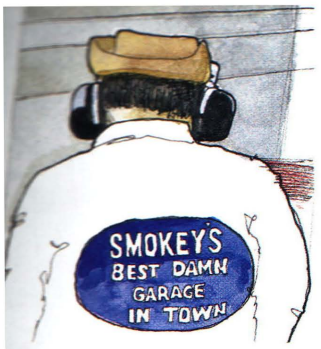


SMOKEY YUNICK

story by **MARK DILL** illustrations by **TOM OSBORNE**

One of the most interesting cars on display in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway's Hall of Fame Museum never ran a race. Still, its peculiar and even frighteningly dangerous-looking design draws attention. Called "the sidecar," one look at it and you'll know how it got the nickname. The unique appearance of the racer centers on its cockpit, clearly reminiscent of a motorcycle sidecar. The idea was to place the driver to the left of the main body to give him better visibility and improve weight distribution on Indy's left turns. A rear engine design in an era when most Indy cars were still front engine roadsters, it looks like a pod strapped to the side of a missile. One shudders to think of the consequences of hitting the Speedway's concrete wall at over 150 mph.

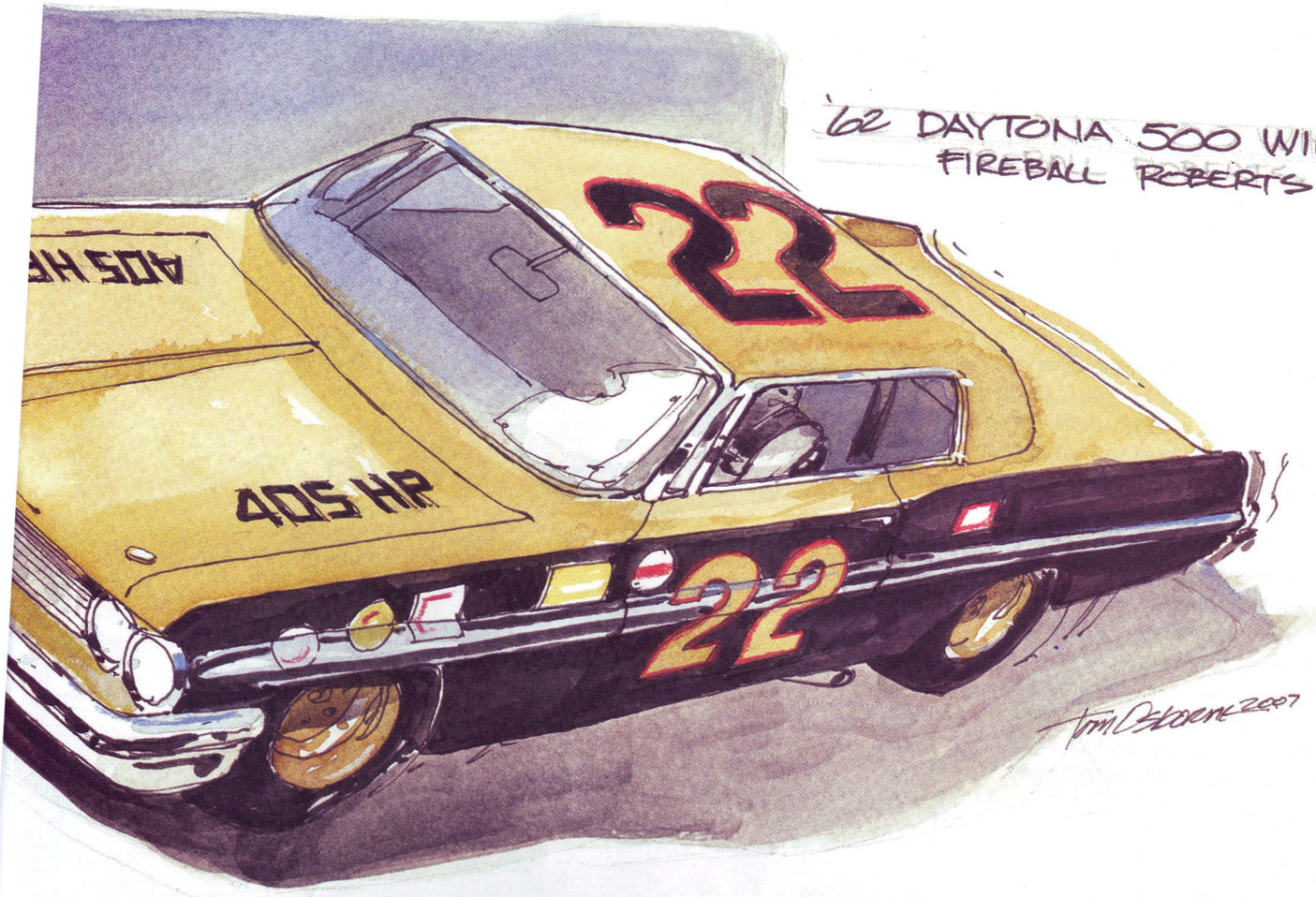
Officially the Hurst Floor Shifter Special, it was an entry for the 1964 Indianapolis 500 but was wrecked in time trials by NASCAR veteran Bobby Johns. This innovative machine was the brainstorm of one of the most colorful characters of post World War II American auto racing, Henry "Smokey" Yunick. Sporting Yunick's trademark black and gold colors, the Hurst car is a symbol of a creative mind unafraid to push the envelope in the quest for a speed advantage.

And this creative mind had been pondering engines and mechanical design since decades earlier. Born well North of the Mason-Dixon in Pennsylvania back in 1923, 12-year-old Henry Yunick cobbled together a tractor from junk car parts to help his family run their farm. After his father died when he was 16, he got into racing motorcycles. He machined his motors for minimal friction to generate maximum speed. They also produced a ton of smoke and it wasn't long before he was pinned with a nickname that became part of his mystique: "Smokey."

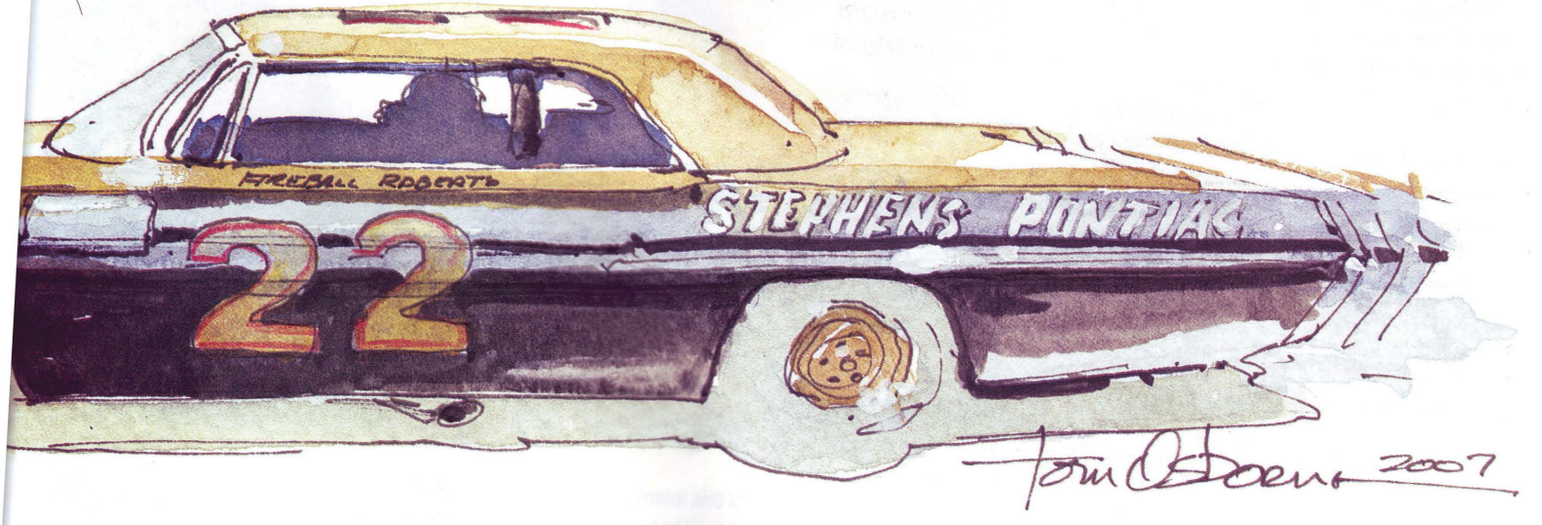
Like most young men born in what some have called "The Greatest Generation," Smokey was confronted with the grim challenge of joining the fight for freedom in World War II. He became a pilot, flying bombing raids in the Balkans and while successfully completing dozens of missions, his creative mind was at work thinking about aerodynamics.

During stateside military flights, Smokey occasionally flew over Daytona Beach, a place where aerodynamics had figured heavily in race car design for decades dating back to the first speed trials on its unique concrete-hard sands in 1903. The appeal of the area was more than Smokey could resist, and after the war he moved to Daytona Beach and set up an automotive shop that eventually gained international recognition with the catchy slogan, "The Best Damn Garage in Town."

If World War II was good for anything, it produced great advances in industrial technology that eventually translated into commercial products such as high performance engines. America was victorious; the powerhouse manufacturer in the world, and Daytona was a hub of high performance automotive gear heads. Bill France, Sr. founded NASCAR in 1948. It was an exciting era of determined young men exchanging ideas and influencing one another. In the middle of all of this buzz Smokey Yunick had the opportunity to meet a racing luminary by the name of Marshall Teague.



1962 FIRECRACKER 400 WINNER
FIREBALL ROBERTS



SMOKEY YUNICK

Teague was a pivotal figure in the sport at the time, and Smokey and his garage had already built enough of a reputation to attract his attention. Teague had established himself as one of the early stars of France's organization and he was always looking for new talent to help him succeed. Teague had won the support of the Hudson Motor Company and drove their Hornet cars to seven victories in 23 races. It was through Teague that Smokey expanded his professional network, including a breakthrough years later that brought him Chevrolet factory backing and a chance to work with retired three-time Indy 500 winner Mauri Rose.

The relentless drive for a competitive advantage was a terrific incentive for the active Yunick mind. Unlike today's rigid specifications defined to precision detail, the early NASCAR rulebook provided plenty of room for what some called innovation, and others viewed as downright cheating.

"It was clearly a different deal than it is today," chuckles Lee Holman, son of NASCAR legend John Holman and the President of Holman and Moody and Holman Automotive, both based in Charlotte. "People did some crazy things like putting gallon milk cartons in their gas tanks to take up space when NASCAR tried to measure the capacity. After inspection, they would use air compressors to deflate the cartons so they could run extra fuel. There were all kinds of tricks, and most everyone was doing it."

But Smokey became the poster child for these "innovations," and stories abounded. One such legend has it Smokey, frustrated by being nailed for infractions during inspection, fired up his car and drove away – without a gas tank. To circumvent the capacity restriction, he had installed a long enough, wide enough fuel line to create an extra five-gallon reserve of fuel. He just wanted to show the inspectors they hadn't caught on to all his tricks.

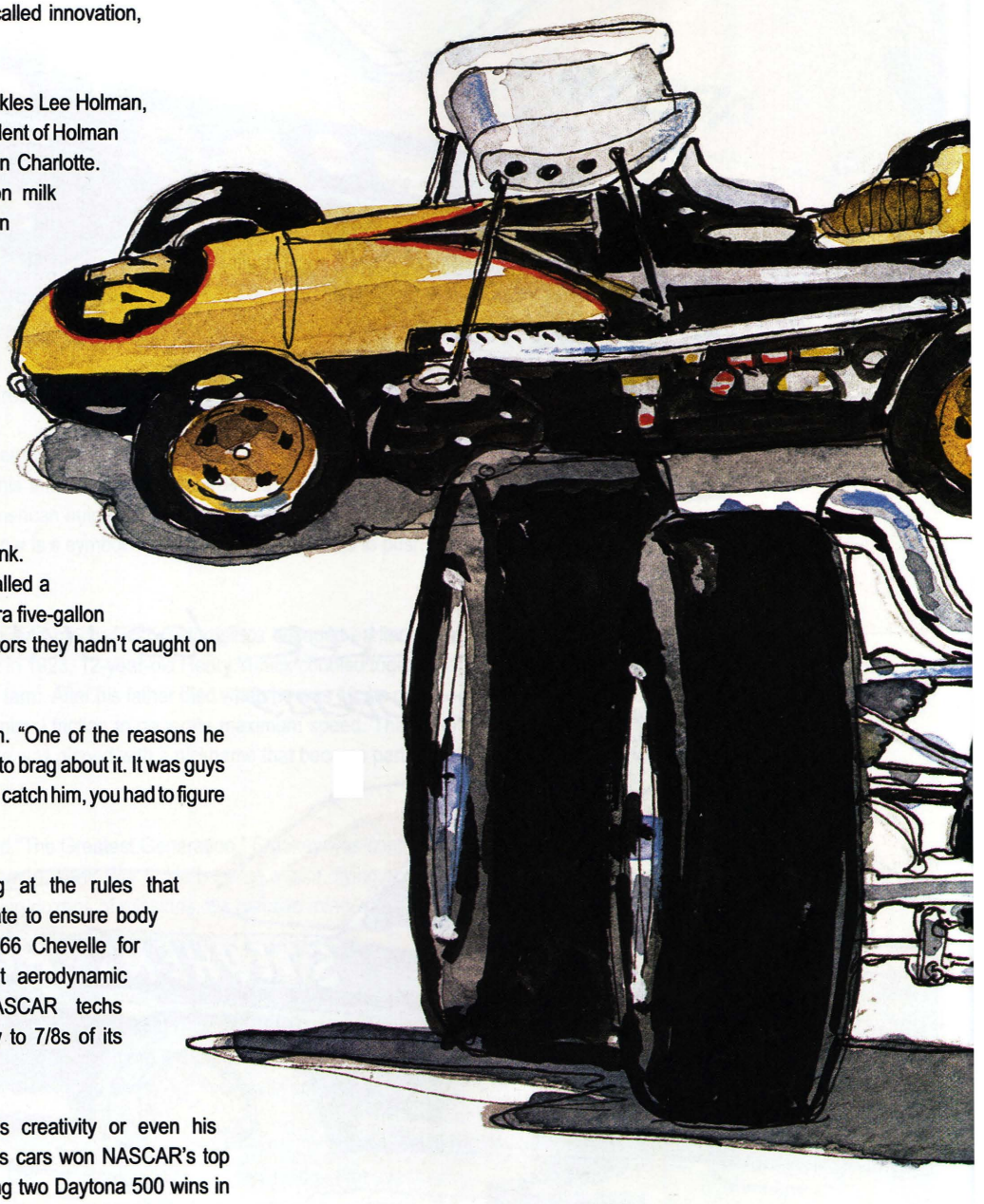
"That was the thing about Smokey," says Holman. "One of the reasons he became known for rule bending is because he liked to brag about it. It was guys like Junior Johnson you really had to watch out for. To catch him, you had to figure it out for yourself."

Still, it was Smokey and his constant poking at the rules that necessitated the now renowned NASCAR template to ensure body uniformity. That came about because of his 1966 Chevelle for Curtis Turner. Fast as blazes with no apparent aerodynamic modifications outside the rules, it took NASCAR techs months to figure out that he downsized the body to 7/8s of its original configuration.

Smokey's mystique was born of more than his creativity or even his success, of which there was plenty. Two times his cars won NASCAR's top championship, as well as dozens of races including two Daytona 500 wins in 1961 and 1962. Less well known is his work to help prepare Jim Rathmann's winning Indy 500 entry in 1960.

Much of the Smokey mystique was about his versatility, which spanned both NASCAR and the Indianapolis 500. He entered cars off and on at Indy from 1958 to 1975, finishing fourth with F1 World Champion Denny Hulme in 1967. But his versatility extended beyond turning wrenches to authoring articles for Popular Science and his autobiography, released shortly before his death in 2001. As if to lend credence to the view that his innovations were substantive advances well beyond just twisting rulebooks to the breaking point, a search reveals the US Patent Office awarded Henry Yunick at least nine patents.

1962 FIRST WING ON A PACECAR



All of this talent and determination was packaged in a cantankerous personality contained in a slight frame typically adorned in a spotless white uniform topped off with a sweat and oil stained, well-worn cowboy hat. Fans typically spotted him chomping a cigar or pipe in the southwest corner of his mouth. In the end,

his mystique may have been that he kept people guessing. Not just about what he would think of next, but what he may have already done that nobody else had yet figured out. ■