

OLDFIELD • DEPALMA • FEUD

OLDFIELD 1911.

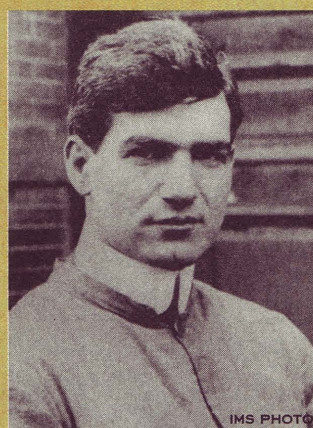
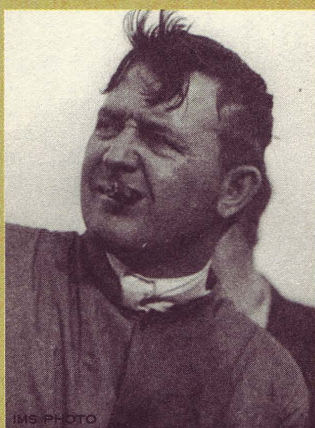
DESPITE THE PRESTIGE of his 1915 Indy 500 win, Ralph DePalma always called his greatest race his 1914 victory in the Vanderbilt Cup. The reason was less about the importance of the race and more about who he defeated: his nemesis Barney Oldfield.

Their rivalry dated back to June 17, 1908 at a dirt track in Reidville, Mass. The then unknown DePalma defeated Oldfield, widely recognized as America's speed king, in a best of three match race. Oldfield stormed away from the track without saying a word to DePalma.

Their conflict brewed for years. When DePalma demanded \$5,000 in appearance money from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway as defending champion in 1916, management rejected him. After the entry deadline passed, a humbled DePalma asked for an exception to join the field. Track management required all those with entries approve the late addition. According to biographer William Nolan, Oldfield was the only one to refuse. As a result, DePalma missed the 1916 Indy 500.

In preparation for the 1914 season, DePalma was named captain of the Mercer team with fellow drivers Spencer Wishart and Eddie Pullen. DePalma had spent the winter developing the cars, but abruptly quit the team when he discovered the company had also hired Oldfield to drive.

DePalma was left without a ride as the Vanderbilt Cup approached.



DEPALMA 1911.

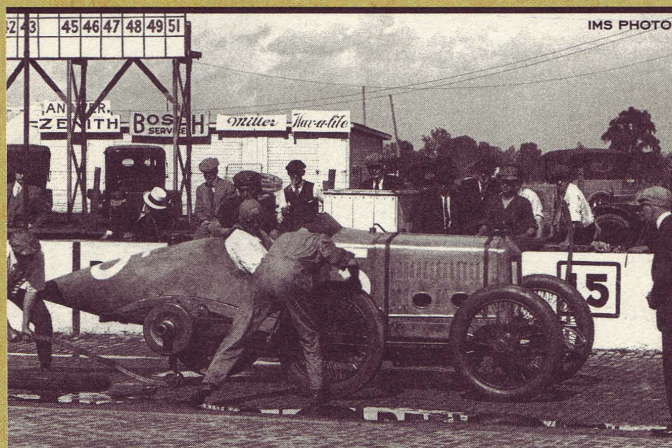
He prevailed upon owner E.J. Schroeder to revive the aging "Gray Ghost" Mercedes, now nearly six years old.

Fueled by the DePalma-Oldfield feud, newspapers built up the drama of the race that was about to unfold. The race did not disappoint. Gradually, all the other favorites fell away and the contest boiled down to a shootout between DePalma and Oldfield.

They battled nose-to-tail around the 8.4-mile Santa Monica, Calif. road course. Oldfield, in the faster car, was notoriously hard on tires. After taking the lead in the closing stages of the race, his tires started to chunk off rubber and he retreated to the pits. DePalma was again in front, and despite Oldfield's charge on the final lap, the Gray Ghost was again a winner.

In later years, DePalma would tell a story that would become legendary. He insisted that he had tricked Oldfield by pointing to his own tires when he passed his crew near his pit. Oldfield, as DePalma told it, took the bait. He believed DePalma would pit on the next lap and did so himself and consequently lost the race.

But DePalma was not above exaggerations. He fabricated a story that he had won more than 2,500 races in his career, a claim unsupported by any documented evidence. In the final analysis, it matters little about whether DePalma tricked Oldfield or how many races he won. DePalma's legend was never about bragging rights, but an indisputable record of hard-earned results. ■



BARNEY OLDFIELD, SEEN HERE DURING PRACTICE FOR THE 1916 INDIANAPOLIS CLASSIC (ONLY 300 MILES THAT YEAR INSTEAD OF 500), WAS ALLEGEDLY THE ONE COMPETITOR WHO REFUSED TO SIGN A WAIVER WHICH WOULD HAVE PERMITTED DEFENDING WINNER RALPH DEPALMA TO COMPETE AS A "POST ENTRANT." OLDFIELD'S FRENCH DELAGE ENDED UP FIFTH.