



# SECRETS OF THE MARMON

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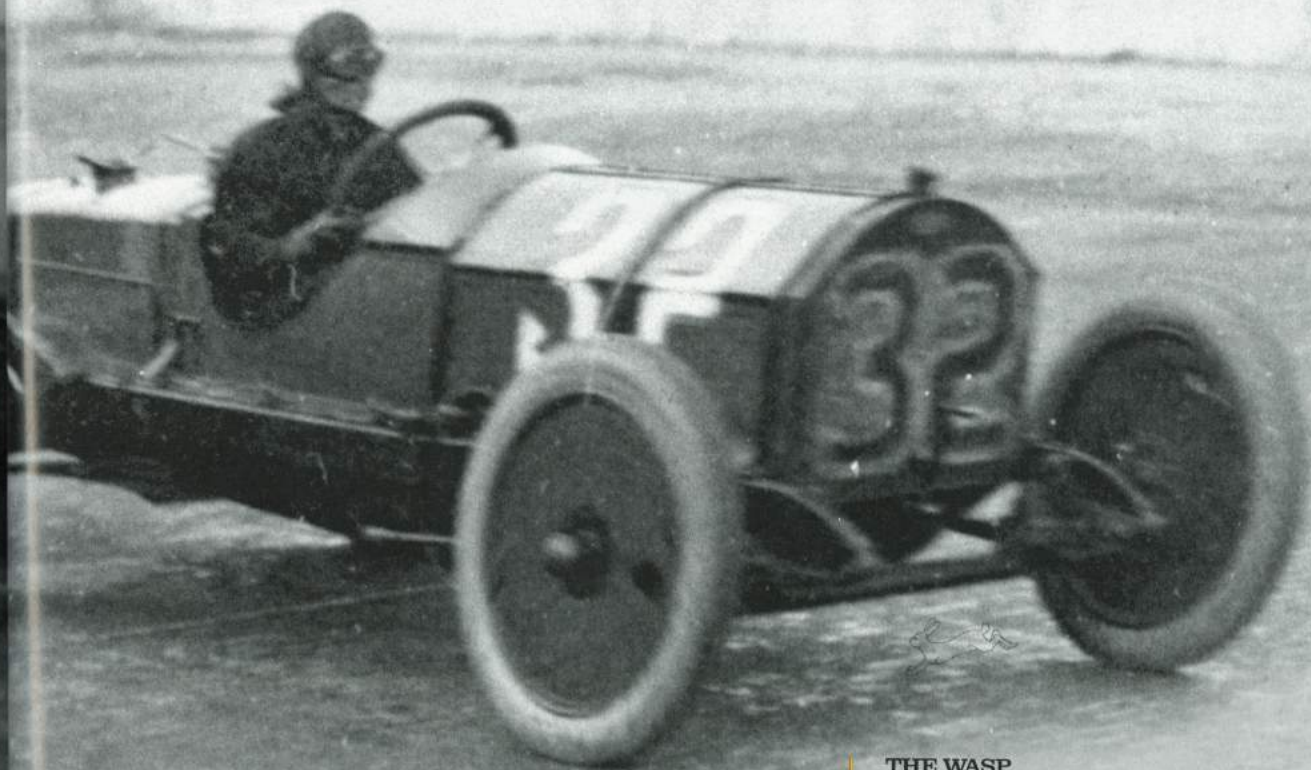
Odds are, if you are reading these words you have visited the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum and stopped in front of the yellow and black Marmon "Wasp" that Ray Harroun drove to victory in the first Indianapolis 500. You may know Harroun played a big role in designing the car and that Nordyke & Marmon, an Indianapolis manufacturing company, produced it. Did you know it was a year old at the time it won the first "500?" Did you know it was nearly destroyed in a savage third-turn accident on The Brickyard a year to the day earlier? Read on, because there are plenty of surprises about one of the world's most famous race cars.

Comparisons of Ray Harroun to NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath may seem a stretch, but it is true both predicted they would prevail in the greatest moment of their careers. Namath brashly guaranteed victory for his upstart New York Jets in Super Bowl III and Harroun predicted he would win the inaugural Indianapolis 500.

So what was Harroun's reasoning? He pointed to his already famous Marmon Wasp racer and asserted that because it was a year old, all the bugs had been worked out.

In an article he wrote for the May 28, 1911, "Indianapolis Star," Harroun said, "I chose the 'Wasp' against a dozen new cars I was asked to





#### THE WASP

**Main |** Ray Harroun predicted that he would win the inaugural "500," pointing out that the Marmon Wasp was a year old and had the bugs worked out already. **Left |** Harroun after the win.



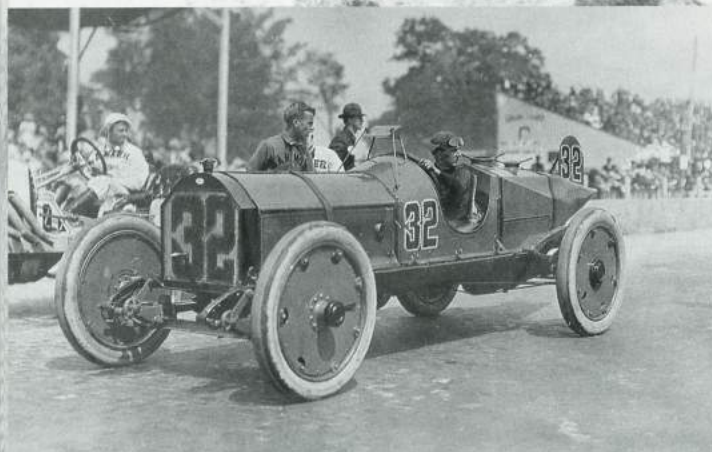
drive simply because I know it to be in better shape for this race than any new racing car that could be built. A car that is built right is in better condition the second year than it is the first."

A commonly held belief is that the Marmon Wasp was designed and constructed for the first Indianapolis 500. It was not. In fact, the machine was developed as much as a year and a half prior and at least eight months before plans for the Indianapolis 500 were announced in September 1910.

What is true is that the car was engineered with the new Indianapolis Motor Speedway in mind. By December 1909 the track was freshly paved with 3.2 million bricks, earning it the nickname "The Brickyard." This was state-of-the-art paving in the day and the goal was a safer track but also one with the blazing speed needed to assert the reputation of America's fastest speedway.

*The second Indianapolis 500 was guaranteed another first-time winner before it even started, as Ray Harroun retired after winning the inaugural in 1911.*





One of the biggest prizes of the upcoming season was the 200-mile race for the Wheeler-Schebler Trophy at the Speedway on May 28, 1910. A seven-foot, sterling silver, Tiffany-designed masterpiece—on display today at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum—was a clear statement by track founders that The Brickyard would take a backseat to no other facility in the world.

By January 1910, Harroun was reportedly supervising the design of a “special” race car. The company was a relative newcomer to the racing game but had already established itself with important victories in such events as the Wheatley Hills Trophy, a support race for the 1909 Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island, New York. Newspaper writers had latched onto their yellow and black racing colors to dub the cars “yellow jackets” and “wasps.”

While there was some debate within the auto industry about the value of purpose-built race cars, Howard Marmon had no hesitation. Marmon was the chief engineer and one of the owners of the company that carried his name and firmly believed the specials demonstrated the engineering prowess of a manufacturer. In an article Marmon wrote for the “Indianapolis Star,” he discussed the value of the special cars and took a particular focus on aerodynamics.

“I have always contended it is a matter of wind resistance. This six-cylinder car will weigh close to 2,200 pounds but with its sharpened fish tail its speed is a matter of speculation at this time,” Marmon said.

#### THE WINNING CAR

**Top left** After losing a tire in practice, Ray Harroun ended up teetering on the Turn 3 retaining wall, but in less than two weeks the car was repaired and ready for the inaugural Indianapolis 500. **Top right** A proud Harroun after doing what he predicted—winning the Indy 500.

**Top left** By January 1910, Harroun was supervising the design of a special race car by Howard Marmon—one of the owners of the company carrying his namesake—with the new Indianapolis Motor Speedway in mind.



Another article published the same day comments on the slick lines of the Wasp. Written by Ernie Moross, who served as director of Speedway contests at the time, it included a sneak preview of the machine at the Marmon factory.

"Long, clean and veritably lithe; close clinging to the earth over which it will speed faster than any bird of the air, it is built for power to push and cunningly contrived to slip through the air with the least resistance to that drag upon all motion of matter—the atmosphere of the earth."

Yes, in a time decades before wind tunnels and computer-aided design, constructors considered how to best flow air over car bodies. This was a primary concern in designing the Wasp, especially its pointed tail.

These considerations may also have had something to do with why the car was a single-seat machine. With a fuselage-like body, it carried no second seat for a riding mechanic. Narrow and sharp-tailed, it was reminiscent of an arrow to observers at the time. Consider, too, that Harroun, like many in the auto industry of the day, had an interest in airplane design and very likely drew parallels between the two categories of vehicles.

While Ray Harroun will forever be associated with the Wasp, all signs point to two other men at the wheel—Marmon and Harry "Sunshine" Stillman—when the car was first rolled out for testing on the bricks in mid-March. Harroun was presumably preoccupied with a race elsewhere. Stillman was the team's number two driver. Reports from the test indicate that company officials were debating the car's name, and the moniker "yellow jacket" was still in play.

The name was apparently resolved by early May when newspapers reported that the Marmon "Wasp" had won its maiden auto race at the two-mile, red-clay speedway outside Atlanta. Harroun was at the wheel during a 12-mile sprint race for the car's first wheel-to-wheel competition.

Next up was the May 28, 1910, Wheeler-Schebler Trophy during the Speedway's first Memorial Day weekend of racing. If anyone was paying attention they could have predicted Harroun's strategy of taking care of his tires and conserving fuel in the first "500" a year later because it was exactly what he did to dominate the 200-mile feature.

Speaking of tires, Harroun, famous for launching Firestone's long dominance of the Indianapolis 500 in 1911, drove on Michels in the Wheeler-Schebler triumph. Unfortunately, two days later while practicing on the morning of May 30 one of those tires let go and Harroun took a harrowing ride that hurled him to the point of teetering on the third turn retaining wall. Uninjured, he was lucky to be alive.

Given that he went the 200-mile race distance without a pit stop it's possible he pushed the rubber one mile too far in practice. Regardless, the Marmon Wasp appeared to be junk. Company officials considered scrapping it and starting over but at some point reconsidered. Less than two weeks later the car was reportedly repaired.

The Wasp fit into the American Automobile Association "Class D" category for purpose-built race cars. These events were limited by agreement of the manufacturers so opportunities to race such cars were few relative to stock machines. The first Indianapolis 500, though, gave Marmon the opening to once again show what the car could do. On Tuesday, May 30, 1911, the yellow and black aerodynamic car took home its second great victory at The Brickyard—one that overshadowed its impressive and dramatic past. •



#### ALMOST NAMED THE YELLOW JACKET

Above | Details of the Marmon Wasp as it is displayed in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum.

Why is the "500" a 500-miler? In 1911, the race's founders figured that was a safe distance for a race to finish by early evening after a 10 a.m. start. Ray Harroun won the inaugural in 6 hours, 42 minutes.