

THE ULTIMATE

O F A T I T A N

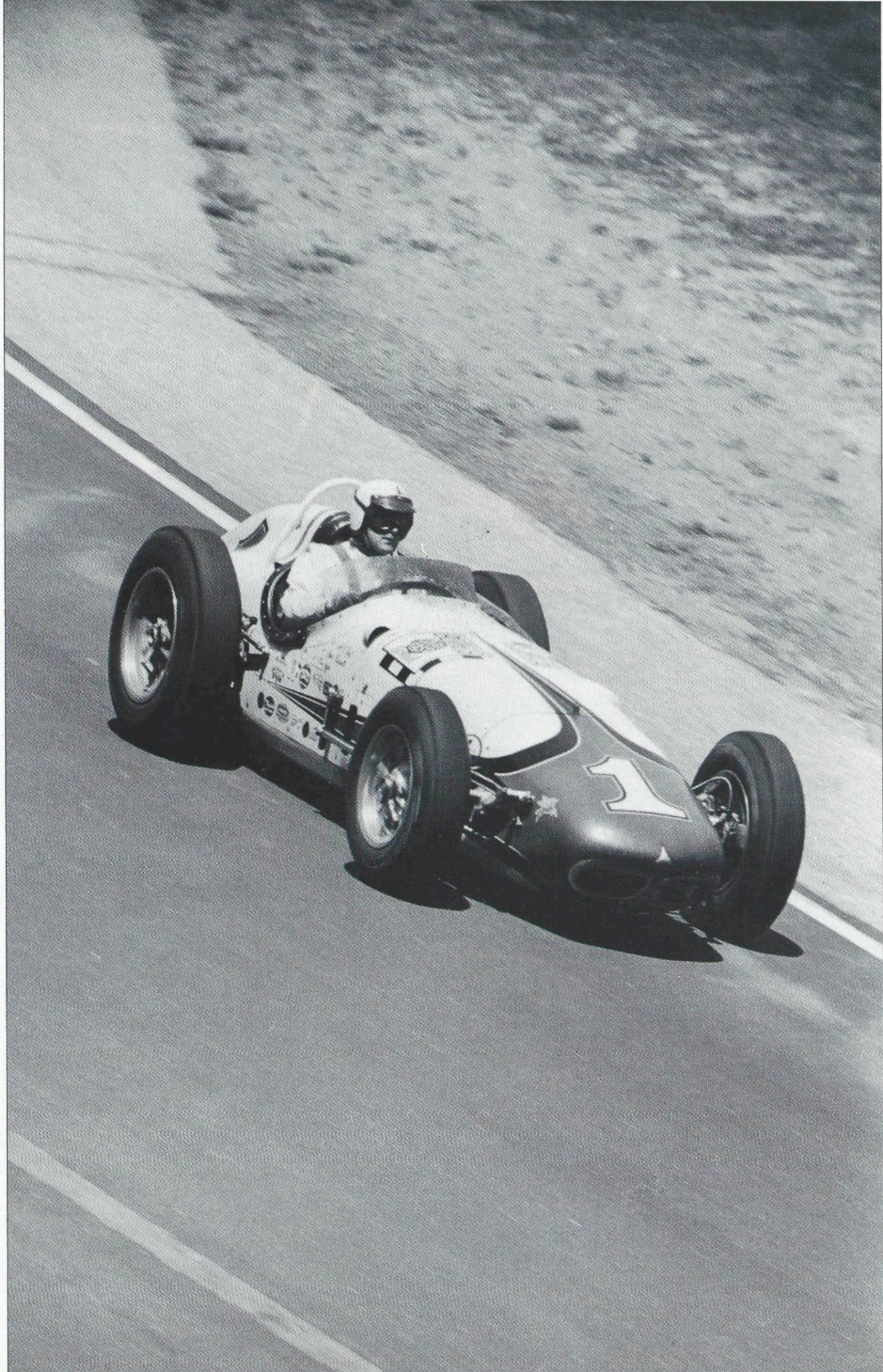


As his unparalleled career winds down, A.J. Foyt still looks for fulfillment

by **WILLIAM NACK**



HOY!



Three laps to go, floating out there in the middle of the high banking of Turn 3, Bobby Unser lost it.

Flat lost it. Swung low and, sweet chariot, suddenly lost control of his car while trying to get the lead underneath A.J. Foyt. All afternoon long, for nearly 200 miles around the two-mile stretch of Michigan International Speedway in Cambridge Junction, Unser and Foyt had been charging at each other, in a pair of USAC stock cars, like the hammers of hell, Foyt in a Ford and Unser in a Dodge. Into Turn 3, Unser was drafting right behind Foyt when, knowing he had the faster car and deciding to wait no longer, he dipped down and stomped on it. At once he was racing under Foyt, and now they were side by side.

"I'm trying to pass Foyt for the lead and I started losing my car in his draft," Unser recalls. "I let my car get loose; my rear end started coming around. The air from his car is sucking mine up toward him. My car is going to spin. And I'm going to hit him because we're so dang close together. I



CO RENTMEESTER



F. SCHNELL

made a mistake and I knew better. I'm going to have a wreck. I'm going to wreck him, too, and it's going to be my fault. Just as simple as A-B-C. At about, oh, 165 miles an hour."

Foyt glanced over and saw the trouble Unser was in, saw he was out of control and about to spin into him. "He saw it," says Unser. "Saw I'd lost it. You know what the guys does? This'll show you how smart he is. Most drivers would have shied away. Not A.J. Foyt. Instead of trying to run away, or pulling to the right to get away from me—and maybe he can get away and leave me to hit the wall, but maybe I hit him, too—no, no . . . he guaranteed the outcome. Guaranteed it. And he did it out of instinct. There wasn't time to think about it. He pulled *down* on me. *On me!* He backed off and came down and cut the draft between us. *Let my car bump his.* It was a very gentle thing. And he put my race car straight. We quivered a little bit but he got me straight."

Roaring out of Turn 3, Unser found himself on the lead with those few laps to go, and down the front straight he acknowledged the debt to Foyt in the only way that he knew how, as one race car driv-

er to another. "I had to wave him by," recalls Unser. "The man saved me from a wreck, and I owed it to him." That done, they went at each other furiously through the final three laps, with Foyt eventually winning a squeaker. Climbing from his car, Foyt spotted Unser.

"Saved your ass, didn't I?" said Foyt.

This was 18 years ago, back in the days when Foyt was still building the legend that he would come to be known by, as the greatest American race car driver in history. Those were the days when his father, Tony, was still alive and the son, craving his approval, fanned with his yearnings the inextinguishable fire that burned in his still-flat belly. Back when he and Unser were still going at it on oil-stained tracks across the land, when their memories were still fresh of raising rooster tails deep in the corners of dirt ovals like the one at Langhorne, Pa., where Foyt once spun like a dervish through the D-shaped circuit's most difficult and dangerous stretch, a dip that the drivers called Puke Hollow. That was back when, at California's Ascot Park, Foyt's keenest rival, Parnelli Jones, once stood in

Foyt first won
Indy in '61
(left); Bobby
Unser (above,
left), A.J. and
Jones shared a
joke at the
Speedway; Tony
handed A.J. the
Indy winner's
milk in '64.

the middle of the racetrack, with cars broadsliding past him, so Foyt couldn't miss the finger that Jones was giving him. And it was when Foyt and Unser had still more Indy 500 victories in them (Foyt's fourth and Unser's second and third), and Foyt had this reputation as a profane, rude, swaggering, mesquite-tough, hot-tempered Texan who ate chili by the quart and flew a red bandanna around his neck. His driving style, paradoxically, belied that image and was, in fact, a sort of model of its kind: cool and clean, patient and precise, free of mistakes.

"That's the key to Foyt's greatness," says Chris Economaki, the editor and publisher emeritus of *National Speed Sport News*, who has watched Foyt since the 1950s. "He almost never made mistakes. Never put a wheel wrong. He never overdrove into a corner, or when conditions were bad. Never spun out, to speak of. Never overshot his pit. He judged his equipment. He won so many races with the canvas showing through a right rear tire that would have blown in another lap. He *really* understood the business he was in. Just never made mistakes."

It was the only style that could have suited the survivor he was to become and remains today. He is a dinosaur from another age, lumbering toward some inevitable extinction, the last of his species, the ultimate driver-mechanic, wearing on his shirts the grease stains from a thousand cars and on his face and neck the faint burn scars from Milwaukee and DuQuoin, Ill. Foyt still bears the limp he got last year in Elkhart Lake, Wis., where his brake pedal broke and he flew off the course and plunged into an embankment, burying the nose of his car four feet deep in the dirt, crushing his feet and driving a broken tibia bone, like a dagger, 12 inches up into his thigh. The wounds were so painful that

he begged attending medics to knock him out with a hammer as he sat for 40 minutes while being cut out of the remains of the car. At age 56, A.J. Foyt is in his last year as a full-time race car driver, taking his bows as he does the Indy Car circuit a final time. Unless he decides to take one more turn at the Indy 500 next May—it would be his 35th straight appearance in the race, and those who know him believe he will be

A.J. and Tony
teamed up at
170.568 mph to
win the pole
for the '69
Indy 500.

there—he will drive his last race on Oct. 6 in the Bosch Spark Plug Grand Prix in Nazareth, Pa.

In this age of complex, time-consuming specialization, when drivers rarely stray for long from their corners of the sport, Foyt leaves behind a career so diverse it may never be matched. Certainly no other man in the history of motor sports has done what he has over the last 35 years, winning not only those four Indy 500s, a record at the time, but also all those races in the sport's other disciplines, in radically different cars: the Daytona 500 stock car race; and the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the 24 Hours of Daytona (twice) and the 12 Hours of Sebring, all sports car races.

"A.J. Foyt is the greatest driver that I ever knew," says NASCAR's own enduring legend, Junior Johnson. "The best all-around. He could drive anything, anywhere, anytime. Won in about everything he ever sat down in."

Bobby Unser is retired from driving, doing television commentary on racing, and he knows all the fine younger drivers—his nephew, Al Unser Jr., and Michael Andretti and Arie Luyendyk—and he wonders just how to tell them about A.J. Foyt, about how he used to drive a race car, this paunchy old crock who walks around with the limp and the scars and the bald spot on the back of his pate. Bobby Unser can close his eyes and see Ascot and Langhorne and Milwaukee and Springfield, Ill., and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and he can see the high bank of Turn 3 in Michigan, where Foyt came down on him, instantly but oh so gently at 165 mph, and nudged him straight.

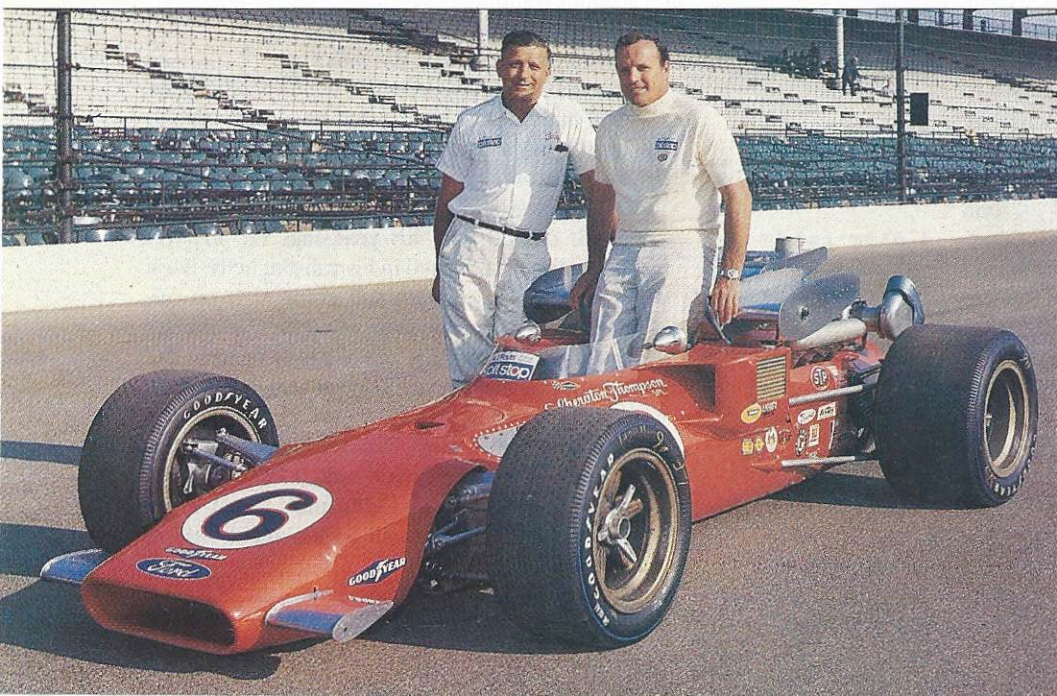
"And that, my friend, is talent," says Unser. "That a person can do that, from instinct, so fast! You don't find that nowadays. Who would have that kind of experience? How could the young drivers, like my nephew or Arie Luyendyk, know how good A.J. Foyt was? He was *really* talented. But how in the hell could they know? They have no idea. They say, 'Oh, he won four Indys and Daytona and Le Mans. . . .' But they don't *really* know. None of them saw the old A.J. The real A.J. The great A.J. Foyt."

Mid-afternoon, and the old A.J., the real A.J., is holding the wheel of his black Honda Accord and tooling along a country road northwest of Houston, beyond the White Oak Bayou toward a setting sun. It is June 25, and the real A.J. Foyt hasn't won an Indy Car race in 10 years, since the Pocono 500 on June 21, 1981—the longest day of the year, of course, and the perfect

omen to usher in the longest twilight in the annals of the sport. His mother, Evelyn, had died of heart failure that spring of 1981—on the night, in fact, that A.J. qualified for the Indy 500—and two years later, in 1983, he would lose his father to cancer, also on the night he qualified at Indy.

"Weird, isn't it?" Foyt says as his hands make almost imperceptible corrections on the steering wheel. "The way they both passed away. They lived to see me make the race, and that was it. I came home, talked to them, they closed their eyes. They died about the same time, 10 minutes till 10."

Foyt is driving out to his ranch, the 1,500-acre spread where he raises cattle for market and thoroughbred horses



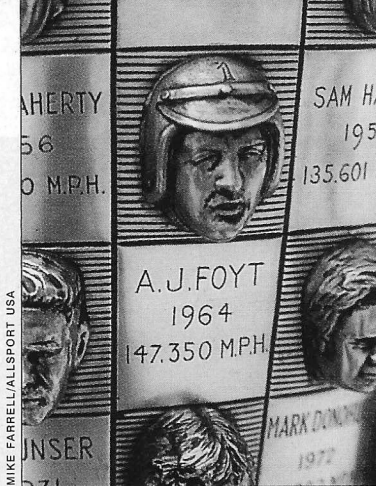
COURTESY INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY

FOYT

es for racing and breeding. Where, above the workshop door, untouched, Foyt keeps the symbol of his father's hold on him. If the loss of his mother devastated the man—"A.J. was a momma's boy," says his wife, Lucy. "She just idolized him"—the death of his father left him adrift, benumbed by a grief that perhaps he will never shake. "It took a long time," says Lucy. "It took a long time to sink in. He'll never get over the loss."

Even today, Foyt often speaks of his father, at times eerily, in the present tense, as if Tony were waiting for him out at the ranch. "My daddy's a pretty good-sized guy," he is saying as the Honda rolls along. "Not that big, but stout. His damn fingers are"—A.J. holds up a thumb and index finger touching in a circle at their tips—"that big around. Daddy'd give you the shirt off his back. If he didn't like you, don't mess with him. He believes in talking straight, not that phony stuff. He's just that type of guy."

So, of course, A.J. likes to spin those tales about the old man. About how tough and honest and ornery he was . . . about how loyal he was to those he counted as family and friends . . . about how hard he had worked up through the Depression and how no one had ever pushed him around . . . about the afternoon in the pits at Indianapolis when, angered by a persistent TV reporter, Tony dropped his wrenches and went after him, leaping over tires and fuel hoses, with A.J. leaping right behind him, chasing him chasing the reporter and yelling, "No, Daddy! No. Don't hit him, Daddy! No, Daddy. No. No. No" . . . about how the old man rarely spared the rod with the boy when he was growing up: "I never got that many whippings, but, whew, when I did, my daddy



Foyt's was the first face to appear four times on the Borg-Warner Indy trophy.

tore my ass up" . . . about the race where Tony, an automobile mechanic by trade, was doing tech inspection and he caught his son cheating: "He saw what I did, which I didn't think he would, and I won the race but he disqualified the car. I was mad as hell. . . . He didn't care if I was his son or not."

About how the old man never, but never, praised the son for anything he ever did in a race car, not even after A.J. won that record fourth Indy 500, in 1977 . . . and about how he and the old man could barely speak, after all they had been through together, when Tony was on his deathbed in the hospital and the doctor left them alone and A.J. bit his lip and said, "Well, Daddy, you know everything about me. . . ."

Foyt swings the Honda off the road and through the gates to the ranch, slowing as he reaches the asphalt drive, pointing here left and there right as he cruises past the wooden fences, clean

and painted white, and the neatly tended pastures. "You're looking at the guy who dug all those postholes," he says. "I dug every hole. You're looking at the guy who painted all this white fence, by himself. You're looking at the guy who built that training track. I built this all up. You're looking at the guy who planted this pasture . . . who cleared all this land, with a bulldozer. And burned it. You're looking at the man who laid this road after he won at Phoenix, '65 . . . put up all these running sheds for the mares and these cattle pens over here. I cleared it all. You're looking at him right now."

He edges the Honda down the road that lines the fields, where bands of broodmares, some with suckling foals at their sides, are grazing with the cattle. Past the watering troughs and the hay barn, up past the oaks and the pond with a jetty reaching out almost to the middle of it. "My father wired all this, ran the lights," Foyt says, his arm sweeping the pens and sheds. "I dug the pond. See that strip of land? I built that so my mother could drive her little motor home out there and fish off it. I got it stocked with bass. Call it Nanny's Lake. . . ."

Up beyond Nanny's Lake, Foyt pulls off the road and parks the car next to the large, orange workshop. Stepping inside the shed, he points straight up, to the runners on which the sliding doors operated. "This was the last building that Daddy wired before he died," says Foyt. "I closed the door one day and looked up and there it was. I thought, 'I'll be goddamned! There's that hammer I've been looking for for over a year. I said to one of the workers, 'You're not going to believe where the old man left that

hammer. Look right above your head.' Daddy left it up there and I ain't never taking it down."

Because the ranch was where he and his father worked side by side, A.J. moving the earth, Tony doing the plumbing and the wiring, today it serves as a kind of monument to their work—the hedges trimmed and the lawns edged and clipped around a spacious brick house that sits on a circular drive behind stone gates crowned with concrete horses' heads. The ranch is Foyt's personal dig. He is out there, on the seat of that chuffing bulldozer, trying to unearth what he still surely longs for, as if father love were some lost city and he will find it if he just keeps digging. So, to be sure, the place represents, for him, an unending search for the missing and inexpressible. Five years ago, a friend of Foyt's, commentator Jack Arute of ABC and ESPN, asked him to define "love, love of your family."

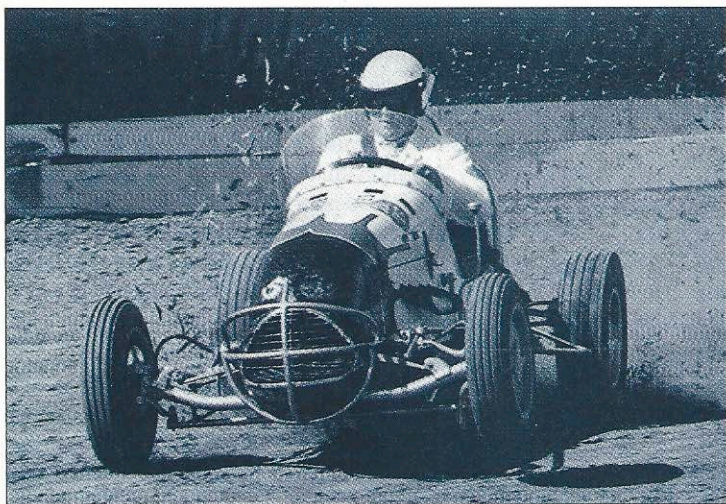
Foyt replied: "It's hard for me to. . . . I probably don't show partiality to nobody. No individual that much. I've had a lot of people say, 'You just don't love nobody.' I guess I do, but I guess I'm kind of like my father. It's hard for me to show. . . . But I don't know. I've worked all my life. And I guess what I have love for more than anything is work. I love to get on my bulldozer. I love to take land and clear it and try to make it pretty. I also love the challenges of business."

Anthony Joseph Foyt Jr. may have been his mother's boy, but he is his father's son. He has been challenging his corner of the world, largely on his own terms, since he first crawled into the little red open-wheel racer, with the Briggs-Stratton engine, that

his father gave him to patrol the yard in when he was three. When he wore that out, Tony built him a midget-type racer that could hit 50 mph, and one night, at the old Houston Speed Bowl, Tony arranged for A.J. to challenge one of the leading adult drivers, Doc Cossey, to a three-lap duel. Little A.J. led Cossey into the first turn, to the cheering of the crowds, threw it sideways into the dirt corners, to even louder roars, and came charging home in front, to an ovation.

He was five. And, for then and forever, a race car driver.

The family lived in the Heights, a working-class section in



Foyt became
a master
at broadsliding
a dirt-track
car through
a turn.

north Houston, across the street from a pickle factory and not far from the garage where Tony worked on other people's cars—he kept his own race cars at home. A.J. spent hours at his father's knee, poking under hoods and chassis, learning how things all worked. "When I was a little bitty kid, I'd do anything, just to be with him," A.J. says. Just as his mother embraced him, so his father disciplined him. "A.J. was definitely

very afraid of his dad," says Lucy. When A.J. was 11, with the help of friends he took his father's midget race car off the trailer, fired up the flathead Ford V-8 and rode it around the yard like a cowboy on a bull, nearly tearing off a corner of the house and turning the yard into a plowed field. The ride ended when the engine burst into flames, bubbling the paint on the hood.

Waiting for the whipping, A.J. was in bed when his parents came home that night, and he could hear his father roaring toward the bedroom. Tony snatched him out of bed, and the boy could hear his mother pleading, "Please don't whip him, please don't whip him," and above that his father yelling, "You do something like that again, I'll beat you to death!"

Five years later, A.J. committed that most unpardonable of all sins in the eyes of his father. The boy and some friends were hot-rodding around Houston in A.J.'s 1950 Ford when the police spotted them and gave chase. A friend was doing the driving, A.J. says, and he asked him to pull over. When the other boy kept gunning it, Foyt says, "I jumped out of the car." The boys eventually ditched the Ford, and the police picked it up. When the old man asked his son about the car—Tony had bought it for

him and was still making payments on it—that was when A.J. did it. He lied to his father. "It was stolen," A.J. said. Of course, the police soon found out what had happened, called the boys in and advised them that their fathers had been summoned.

Given a choice, A.J. would have opted for the gallows. "Just put me in the reform school," he said. "I don't want to see my daddy. I lied to him. He always said he'd beat me to death for lying. *Unmercifully!* Please, just let me go. . . ."

Tony arrived at the station house with a face of stone. He listened as the officer explained that they were not filing charges against A.J., and they were going to release him. "He's a good boy," the officer said. "Even though he lied to you."

Tony glanced over at his frozen son. "That's right," Tony said. "He lied to me."

A.J. began to say his prayers and the police answered. They were releasing him, they told Tony, on one condition: "That you will not lay a hand on him."

The old man thought about that a moment but finally agreed. Recalls A.J.: "I thought, *'Thank you, Lord!'* We got in his car. I can still remember it, '49 Mercury, metallic-green convertible with a Cadillac motor. I got in the right side. I thought, 'Any minute, I'm going to spit all my teeth out. He's going to bust me upside my head.'" Tony never laid a hand on his son. What he did, if you were 16 years old and you loved cars, was worse.

"You know that car you've got?" Tony said.

"Yessir. . . ."

"It's going to sit in the driveway for *one* year."

"Daddy. . . ."

"Shut up! One year. Every day after school, you catch that bus and be at my shop at 3:30."

And there the Ford stayed, idle in the driveway while the old man worked to pay it off, and nothing could persuade him to reduce the sentence. Tony Foyt was old school, a quiet, strong, stubborn Texan who brooked no nonsense and catered no small talk. Says Tim Delrose, a longtime family friend, "If Tony said something and A.J. asked him, 'What did you say?' Tony would say, 'You heard me.'" The old man worked obsessively. One evening he was laying a septic field at the ranch. A.J.'s crew had the cars all set to drive to a race up in Bryan, Texas. They were getting anxious. Tony wouldn't be rushed.

"It's getting too dark, Daddy," said A.J. "We're not leaving till it's done," the old man said. "Get the cars, A.J., and bring 'em around and shine the lights on me." They all worked into the night, in the glinting headlights. "We finished it," says Delrose.

The old man's extended family adored him. A.J. and Lucy raised three children, all of them grown up now—Anthony Joseph III (Tony), 35, who trains a barnful of racehorses in Kentucky; Terry, 33, a housewife in Houston whose first child, Larry, from an earlier marriage, was adopted by Lucy and A.J.; and Jerry, 28, a graduate of the University of Texas, who is vice-president of his father's Honda dealership near Houston. "My grandfather didn't raise us, but he took care of us if we ever needed anything," young Tony says of his namesake. "They really don't make 'em like him anymore. If he liked you, he would absolutely go out of his way for you."

Foyt viewed himself and his parents as a kind of team, bonded by the hardscrabble life they had endured together in the Heights, in the days they had to scratch to make things go. Early in Foyt's career, when he was out there racing from one

FOYT

bullring to another, sleeping in his car and washing at gasoline stations, he found himself stranded and penniless with a midget car in Florida. He called his parents in the Heights, and they broke the piggy bank and went down to Western Union. “My parents rolled 50 dollars’ worth of pennies and sent me the money to get home,” A.J. says.

Foyt always had this vision of how he would claw his way to the top, earning fame and fortune on the way, and then set his parents up in easy retirement—his mother fishing forever in Nanny’s Lake and his father running the lights and hammering the nails. And the fame came fast enough to A.J. Foyt—first in the dirt cars, the midgets and the sprint cars, and then the Indy Cars and the stockers and, finally, the sports cars. Foyt was 26 years old when he won his first Indy, in 1961, but by then he was known throughout the sport as this hard-charging, bandanna-flying, damn-the-torpedoes kid who could drive the paint off the midgets and the sprint cars.

“He was the best midget car racer ever,” says George Bignotti, Foyt’s chief mechanic when he won at Indy in 1961 and ’64, who raced midgets with A.J. beginning in ’59. “Start him in the back of 12 cars and drop the flag, and in five or 10 laps he’d be leading the race. He *wanted* to win. Very aggressive. He was fantastic in the midgets.”

Those were the days when dirt-track racing was a major element in motor sports, when even the big Indy-type cars raced over the dirt and shot out rooster tails of dirt and stone behind them. Says Foyt: “Some of the hardest races I ever had—been so tired and beat up with blood running out of my eye and all—have been sprint races on the dirt. Got out of there many a time and there’d be just solid blood on my shoulder and around my face. They’d run those big old knobby tires, and they just dug and threw stones and dirt, just like a guy shot you with a shotgun. Hands as raw as hamburger. Now that hurt. God, I’d like to see some of the Indy Car drivers today get in a sprint car

At five, little
A.J. took on
Cossey, a top
local driver, in
a midget
racer—and won.

and I have a set of knobs and I’d just sweep by ’em. I guarantee you. I have had my face shield and my goggles knocked clean off my face, sheared right off my helmet—*tat-tat-tat-tat*—just like a machine gun.”

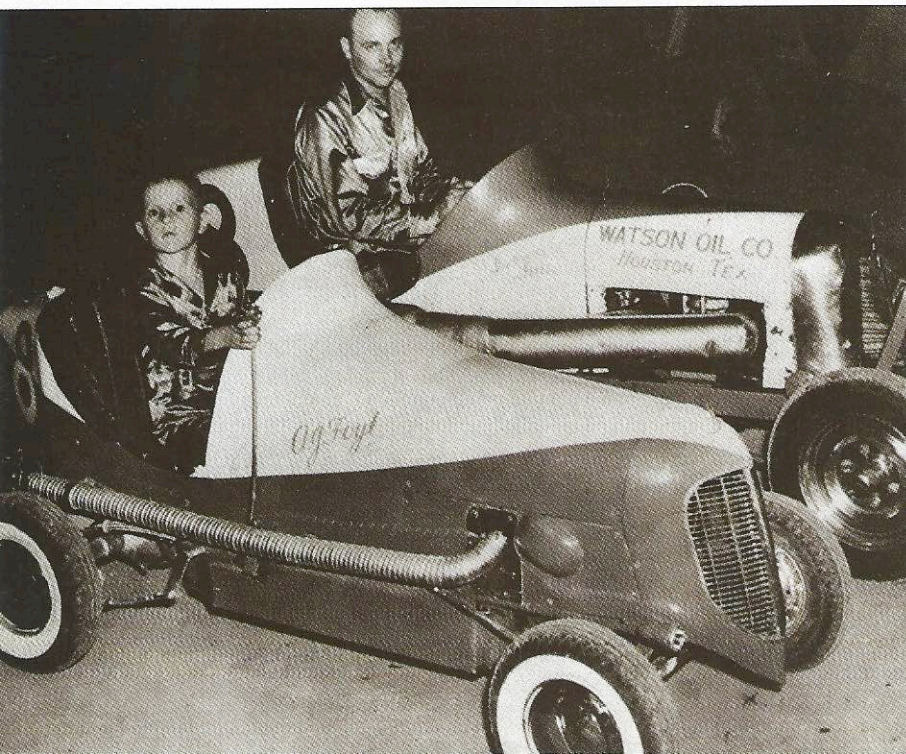
“Watching Foyt on the dirt was like watching a concert,” says Cecil Taylor, a car owner and mechanic who first saw him race in 1956. “Artistry in motion. It was a beautiful thing to watch. He’d be running fast and be sitting back in the car like in a rocking chair, all relaxed and everything under control, with those clods flying up. Those were *men* who drove those cars, in those days; they weren’t boys. And A.J., he was the Man.”

He was the Man through two decades, the 1960s and into the ’70s, the years he developed a constituency of racing fans who saw him then, as they still see him today, as a folk hero and pioneer, a kind of throwback. The perception is central to his enduring appeal as the tough, rugged individualist building his cars and driving them himself; the mean, self-reliant loner doing battle against the Organization Men, the Roger Penskes and the Carl Haases; the aging, outspoken guy taking on the aerodynamacists and engineers and pale little men with computers.

They saw him when he was the Man. They saw him in Langhorne that day when he was racing on the lead with three or four laps to run and a bolt fell out of the radius rod—a part of the car’s suspension—and the rod flew right up next to him. “And Foyt sticks his hand out,” Bignotti recalls, “and gets the radius rod in one hand, and he comes by and has his knee on the steering wheel to keep it straight. The sonofagun drove that car and won the race, holding the radius rod with one hand and driving the car with the other. The people all saw that.”

They watched him, with a touch of awe, when he raced his dirt car on the pavement against all those Indy pavement cars in Milwaukee, in 1965, just a day after he’d won a dirt race with it in Springfield, Ill. “He went out and put the dirt car on the pole,” says driver Johnny Rutherford. “That was unheard of. Over cars designed *specifically* for pavement. It endeared him to the masses.” Particularly when the masses saw him nearly pull it off: “Come the start,” says Foyt, “and I’m sitting waaaay up here and everybody else is sittin’ waaaay down there. After every yellow flag I’d take the lead. Accelerate past everybody. Then they’d run me down. Finally blistered a right rear tire. Damn near won the race. Ran second.”

And they saw him crush his bones at Elkhart Lake and remember him saying, “Fire can make a dead man move.” They stood in horror in DuQuoin, in 1972, the day he was leading the dirt track race by a lap, with only five to go, and he pitted for a squirt of fuel and the fuel hose broke loose and doused his head with two gallons of alcohol-nitro mixture. “I figured it would evaporate,” Foyt says. “The exhaust pipes coming out the side, sometimes they burp fire, and when they did, I went up in flames like a Buddhist monk. I’d already left the pits, and I tried to jump from the car because I was burning, goddam, and when I jumped out of the car, I didn’t have it stopped, and I fell in front of my left rear wheel, so it run over my left foot and it twisted and flipped me in the air, and I was still burning. I knew the infield had a lake in it, and so I’m trying to run for the lake, in a panic, and I’m limping on my ankle, like a horse with a broken leg, and my daddy was running after me with a fire extinguisher, and as I hit the inside



COURTESY A.J. FOYT

guardrail, I fell over it, and my daddy squirted me with the extinguisher and put the fire out. Whew! My face was burned, and the docs told me, 'You won't have no beard.' And I said, 'Who gives a —?' ”

They saw him beat on his cars with hammers, in a rage, and snarl at the press and stomp through the pits. They heard him say whatever came to mind. He was trying to qualify a March chassis in 1983 at Indy and going nowhere. The public address announcer asked him what the problem was, and Foyt blurted, "This car I'm driving is just a tub a ——" Robin Miller, a sportswriter for *The Indianapolis Star*, recalls looking over and seeing the reaction of Robin Herd, a co-founder of March Engineering: "Herd is sitting on the pit wall with his head in his hands. The Great American Legend just called his car a tub of —." They all knew how Foyt and Bignotti used to carry on, fighting and shouting at one another. They sometimes fought so much that they forgot to celebrate. Rutherford recalls a time when Foyt, after winning a feature race in a sprint car that Bignotti had built, pulled into the pits, took off his helmet, threw it in the seat and yelled, "Goddammit, George, I'm getting tired of driving my ass off to make you look good. . . ."

For years Foyt has been the most intimidating presence in motor racing, and there are few drivers out there who have not felt at least a gust of his passing heat. In 1982, in his rookie year at Indy, Bobby Rahal was coming out of a turn with Foyt right behind him. "I didn't cut him off," says Rahal, "but I think he expected me to move out of his way, and I didn't. And he shook his fist at me as he went by. But, you know, you're nobody unless you've had a fist shaken at you by A.J. Foyt."

As volatile as he can be outside a race car, no driver has ever seen him lose the handle on himself in a race car. "He tried to be, and was, very intimidating," says Mario Andretti, 51, Foyt's most enduring rival. "And I've had my run-ins with him. A lot of them. But I'll tell you one thing: I've never, ever, ever seen him do anything foolish out on a racetrack. Never. I've seen occasions in a race where he could have gotten carried away, but I have never seen his emotions get the best of him."

To be sure, most drivers who have known him long do not buy into the man's image as a distant, fearsome, unapproachable presence in the garages. Like his father before him, Foyt chooses his friends sparingly, but he will do most anything for



GEORGE TIEDEMANN

Foyt was in the front row at this year's Indy in spite of his Elkhart Lake injuries of '90.

those he chooses. All these years later, Al Unser Sr. still can't figure why Foyt picked him. It was 1965, Unser's rookie year at Indy, and the last of his cars had blown up and he was resigned to not making the show. And there, in Unser's garage, appeared Foyt, who had already won Indy twice and had two fast cars ready for the race.

"You want to run my backup car?"

A.J. asked. "Think it over and come to my garage."

Unser followed him like a puppy through clapboard rows of garages that made up Gasoline Alley. He finished ninth that year in Foyt's car, and he went on to win the 500 four times in the next 22 years, tying Foyt for most Indy victories. "I've often wondered why the man did a thing like that," Unser says. "It has meant a lot to me over the years. I wasn't anything, and there were experienced drivers standing in line to get in that backup car. For some reason he picked me. I still don't know why. He's just like that. He looks at somebody and likes them."

Rutherford was another. He was running an Indy Car in Phoenix in 1968, and he hit an oil slick and then a fence and spun to a stop. Andretti and Roger McCluskey hit the slick, too. McCluskey's car spun Rutherford's sideways, and Andretti's slammed into the right side of Rutherford's. It burst into flames. Rutherford put his hands on the sides of the cockpit to push himself out, and the leather glove on his right hand shrunk instantly in the ferocious heat of the burning fuel. He pulled the glove from his hand. Much of the skin on his fingers slid off with the glove, the skin turning inside out and hanging like tubes from his hand. Foyt came running from the pits and looked at Rutherford and hollered, "Goddamn!"

"A.J., my feet are burning," Rutherford screamed. The laces on his shoes were smoldering like wicks. Foyt dropped to his knees and, with a fingernail, raked down the burning laces until they popped open. Turning, he saw McCluskey lying on a stretcher, slightly dazed. Foyt, an immensely strong man, picked McCluskey up off the litter and handed him to a medic. "You're not hurt that bad, Roger," A.J. said. He laid Rutherford on the empty stretcher and followed the ambulance to the hospital. When the doctor finally showed up, Foyt bellowed, "Where the hell you been?"

"I was mowing my yard," the doctor said.

Rutherford thought Foyt might lay the doctor out right there. "If looks could kill. . . ." he said.

Foyt never left Rutherford that day. He helped wheel him out of the hospital after Rutherford's burns had been treated. He helped him into the car. And he was driving him back to the hotel when Rutherford, nauseated from medication, started to get sick. Foyt pulled over, jumped



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out, whipped open the passenger door, and then held Rutherford's forehead as he vomited into a ditch. "That O.K.?" Foyt kept asking. "You feeling better?"

That was nearly 25 years ago, but Rutherford still thinks about Phoenix. "I'll never forget that, ever," he says. "Lot of people classify him as an s.o.b., but he's far from it. He's a pussy cat. With people he knows who are in need or in trouble. . . ."

As Tony Foyt was. He was dying in the winter of '83. For nearly 20 years, since A.J. and Bignotti had gone their separate ways, the old man had been his son's chief mechanic. Together, with cars they built back in Houston, they had won the Indy 500 twice, in 1967 and '77. "They fought with each other, they cursed each other, and they went everywhere together," says Delrose. "They drove down all the roads. How many times do you see a thing like that between a father and son? But they had that."

Through the years, Tony was the only figure of authority who could command his son's undivided respect, the only man who ever demanded and set limits for him, the only man who could ever stand up to him. A.J. has a galactic ego—"It swelled up too many years ago and stayed there," says Bobby Unser—and at times it is suggested that the way he carries on is like a prolonged case of the Terrible Twos. Taylor, who works frequently on Foyt's pit crew, recalls the aftermath of a frustrating practice session at Indy in the late '60s. When the car was rolled back into the garage, A.J. threw a tantrum that stunned even his crew to

As the sun sets
over his ranch,
Foyt can look
back on an
unparalleled
driving career.

silence. Tony came forward and grabbed his son and slammed him up against a wall. "What the hell's wrong with you, boy?" he demanded. "You gone crazy?"

Only Tony could have gotten away with that. "He was the only guy I ever saw that could really deal with A.J.," says Taylor. "What A.J. probably didn't realize is that Tony was not only his father, but probably his best friend, his mentor, his team and fi-

nancial manager, just a whole lot of people rolled into one." "Tony was the rock," says Delrose "His dad controlled him. He'd fire at the drop of a hat if anybody said anything against A.J. They loved each other. But they just didn't show it."

Tony never told A.J. how proud he was of his son's race car driving. Not one word of praise in all the years they were together. Not once in all the victory lanes they ever visited. Not even after that final victory at the Brickyard. Says A.J., "After I won, the crew was drinking and blowing their horns on how they did this and how they did that, and I said, 'Well, Daddy, what do you think? Did I do a pretty good job today?'"

Tony turned and grinned. "I don't know about good," the old man said. "You did fair. . . ."

"That's the best words I ever heard from you," said his son.

In the winter of 1983, Foyt resisted all entreaties that he run in the 24-hour race at Daytona. He hadn't driven an endurance race since he and Dan Gurney had taken Le Mans in 1967. He did not want to leave his dying father, but Tony had insisted. "There ain't a damn thing you can do sitting around here," the old man said. "Go down there and have some fun. Get out of here."

Reluctantly, A.J. left. When the car he was supposed to drive broke down, another car owner, Preston Henn, urged him to jump in his Porsche 935. "I've never driven a Porsche," A.J. protested. "I don't even know the shift pattern."

There was a derelict Porsche sitting nearby, and Henn persuaded Foyt to sit behind the wheel and learn the pattern. With Bob Wollek as his co-driver, Foyt raced to victory at Daytona. After the grueling event Foyt remembers thinking what he had never thought before: *If I never won another race, I wouldn't care.*

It all seemed so quick and unfair. So quick that Tony forgot to put away the hammer, the one he left above A.J.'s head, and so unfair that it would grieve and trouble the son for years. "And a lot of times I get tears in my eyes," A.J. would say. "I know it's silly. But it's like I lost something that I never really had. You know, it's kind of like a dream. Am I in a dream? Am I going to wake up or what? I guess I lost it all so quick. . . . We all worked our butts off, and when my parents can finally turn around and have life easy, everything was just swept out from under 'em."

It left A. J. trapped in an unending search. . . .

Not long before the old man died, in a hospital room in Houston, Tony's doctor, Gary Friedman, gave two generations of Foyts his final notice at bedside: "If you have anything to say to each other, or you're holding back, I think maybe you ought to say it. I'll wait outside."

Friedman left, and A.J. began to bite his lip.

"I've assigned the accounts over to you," Tony said. "You know everything. You know what I want you to do. What do you think?"

A.J. could hardly speak. "Well, Daddy, things aren't working like we hoped."

"I know it," said Tony.

"You have anything you want to talk about?"

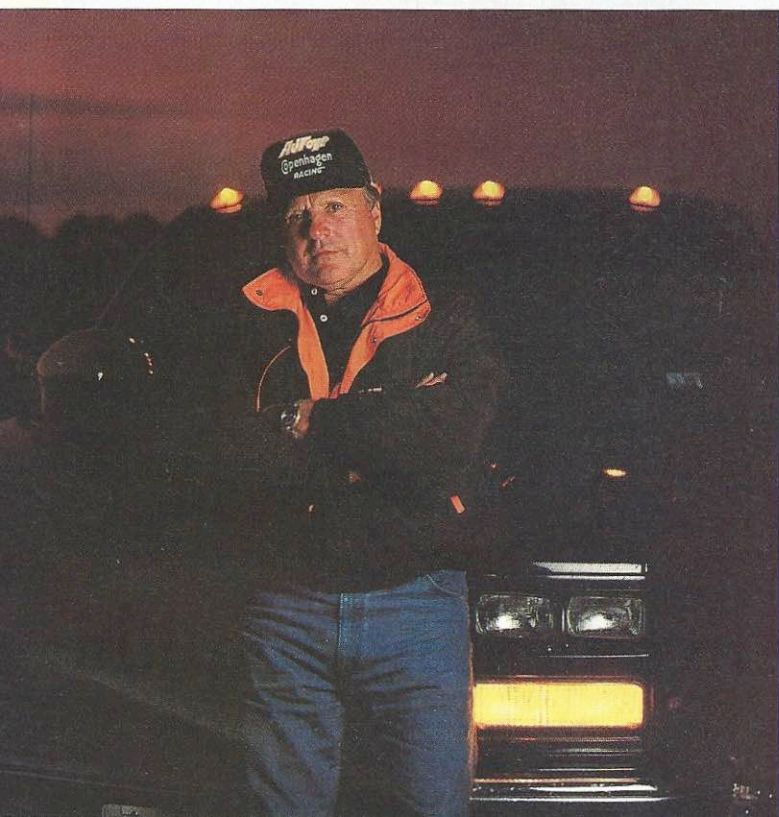
"No, not really," Tony said.

"Well, I don't really have much to say. If anything ever happens, I'll do what I can to try to carry on."

"I know that," Tony said. "But don't worry about things."

"Are you *sure* you ain't got something to tell me?"

"No," the old man said. "I've told you everything." ■



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