

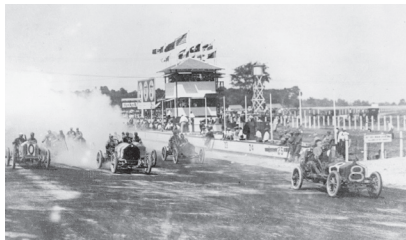
Throughout most of the Speedway's history, the Indianapolis 500 was the sole race on the storied track's annual calendar. Times changed, and the Racing Capital of the World responded to the sport's growth with premiere events such as the United States Grand Prix (Formula One) and Brickyard 400 (NASCAR Nextel Cup Series). Far from a break with tradition, this is another example of the more things change, the more they stay the same. Indeed, one of the Speedway's busiest years came very early in its history, way back in 1910.

SPEEDWAY'S

1910

story by | Mark Dill
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BUSIEST
year



(above) The original crushed rock and tar surface used for the first meets in 1909 proved to be hazardous.

(below) Balloon races were the first events held at the track in June, 1909.

inaugural races at the Speedway in August 1909 were disastrous. The track's crushed rock and tar surface was not up to the pounding of 2,000-pound racers and deterioration produced hazards resulting in the deaths of one driver, two mechanics and two spectators. Speedway founders, led by the indomitable Carl Fisher, re-grouped to build the most advanced track in the world.

By December, the track was a brick-paved wonder at a cost of more than \$150,000. The founders' total investment in the Speedway was significant: \$700,000, which equates to \$14 million today. An aggressive calendar for 1910 was planned to put the track on solid financial footing. Always ambitious, Fisher drove his team to schedule race meets on the three summer holidays as well as a 24-hour race, an aviation show and a balloon race.

THE MAY RACES

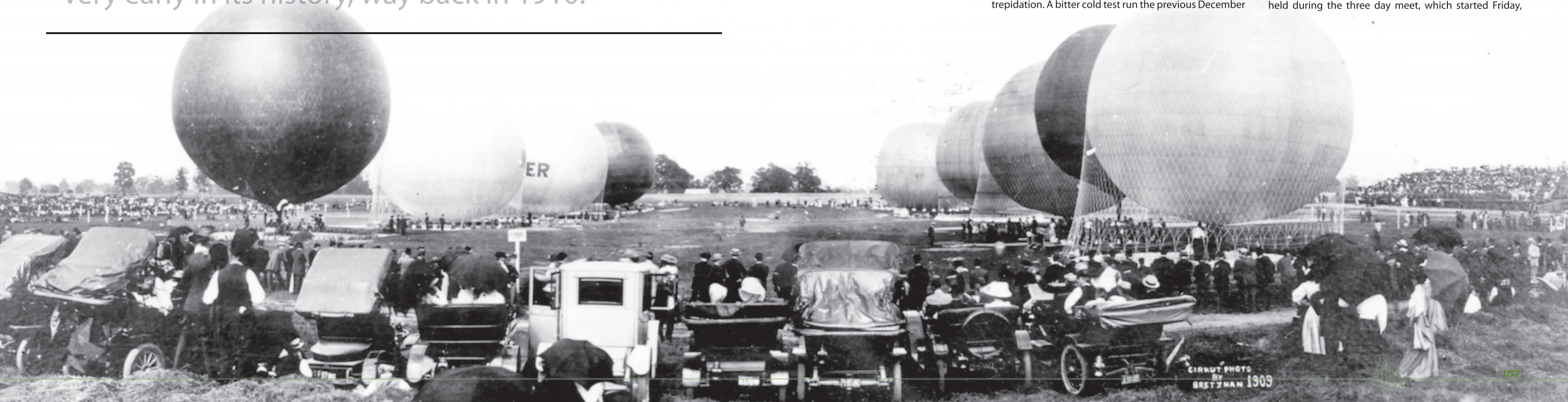
Expectations for the first race meet, held over the Memorial Day weekend, were high and not without trepidation. A bitter cold test run the previous December

proved the brick surface was outstanding, but the August event still left much to live down.

Promoter extraordinaire, Ernest Moross, who managed the career of the country's most famous – and flamboyant – racer, Barney Oldfield, was the Speedway's Director of Contests. Moross planned schedules and dreamed up creative entertainment, such as a deal with the Overland Automobile Company to conduct "hazard races."

Several Overland cars scaled 15-foot wood ramps before bouncing through the creek ditch in the southwest corner and scooting onto the bricks for a lap around the course. Overland also participated in another attraction, by presenting a gold-plated touring car to the driver busting off the fastest mile of the season. This eventually went to the big talking, cigar chomping Oldfield, who set a 35.6-second track mile record (101.1 mph) on May 30. Dubbed the "Lightning Benz," his car was nearly as huge a drawing card as its famous driver. Oldfield set a 131 mph world land's speed record in the raucous, 200 HP chain driven monster just two months earlier at Ormond-Daytona Beach in Florida.

Twenty-five races and three time trial sessions were held during the three day meet, which started Friday,





(above) **Left-Right: Arthur Newby, Frank Wheeler, Carl Fisher, James Allison. The four founders of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.**

May 27 and ended Monday, May 30 with no action on the Sabbath. Typical of track races of the era, most of the events were five to ten mile sprint runs between just three to eight cars. Most important were the Wheeler-Schebler Trophy for 200 miles, the 100-mile Prest-O-Lite Trophy and the 50-mile Remy Brassard (an armband) and Trophy.

Wheeler-Schebler was a carburetor company headed by Speedway co-founder Frank Wheeler and its race drew the largest starting field of 19 cars. Prest-O-Lite was a compressed gas headlight manufacturer led by Fisher and another Speedway co-founder, James Allison. Remy was a magneto company.

The big event of the opening day was the Prest-O-Lite Trophy, won by 23 year-old Tommy Kincaid in a National, an Indianapolis company whose president was the fourth Speedway co-founder, Arthur C. Newby. A sprint race carrying special significance was the five-mile run for the Speedway Helmet won by Bob Burman, a prize that carried a \$50 weekly salary until its defense at the July meet.

Ray Harroun, who won both the Wheeler-Schebler and the Remy Brassard, was the star of the meet. Custody of the \$10,000 Wheeler-Schebler trophy, of Tiffany design, was awarded to the manufacturer of the winning car, a Marmon Wasp. Likewise, Remy presented Marmon with their \$2,500 trophy. Harroun received \$1,000 for winning the 200-miler, and a \$75 weekly “salary” from Remy until July. The Remy Brassard was an armband adorned with a silver badge.

By every measurement, the new brick track lived up to expectations. Blazingly fast, twenty-eight speed records were established for various classes of car according to weight and engine displacement. Large crowds set records for track racing, too, with estimates for Memorial Day hitting 60,000 and over 100,000 for the three days combined. Most importantly, the track was now the safest in the world with only one driver injured, Charles Merz.

The races were not without controversy, as the governing American Automobile Association (AAA) banned several entries from the stock car events, which made up the bulk of the card. To qualify, manufacturers had to produce at least 25 cars of the model they entered. The AAA judged some companies fell short, the most significant being Buick, with star drivers Bob Burman and Louis Chevrolet. As a result, they could only race in the “free-for-all” classification, which accepted cars built for racing. Unfortunately for Buick, these were not the biggest races.

THE AVIATION SHOW

After Memorial Day, no time was lost in getting ready for the Aviation Show, scheduled for June 13 through 19. Wilbur and Orville Wright’s planes arrived June 7. Of the eleven entries, the Wright brothers owned six.

The Speedway had a transformed look, with the erection of an “aerodrome” to house planes. At its entrance was a wooden “monorail,” a guide with a groove cut in it to launch the Wright planes because they used skid pads instead of wheels. American flags marked a course in the infield and judges assessed how well pilots stayed within its parameters as they did “laps.” Wing-to-wing competition was too dangerous, so competitors started at different points on the course and raced to see who closed the gap.

As the first licensed aviation meet in America, the event was historical. This was the first public demonstration of aviation in Indiana – it was still a marvel to see machines fly. Carl Fisher, flying with Orville Wright, became one of the earliest passengers in aviation.

An exhilarated but humbled Speedway President confessed to a white-knuckle experience, “I’ve had enough. If there are no dents in the framework where I had it gripped it is because I couldn’t squeeze hard enough.”

Romantic accounts of Orville Wright soaring to lofty heights at dusk and peering over the horizon to see the sun after darkness coated the ground below mesmerized Indianapolis. Inexperience among the pilots, called birdmen by the press, reflected the nascent nature of aviation. Walter Brookins, the Wright’s 21-year-old star, had only taken up flying three months prior. All the more astounding, then, was the daring of young Brookins, who, on Monday, June 13, took a 40-foot wingspan plane made of balloon silk stretched over a spruce wood frame to a new world’s altitude record at 4,384.5 feet.

Monday was beautiful but the rest of the week offered intermittent rain and turbulence. With planes more temperamental than race cars, Speedway management offered “wind checks” as well as traditional rain checks. Pilots found a happy hour late in the day when conditions calmed but they still had light. Just past 6:30 Friday, Brookins ascended to new heights, breaking his four day-old record to reach 4,938 feet. More thrilling, his engine failed on his descent and he glided the plane at the mercy of the wind, landing some four miles north of the Speedway, unhurt.

First day attendance disappointed, but news of Brookins’ bold moves attracted a respectable crowd of 19,000



(above) **Spectators gather around a bi-plane sitting on the track during the June air shows.**



(above) **Bob Burman, winner of races in May and July of 1910.**



by Wednesday. Of interest, too, was another creative promotion done in cooperation again with Overland. The Indianapolis auto company fashioned a novelty car called a Wind Wagon. Its engine powered an eight-foot wooden propeller at the rear, mounted on a chain-driven shaft and positioned high enough to clear the ground. The car raced airplanes around the brick oval, losing a close finish on Tuesday.

THE JULY RACES

Cars began practice for the July 1-4 race meet less than ten days after the aviation show. The AAA announced the reinstatement of the Buick team. Their star, Bob Burman, won the big opening day event, the 50-mile G & J Tire Company Trophy. The ten-mile, free-for-all Speedway Helmet race was again staged, this time won by Benz driver Eddie Hearne.

Burman returned the following day, July 2, to nail down another stock car victory in the Remy Brassard. But the biggest of all 26 events over three days was the 200-mile Ira Cobe Trophy won by Marmon's 20 year-old Joe Dawson over 14 competitors on July 4. Called the "Vanderbilt of the West," after the famous Vanderbilt Cup races ran on Long Island, New York, the \$3,000 Cobe Trophy was sponsored by Ira M. Cobe, President of the Chicago Automobile Club. Cobe's inaugural event, won by Louis Chevrolet, was held in Crown Point, Indiana in 1909.

While racing was outstanding and 39 new records were established, attendance was off. Only 6,000 fans came opening day, and an estimated 20,000 appeared on the July 4th holiday. Management took immediate steps to increase the appeal of the next event. They canceled a 24-hour race and a balloon race scheduled for August, and trimmed the Labor Day program to two days from three.

Ernie Moross traveled to Europe in an appeal to their manufacturers to come to Indiana for the September race, but yielded nothing. Aside from Ralph DePalma's Fiat and Hearne's Benz there was no European influence. Later in August, the AAA reversed its earlier decision and disqualified the Buicks from the stock car races. Buick was noticeably absent from the September meet, and the Speedway began to put more emphasis on free-for-all contests. Three days after the Cobe Trophy, Tommy Kincaid became the only fatality of the year when he crashed through a fence on the backstretch while testing. Rumors flew that his National team would pull out of racing and his close friend and teammate, Johnny Aitken would retire.

THE SEPTEMBER RACES

Both National and Aitken came roaring back with victories in the September meet. National driver Howdy Wilcox captured the Remy Brassard 100-miler on opening day, and teammate Aitken won the 200-mile season finale on Labor Day. Eddie Hearne in his Benz was the other star, winning two free-for-all races, the 10-mile Speedway Helmet and a 100-mile event.

Rain plagued the two-day meet, always threatening but clearing just enough to squeeze in 19 events. The 200-mile finale played out under dark cloud cover



(above) The peculiar "Wind Wagon."

punctuated by bright flashes of lightning. Attendance suffered, with estimates ranging between 15,000 and 20,000. A downtown Labor Day parade staged by the city competed for attention, drawing 75,000 according to police estimates.

Fisher's active imagination was hard at work even before the September meeting as the Speedway announced on September 5 its intentions to hold a big 500-mile event in 1911 with the richest purse in the world. But first, the risk-taking Carl Fisher entered as a competitor in the next event, a balloon race scheduled for September 17.

THE BALLOON RACES

On the afternoon of Friday, September 16, the Indianapolis Gas Company began inflating thirteen balloons in the track's infield at the rate of 40,000 cubic feet an hour. At 3:58 the following day, 6,000 spectators gathered to watch the send off under the direction of the Aero Club of America. The objective was to travel the greatest distance, but they had little influence on their direction. They risked traveling over the Great Lakes in a thunderstorm.

The balloons were of two classes, championship and free-for-all. The nine championship craft were larger, the biggest Alan Hawley's 80,000 cubic foot America II. Hawley won the contest, landing in Virginia. Fisher, in his Indiana II, built by his longtime friend and expert balloonist George Bumbaugh, had a harrowing experience in a thunderstorm. He was grateful to land in Pittsburgh. It was a tumultuous conclusion to a pivotal year for the young Brickyard.



(above) Eddie Hearne had a successful year at the Speedway in 1910, winning in July and August.

(right) The popular balloon races brought thousands of spectators to the Speedway for something other than automobile racing.



(above) Johnny Aitken won the 200-mile race held in August. Aitken would make two "500" starts.

