

1937

A finish for the ages...
for 45 years, the Indy
500's closest finish.

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SHAW AT FINISH OF RACE.



ON A BLAZING hot day, the Indianapolis 500 came down to which of two drivers could carry the most momentum off Turn 4 on the 200th lap. With two powerful Indy cars in nearly a dead heat, the hundreds of thousands of people present knew history was being written before their eyes. Does this sound like the finish of last year's 90th running of the Indy 500? Of course it does. But this is a tale of the 1937 Indy 500, the race that remained the closest finish for 45 years.

So much of the greatness of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing" is its history, and that feeling had firmly taken root by 1937 when the Speedway celebrated the 25th running of the Indianapolis 500. On hand were Ray Harroun and Joe Dawson, the first two winners of the classic contest, reunited with their victorious machines. Harroun drove his legendary Marmon Wasp and Dawson his dark blue National in pre-race festivities.

"The track is about 10 mph faster than in 1912," said Dawson. He noted the asphalt

paving in the corners that began to conceal the brick surface in 1936 and how smooth it felt under his wheels compared to his jarring ride of 1912.

As if to prove Dawson's point, Jimmy Snyder, called "The Flying Milkman" from his Chicago milk truck driving days, busted the 130mph barrier in qualifying. The 28-year-old scorched the bricks and patchy asphalt for a one-lap track record of 130.492 mph during his 10-lap

qualification run. In all, 11 drivers eclipsed Rex Mays' 1936 pole-winning speed of 119.644 mph.

The speeds dispelled the notion that a change from a special fuel blend to pump gasoline would slow the cars. Since 1934, the racers had used the fuel blend, the amount was limited. The 1936 limit was 37.5 gallons, forcing some to retire from the race because they ran out. There would be no fuel limitation in 1937.

Time trials produced controversy off the track. Joel Thorne, a young millionaire sportsman, found himself an alternate starter for the race and decided to buy Cliff Bergere's Midwest Red Lion Special and withdraw it. Speedway officials refused, and Bergere, a 40-year-old former Hollywood stunt man, went on to finish fifth. Thorne eventually drove in four Indy 500s, with a fifth-place finish in 1940. He owned the winning car in 1946.

Millionaire Thorne's attempt to manipulate qualifying results was evidence that the Indy 500 was already more than racing's biggest payday. Fame, prestige, or even a sense of immortality was part of the bargain. The pressure to perform in the final round of qualifying on Saturday, May 29, may have contributed to two deadly accidents in practice Friday afternoon, involving the cars of drivers Frank McGurk and Overton Phillips.

Three men were killed: McGurk's riding mechanic, Albert Opalka, Champion Spark Plug Company Vice President Otto Rohde and George Warford, a track worker. Rohde was also a founder of the Champion 100 mile-per-hour club for drivers averaging that speed for an entire "500."

In those days before an inside wall bordered the pits and track, Phillips' unimpeded flaming racer skidded wildly into the pit area and struck Rohde, Warford and three other men. The injured men pleaded their case to City Hospital doctors to be allowed to listen to the radio broadcast when Race Day dawned on Monday, May 31.

With a temperature of 75 degrees at 6 a.m., a record crowd of 170,000 people jammed into the Speedway and braced for a



sweltering day. The cloudless sky revealed a blazing sun that pushed thermometers to 92 degrees before the 500 miles were run. On the parade lap, the glaring rays bounced off the 33 starters to present a dazzling spectacle. No machines glowed more brilliantly than the silver, cream and copper colors of front-row starters “Wild” Bill Cummings, Wilbur Shaw and Herb Ardinger.

Buried deep in the seventh row was track-record holder Jimmy Snyder in his blue-and-white Sparks engine machine, one of Joel Thorne’s entries. Snyder, who lost his opportunity to sit on the pole by not qualifying on the first day of time trials, began a relentless surge through the field. At the front, Ardinger grabbed the lead but could only hold on for four laps before Snyder, in a breathtaking display of speed, seized first place.

Snyder’s breakneck pace was more than the transmission of Joel Thorne’s machine could stand. His shooting star lasted a scant 67 miles, a spectacular effort that fell far short of a spot on the Borg-Warner Trophy. Ardinger led for two laps before succumbing to the advance of Wilbur Shaw, who held the top spot for the subsequent 125 miles.

Despite the heat, speed records tumbled,

and in the end, only one would survive – the 200-mile mark Shaw set in the same car the previous year. The new speed records were impressive given numerous stops for tires and relief drivers. Jimmy Snyder returned to the fray at 175 miles, spotting Herb Ardinger. It did not last long. On Lap 105, a broken steering arm sent him spinning in the southwest turn, grazing the wall. Snyder returned yet again at 300 miles, relieving Tony Gulotta in the Burd Piston Ring entry.

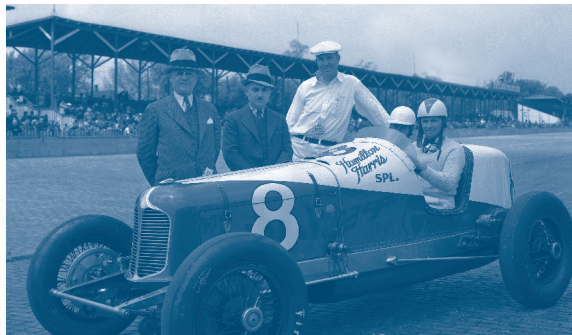
There would be no relief for Wilbur Shaw, who hung gamely to the lead until his three-minute, nine-second stop for tires and fuel on Lap 74. Ralph Hepburn, the 40-year-old veteran of 10 “500’s”, took the top spot, but Shaw returned to the track and charged back to the front within 10 laps.

By Lap 108, Hepburn pitted for relief, and California rookie Bob Swanson jumped

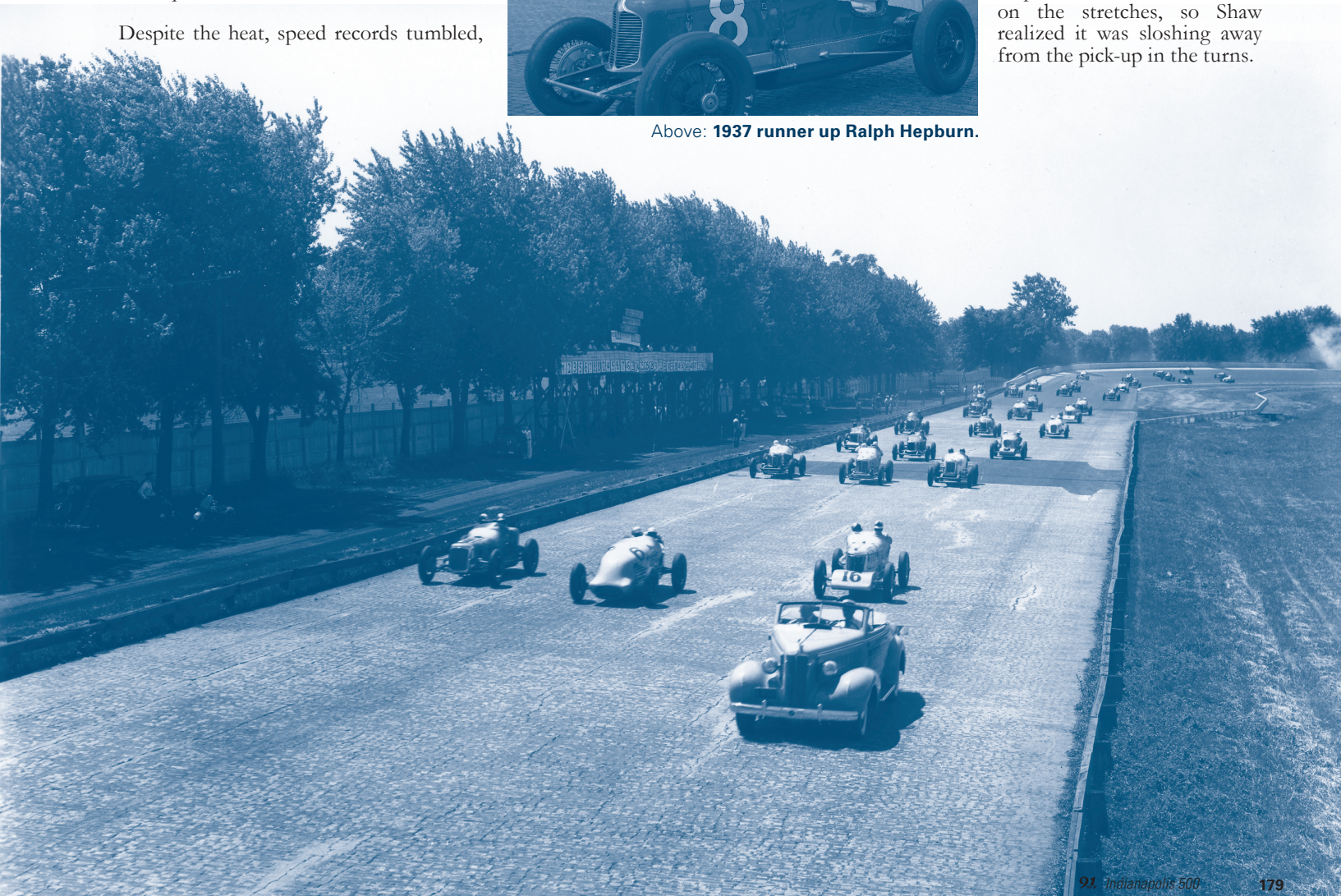
into the seat of the Hamilton-Harris Offy, the same car Louis Meyer had driven to victory in 1936. Swanson drove like a veteran and assumed the lead when Shaw made his second and final pit stop on Lap 130. Shaw and his 45-year-old riding mechanic Jigger Johnson furiously gulped water as their crew doused them with another bucket full while fueling the Shaw-Gilmore special in two minutes, 40 seconds.

Two laps down, Shaw carved off chunks of Swanson’s lead. Hepburn, who had been taken to the infield hospital, left the building and scaled its wall to find a perch on the roof to watch the 24-year-old rookie and defending national midget champion try to stave off Shaw. Swanson led for 33 circuits but was forced to pit for fuel and tires on Lap 163. Hepburn was there, ready to take over the wheel. He returned to the race more than two minutes behind Shaw, who clearly had the faster car.

Inside Shaw’s cockpit, the drama had begun. He noticed his oil pressure gauge drop to zero in the middle of Turn 3. The car had been leaking oil profusely; in fact, his socks were soaked in his shoes. The oil pressure returned to normal on the stretches, so Shaw realized it was sloshing away from the pick-up in the turns.



Above: 1937 runner up Ralph Hepburn.



Shaw knew the car well – he designed and helped build it at a cost of \$8,400. He nursed his baby through the turns to maintain oil pressure. With Hepburn closing, Shaw did the math to calculate the speed he'd need to hold the veteran off.

The grandstands thundered when Shaw got the white flag, still with a lead of about 200 feet. Relentlessly, Hepburn closed. It all came down to a shootout on the last turn of the last lap, and it became the stuff of legend.

Some, such as renowned Speedway Public Relations Director Al Bloemker, later wrote that Hepburn briefly pulled ahead of Shaw. Years after the race, Shaw recalled the 2,000-foot drag race to immortality when he said, "I could see the front end of his car out of the corner of my left eye ... I planted the accelerator as far down as it would go and held my breath."

To uproarious applause, Shaw, a 34 year-old Indianapolis native, surged ahead

in what remained the closest finish until 1982. Pandemonium followed when he and Johnson came to a halt and were swarmed by admirers. The intensity of the crowd soared to a new level when Shaw and Hepburn continued to pass and re-pass one another during the traditional "insurance lap" drivers took to safeguard against scoring errors. But there was no error, and Shaw picked up \$36,075 in total prizes at the following night's victory dinner at the Claypool Hotel.

Wilbur Shaw went on to win two more Indy 500s (1939 and 1940) and, with Tony Hulman, rescued the Speedway after World War II. He served as its president until he lost his life in an airplane accident in 1954. Ralph Hepburn, always a favorite, lost his life in one of the storied Novi racers during practice for the 1948 Indy 500. On the 70th anniversary of their great battle, the history books still record their showdown as the eighth closest in Indy 500 history – the only one in the top 10 pre-dating 1982. ■



Above: Tony Hulman and Wilbur Shaw signing purchase agreement for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1945.

Below: 1937 winner Wilbur Shaw and riding mechanic Jigger Johnson in the winning Shaw-Gilmore Special.

