to have earned the respect of the road racers in the IndyCar Series.

"There was a time a long time ago when I wasn't sure if I was respected or not but I've even heard from a couple guys this year that gave me compliments on the progress I've made on road and street courses," he said. "That's one thing that's hard to keep focus on at times. But when I first started it I was further off the pace than I was this year and the quality of road racing in our series right now is pretty high, I believe, compared to when I first started."

"I think I've gotten better, it's just that the competition is that much better as well. Obviously, I've got a lot of work to do but I don't worry about not being respected by the guys I race against. I've been doing it long enough that I don't question that."

Carpenter credited Bentham, the 1998 Toyota Atlantic champion, for advancing his road racing knowledge and technique in their first season of working together.

"He was obviously a big help," he said. "I've never shied away from getting help on road and street courses. [Bryan] Herta and I worked together one year but Lee really helped and had a good system of coaching. Derrick [Walker] also, has helped me in a lot of ways this year. And as far as that, I think it was kind of he stepped in, in a tough situation and really kind of took more responsibility after we had our crash in May. And it took us a little while to really get comfortable and really understand one another."

"But we had a good progression all year and I felt like after the test we did in Sonoma that from then on we were really in sync. It showed an improvement at Sonoma. And then obviously at Baltimore we had a much better weekend."

Carpenter started the season with Michael Cannon as his race engineer, but the veteran had to step away after the Indy 500 due to seek treatment for health issues that have since been resolved. Carpenter says Barnes blossomed after being given the chance to take over ECR's engineering program.

So it's always fun seeing a young guy like Matt [Barnes] get the chance," he remarked. "Sometimes you get these young engineers and they've worked as assistants for so long and they've got so much drive and desire to be a race engineer it's amazing what they can do."

Looking ahead, Carpenter has a few goals for 2013, including another 500-mile race that's dear to his family, bettering ECR's place in the championship standing and possibly adding a teammate to the fold.

"I think the key thing is just improving," he said. "Obviously, it's hard to win in this series yet we won this year. So, obviously, winning is always going to be a goal and winning the Indy 500 is going to be a goal. But we just think that if we really improved a little bit more all-around and become more consistent we probably could've had some more podiums on ovals this year. There were times where I wasn't as good as I needed to be and there were times that we made other mistakes as a unit."

"We seemed to get better all-around and the mistakes that I made at Baltimore need to go away and hopefully we'll find our way into becoming a 'top 10 in the championship' kind of team. I think that's really the next step is being a little stronger in points, not just oval championships. And, if possible, being able to grow the team as well."

*Marshall Pruett is **SPEED.com's Auto Racing Editor**, and covers the IndyCar Series. Before joining SPEED, Pruett worked in open-wheel racing for 20 years as a mechanic and engineer. He also contributes to **RACER**, **Road & Track** and **Racecar Engineering**.*