

1917: YEAR WITHOUT A

RACE

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In 1917, the bloody conflagration raging in Europe boiled over into the global conflict now known as World War I, as the United States could not resist the pull to take sides. Even the already iconic Indianapolis 500 fell victim to the carnage, as America's priorities turned to protecting freedom in the country and around the world.

Despite plans to organize the 1917 Indianapolis 500, Speedway President Carl Fisher made the call to cancel the race for the first of what proved to be six occasions in its history, first due to World War I and later, World War II. Instead, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was converted into a military base. The year proved to be a milestone for the Speedway for several reasons, including the departure of one of its founders.

War in Europe between the Allies, led by Great Britain and France, and the Central Powers primarily of Germany and Austria-Hungary, haunted the United States since 1914. While it would be April 1917 before America entered the conflict, Fisher anticipated the possibility. Evidence of that was the decision of track officials to organize the one-off "Harvest Classic" race meet of September 9, 1916.

The "Harvest Classic" was reminiscent of the earliest Speedway events when several races were conducted with a longer feature. In this case, there were three contests of 20, 50 and 100 miles. Johnny Aitken ended up sweeping the day.

From a business perspective, the event was a hedge by Fisher and his partners. They sensed the inevitable magnetic pull for the United States to be drawn into war. With the possibility of shutting down operations, the meet served to shore up financial reserves.

Still, plans for the "500" continued—but with a wrinkle. Fisher got into a tussle with Indianapolis hoteliers who he felt were gouging out-of-town race fans. He even threatened to move his "International Sweepstakes" to Cincinnati.

Investors there had constructed a two-mile board speedway and were anxious for a return on their money. When in March it became obvious the United States would declare

war on the Central Powers, Fisher's threat became moot. Speedway officials announced the cancellation of the 1917 Indianapolis 500 and that the facility would be available to the Aeronautical Division of the U.S. Army Signal Corps.

Fisher had seen the Speedway as a multi-purpose facility since its original construction, especially as an airfield. Its initial event was a national championship balloon race on June 5, 1909. There would be a second balloon race in September 1910 but more significantly the track hosted America's first national air show starring the Wright Brothers in June 1910.

The Speedway's copious infield, complete with a special "aerodrome," which, in essence, was a prototype airplane hangar, probably was among the most advanced airplane facilities in the country. America's military was notoriously underfunded at the time and it would not be until after World War II that the U.S. Air Force would be officially formed as a distinct branch of the Armed Forces.

The Speedway was pressed into service largely as a landing strip and refueling depot for aircraft traveling from Dayton's Wilbur Wright Field and Chanute Airfield near Chicago. The track's garages were also useful in developing and

Eddie Rickenbacker drove in the first six Indy 500s before becoming a World War I flying ace, when he shot down 26 enemy aircraft. After the war, Rickenbacker was instrumental in pulling together the investment group who purchased IMS from the remaining founders in 1927. He is seen here displaying the checkered flag during his time as track president.



maintaining engines. Nearby rail service that had been so helpful in delivering building materials and passenger trains for race fans was important infrastructure for military supplies.

While Fisher never did "move" his international sweepstakes, the decision to cancel the "500" opened the door for the Cincinnati board track. Officials there seized on the American Automobile Association (AAA) race date left open on what was then called, "Decoration Day," and a 250-mile contest was staged on May 30. Most of the top American drivers were among the 28 starters with Louis Chevrolet coming home with the win in a Frontenac car of his design after Ralph DePalma's Packard failed.

Board tracks were sprouting up around the country. They had been used for bicycle and motorcycle racing for over 20 years. The first such track for auto racing came in 1910 at Playa Del Rey near Los Angeles. Others followed at cities like Chicago, Des Moines, Tacoma, Uniontown and Sheepshead Bay.

The board tracks were symptomatic of changes in the world beyond those induced by what was then called 'The Great War.' American auto racing had matured and entered a new phase. The wood saucers were part of the rise of the speedways—purpose-built plants focused on all-out speed.

With few exceptions, the great American road races on public road courses largely gave way in 1916 with the demise of the most famous of the genre, the Vanderbilt Cup and the American Grand Prize. While the big road races were the largest and most important motorsport contests of the first decade of the 20th century, they were impossible to police for safety and impractical for collecting gate receipts. Fans, too, preferred the speedway design as they could observe more of the action instead of just one corner of a course that could be 20 miles or more in length.

One speedway, Twin Cities, was constructed near Minneapolis in 1915 and was paved with concrete. It was also distinguished by the fact that one of the primary investors was Frank Wheeler, an IMS co-founder. Aside from apparently keeping his new investment a secret from his Indianapolis partners, the venture proved a financial disaster. The first race was on Labor Day, 1915, but attracted only 14 entries and an equally disappointing gate attendance.

This debacle would not only sink the track by 1917 but also drive Wheeler to divest his interests in IMS in order to get a handle on his finances. Wheeler departed in 1917 as another Speedway founder, James Allison, bought him out. In their

RIGHT TOP TO BOTTOM: This poster was used to promote Frank Wheeler's short-lived Minneapolis-St. Paul racing facility. Troops hunker down in the front line trenches of WWI during the conflagration's darkest days.

time together the four founders—the other being Art Newby—only produced six Indianapolis 500s.

Even without the Indianapolis 500, the 1917 AAA season forged ahead. Oval tracks dominated, especially the rapidly assembled board tracks. Wheeler and his Twin Cities team made one last futile attempt to recover their losses on the concrete speedway with an April race. Frank Wheeler sold his interests in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in May 1917.

In 1917 the war, the demise of the public roads courses, and Wheeler's departure marked a kind of demarcation from American racing's earliest days. There would be a changing of the guard among the drivers, too. Barney Oldfield, the archetypal American fairgrounds barnstormer from the turn of the century, was wrapping up his driving career and would retire the following year.

Eddie Rickenbacker, a widely respected wheelman, extended his craft to the air to become America's most highly decorated fighter pilot. He would return redefined and become one of the country's best-known business executives with many varied accomplishments, among them leading a new investment group to purchase the Speedway in 1927.

Georges Boillot, the great French grand prix driver who set the fast time in qualifying for the 1914 Indianapolis 500, was not so lucky. Also a fighter pilot, he lost his life in battle.

With war concluding in 1918, the Indianapolis 500 returned the following year. The race was once more America's premier motorsports event, but like the rest of the world, it was forever changed.

