

# The Day an Indy Car Won an Off-Road Race



*The 1914 "Cactus Derby"*

BY MARK DILL

On May 30, 1914 America's esteem took a beating. National pride figured heavily when automobiles from the major car producing countries of France, Italy, Germany, Britain and the United States competed on the international stage. The Indianapolis 500 that day was humbling for America. With only eleven of the thirty starters, European machines took six of the first seven finishing positions, with Frenchman Rene Thomas in a French Delage winning.

The sole bright spot for the United States was the fifth-place finish of Indianapolis-based Stutz Motor Car Company entry in the hands of legendary driver Barney Oldfield. Founded by Harry C. Stutz in 1912, the company's factory, located at Capitol Avenue and 10th Street, operates today as the Stutz Business Center, leasing space for small and mid-sized companies.

Oldfield struggled with his white and red #3 Stutz racer in qualifying, starting last. His fortunes on race day improved considerably as he drove the 434 cubic inch engine racer steadily forward, although several laps off the pace at the finish.

The race was one of two appearances in the Indianapolis 500 for Oldfield, the other coming in 1916, where he finished fifth again. Always a controversial figure, Barney was banned several times by the sport's governing body, the American Automobile Association (AAA), for staging unauthorized exhibition contests as he barnstormed county fair horse tracks across the country. In one series dubbed, "The Championship of the Universe," he staged "races" against a bi-plane flown by pioneer aviator Lincoln Beachey.

Indisputably the most famous American driver of his day, Oldfield was more about promotion than sport. His barnstorming tours popularized him with grassroots America, and in 1909 he became the first celebrity to endorse Pepsi. His picture, coupled with the

slogan, "A bully drink...refreshing, invigorating, a fine bracer before a race," splashed across newspapers around the country.

## *On to the Cactus Derby*

Like many racing historians today, Oldfield's critics viewed him as less a racer and more a showman. But in 1914 Oldfield resurged.

Established as a legitimate talent on mile dirt ovals, that year he demonstrated prowess in road racing, scoring second-place finishes in the Vanderbilt Cup and at the Corona, California prize, both 300-mile events. At age 36, he had been in the game longer than anyone, and some writers called him "the grand old man."

As the year drew to a close, Oldfield saw one more opportunity to silence his critics. He decided to do what was unthinkable even in those days, enter his Indianapolis racer in the biggest off-road race of the day, the seventh running of the Los Angeles to Phoenix Desert Classic. It was a 671-mile grind through desert sands and mountainous countryside.

Conventional wisdom suggested that only reinforced stock cars had the sturdiness to survive the potholes, boulders and river beds the course presented. The experts felt the Stutz was better suited to smooth surfaces like the state-of-the-art brick track at Indy and would collapse before the end of the first leg of this backbreaking, machine-busting gauntlet nicknamed "The Cactus Derby."

## *A Stellar Gathering*

The field of twenty cars assembled for the seventh running of the Cactus Derby was the strongest in the race's brief history. Not only was it the largest field to date, but also promotion around

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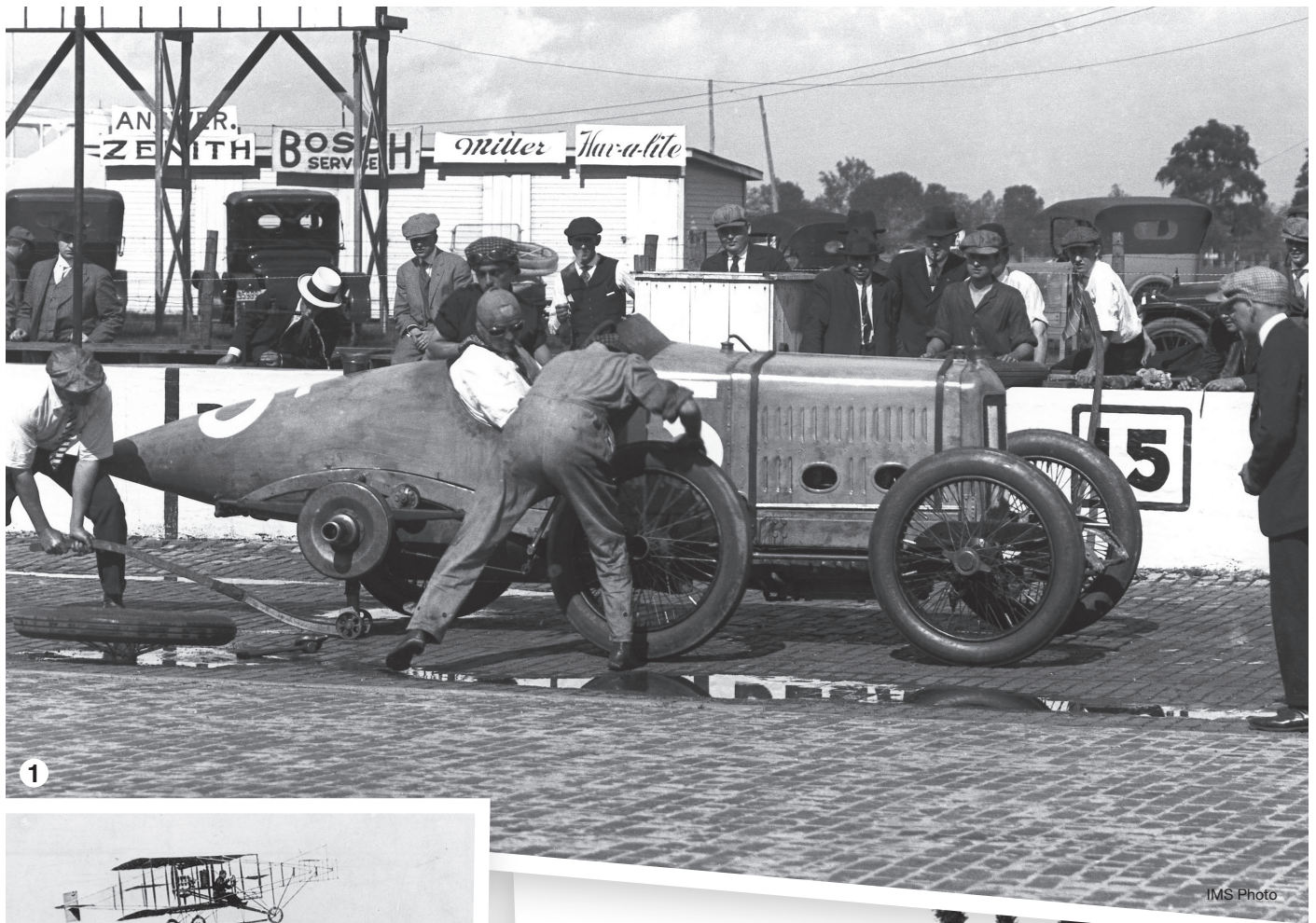


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BARNEY  
OLDFIELD

*Covered in mud at the conclusion of the Cactus Derby.*





IMS Photo



1—Despite the fact that Barney Oldfield was arguably the most famous race car driver of his day, he only participated in two Indianapolis 500s: 1914 where he raced the same Stutz with which he would later win the Cactus Derby and 1916 (*shown above making a pit stop*), where he finished fifth in a Delage.

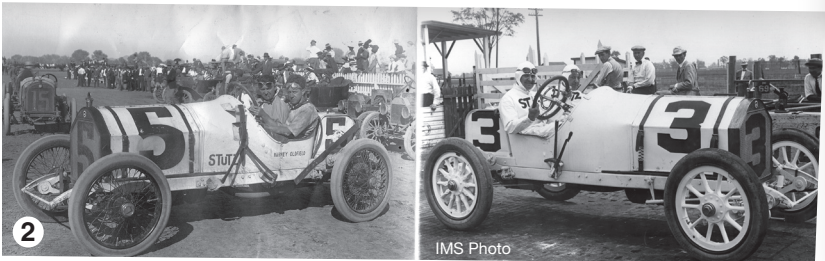
2—Always the showman, Oldfield often staged races pitting two of the era’s technological achievements

against each other: the airplane and the automobile. These unsanctioned races against pilot Lincoln Beachey were a bone of contention between Oldfield and the AAA, the official governing body of auto racing in the United States.

3—Oldfield roars through the desert in 1914. His Indy car was clearly faster than the competition but it encountered its fair share of troubles.

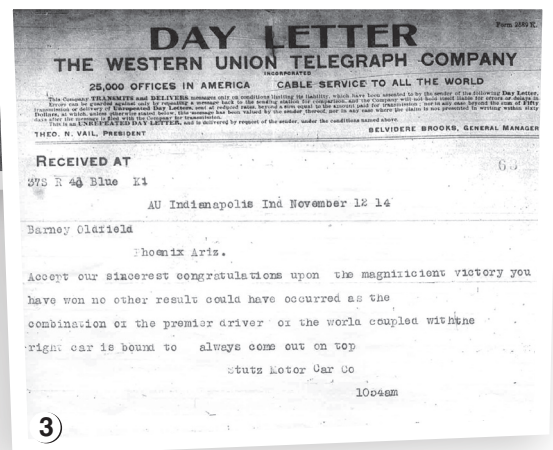


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1—Oldfield and Hill stranded in the wet sand of the New River just outside of Phoenix. The help of a mule team got the pair out and on their way quickly enough to maintain the lead they had built up.

2—A comparison of Oldfield’s car in the “Cactus Derby” (left) and as it ran at Indianapolis (right).

3—A telegram sent by the Stutz Motor Company, congratulating Oldfield on the victory.

the event attracted the top road racers of the West, plus Louis Chevrolet and Cliff Durant. Both Chevrolet and Durant would later compete in the Indianapolis 500. Durant was the millionaire son of William Durant, the business executive who established General Motors. Chevrolet and Durant were entered in Chevrolet stock cars.

Among the top off-road racers was Louis Nikrent, who won the event in 1909 in a Buick. In 1914 he was back in a Paige automobile, the company eager to promote their new six-cylinder engine model. Defending champion Olin Davis drove the big Simplex “90” described as towering over the other cars like a battleship over tugboats.

### *To Needles, California*

The race started on Valley Boulevard at Eastlake Park in Los Angeles at 5:30 a.m. in drizzling rain. Organized by the Western Automobile Association, the racers were sent on their way by

[ Ten ]

starter George Adair in two-minute intervals. Despite the fact that the early hour was as dark as night, over three thousand people crowded around the starting line on the Pacific Electric bridge. Police frantically tried to keep people on the curb, but it was hopeless. For over one thousand yards they lined the road with barely a car width’s opening, providing a harrowing experience for the drivers. Oldfield, with riding mechanic George Hill – who drove in the 1915 Indianapolis 500 – started fifth in car number five.

The 671-mile race was divided into three legs. Los Angeles to Needles, California was 301 miles. Needles to Prescott, Arizona was 236 miles, and the final leg, Prescott to Phoenix, was 134 miles.

The perils of racing beyond the confines of a speedway were evident in the first four miles when driver J.F. Pink struck a telegraph pole wire and suffered lacerations across his legs. He was taken to a hospital and his riding mechanic, Tom Eley continued on in the #18 Thomas entry.

Driving conditions were treacherous as a steady rain reduced the charted course to mud. On the way to Needles, the drivers had checkpoints in San Bernardino, Victorville and Barstow. They didn't get a break from rain until they were twenty miles outside of Barstow or 150 miles into the race.

The story of the first leg was the seesaw battle between Oldfield's Stutz and the Chevrolet of Durant. Oldfield's Indy car was faster, but Durant gained almost six minutes in Barstow when he stopped only to register with officials, while Barney took on fuel and oil. The Stutz would not surge into the lead again for another eighty miles.

Interest in the event was pervasive throughout the region. The course was charted along the route of a railroad, and sixty-eight wealthy Los Angeles businessmen commissioned a train called "The Howdy Special" to follow the race. Dressed in what they called "Yama-Yama" costumes of red and black, the men were like current day football fanatics showing up painted in their team's colors.

Train stations along the course were gathering points for thousands of fans that not only awaited a glimpse of the cars, but also received regular updates through telegraph reports from other points along the course. Just north of Victorville the Howdy Special nearly became an incident in the race. It was at this point the railroad tracks intersected the race course, and the Schnack brothers in the only Ford in the race, were determined not to be delayed by the approaching eight-coach car train. Schnack gunned the Ford in an effort to beat the locomotive, narrowly averting disaster by a mere twenty feet.

With the racers forty miles out of Needles, town machine shop whistles blew, signifying that the rest of the day was a holiday. Children were released from school, and everyone flocked to the edge of the road, which was roped off for the occasion. Oldfield covered the distance in eight hours and forty-six minutes with Durant five minutes behind. Always the showman, cigar-chomping Barney had bet all takers he would beat the Howdy Special into town. Upon their arrival he was there to greet them despite the train's one hour head start.

### Needles to Prescott

Only fourteen cars lined up for the start of the race's second leg at 5:30 a.m. Tuesday, November 10. Rain persisted and the drivers faced sleet in higher elevations. The strain of the grind was evident as the leaders struggled.

Defending champion Olin Davis suffered a set back when the oil tank on the monstrous Simplex vibrated off the car and tumbled down a ravine. His riding mechanic was able to rig up a hand pump and hose from a five-gallon oil can and held it in his lap while he pumped the oil into the engine.

Louis Nikrent lost time when a rock bent the steering knuckle of his Paige, and both Chevrolet cars encountered trouble. At the California-Arizona border, the drivers were told to use a railroad bridge to cross the Colorado River. Wood planks were laid across the railroad ties, but Durant missed one side and violently bounced his way across, destroying a wheel. In the meantime, teammate Louis Chevrolet had stopped in the town of Seligman for supplies. An exuberant spectator jumped into action, mistakenly dumping ten gallons of water into the Chevy's gas tank. Durant appeared

a short time later and the Chevrolet team decided to take one of the wheels off Louis' car to replace the damaged one on Durant's racer. Louis then joined Durant in the car, leaving their riding mechanics to deal with the other machine.

Oldfield had his share of problems too. At a spot called Gold Hill he stalled when he found his car improperly geared for a steep incline. A group of people came to his aid, pushing the Stutz to get it started. Oldfield stormed into Prescott at 1:50 p.m. with an elapsed time advantage of forty-nine minutes over second place Davis in the Simplex.

### The Finish

Oldfield and Davis ran close together on the course for the first thirty-four miles of the chase into Phoenix, until the Simplex slipped into a ditch and broke its drive train. Oldfield pressed on, enduring a hailstorm on a 7,000-foot mountain pass.

He remained unchallenged until he was within twenty miles of the finish at the New River, which was normally a dry riverbed. The unusually heavy rains flooded it, and Oldfield and Hill studied it to find a shallow passage. On a prayer, they plunged in. The Stutz was lower slung than the other cars and its flywheel sunk in the wet sand, stalling the engine halfway across. They struggled to push the Stutz and watched helplessly as first Nikrent in the Paige and then a Cadillac driven by Bill Bramlett shot effortlessly across.

Good fortune appeared in the form of a mule team, which Oldfield immediately hailed for assistance. Strapping the animals to the Indy car, their owner drove them and the machine out of the river. They had lost over fifteen minutes of their forty-nine minute lead. The engine fired, and they stormed off toward the Phoenix fairgrounds.

Thousands of fans and automobiles lined the roads for several miles outside Phoenix. The Howdy Special was parked on rails near the finish. Nikrent was first across the line, his Paige so coated with mud no one could see the number and many in the crowd assumed it was Oldfield. Bramlett in the Cadillac was next in an amazing finish. After crossing the New River he had crashed into a wooden fence, destroying his steering linkage. He and his mechanic roped long pieces of the wood to the front axle and then rubbed them against the wheels to steer. The car crept home fifth on elapsed time.

Oldfield drove at top speed in the final miles, losing control at one point and clipping a telegraph pole. The Stutz did a partial spin, but the veteran driver kept it running. He completed the run with an elapsed time of twenty-two hours and fifty-nine seconds for an average speed of 29.1 mph. Nikrent was second, thirty-five minutes behind. Only eight cars finished the race. A band from the Howdy Special greeted them and thousands of people cheered as factory whistles squealed in the background.

Oldfield, encrusted in mud, still clinched his teeth around his now unrecognizable trademark cigar, which was later auctioned to the "Howdies" by newspaperman Connie Miles. The cash award for his effort was a modest – even for 1914 – \$2,750. More important to the master showman was the inscription that came with a gold and diamond medal for his victory. It read, "Master Driver of the World," awarded to the man who won an off-road race in an Indy car. ■



### VICTORY MEDAL

*For his victory in the "Cactus Derby," Oldfield received this medal. The inscription on the back reads "Master Driver of the World."*