

Marriage Takes Away Daring of Auto Racers, says Veteran

If Driver Wants to Break Records, He Must Stay Single, Declares Joe Dawson -- Recalls Thrills of His Track Days

By C. William Duncan [1932]

If an automobile racer wants to break track records and long remain a prominent figure in his sport, he should by all means stay single, according to Joe Dawson, winner of the Indianapolis classic twenty years ago, now a resident of Philadelphia and member of the Contest Board of the American Automobile Association.

"When a driver is young, he is full of the old pepper and doesn't think twice when he has to take a chance on the track," opined Mr. Dawson. "If one of the other drivers gets killed, the youngster says to himself, 'Too bad, but it isn't my turn yet.' He becomes a fatalist and has no fear. "Marriage brings responsibilities to everyone and responsibilities slow down the daring ones on the track. They think twice before taking chances and consequently slow up."

I found Mr. Dawson where I expected to find him -- standing in front of an automobile. It wasn't a racing car, however, but an ordinary touring car, because he is a service manager now. He was very busy and there were interruptions from employees and by telephone, but even they didn't prevent him from giving me a good account of his experiences on the track.

A bad smash-up, he believes, rivals marriage for slowing up a driver. His came at Indianapolis in 1914, and he never raced in competition thereafter. He did break, or help to break, many speed records, however.

He established a straightaway record at Pablo Beach, Fla., in 1917, and a twenty-four-hour record at Sheepshead Bay the same year. This record of 1898 miles in twenty-four hours stood for twelve years. He was one of four drivers to make a new cross-continent record in 1916. Their feat of crossing the continent in five days and eighteen hours was considered remarkable then.

Youngsters Have Most Nerve

I asked him at what age he thought a racer should retire and he declined to express an exact opinion.

"All I'll say is that the youngster has the most nerve. The aviators in the World War were mostly men under twenty-five, you know," was his comment.

I asked him to tell about the race which stood out most prominently in his memory and thought surely he would talk about the Indianapolis

classic of 1912, which he won. He didn't.

His mind wandered back over twenty-two years and he talked of the Vanderbilt Cup race on Long Island in 1910.

"That race was really colorful," he said. "People came from all sections during the night, bringing their food and refreshments with them. The race started not at 10 in the morning but at daybreak. It was international in aspect, as there were drivers there from Germany, France, Italy, and other countries as well as from the United States. It was a great sight to see them flying off in the grey dawn.

"The course lay over twelve and a half miles of highway on Long Island making it still more picturesque and different.

"At one stage of the race I was seven minutes out in front. I was hitting around seventy miles an hour, as were most of us. Policemen were stationed along the route to keep the people off the highway, but because a human being is a curious animal, the crowds would insist on running out on the highway after one car went by and stay there until the roar of another warned them to seek safety. Sometimes a fellow would decide at the last minute to run across the road, just like a chicken does.

"Well, one of them ran in front of me and I hit him, knocking him high in the air. A crowd gathered around my car and it was a few minutes before I reached the pits. I was 'all shot' because of hitting the man and

intended to abandon the race, when somebody ran up to me and said the man hadn't been hurt. So I went back in the race and finished second to Harry Grant who was later killed at Sheepshead Bay.

Man Really Was Killed

"When the race was over, I learned they had tried to make it easy for me. The man I had hit had been killed instantly. His estate sued me for \$25,000, but never got anything because the court ruled that the road, although a public highway, had been advertised for weeks as a racetrack during those hours and that people had been warned not to run out on the track. Regardless of the verdict, it was a deplorable incident in my career, but one over which I had no control."

"Two years later I won at Indianapolis and two years after that I cracked up and lay for three months in the hospital, suffering plenty. I don't think any racer is ever the same after three or four months in the hospital.

"Wasn't it just as dangerous for you to go out and establish speed records in later years?"

"Perhaps so, but it was a different setting from the active track competition."

"What do you note as the outstanding change between racing in your day and racing now?"

"The records are being lowered frequently, but I don't think that is because the drivers are any better than we were. Conditions are better.

The cars and the tracks have improved tremendously. Any one knows that the automobile of 1932 is much finer than a 1912 car, and also that the speedways of today are better for racing than the highways of twenty years ago."

"Automobile racing is still the most dangerous of all sports, however. It makes me mad when I hear people 'boo' from the stands at some driver they think should go faster or take more chances. They don't care to realize that the driver is out there really risking his life to give them a thrill and that many good men are whisked into eternity in split seconds every season."

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