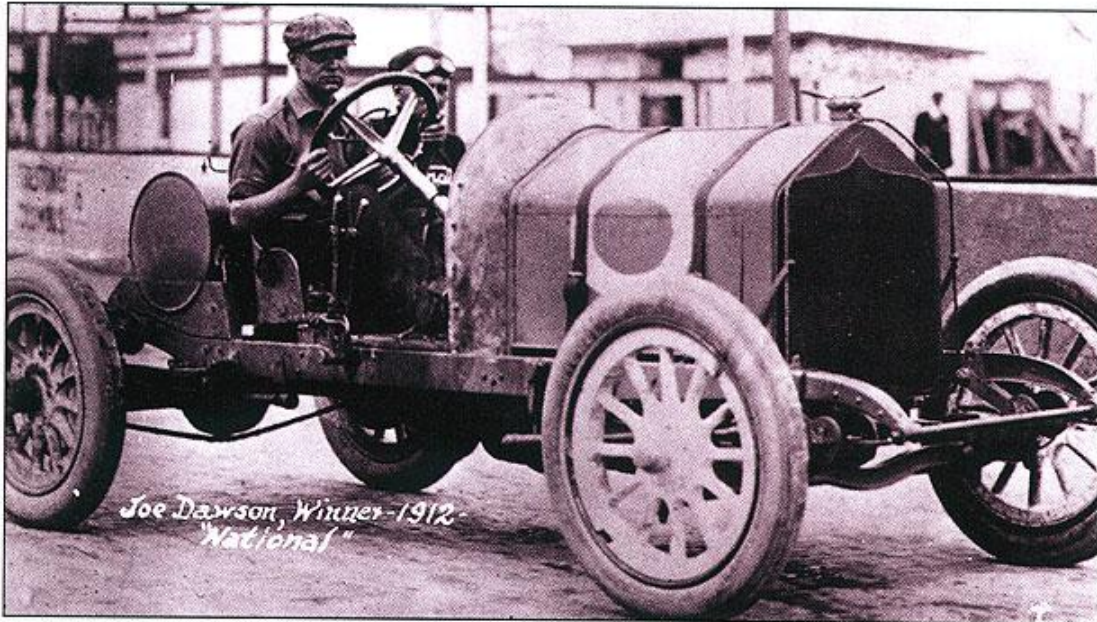


“The Indiana Whirlwind”

Joe Dawson Won the Indy 500 100 Years Ago



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The 1912 Indianapolis 500 Mile Race is easily an exception to the conventional wisdom that nobody remembers a loser. The stirring and improbable finish to that race had Ralph DePalma pushing his broken Mercedes down the Brickyard's front stretch after leading 196 laps, a record that still stands for a driver in a losing effort. Indeed, when the race was recalled in the ensuing decades it was for DePalma's sportsmanship and bravado in accepting defeat and not for the winner - 22-year-old Odon, Indiana-born Joe Dawson, dubbed "The Indiana Whirlwind" by the press.

If not for the shocking finish of the 1912 Indianapolis 500 little could be said of the event other than Ralph DePalma's utter dominance with his 1908 Grand Prix Mercedes. After taking the lead on the third lap he did nothing but continuously extend his advantage until accumulating a five lap edge on second-place Dawson.

Dawson, on loan from his employers at Nordyke & Marmon to drive for National, ran ahead of Teddy Tetzlaff of Fiat. The three ran in procession throughout the second half of the race. When DePalma's Mercedes ground to a halt with a broken piston rod on lap 199 Dawson was in position to pounce.

He led the final two laps to establish a record for leading the fewest laps in an Indianapolis 500 victory. That record stood for 99 years until last year's 100th Anniversary Indy 500 when Dan Wheldon led but a single lap to capture that historic contest. Dawson, at 22 years, 10 months was also the great race's youngest winner until 40 years later when Troy Ruttman, at 22 years, 2 months won the 1952 edition of the Greatest Spectacle in Racing.®

By all accounts Dawson was a simple, modest man. He reportedly spent about an hour wincing over the blisters on his palms as well-wishers eagerly shook his hands and slapped him on the back.¹ He announced, "Gee, I'm hungry,"² and made his exit from the track to get to his parents' house at 2828 North Illinois Street. There he found his mother, known for her incessant worrying, waiting outside.

"Joe came right home," his mother said. "I was on the walk to meet him. I threw my arms around his neck. I was happy because my boy was home again, safe, and because he was the winner."³

Dawson lived there with his parents where he kept a 1912 version of a man-cave with over 100 college football and baseball pennants and automobile photos on the walls. He withdrew to this personal space where he puffed cigars

and spent several nights a week consuming peanuts by the bag and books from his collection of several hundred.⁴ The night of his victory, while Indianapolis society celebrated the great race and its heroes, Dawson sneaked away to his YMCA where he took a steam and a bath.

Dawson came from a close-knit family where even as an Indy 500 winner he called his mother his "favorite girl" and lived with his parents. After studying at Chicago's Crane Manual Training High School he followed his father, Chase Dawson, to Nordyke & Marmon in Indianapolis. Chase was an assistant superintendent of the company.⁵

Dawson joined Nordyke & Marmon in 1906 at 17 as a stock boy. He progressed to assembly, test driver, riding mechanic and eventually teammate to Ray Harroun as a works driver in 1910 before he turned 21.⁶ He quickly asserted himself as one of America's top racers - clear proof he was more than a journeyman driver who got lucky at the Brickyard in 1912.

Two years before his "500" victory Dawson had already enjoyed significant success at the Speedway, taking home three race wins during speed meets held at the track in May and July 1910. Two of these were major races - the 200-mile

Cobe Trophy and the 100 miler for the Remy Grand Brassard, both in July.⁷

In November he again piloted a yellow-jacketed Marmon to an impressive win in the 100-mile City of Atlanta Trophy race. That same month he dominated the City of Savannah Trophy, a 277.44-mile contest.⁸

He won greatest acclaim at the 1910 Vanderbilt Cup - not just for his driving prowess but his character and compassion. This was the final run for the Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island - a treacherous, even insane, event that exposed thousands to danger.

Long known for its massive crowds easily the size of today's Indy 500s, people lined the public roads over which the contests were conducted. The course was virtually devoid of safety barriers or police protection. People ran freely across the 12.64-mile course⁹ in the middle of the race. Oblivious to danger, some even tried to touch the speeding racers.

By lap 18 of the 22-lap contest Dawson and his Marmon had amassed an impressive 4 minute lead over second place Harry Grant in an ALCO.¹⁰ Suddenly Dawson met fate in the form of Henry Hagedorn, a spectator who simply didn't get out of the way fast enough.

Dawson struck the man, knocking him several yards down the road. Both Hagedorn's legs were broken, and a distraught Dawson, convinced he had killed the man, pulled to a stop in his pit.¹¹ It took several minutes for his crew to convince their driver Hagedorn would survive his injuries. That time, plus a delay to repair a cracked radiator dropped Dawson two positions and six minutes off the pace.¹²

His ensuing four lap charge made up all but 25 seconds of winner Grant's margin and earned him the nickname of "Indiana Whirlwind" in the press box.¹³ All the more impressive was that Dawson's Marmon had the smallest engine in the race at 317 cubic inches¹⁴ producing 32 HP. This placed the Marmon in the smaller of two classifications within the race: Division 4-C for engines of 301 to 450 cubic inches. Division 5-C was for engines of 451 to 600 cubic inches.¹⁵ For his efforts, Dawson was awarded the Vanderbilt Donor's Trophy as the top finisher in Division 4-C.

All of this meteoric success transcended Dawson from auto racing hero to mainstream society status when he became romantically linked with Mabel McCane a Vaudevillian

actress.¹⁶ McCane who was at the Brickyard to witness Dawson's victory in the Cobe Trophy was awestruck.

The affair was intense but short-lived. When he took her for a high-speed gallop around the Vanderbilt course in October she was terrified at the sense of speed.

"I do not want a husband who is always shaking dice with death, who may any day be returned to me on a stretcher the broken and bleeding shell of the man whom I love." ¹⁷

Coincidence or no, Dawson's racing results went south with his love life. 1911 was highlighted by a fifth-place finish again for Marmon in the first Indianapolis 500. Marmon's withdrawal from competition was no doubt a career disruption for the young Hoosier.

His next big accomplishment came with his 1912 Indy 500 triumph but that was quickly followed by another setback. On July 4 he was suspended by the American Automobile Association (AAA) Contest Board when his manager C.F. Shuart arranged for him to compete in an Elks Lodge Benefit race without their sanction. The two were reinstated by the AAA on September 27.

Despite being linked to a last minute entry to drive a Deltal racer in the 1913 Indianapolis 500, Dawson did not

compete. He returned to the Speedway one final time as a driver for a fateful run in the 1914 Indianapolis 500.

Driving a privately entered Marmon, Dawson dove to the bottom of the track entering the southwest turn to avoid the spinning Isotta of Ray Gilhooley on his 45th lap. Dawson's left front wheel slipped off the edge of the running surface became twisted and the force threw the machine end-over-end. Dawson was pinned under the car and his mechanic Vere Barnes was thrown clear. Both survived but Dawson's injuries were far more serious.¹⁸

Early newspaper accounts¹⁹ reported that Dawson would probably die from spine injuries and "crushed lungs." Over the next few weeks doctors determined that his most serious injuries were several fractured vertebrae, a broken collar bone and extensive bruises and lacerations.²⁰

Still in the hospital by July 11, Dawson had reportedly put on 10 pounds and was predicting he would compete again at the Brickyard in 1915.²¹ A month later he was released from the hospital still in a back brace²² to convalesce at his parents' home.²³

Despite regular proclamations that he would once again compete in the Indianapolis 500 Dawson never returned as a driver. He did continue to drive in stock car record

trials, even setting the 24 hour world's speed mark in August 1917 when he covered 1,898 miles on the high-banked Sheepshead Bay board track.²⁴

Dawson remained in the automobile industry and served on the AAA technical committee as a regular official at the Atlantic City Speedway.²⁵ As Superintendent of the Philadelphia Marmon Company²⁶ he drove a Marmon "78" Speedster to pace the 1928 Indianapolis 500.²⁷ Dawson would take the spotlight at the Brickyard one final time as part of the pre-race ceremonies prior to the 1937 race.²⁸

United with his race-winning National he toured the now partially asphalt coated track and declared the great Speedway was at least 10 mph faster than in his glory days. This last hurrah came 9 years short of Dawson's passing on June 18, 1946.

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¹ *Indianapolis Star*, "Joe Dawson, Calm and Unaffected," May 31, 1912, page 1.

² *Indianapolis News*, "Gee, I'm Hungry," May 31, 1912, page 21.

³ *Indianapolis Star*, "Dawson's Mother Happy," May 31, 1912, page 3.

⁴ *Indianapolis News*, "Gee, I'm Hungry," May 31, 1912, page 21.

⁵ *Indianapolis Star*, "Dawson's Mother Happy," May 31, 1912, page 3.

⁶ *Indianapolis News*, "Gee, I'm Hungry," May 31, 1912, page 21.

⁷ *Indianapolis Star*, "Dawson's Carries Out Racing Plan," May 31, 1912, page 3.

⁸ *The New York Times*, "Dawson to Drive in \$25,000 Race," March 19, 1911.

⁹ *The New York Times*, "Vanderbilt Cup Race," page 12, April 2, 1910.

¹⁰ *The Motor World*, "Start of the Race and Its Spectacular Running and Finish," page 365, October 6, 1910.

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 - ¹² *Cycle And Automobile Trade Journal*, "The Vanderbilt Cup Race," page 92a, November 1910.
 - ¹³ *Automobile Topics*, "Grant Wins Vanderbilt Cup," page 24, October 8, 1910.
 - ¹⁴ *The Motor World*, "Fine Field For Sixth Vanderbilt," page 815, September 29, 1910.
 - ¹⁵ Entry Blank, Sixth Wm. K. Vanderbilt, Jr. Cup Race, October 1, 1910.
 - ¹⁶ *The Washington Post*, "He Was Too Fast For An Actress," November 6, 1910, page 10.
 - ¹⁷ *The Washington Post*, "He Was Too Fast For An Actress," November 6, 1910, page 10.
 - ¹⁸ *The La Crosse Tribune*, "Frenchman Wins Hoosier Classic," Monday, June 1, 1914.
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 - ²⁰ *The Newark Daily Advocate*, "French Driver in French Car Won Big Race," June 1, 1914, page 3.
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 - ²³ *The Washington Herald*, "Dawson Goes Home," August 8, 1914, page 1.
 - ²⁴ *Corsicana Daily Sun*, "Speed King in Corsicana," November 5, 1917, page 5.
 - ²⁵ *Motor*, "Hero of the 1910 Vanderbilt and the Winner of the 1912 500 Mile Race," January 1929.
 - ²⁶ *Motor*, "Hero of the 1910 Vanderbilt and the Winner of the 1912 500 Mile Race," January 1929.
 - ²⁷ *San Antonio Light*, "Marmon Pace Car at Race," May 28, 1928, page 5.
 - ²⁸ *Indianapolis Star*, "Harroun, Dawson Show Youngsters Cars," page 14, June 1, 1937.