

“A few months ago — surprisingly few, when considered what has been accomplished since then — Carl Fisher and his associates drove out to the quiet farms, and, pointing to the grain-covered fields, predicted that before long that spot of land would be the object of the entire motor world’s attention.”

-The Indianapolis Star, August 16, 1909

Baptism by Fire

The Speedway’s First Auto Race Meet

story by: Mark Dill • photos by: IMS Archives

In only four months since the Indianapolis Motor Speedway’s March 20, 1909 incorporation, 41 buildings sprouted up on the grounds as if the fertile farmland had birthed a new harvest. A world-class facility greeted teams as they arrived for practice just two days after the August 14 close of a Federation of American Motorcyclists race meet many viewed as a fiasco of accidents.

Grandstands, garages, clubhouses and refreshment buildings — all in uniform white with green trim — buzzed with activity. Flags of many nations fluttered above the buildings in the breeze of a blue Indiana sky. The track appeared white as concrete, its crushed-limestone surface glistening in sunlight. This contrasted with verdant sod covering the infield and edges of the course.

Still, concerns persisted that the track’s surface would crumble

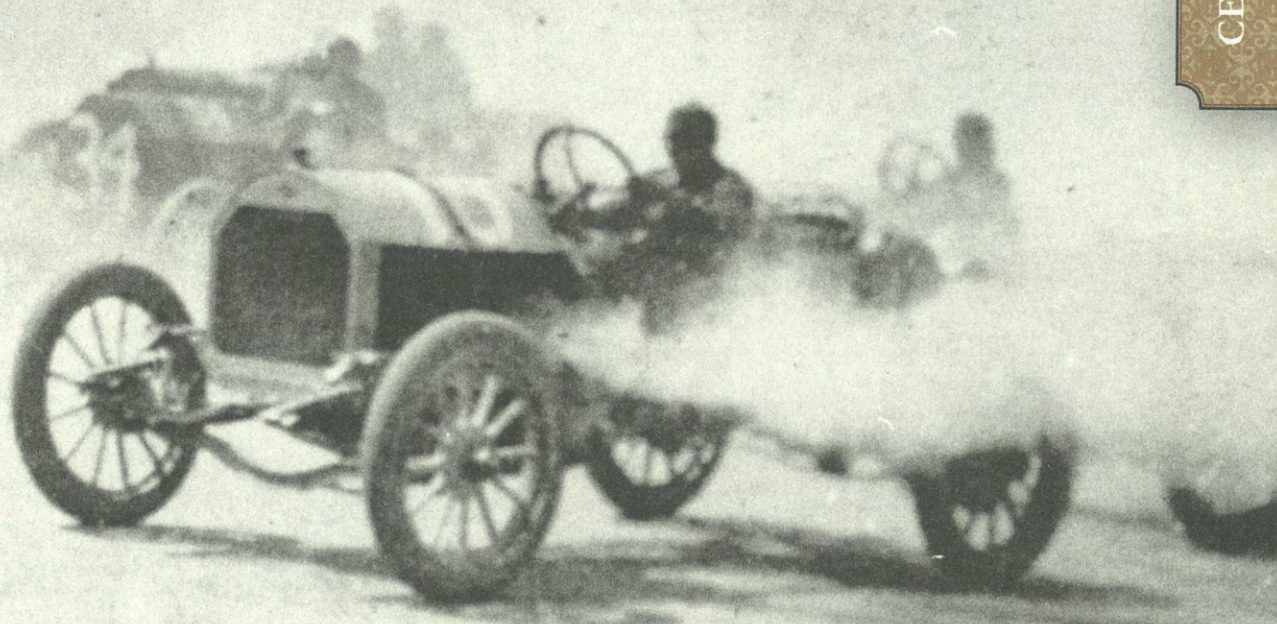
under 2,000-pound race cars. Speedway President Carl Fisher supervised laborers toiling around the clock. Aided at night by gas headlamps from Fisher’s Prest-O-Lite Company, the men steamrolled stones and poured pitch.

Marion County roads were congested as never before. Hotels overflowed and homeowners lent rooms for rent. From Thursday, August 19, the first day of the race meet, through Saturday’s close, crowds grew increasingly larger, totaling 75,000 people, the greatest paid attendance anywhere.

Women were throughout the grandstands, their dress and millinery panoply of color topped only by their red, yellow, green and blue Japanese parasols provided by the Overland Automobile Company. Laborers pulverized stones on Thursday morning, nearly up to the

Inset: Heavy steamrollers were used to ensure a smooth surface both on the straights and in the turns.

Virtually all of the cars in the 1909 meet were stripped-down passenger cars, number 33 being a slightly modified “stock” Buick. A recent rule required that any car competing in a stock class had to have been part of a run of at least 25 units, while its manufacturer had to have produced a minimum of 50 automobiles in total to be eligible.



noon start of the races. Five races were on the card that first day, all for stock chassis with engines of increasingly greater cubic-inch displacement.

THE FIRST RACES

The AAA's premier starter, Fred Wagner, waved the Speedway's first auto race — a five-mile sprint — into history. Stoddard-Dayton driver Louis Schwitzer earned the distinction of winning it.

The second race delivered what the Speedway founders hungered for — a new speed record. Buick's Louis Chevrolet won the 10-mile race in 8:56.40, 15 seconds faster than Barney Oldfield's 1904 record.

In another five-mile contest, Wilfred Bourque out-dueled Bob Burman to win. Next, 16 entries assembled for a handicapped event for cars of various engine sizes. Ray Harroun scored the first of his career eight wins at the Speedway.

The main event was the 250-mile Prest-O-Lite Trophy race. The Buick team again dominated, with Louis Chevrolet out front.

The long race took its toll on the track as a shower of stones pelted drivers. A rock shattered Chevrolet's goggles, scattering glass slivers into his eyes. Blinded, Chevrolet stopped and was guided to the track hospital.

Eight laps after Chevrolet's departure, tragedy struck. Wilfred Bourque lost control exiting Turn 4. His Knox racer somersaulted into fencing at the outside of the track. Harry Holcomb, a 22-year-old mechanic, was tossed from the car and hit a post. Bourque, 26, was pulled from under his machine. Both men died almost immediately. Buick's Bob Burman went on to win the Speedway's first race of significant distance.

THE G&J TROPHY

Friday, August 20, offered seven races, five sprint contests of five to 10 miles as well as a 50-miler and a 100-mile feature. Buick's Lewis Strang “bookended” the day with wins in the first and final events, a five-mile sprint and the 100-miler.

Distinctive with a red handkerchief pinned to his dust cap whipping in the wind, Strang led the 100-mile G & J Trophy race

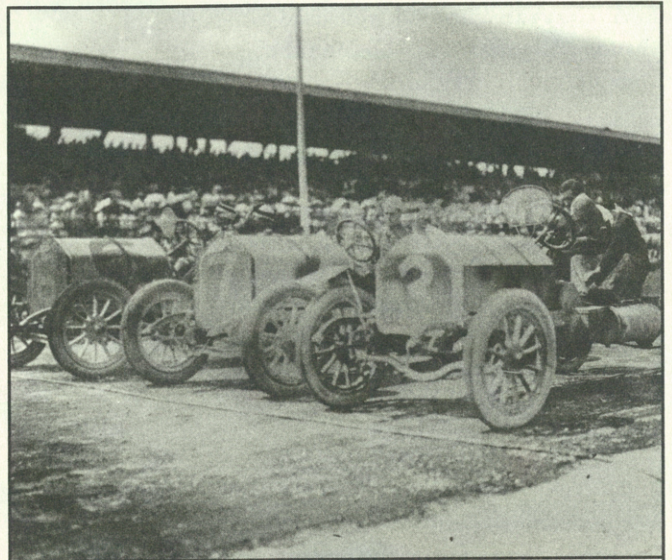


Two stars of the mighty Buick team: Bob Burman (upper left) and Louis Chevrolet (lower left).



(Upper right) The ill-fated Wilfred "Billy" Bourque lines up in his Knox (#3), next to the Nationals of Charlie Merz (#7) and Tommy Kincade (#6).

(Lower right) Ray Harroun, destined to be the winner of the first "500" in 1911 won a four-lap standing start dash during the problem-filled 1909 meet.



from start to finish. With romantic flair his beautiful actress wife, Jeanne Lou (stage name: Louise Alexander), rushed to his side with a kiss for his dusty face.

National driver Charlie Merz, at 21 the youngest competitor at the meet, beat out Louis Chevrolet in the second race, a five-miler. A local boy, the victory met with cheers.

Another National driver, Johnny Aitken, picked up two wins in 10- and five-mile events. The five mile race remains the closest contest in the history of the track. Aitken and Merz, both driving Nationals, finished in a dead heat. Judges gave the edge to Aitken. Crowd favorite Barney Oldfield drove his "Old Glory" National, named because of the giant American flag painted on its cowling, in the 10-miler. Dramatically, backfire from his carburetor burnt through leather straps holding the cowling and it flew back at Oldfield. He blocked it with his right arm, but suffered a deep laceration.

After a 50-mile contest dominated by two Stoddard-Daytons, Oldfield reappeared for the 10-mile Ford Trophy race. This time in his 120-hp Grand Prix Benz, he rocketed into the lead but his weakened arm forced an error in Turn 4. Len Zengel in a Chadwick went on to win.

TRAGEDY ON THE FINAL DAY

The final day offered the marquee contest of the entire meet: the 300-mile Wheeler-Schebler Trophy race. Commissioned by Speedway founder Frank Wheeler, the Tiffany's-designed \$10,000 sterling-silver trophy stood 7 1/2 feet high.

Three races preceded the running of the big event, the most important of which was the 25-mile Remy Brassard contest. Barney Oldfield in his Benz, his bandaged arm still smarting, led all the way, establishing four new world's records. In the other events, Fiat driver Eddie Hearne won the 10-mile amateur championship and Tommy Kincade won a 15-mile handicap in his National.

Johnny Aitken grabbed the lead of the Wheeler-Schebler Trophy race from the onset. He set a new world's competition record of 1:31:41.9 for 100 miles. His National's engine crumbled under the

pace and Aitken, coated with dust, emerged from his car predicting someone would get killed because the track was coming apart.

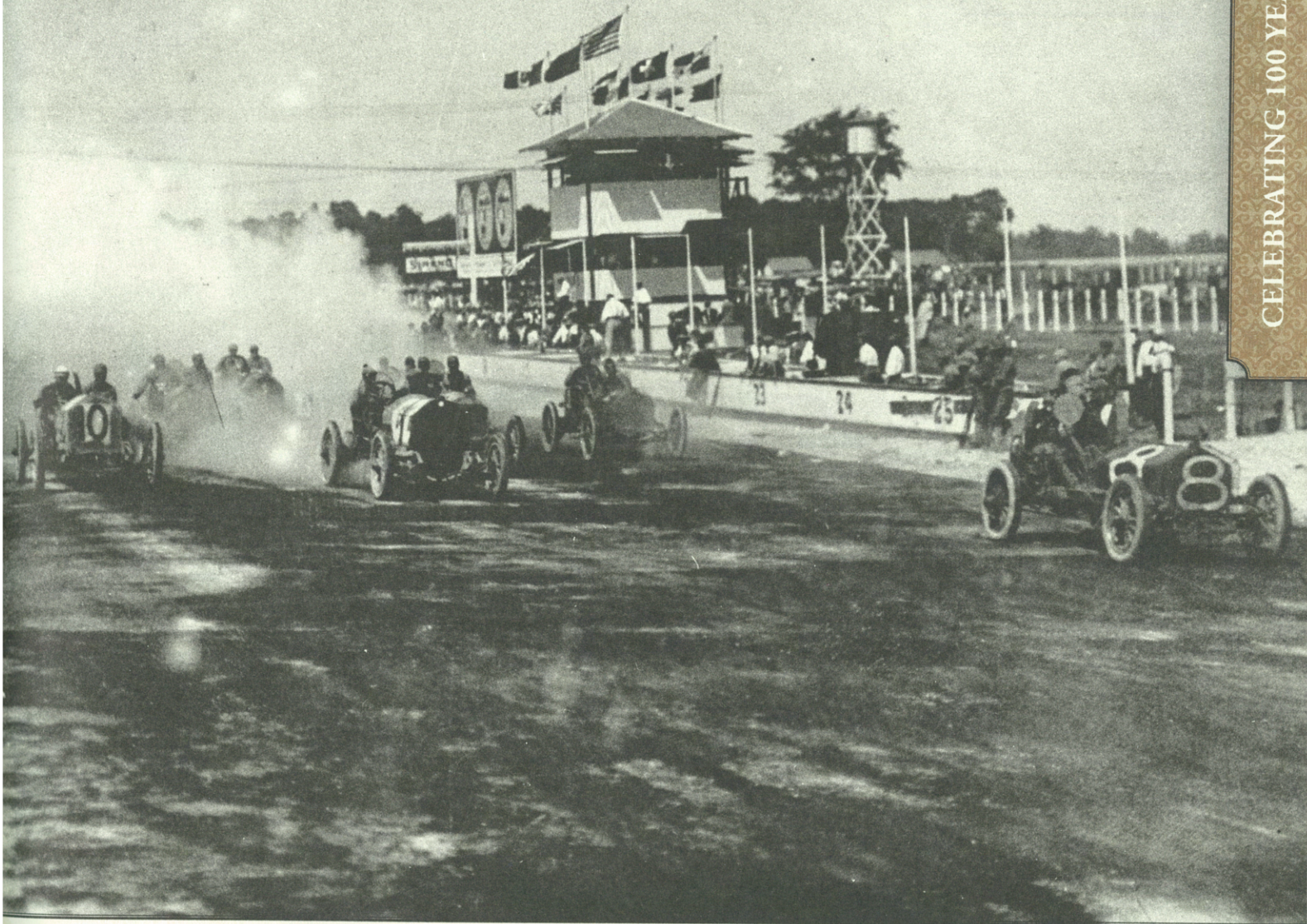
Bob Burman led before cracking a cylinder at 140 miles. Jackson driver Leigh Lynch, who led until the race was stopped, assumed first place.

Disaster struck at 175 miles. Entering the southwest turn, Charlie Merz had his right front tire blow. The National abruptly charged the wood post and wire outer fence. The grandstands were overflowing and, despite warning signs, spectators pressed against the barrier as much as eight people deep.

Speeding at 75 mph, the racer plowed over fence posts, flipped and landed near a creek outside the track. Merz remained in his seat, buried beneath his machine, while riding mechanic Claude Kellum was killed when catapulted to the ground. In the National's wake were two dead spectators. Several others had been knocked aside as the crowd panicked.

The spectators were James West and Homer Joliff. Joliff, a 28-year-old farmhand, watched the race with his boss, Lora Vandiver. The two were preparing to leave for home when Joliff told Vandiver, "I guess I'll turn back a minute and see this car go by."

Twenty-nine-year-old James West, who was struck squarely across the National's radiator, remained misidentified for several hours. A search of his pockets produced the business card of Benjamin Logan. When Logan returned home to his grieving wife, a new push was made to identify West.



Johnny Aitken (#8) takes the lead with a National at the start of the ill-fated 300-mile Wheeler-Schebler Trophy race on the third and final day of the meet.

Kellum's death also produced confusion. The 28-year-old, who had run for a state legislative seat for the Socialist Party, started the race riding with Aitken. He replaced Herbert Lyme, who rode with Merz. Merz had stopped with a dead battery. Lyme sprinted from the backstretch to the pits and was too exhausted to return with a new battery, so Kellum sprang into action.

Charlie Merz turned his engine off and wiggled out from under the smoking National. Amazingly uninjured but splattered with mud from the creek, he later said, "I think I am the luckiest man on earth ... it all happened so quick I was helpless."

Screaming confusion reigned as separated family members searched desperately. Police and soldiers struggled to hold the crowd back as Red Cross workers carried the injured men across the track while the race continued.

At 235 miles, Marmon driver Bruce Keen hit one of the poles supporting the pedestrian bridge near the head of the front stretch. Riding mechanic James Schiller was tossed from the car, but not seriously injured. Keen remained in the machine and was unharmed. Still, AAA officials stopped the race.

1927: Frank Lockhart is the first to qualify for the "500" at over 120 mph.

BIRTH OF THE BRICKYARD

The races created sensational newspaper stories as well as threats from the AAA to never sanction events at the Speedway again. Nobody was more devastated than the Speedway owners.

Art Newby, president of National and a Speedway founder, announced that he was withdrawing his car company from racing. He later rescinded the order, but the empathetic man known as the "quiet philanthropist" couldn't bear the thought of creating tragedy.

"It's not worth half the price," he lamented. Determined to deliver a safe, reliable running surface, Speedway management soon made a historic decision. The Brickyard was about to be born. 