



main: Jim Hurtubise straps on his helmet at Indianapolis Raceway Park in 1966. The damage to his hands from the 1964 accident is evident. inset: The world's most expensive beer cooler, "The Mallard" in 1972.

HERK

THE DAY HERCULES CONQUERED NASCAR

U L G N

words: Mark Dill

After defying death in a fiery, disfiguring crash at Milwaukee in 1964, Jim Hurtubise's fingers were burned down to tendon and bone. Later, he told doctors struggling to salvage them, "Just shape them so I can grab a steering wheel and hold a bottle of beer." Courage, humor and a free spirit have always been used to describe the man his fans called "Hercules."

The arrival in NASCAR of high-profile open wheel drivers such as Indy 500 and IndyCar Series champions Sam Hornish Jr. and Dario Franchitti is one of racing's big storylines of 2008. Actually, there's a long history of Indy 500 veterans winning in NASCAR's premier series. Fourteen, including Tony Stewart, Tim Richmond, Dick Rathmann, A.J. Foyt, Dan Gurney, Parnelli Jones, Robby Gordon and Mario Andretti, have won major races.

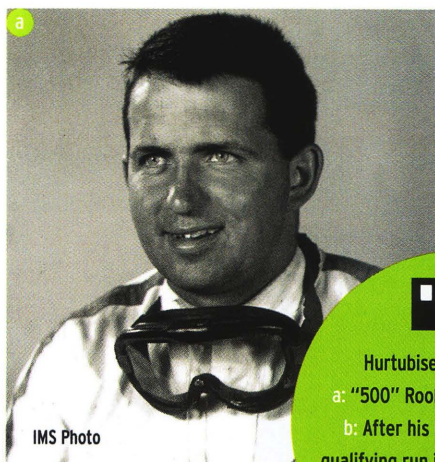
Also among those legendary names is perhaps the most courageous and colorful driver to ever race at the Indianapolis



Motor Speedway: Jim Hurtubise. He was as well known for his irreverent antics as he was for his driving bravado.

Hurtubise turned the racing world upside-down by annihilating the Indianapolis Motor Speedway track record by more than 2 mph as a rookie in 1960. Twelve years later in 1972 after the final day of qualifying, Hurtubise, in the pits, popped the hood of his aging roadster to reveal six cases of beer on ice.

Hurtubise's mix of daring driving and outgoing personality made him a crowd favorite and earned him the nickname "Hercules," or "Herk" for short. Nowhere was his flat-out driving style more evident than in his United States

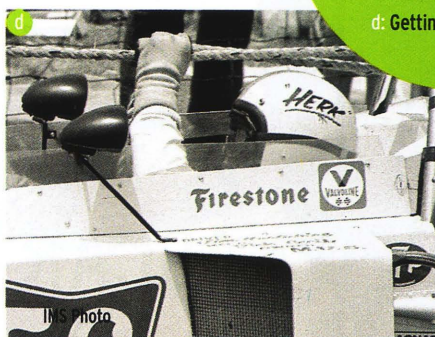


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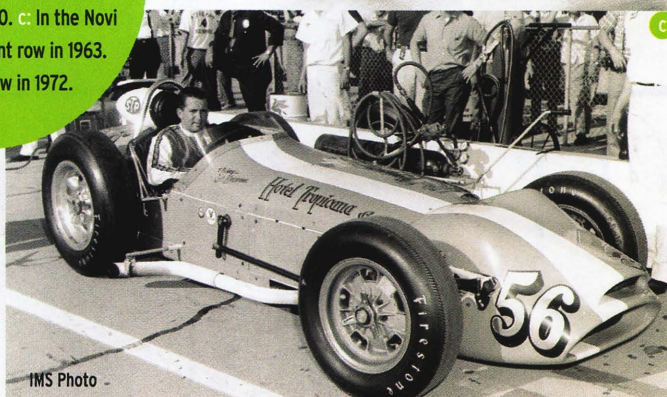
Hurtubise at Indianapolis:
 a: "500" Rookie of the Year, 1960.
 b: After his record-shattering qualifying run in 1960. c: In the Novi that sat on the front row in 1963.
 d: Getting a tow in 1972.



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Auto Club (USAC) sprint car racing days when he amassed 18 victories between 1959 and 1963 against competitors like A.J. Foyt and Parnelli Jones.

Hurtubise was born in North Tonawanda, N.Y. on Dec. 5, 1932, and as a young man traveled west to California on a motorcycle to pursue his ambition of becoming a race driver. Effectively homeless, he and a friend camped in fields and worked until they could afford a trailer. With little money, but an inexhaustible supply of determination, Hurtubise fashioned his first Ford-and-Chevy-powered sprint cars from spare parts dating back to the 1930s.

He competed in the California Racing Association (CRA) on Southern California ovals from 1955 through 1957. From there, he transitioned to the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) sprint car series before entering the USAC big leagues in 1959.

Success in USAC put the 27-year-old rising star's goal of running in the Indianapolis 500 within

reach. His startling qualifying run in 1960 made him a household name among race fans.

Using an unconventional high line to slither through the Speedway's fast corners, Hurtubise had his Travelon Trailer Offenhauser roadster flying. Just a tick of the watch short of the then-amazing 150 mph barrier, Hurtubise raised the one-lap record to 149.601. In the race, an oil leak sidelined him with just 15 laps to go, but a strong effort that had him running fifth at one point netted him Indy's Rookie of the Year honors.

Fearless, Hurtubise could be relied on to deliver if his car could keep up with him. He won front row starting spots at Indy in 1961 and 1963 and led a total of 36 laps in those two races. The 1963 race paired him with Andy Granatelli's storied Novi racer, the only machine as popular as its driver. Its deafening eruptions and rumored dynamometer readings as high as 800 HP made the Novi awe-inspiring.

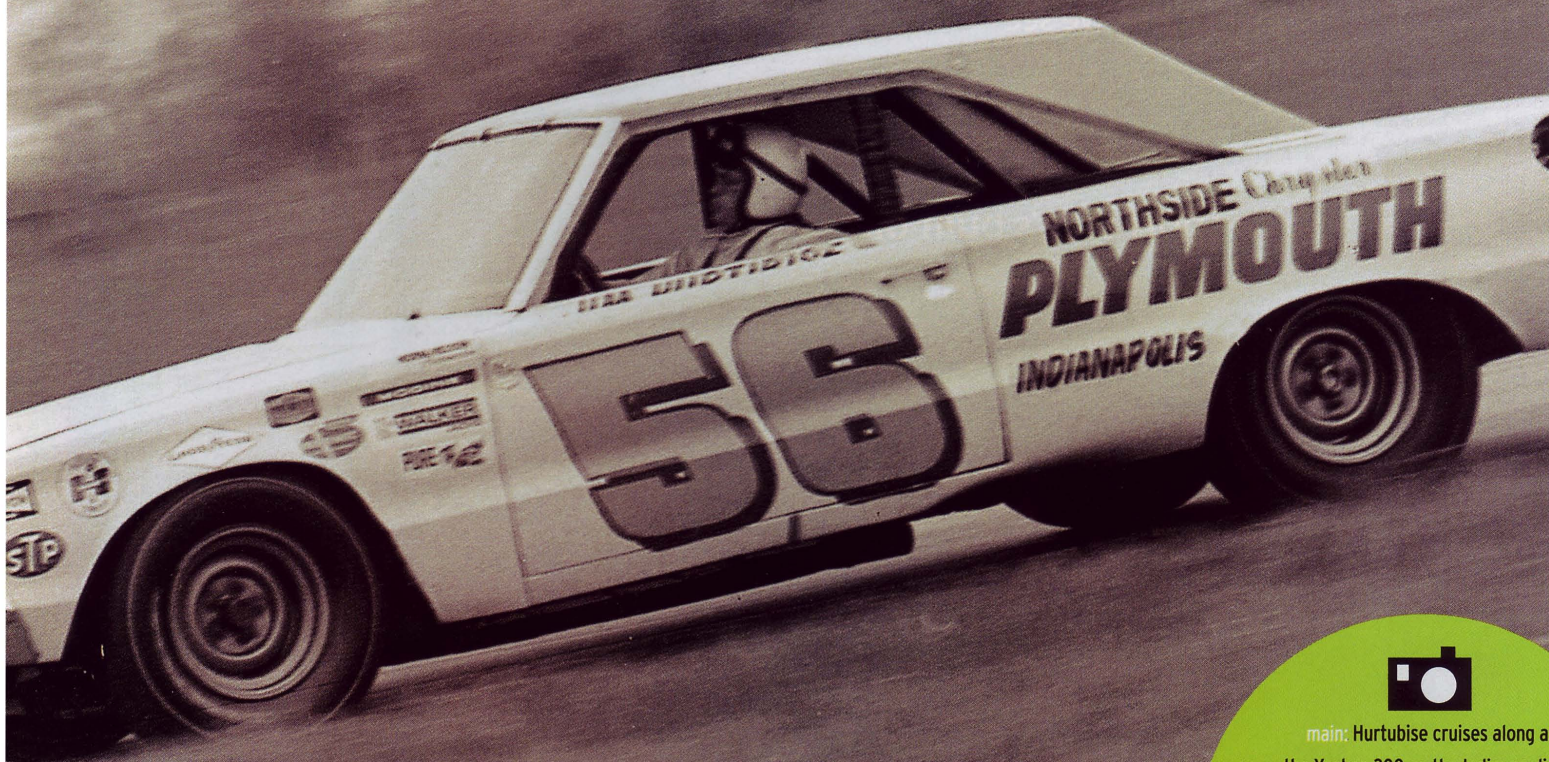
Blazingly fast in time trials, the combination

disappointed in the race, recording a 22nd-place finish. Such was the story of Herk's Indianapolis 500 fortunes. In 10 Indy 500s he recorded only a 13th-place finish as his career best in 1962.

Actually, it was a miracle that he even raced again after 1964. One week after that year's Indy 500, the USAC championship trail regulars gathered in Milwaukee for the Rex Mays 100. Herk was collected in a disastrous accident while dicing for the lead with Indy 500 champions A.J. Foyt and Rodger Ward. Ward's car suddenly slowed and Herk ran into the back of Foyt, who had to abruptly check-up.

Hurtubise's Offy roadster vaulted into the concrete wall, ripping the right rear wheel off and bouncing it into the cockpit. The collision broke three of Herk's ribs, punctured a lung and knocked him unconscious. It also split a reserve fuel tank, spewing fuel that ignited into a blaze around the driver. With his arms hanging helplessly outside the cockpit, the flames inflicted their devastating damage.

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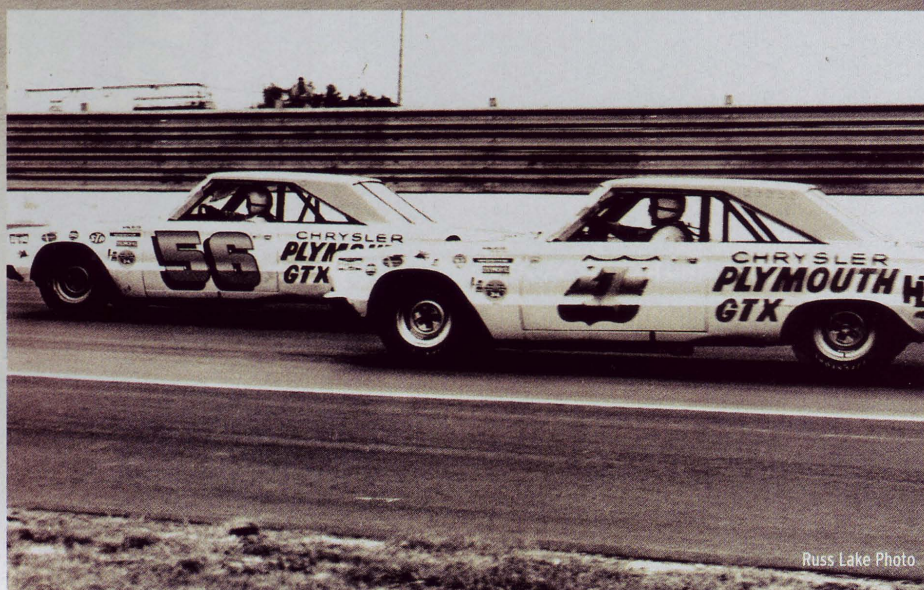
main: Hurtubise cruises along at the Yankee 300 on the Indianapolis Raceway Park road course in 1966. The Norm Nelson Plymouth was the same car Hurtubise captured victory in at Atlanta earlier that year. below: Hurtubise (56) dices with his car owner, Norm Nelson (1) in the North Turn at the Milwaukee Mile, 1966.

Hurtubise's burns were serious and covered 40 percent of his body. Initially, doctors questioned his ability to survive. After initial treatments at a Milwaukee hospital, he was transferred to Brooke Army Hospital's burn center in Houston.

Numerous operations followed from June through the following February. His hands were the biggest challenge. His irreparably damaged tendons limited the flexibility he could recover in his fingers. Doctors could shape his hands, but he would never have a full range of motion. For Herk, there was no hesitation: shape them so he could grip a steering wheel.

By March 1965, he was back in an Indy car with an impressive 4th-place finish in the Phoenix 150. He struggled for much of the rest of that year, but scored big in September with a win in the USAC stock car Milwaukee 250 at the scene of his tragic accident. Herk also nailed down three second and two third-place finishes that year. This was all done in Norm Nelson's Plymouth stock car, which earned them factory support for a limited NASCAR schedule in 1966.

This potent combination demonstrated their formidable power with sixth-place finishes in the season opener at Riverside, Calif. and in the prestigious Daytona 500. All of this led up to Hurtubise's huge success in the seventh running of the Atlanta 500 in March 1966.



Russ Lake Photo

Ford and Chrysler-Plymouth were locked in an intense rivalry, and Hurtubise was one of seven Plymouth entries. The undisputed leader of the Plymouth contingent was 29-year-old Richard Petty, who won the pole at 147.742 mph. Herk started fifth in the field of 44.

Petty roared into the lead for the first 31 laps, but ominous smoke from the back of his trademark blue car portended failure. A crack in his oil pan forced the addition of oil at each pit stop. He led a dominating 131 laps before his engine, starved for oil, let go on Lap 186.

With Petty out of the picture, Hurtubise had the car to beat. Although nine drivers traded the lead 23 times during the race, the contest boiled down to a battle between Hurtubise's white and flame-orange racer and Ford's "Golden Boy," Fred Lorenzen.

Lorenzen was no match for Hurtubise. Herk led 139 laps of the 334-lap contest, including the last 57. When he took the lead for the final time on Lap 277, the only drama concerned pit stops. Hurtubise's last pit stop came with 112 miles remaining and Lorenzen had pitted with just 77 miles to go, well within the range of his fuel mileage, which allowed him to travel 90 miles between stops. Herk would have to stop one more time, giving Lorenzen an edge.

This element of suspense disappeared when defending NASCAR champion Ned Jarrett lost

his Ford engine on Lap 295. Hurtubise streaked into the pits during the caution for fuel and tires and was good to the final lap.

By today's standards, the race was anything but close. Hurtubise never backed off, blasting full-throttle through the high banks and finishing more than a lap ahead of Lorenzen and his Ford teammate Dick Hutcherson in third. Four laps back was Plymouth driver Paul Goldsmith. Eight laps behind the winner came the fifth-place Plymouth of Jim Paschal.

**"This is the biggest race I've
ever won. Never have I ever
thought of quitting."**

Jim Hurtubise

From the winner's circle Hurtubise said, "This is the biggest race I've ever won. Never have I ever thought of quitting."

All of this played out before a record crowd of 71,000 fans. For his efforts, Herk earned \$17,920 of the \$77,000 purse for the biggest payday of his career. He also earned the respect of NASCAR's stars.

Lorenzen said, "Hurtubise drove a hell of a race. He had me by a lap and he never slowed up."

Some suggested Herk should switch to NASCAR permanently. Between 1963 and 1968, he competed in 16 NASCAR races, finishing in the top-10 eight times.

The Atlanta victory remained the high point of Herk's unconventional career. He did earn the distinction of qualifying the last front-engine racer — a car of his own design — in the Indy 500 in 1968. He also set a closed-circuit world record with the same car, his Mallard, at Daytona in 1968 with a speed of 191.938 mph.

Herk gradually faded from racing as a competitor, attending the Daytona and Indy 500s annually to renew friendships. A heart attack claimed his life Jan. 6, 1989, near his home in Port Arthur, Texas. He was 56 years old, the same number he always used on all his race cars.



The crew goes to work on the factory Plymouth. Cleaning the front windshield is chief mechanic and engine builder Jerry Kulwicki. Kulwicki's son Alan would capture the Sprint Cup Championship in 1992.



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