



# THE SPEEDWAY'S WINNINGEST DRIVER

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Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall-of-Fame driver Johnny Aitken could be the answer to a number of Trivial Pursuit questions. Who led the first lap of the inaugural Indianapolis 500? Which driver first tested bricks when the track founders considered paving options? Who was the first man to cut a high-speed practice lap at The Speedway?

Johnny Aitken's rise to prominence came under the guidance of Art Newby and his company, the National Motor Vehicle Company. Newby is better known to race fans as one of the four founders of The Speedway.

Like many of his contemporaries, Aitken was an employee at the manufacturer he raced for. Not only did such drivers compete in wheel-to-wheel contests, but they also test-drove passenger car models and supervised tuning them.

Smart and capable, by 1909 as the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was being constructed, Aitken was Newby's "go to" driver. On July 29 he made history as the first driver to practice at speed on the new track. He also drove for National in organized endurance runs, such as the September 1909 Munsey Tour between Washington D.C. and Boston.

Just prior to the Munsey Tour, Aitken tested pavement options of brick, cement and wood creosote block at IMS. In one test, his "Big Six" National was roped to two posts at either end of the car and Aitken gunned the throttle to do what was probably The Speedway's first burnout. The objective was to determine the durability of the proposed running surface.

When The Speedway wanted a driver for promotions, Aitken was at the top of the list. Undoubtedly, Newby's leadership

at both National and the track was behind those decisions, but Aitken fit the bill. Described as both modest and friendly, local news reporters dubbed him "Happy Johnny."

Aitken backed up all the attention with on-track performance. At The Speedway's first auto races in August 1909, he set new American speed records for stock cars and dominated the first half of the weekend's feature race, the Wheeler-Schebler Trophy. He also won two of the weekend's 16 races; the first of a record 15 wins at The Speedway—more than any other driver in history.

In December Aitken was among a small group of drivers to brave unusually frigid weather for a time trial on the freshly paved Brickyard. Again, he established new speed records and early in the year newspapers proclaimed him the driver to beat in 1910.

Despite being only 25, Aitken was recognized at National as a leader. He mentored 21-year-old future "500" champion Howdy Wilcox and another youngster, Tom Kincaid, 22.

Kincaid and Aitken were particularly close. In one newspaper account they lived together and even borrowed one another's clothing. Tom called Aitken, "Jack," and their inseparable nature earned them the nickname "The Indigo Twins" from the midnight blue color of National's team cars.

In May 1910 the duo combined to win six of 22 races during The Speedway's first races after becoming The Brickyard. That included Kincaid's win in the 100-mile Prest-O-Lite Trophy.

Tragedy struck on July 6 when Kincaid was killed during tests at The Speedway. Aitken and Newby were reportedly

devastated but soldiered on to return to IMS for another race meet in September. Adding to his tally of IMS victories, Aitken scored three more wins, duplicating the total he recorded at the July meet held days before Kincaid's passing.

Kincaid's death wasn't the first time Aitken had lost a friend in racing. His mechanic, Claude Kellum, was killed riding with National teammate Charlie Merz during The Speedway's first races in August 1909.

After marrying in 1912, he had to pull away from competition driving per Art Newby's National company policy of not allowing married drivers on his team due to the danger. This was not before he competed in the inaugural Indianapolis 500 in 1911 to become the first driver to lead the famous race by heading the field for the initial four laps. It was an otherwise unremarkable performance as a piston rod failed at Lap 125.

Stepping away from the cockpit did not mean Aitken departed the sport. He returned to The Brickyard in 1912 as the National team manager. National had contracted Joe Dawson to drive. Dawson was on loan from Marmon as that company had withdrawn from the sport after winning the first "500."

Aitken's involvement was probably important to acclimating the new driver to the team. The National was fast, and when Ralph DePalma's Mercedes failed while leading with little more than a lap to go, the 22-year-old Dawson won.

Aitken returned to The Speedway in 1913, this time as team manager for the French Peugeot team. The track founders had worked hard to attract European entries and Newby assigned Aitken the task of making them feel at home.

Aitken spoke French, a great benefit to the team as they grappled with understanding the nuances of The Speedway. When the Peugeots were hampered by tire wear in practice, Aitken recommended a switch to Firestones from a European brand. The American rubber had been developed at the track and proved more durable on the rough surface. Aitken again found himself managing a winner as Jules Goux captured first place.

By 1915 Aitken, now employed by the locally based Stutz factory, was free to return to driving in the "500." He served as relief driver for two Stutz primary drivers—Gil Andersen and Earl Cooper. Both finished in the top ten.

In 1916, Aitken signed on as lead driver for the Indianapolis Speedway Team Company, formed by track founders Carl Fisher and James Allison. They had acquired Peugeot racers, widely regarded as the best in the world at the time.

This was the year of the first official points championship by the American Automobile Association (AAA). Aitken waged a season-long battle with Dario Resta, who, in a factory-backed Peugeot, won at The Brickyard in May.

Aitken had his biggest day at IMS in 1916 as well, but not in the "500." Speedway officials presented a never-to-be-repeated "Harvest Classic" on Saturday, September 9. Aitken swept a card of three races of 20, 50 and 100 miles.

Both drivers won six championship races that year, each taking five on board tracks such as Cincinnati, Sheepshead Bay, Chicago and Omaha. They split the Santa Monica road races with Resta winning the Vanderbilt Cup and Aitken the American Grand Prize. In the end, though, Resta had the most points and was champion.

Pilot Aitken Wears Speedway Helmet



JOHNNY AITKEN

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The Indianapolis Speedway race team was the precursor to Allison Experimental Company and Aitken again retired from driving to accept an executive position with the firm. With World War I, Speedway officials cancelled the "500" in 1917 and 1918. Allison saw the opportunities to design and build engines for the U.S. military.

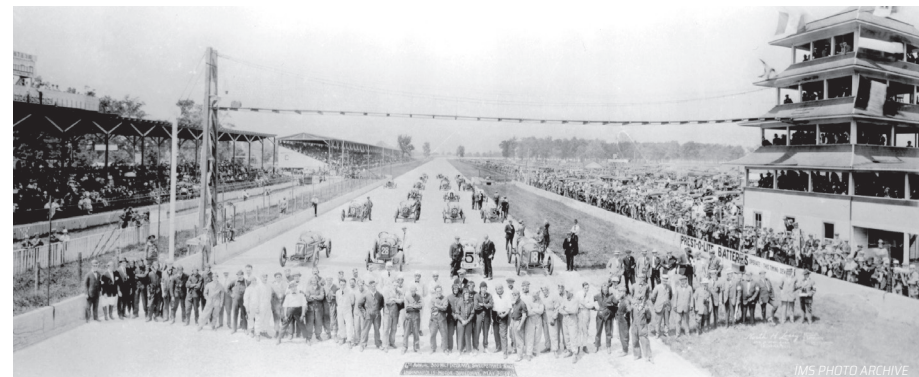
For the brilliant, 33-year-old Aitken, the promise of a wonderful career with a great company was soon dashed. He lost his life to the infamous influenza pandemic of 1918. He passed on October 15.

Sixty-three years later in 1981, Indiana-born Johnny Aitken was voted into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum's Hall of Fame. His widow, Bessie, who passed at age 102, lived to see the recognition. ■

**BELOW:** Johnny Aitken (4) led the first four laps of the inaugural Indianapolis 500 in 1911. | The full field of the 1916 "500" with Aitken's No. 18 car in pole position. | Aitken and his riding mechanic in a promotional photo for Oilzum, a motor oil company still in business today. | Peugeot drivers Jules Goux (left) and Georges Baillot confer with team manager Aitken in 1914. **RIGHT:** Aitken models an unusual IMS race trophy in 1910, "The Speedway Helmet."



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