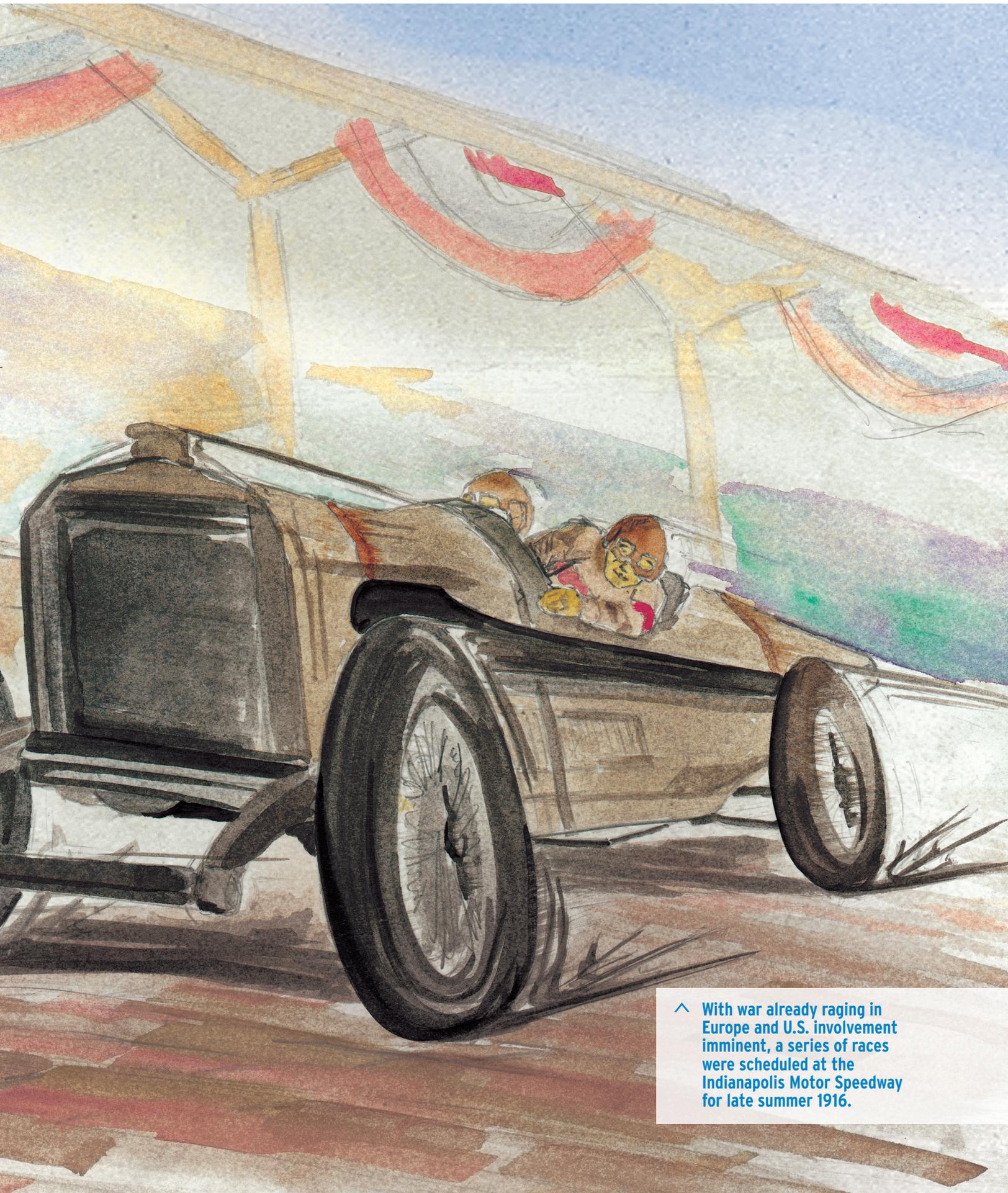


A F O R G O T T E N
CLASSIC

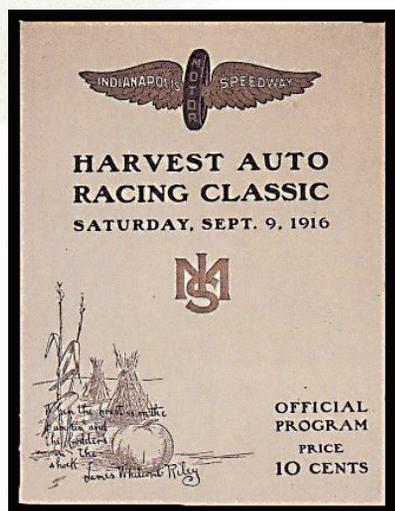
The Allstate 400 at the Brickyard instantly became one of the premier events in motorsports when it was introduced in 1994. But long before NASCAR arrived at the Speedway, even long before NASCAR was founded, the Brickyard hosted another major event other than the Indy 500. Named the Harvest Auto Racing Classic, it wrote an obscure chapter in Speedway history 90 years ago in September 1916.

by **Mark Dill**
illustrations by **Gregory R. Beall**





^ With war already raging in Europe and U.S. involvement imminent, a series of races were scheduled at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for late summer 1916.



Originally, 20 cars were entered for the Harvest Classic, but the attrition at Cincinnati took its toll and by race day the field had dwindled to 14. News reports throughout the week speculated on the participation of Ralph DePalma, every bit the superstar Tony Stewart or Dale Earnhardt Jr. is today. DePalma's Mercedes blew an engine while battling Dario Resta for the lead on the board track a few days earlier in Ohio and was not repaired in time to compete in the Indy Harvest Classic.

DePalma, winner of the 1915 Indy 500, had been the subject of much controversy in May when he held out for appearance money to drive in the Memorial Day Classic. Carl Fisher refused, and DePalma did not run in the May race. All was forgiven by September, and an agreement was reached for the great

driver to race one of the Speedway's Peugeots. Dario Resta, who in May won the only Indy "500" scheduled for less than 500 miles, had blown an engine in Cincinnati and elected not to enter the Harvest Classic.

Despite a sunny, postcard-quality day, crowds at the Speedway were disappointing, with little more than 10,000 people in attendance. With the Indiana State Fair closing just the day before, speculation was that the city didn't have enough energy for another event. Weak ticket sales in the days leading up to the races worried management. On Friday, track General Manager T. E. "Pop" Myers announced that he had pushed back the starting time of the event from the previously advertised 1:30 to 2pm in hopes of attracting working people to leave their jobs early and travel to the Speedway. The Speedway had also announced a silver trophy competition for 21 music bands to round out the event's appeal. But those efforts failed to yield the desired results and much of the city missed a terrific show.

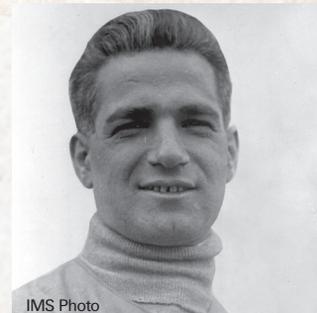
< **The 1916 Harvest Auto Racing Classic consisted of three races of various lengths, all held on the same day.**

In many ways, 1916 was one of the strangest years in Indianapolis Motor Speedway history. Management decided to shorten the Indianapolis 500 to a 300-mile event. War raged in Europe, sharply reducing competition from overseas and casting a shadow on the future of racing at the giant Indiana facility. The Speedway's visionary founder, Carl Fisher, foresaw America's inevitable entry into World War I and shared his views at the annual meeting of the track's investors and management in June of that year. He knew the conflict would force a moratorium on racing at the track and proposed a second event for the year, the "Harvest Classic" in September. Fisher's goal was to generate enough profits to keep the business afloat until the war subsided and things could get back to normal.

Saturday, September 9 was selected for a card of three races, at distances of 20, 50 and 100 miles. The cash purses were \$1,000, \$2,000 and \$5,000, respectively. The race was just a few short days after a 300-mile spectacular in Cincinnati, the home of a new board track.

Board tracks became popular at that time because they were fast and could be assembled at relatively little cost. Taking place on Monday, September 4, the race was the inaugural event for Ohio's short-lived track of wood, attracting 29 entries pursuing a \$30,000 purse. Almost 50,000 spectators watched seven cars finish a tough race won by Johnny Aitken in a Peugeot owned by the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

DePalma (right) skipped the 1916 Indy "500" but was ready to run in the September races. Dario Resta (below), however, was the opposite. Having won the Indy "500" in May, Resta had engine troubles and had to skip the Harvest Classic.



IMS Photo



IMS Photo

The 20-Mile Race

Ten cars started the first event, set at eight laps or 20 miles. The two shorter races used a rolling start instead of a pace lap. Drivers were instructed to start their cars and hold alignment in two rows of four with two more trailing for 50 yards until they passed under a narrow suspension bridge over the track where starter Charlie Sedwick cast his signals.

The front row consisted of Louis Chevrolet in a British Sunbeam, Harry McNey in an Ostewig, Art Johnson in a Duesenberg and Aitken in his Peugeot. Aitken rocketed to the front in the first mile, but the race was far from a cakewalk for the Indianapolis native. Howdy Wilcox, who would win the Indy 500 in 1919, was handicapped by starting at the back of the field and had to work his way through traffic. He drew steadily closer to Aitken, and by lap four was on his tail. Wilcox never made the pass, but the two finished nose-to-tail only 33 hundredths of a second apart, averaging just over 95 mph.

The 50-Mile Race

The 50-mile race was even more competitive, despite another short field of only nine cars. Wilcox gunned into the lead and held it for the initial 10 miles. Tire problems forced him to pit, allowing Aitken to again lead the field, but he was pressured once again. Englishman Hughie Hughes in a Hoskins Special pushed Aitken, and even took the lead briefly on Lap 15.

The two racers diced relentlessly, running wheel-to-wheel into the final lap. The Speedway's electric timing device recorded Aitken's margin of victory at 28 hundredths of a second for a speed average of nearly 92 mph.

The 100-Mile Race

The last event of the day was an American Automobile Association (AAA) National Championship race and produced the largest starting field of the day, 14 drivers. Among the entries that sat out the first two events was the Maxwell team of Eddie Rickenbacker and George (Pete) Henderson as well as Tommy

Milton in a Duesenberg. This race marked the first time Milton was entered to drive a race at the Speedway. He would later become the first two-time winner of the Indianapolis 500. Rickenbacker had a big future too: He purchased the Speedway in 1927 and managed it until selling to Tony Hulman in 1945.

As in the other two events, starting order for the 100-miler was relegated to luck of the draw. Duesenberg driver George Buzane started from the pole, leading the field and following Fisher in his Premier Model 6-56 pace car. No surprise that Aitken, known in the day as "Happy Johnny," was the man to beat. He took an early lead, but Rickenbacker's Maxwell was fast and hung close.

The race was characterized by two great battles. While Aitken and Rickenbacker fought for the lead, Hughie Hughes and Wilbur D'Alene in a Duesenberg disputed third. Aitken held a slight edge, but never more than 100 feet. Rickenbacker, whose fans called "Rick," surged in front on Lap 24 of the 40-lap contest, only to see Aitken slip by again the next lap. Rickenbacker stormed in front once more on Lap 33, but Aitken was back on top the next circuit. With only four laps remaining, a steering arm to Aitken's right wheel snapped, rendering the car unstable. He slowed markedly and Rickenbacker shot his Maxwell into first place.

There was no shortage of drama packed into those 100 miles. The Maxwell crew noticed Rickenbacker's right rear wheel wobbling and tried to warn him with gestures from the pits. So close to victory, the daring driver decided to take the risk and pushed on. Coming out of the northwest turn with just five miles to go, Rickenbacker's right rear wheel buckled and the Maxwell's axle scraped the bricks and twisted the car backward, destroying the other rear wheel before sliding into the wall. He narrowly escaped being hit broadside by D'Alene and Hughes. Passing the stricken Maxwell, Hughes shot by D'Alene to roar into second place.

Walking with riding mechanic Pete Henderson back to the pits, Rickenbacker's bravery was rewarded with cheers. Equally daring, Aitken, who had noticed Rickenbacker's wobbly wheel, also saw opportunity. He stayed on the track



^ A rare newspaper photo from the Harvest Classic shows Johnny Aitken pouring water on his tires, a common practice for the time.

with only one of his front wheels connected to a steering rod. When his rival failed, he still had to nurse his Peugeot through the final five miles. He held on to sweep the day, lowering his average speed to 89 mph, but winning by 19 seconds over Hughes.

Hughes, like Aitken, was one of the few drivers to finish in the money in all three races. Prize money was distributed to only four drivers in the 20-miler, to five more in the 50-mile contest and seven in the AAA Championship race. For all the pre-race drama, Ralph DePalma failed to pick up any money.

For "Happy Johnny," the sweep netted him \$4,600. The 20-mile event paid \$400 with \$700 for first in the 50-miler and \$3,500 in the championship race. Combined with the \$12,000 he was awarded for winning in Cincinnati the previous Monday, he picked up \$16,600 for winning four straight races against stiff competition in a single week.

The victories were also Aitken's last appearance at the Speedway. He died in the influenza epidemic of 1918 before racing resumed the following year.

Ironically, Johnny Aitken's name is probably as obscure in Speedway history as the Harvest Classic races he won. Although he only raced in two Indy 500s, in 1911 and 1916, he ranks among the most successful competitors ever to appear at the track. He managed the winning Indianapolis 500 teams of 1912 and 1913 and won the pole for the Indy 500 in 1916. What's more, it is Johnny Aitken, not Jeff Gordon or A. J. Foyt, who has more wins at the track than any other driver. His Harvest Classic victories, combined with his 12 wins in four Speedway race meets in 1909 and 1910, give him a grand total of 15 race victories as a driver at the most storied track in the world. ■



< **The last lap duel between Hughie Hughes (left) and Aitken (right) in the 50-mile race produced one of the closest finishes in the history of the Speedway. A mere 28 hundredths of a second separated the two as they passed under the suspension bridge and saw the checkered flag.**





closer look //

WINNING AT THE BRICKYARD

Perhaps an apples-to-oranges comparison, but from a statistical standpoint it's interesting to note that neither Jeff Gordon, Michael Schumacher nor the 4-time Indianapolis 500 winners can claim the title of winningest driver at the Speedway.

That title goes to Johnny Aitken. Aitken racked up 12 race wins in the 1909 and 1910 races run BEFORE the first Indianapolis 500 in 1911. He grabbed three more in the 1916 Harvest Classic. True, no one would rank these wins on the same level as the four Indianapolis 500 wins that A.J. Foyt, Al Unser and Rick Mears claim since Aitken's wins were all in shorter 'sprint' races and not the grueling 500-mile contest, but none-the-less, it is still quite an accomplishment. ■

WINS	DRIVER	YEARS	EVENTS
15	Johnny Aitken	1909, 1910, 1916	various events
8	Ray Harroun	1909, 1910, 1911	various events, 1911 Indy 500
6	Louis Chevrolet Eddie Hearne Joe Dawson	1909, 1910 1909, 1910 1909, 1910, 1912	various events various events various events, 1912 Indy 500
5	Arthur Greiner Howdy Wilcox Michael Schumacher	1909, 1910 1909, 1910, 1919 2000, 2003-2006	various events various events, 1919 Indy 500 United States Grand Prix
4	Barney Oldfield A.J. Foyt Al Unser Rick Mears Jeff Gordon	1909, 1910 1961, 1964, 1967, 1977 1970, 1971, 1978, 1987 1979, 1984, 1988, 1991 1994, 1998, 2001, 2004	various events Indy 500 Indy 500 Indy 500 Allstate 400 at the Brickyard

Inaugural Indianapolis 500 winner Ray Harroun has more than just that one win on his Indianapolis Motor Speedway résumé.



IMS Photo