

The 1920 Auto Racing Season in Review

A season of change, triumph, and tragedy

The American Automobile Association (AAA) Speedway Championship of America was to be decided at the Los Angeles Speedway, a 1.125 mile board oval track, located in Beverly Hills, California on Thanksgiving Day November 25, 1920. The contenders for the title were Gaston Chevrolet, Tommy Milton, Jimmy Murphy, and Ralph DePalma.

The 1920 racing season opened at the recently constructed Los Angeles Speedway on February 28, 1920. The Los Angeles Speedway, designed and built by Jack Prince, was constructed in a few months and completed barely in time for the opening race of the 1920 season. The track was constructed with 4 million feet of Oregon pine and 40 tons of nails. The racing surface was built with 2 X 4's placed on edge lengthwise, the turns were banked 35 degrees.

Blacktop had yet to be perfected; auto racing tracks at the time were dusty dirt fairground oval tracks or public dirt roads. The Indianapolis Speedway paved its crushed stone and tar racing surface with bricks in 1909. To create a dust free stable racing surface board tracks were developed. Two dozen oval board tracks of all sizes were built between 1910 and 1928.

Jimmy Murphy recorded the first win of his career at the opening race of the 1920 season at Los Angeles Speedway driving a Duesenberg. Murphy was a former mechanic and riding mechanic to teammate Tommy Milton on the Duesenberg team. The riding mechanic was part of the racing scene in the early years of auto racing. One of the best descriptions of the duties of the riding mechanic can be found in Eddie Rickenbacker's autobiography "Rickenbacker." Rickenbacker, former Indianapolis 500 driver prior to World War 1, World War 1 Ace of Aces, auto manufacturer, owner of the Indianapolis Speedway from 1927 – 1945, and President of Eastern Air Lines described his riding mechanic duties prior to the start of the 1906 Vanderbilt Cup race. "Standing by this powerful little car (Frayer-Miller), he (Lee Frayer) began by pointing out to me the instruments on the dashboard. Watch the oil gauge; watch the gasoline gauge, when the pressure of either gasoline or oil fell below the minimum I would have to pump it back up. Watch for tire wear, especially the rear ones. Let me know when the rubber begins to wear off. You can tell it easy, the fabric's a different color. Keep a lookout to the rear, and let me know if anybody wants to pass. We won't be able to talk over the sound of the engine, so tap my knee once if somebody is coming up to pass me. Two taps mean a tire is going bad."

Gaston Chevrolet won the second 1920 American Automobile Association Speedway Championship of America race at the Indianapolis Speedway on May 30, 1920. The eighth annual International Sweepstakes Race at the 2.5 mile brick Indianapolis Motor Speedway would be run under the new 183 cubic inch rule replacing the much larger 300 cubic inch engine. The Duesenberg team almost did not make the race only arriving at the last minute.

Ralph DePalma paced the 23 starters in his Ballot. Ralph DePalma late in the race was in a position to win his second Indianapolis 500 only to burst into flames and eventually finish 5th. Gaston was near the front all day took the lead when DePalma had his drama.

Gaston Chevrolet won driving a Frontenac race car. Louis Chevrolet and Gaston formed the Frontenac Motor Corporation in 1916 after Louis's departure from the Chevrolet Motor Company. Louis Chevrolet and William Durant, the founder of General Motors, formed the Chevrolet Motor Company in 1911. The Chevrolet name became synonymous with the automobile but not to the benefit of Louis Chevrolet. Tommy Milton would give Louis Chevrolet and Frontenac another Indianapolis 500 win in 1921.

In between the February 28, 1920 Los Angeles Speedway 250 and the May 30, 1920 Indianapolis 500 Art Klein, Jimmy Murphy, and Tommy Milton won a series of 50 mile heat races at the Los Angeles Speedway March 28, 1920 and Tommy Milton set a new United States one mile speed record on the sands of Daytona Beach.

Fred Duesenberg and Tommy Milton developed a straight eight twin engine Duesenberg powered land speed record car to run on the sands of Daytona Beach, Florida in April. On Tuesday April 27, 1920 Tommy Milton set a new United States one mile land speed record of 156.047 miles per hour. In various Wednesday newspapers they described at the end of the record run Milton's Duesenberg caught fire and he "steered the car into the ocean after slowing down to drown out the flames." At the same time that Tommy Milton was setting land speed records teammate Jimmy Murphy was also setting records driving a straight eight single engine Duesenberg on the beach course.

On June 19th it was back to the boards for the first of two non point American Automobile Association races at the 1.125 mile Uniontown Speedway in Pennsylvania. Tommy Milton driving a Duesenberg won the 225 mile race. Wade Morton and his riding mechanic Arthur Kemp blew a tire which caused their Duesenberg "to topple and role down the track." Neither was seriously injured.

This was during a time when there was little safety on the race track, no helmets, no seat belts, no fireproof clothing, no fuel cells, no safer barrier walls, and the cars rode on skinny tires. Passenger automobile tires with 70 pounds of air pressure had a life of 6,000 to 8,000 miles in the late teens and early twenties.

The third American Automobile Association Speedway Championship of America race was held July 5, 1920 at the Pacific Coast Speedway, Tacoma, WA. Tommy Milton bested all challengers on the 2 mile board speedway.

In the July 17, 1920 issue of the Syracuse Journal an article ran promoting the upcoming New York State Fairgrounds race in September. The article detailed the exploits of Syracuse, NY native Johnny Bresnahan, Gaston Chevrolets Indianapolis 500 winning riding mechanic. "Johnny Bresnahan, auto mechanic has a hunch he will never get hurt while sitting beside driver

in racing car.” “Syracuse lad believes he was born under a lucky star. For more than two years Bresnahan has been sitting beside Gaston Chevrolet, one of the world’s greatest automobile racers. In all Bresnahan has taken part in 15 big races and he has yet to have a serious spill.”

The August 8, 1920 edition of the Los Angeles Examiner posted the American Automobile Association Speedway Championship of America standings after the Pacific Coast Speedway event. “Drivers winning major events during 1920 are awarded certain points according to a system arranged by the Contest Board of the American Automobile Association and when the season closes on Thanksgiving Day at the Beverly Hills track the 1920 Championship will go to the driver who has earned the greatest number of points:”

Gaston Chevrolet	1015
Tom Milton	670
Jim Murphy	665
R. Thomas	520
Joe Thomas	296
Ralph Mulford	270
Eddie Hearne	205
Ira Vail	140
R. de Palma	105
K. V. Goodson	61
Ed O’Donnell	60
Art Klein	60
J. Chassagne	50
Roscoe Sarles	40
Tom Alley	16
P. Henderson	14
J. de Palma	10

The only road race on the 1920 American Automobile Association Speedway Championship of America circuit was held at the Eighth Annual National Road Race in Elgin, IL. The 251 mile race on the 8.5 mile dirt road course was won by Ralph DePalma driving a Ballot averaging 79.5 miles per hour. The crowd was estimated to number 60,000 persons.

The Saturday September 4, 1920 edition of The Evening Telegram – New York headlines read “Noted Drivers to Race at Uniontown Monday. The 225 mile automobile contest is not “a championship race, for the officials did not put up the necessary \$100 a mile to make it so, in accordance with the rules of the A.A.A.” The race is sanctioned by AAA but the “race will have no bearing on their present standings for the championship.”

The article printed the current point standings:

Gaston Chevrolet	1030
Tommy Milton	930
Jimmy Murphy	805
Ralph DePalma	605
Rene Thomas	520
Ralph Mulford	350
Joe Thomas	301
Eddie Hearne	296
Ira Vail	140

Tommy Milton won his second Uniontown Board Speedway race of the year on September 6th driving a Duesenberg in the Uniontown Speedway 225 mile race.

The Los Angeles Times and Los Angeles Examiner featured stories in their September 12, 1920 edition detailing the American Speedway Championship. "Chevrolet is still leader" "But only holds position by a narrow margin" "Speedway Championship will be decided here." "Chairman Richard Kennerdell of the AAA Contest Board has just given out the official standings of the drivers in the battle for the Speedway Championship for 1920. The Thanksgiving Day 250 – Mile race at Beverly Hills, which is the only remaining event of the season, carrying championship points."

The Current Standings:

Gaston Chevrolet	1030
Tommy Milton	930
Jimmy Murphy	805
Ralph DePalma	605
Rene Thomas	520
Ralph Mulford	350
Joe Thomas	296
Eddie Hearne	205
Ira Vail	140

A non point's race was held at the one mile dirt track at the New York State Fairgrounds in Syracuse September 18th. The Syracuse Post Standard reported "Ralph DePalma thrilled a vast crowd at the State Fair. Noted Italian establishes world's records to defeat nation's drivers." DePalma driving a Ballot won all three events in record time. Ralph DePalma defeated Gaston Chevrolet and Ira Vail in the 10 mile race. Eddie O'Donnell and Gaston Chevrolet followed DePalma across the line in the 20 mile race. The final 50 mile race was won by Ralph DePalma over Jimmy Murphy and Ira Vail.

Tommy Milton on Saturday September 18, 1920 announced that he was severing his long standing connections with the Duesenberg Company and would drive Cliff Durant's Chevrolet Duesenberg Special. Roscoe Sarles, a Frontenac driver, will take over the vacated Milton ride. "Milton is 100 points behind Gaston Chevrolet in the official Championship Standings for the Speedway title of 1920. Tommy is unquestionably the outstanding driver of the year with a victory in the Beverly Hills 50- mile sprints, two wins at Uniontown, third at Indianapolis, second at Elgin, not to mention a flock of new straightaway records made at Daytona. Milton was pinning his hopes of capturing the 1920 Championship with the change" reported the Los Angeles Times.

Another new board track was on the schedule. Jimmy Murphy won the Fresno Speedway non point's race on the 1 mile speedway October 2, 1920. This was Jimmy Murphy's second win at the opening of a new board track event in 1920.

The fifth and final American Automobile Association Speedway Championship of America points race to decide the 1920 championship was scheduled for Thanksgiving Day November 25th at the Los Angeles Speedway. The November 21st Los Angeles Examiner reported the "points in the championship standings are arbitrarily awarded by the American Automobile Association to certain races on certain tracks and the Los Angeles Speedway has been awarded two Championship races. Chevrolet, Milton, Murphy and Ralph DePalma still have a chance for the title. To date there have been four championship races, the 250 mile event on the Los Angeles Speedway Thanksgiving Day being the fifth and final event of the 1920 season for which championship points are awarded. The points will be awarded in the coming race as follows: First, 500: second, 260: third, 140: fourth, 80: fifth, 50: sixth, 35: seventh, 25: eighth, 15: ninth, 10: tenth, 5.

"The Standings of the Drivers at the present time:"

Gaston Chevrolet	1030
Tommy Milton	930
Jimmy Murphy	805
Ralph DePalma	605
Rene Thomas	520
Ralph Mulford	350
Joe Thomas	301
Eddie Hearne	205
Ira Vail	140
Eddie O'Donnell	110
Ken Goodson	61
Art Klein	60
Jean Chassagne	50
Roscoe Sarles	40
Tom Alley	36

Joe Ford
John DePalma

35
10

Ralph DePalma sent a wire Tuesday November 23rd notifying the Speedway Association "My car on steamer, cannot ship to Los Angeles until Tuesday, therefore cannot be with you Thanksgiving Day." The withdrawal reduced the field to 12 cars.

"Gaston Chevrolet, Eddie O'Donnell, Lyall Jolls Killed!"

Roscoe Sarles driving a Duesenberg won the tragic Los Angeles 250 mile race on the 1.125 mile board track over Eddie Miller and Eddie Hearne. Jimmy Murphy, from his pole starting spot led the first lap. Sarles was in front the remaining laps of the 200 lap race.

"On the leader's 162nd lap," the Friday November 26, 1920 issue of Los Angeles Times and Los Angeles Examiner reported, "Gaston Chevrolet's green Frontenac closed in on his teammate Joe Thomas in his bright blue Frontenac. At the same time Eddie O'Donnell's (with riding mechanic Lyall Jolls) gray Duesenberg went to the top to pass both Thomas and Chevrolet. As the three cars drew even in turn one Chevrolet and O'Donnell tangled and did a half spin. O'Donnell's Duesenberg was thrown directly down the track on its side and crashed into the infield. Chevrolet's Frontenac was thrown in the opposite direction into the outside wooden guardrail. He struck the rail and rolled over down the track. It landed not far from the Duesenberg. Both cars were reduced to heaps of junk (killing Chevrolet and Jolls). O'Donnell died shortly after the crash. Chevrolet's mechanic, Johnny Bresnahan, came through with minor scratches."

The November 26, 1920 edition of the Syracuse Journal "Eddie comes up and hits our right rear and shot us in the rail" stated Johnny Bresnahan. "I wish the other boys were as well off as I am," he said. "If they were I'd be tossing dice with them tonight."

Johnny's mother was quoted "He must quit the racing business. I warned him several times and others have too, to leave the race tracks, but he said the fascination was too great. The accident was terrible, but it ought to be a lesson to him."

Jimmy Murphy finished fourth and Tommy Milton dropped out with mechanical trouble.

In the Sports and Motoring section of the Friday November 26th edition of the Los Angeles Times the headline read "Chevrolet, though dead, is Speedway Champion."

“The final standing in the American Automobile Association Speedway Championship of America for 1920 is as follows:”

Gaston Chevrolet	1030
Tommy Milton	930
Jimmy Murphy	885
Ralph DePalma	605
Roscoe Sarles	540
Rene Thomas	520
Joe Thomas	351
Ralph Mulford	350
Eddie Hearne	345
Ira Vail	140
Eddie O'Donnell	110

In what was a progressive year with two new board tracks built, a new smaller engine formula, a new land speed record, a positive year for the Chevrolet brothers (Indianapolis 500 win and a Championship) only to be overshadowed by one of the most tragic auto racing accidents that took the lives of three participants in one crash in what was otherwise a year free from serious accidents.

In a recap of the 1920 racing season the Sunday March 6, 1921 edition of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle - New York “The 1920 season saw the late Gaston Chevrolet Crowned King of the Speedway. Chevrolet practically won the title by his victory at Indianapolis for which he received 1000 points toward the A.A.A. driving championship making his total 1030. The little French driver never lived to know his accomplishment as he was killed on the 150th lap of the Thanksgiving Day race.”

A.A.A. Driving Championship

1. Gaston Chevrolet	1030
2. Tommy Milton	930
3. Jimmy Murphy	885
4. Ralph DePalma	605
5. Roscoe Sarles	540
6. Rene Thomas	520
7. Joe Thomas	351
8. Ralph Mulford	350
9. Eddie Hearne	340
10. Eddie Miller	260

All publications listed Gaston Chevrolet as the 1920 American Automobile Association champion including Indianapolis 500 programs, American Automobile Association Yearbooks, Peter DePaolo's 1935 book Wall Smacker, Fred Wagner's 1949 book Saga of the Roaring Road. In 1951 Tommy Milton was declared the 1920 Champion. As can be seen here Gaston

Chevrolet gathered the bulk of his points at the Indianapolis 500 and led the point standings the rest of the season. There is no doubt Gaston Chevrolet was the true 1920 American Automobile Association Speedway Champion of America.