

SPECIAL: UNSER'S LOWDOWN ON INDY DRIVERS

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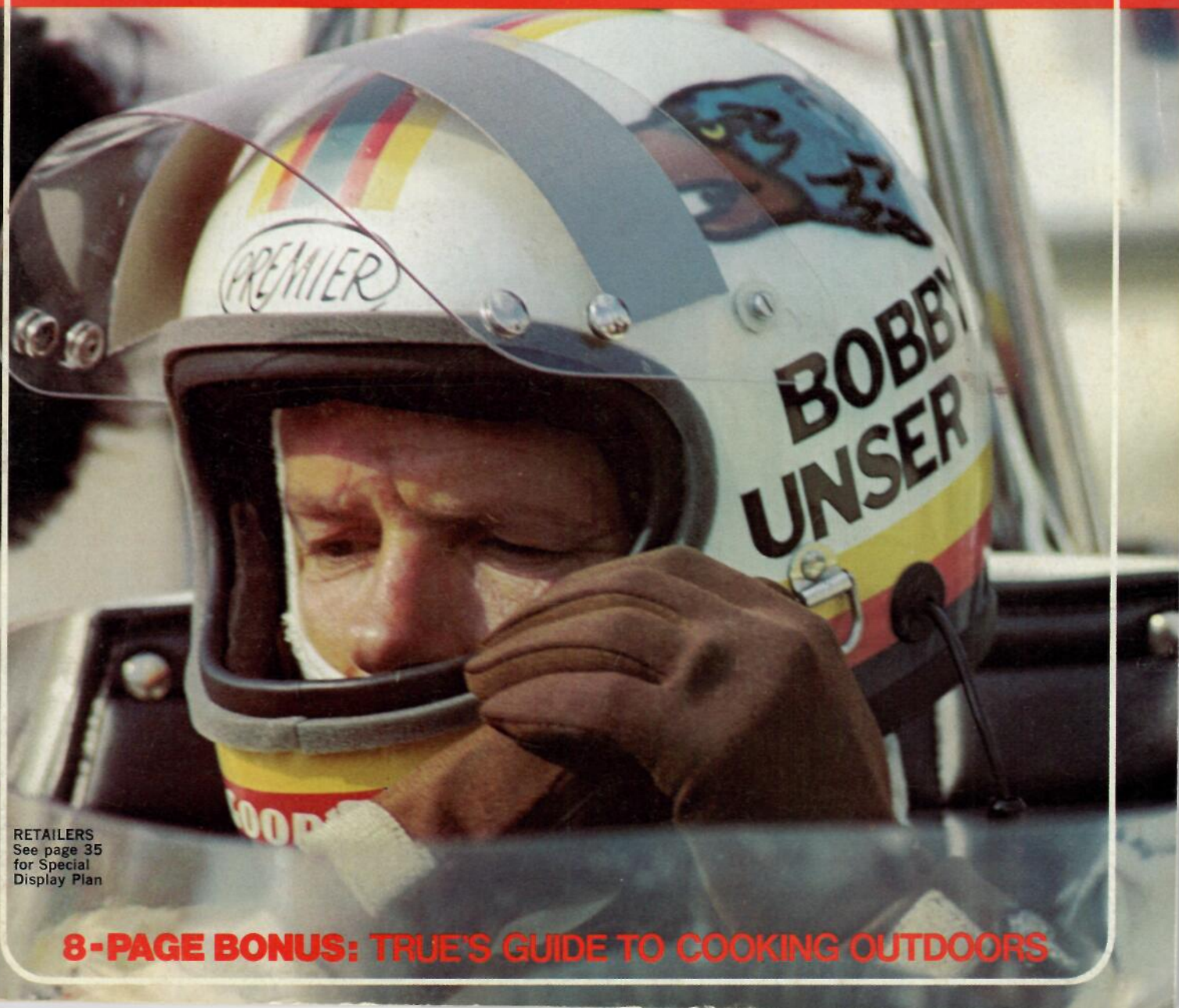
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AUTO RACING
BY HAL HIGDON

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY DICK FRANK

Bobby Unser is not only one of the world's top race-car drivers, he is also an outspoken man who calls his shots as he sees them

Bobby Unser Rates the Indy Drivers

We made history back at Indianapolis," laughed Bobby Unser. "Turned everybody on their ears! Flipped them upside down and shook them—ran away from them!"

Bobby spun the steering wheel of his rented Ford LTD and slid around a corner in the road leading from the Phoenix airport, where we had left his fiancée. We accelerated quickly, the engine roar rivaling that of a jet taking off. Bobby had blown the muffler the previous evening. Arriving back at the motel after a long day tire-testing at Phoenix International Raceway, he found Terry Arfons, a Goodyear tire engineer, parked in the driveway. Bobby planted his bumper against that of Terry's car and nearly pushed it into the swimming pool. Then Bobby had sat in his car alternately flipping the key and stomping the accelerator—*Bam! Bam! Bam!* That's when the muffler blew. Bobby Unser works hard and Bobby Unser plays hard.

"It was a successful year in many ways," said Bobby, reflecting on 1972,

as we slid around another corner. Bobby Unser drives an Eagle, the world's fastest race car. Nobody can ride with him in that single-seater going nearly 200 mph around the Indianapolis Motor Speed-

On Swede Savage: "You wouldn't even have to put him in the top hundred drivers."

way, but I got a hint of Bobby's ability as a charger in the passenger seat of that LTD. "But the year was somewhat of a disappointment to us," he continued, "because theoretically we could have won every race." By "we" he meant himself and designer-owner Dan Gurney. Their Eagle had qualified fastest in eight of the ten USAC championship races last season—nine if USAC's timers hadn't erred at Milwaukee. He had led every race he ran. But because of a series of engine failures and freak incidents, the

1968 Indy winner only finished (and won) four races, and none of them big ones. "That's where the disappointment comes," he said. "When you have something in your hand and you can't grasp it."

Like the other drivers in USAC, I had been chasing Bobby Unser all season. I didn't want to beat him, just to interview him. Bobby is perhaps the busiest man in racing and everybody wants a piece of him. You rarely see Bobby Unser quoted at length, because he is always rushing somewhere.

The previous night we had dined with several of his friends. Bobby talked about hunting near his ranch in Chama, New Mexico. "You should have seen Terry when we bagged a deer last fall," Bobby told me, indicating Terry Arfons seated across the table. "Only wounded him. So

On Bobby Allison: "I've never seen a NASCAR driver come up and hit it like him."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACING PICTORIAL, INC. AND PETE BIRO



Swede Savage



Bobby Allison



Peter Revson



Bobby Isaac

I hands Terry a knife and says, 'Slit his throat.' So Terry goes—" Bobby draws one index finger lightly across his throat and makes a sound like a rabbit pissing in the snow. Terry Arfons meanwhile was grinning from ear to ear.

Bobby rocked back and forth in his seat, shaking his head: "So I said, 'God-damn, Terry, have mercy on that deer! Stick him like you *mean* it!' That poor Terry. Nearly drowned in that deer's blood. I felt more sorry for him than I did for the deer."

Auto racing has its chargers and stokers. Bobby Unser is a charger. Some sportswriters suggested that had Bobby

On Peter Revson: "He's got desire—the one secret of every man's career."

not charged quite so hard in 1972, he might have won more races. Bobby disagrees. "The things that broke would have broke no matter how slow we ran," he insists. "Some drivers inherit victories, but sitting back and waiting for the hot dogs to drop out isn't my way. It isn't Mario Andretti's way, and it isn't my brother Al's way. If I had to stroke to win, I'd retire."

On Bobby Isaac: "I could take away one-third of my USAC horsepower and still beat his NASCAR by ten mph."

After dinner Bobby asked me to call him in the morning. "We'll talk on our way to the track," he said. After we left the airport, Bobby decided he wanted to stop for breakfast. When the waitress had taken our order, he leaned back, relaxed and began to talk.

"I've often wondered over the years, how come they pay me so much money," Bobby began. "But when you stop and think about it, I've been extremely desirable for a lot of owners. Goodyear also says I'm their number-one tire-tester by a wide margin. They check their sheets

On Mark Donohue: "Dan Gurney says I'm just as smart as Donohue and can run a car faster."

every year on Donohue, Foyt, Johncock, Rutherford and the rest, and there is always more speed on the Bobby Unser sheets. You see more tires tested with less mileage run.

"Nobody can ever determine a driver's value. What does Jackie Stewart lend toward his team's success? How much is it Stewart? How much is it the car? How much is it his ability to put the deal together? I don't think there's any way to measure my importance with the Eagle. A lot of people say, 'Well, if it wasn't for you, Bobby, they just wouldn't even have a decent car.' But by the same token, I can say if it wasn't for Dan Gurney, I wouldn't have a decent car."

Dan Gurney is the recently retired Grand Prix and Indy 500 driver who de-

On Jerry Grant: "If we turned Jerry loose on his own, he wouldn't know where to start."

signed the Eagle. A measure of his success is that he sold 22 of those machines in 1972. Theoretically, two-thirds of the starting field at Indy this year could be comprised of Gurney-built cars. Bobby continued: "See, before I went to work for Dan, I wasn't all that smart. He and his people have furthered my knowledge tremendously. Dan has a friendly rivalry with Roger Penske [owner of Mark Donohue's race car], and last May Dan said to me: 'Man, I'm tired of hearing about this college degree of Mark's. You are just as smart as he is.' I reminded him that I didn't even finish high school. He just laughed and said, 'But you can go out there and make that car run faster.' That's a compliment and it made me feel good.

"The newspaper guys got on this kick pretty big a couple of years ago with

Revson and Donohue. It was almost an anti-Bobby Unser thing. That front row at Indianapolis: two college graduates."

"Revson never graduated from college," I informed Bobby.

"Didn't he?"

"No. Peter bounced in and out of a half-dozen prep schools and colleges, but never stayed long enough to get a degree. He didn't get his head straight until he went racing."

"Really?" said Bobby laughing. I could

On Mario Andretti: "Parnelli Jones is a better road racer than Mario."

see Peter Revson's stock had just risen in Bobby Unser's eyes.

Revson, Donohue and Unser did have one thing in common, however, other than having formed the front row at Indy two years in a row. "Desire," Bobby acknowledged. "That's the one secret of every man's career. A lot of people ask me how to become a race driver. It's stupid. If you want to, you will. If you have the desire to do it, you don't need to ask anybody. You'll figure out a way.

"That's the only thing that has made me: desire. I don't think I've had any natural talents, but some people, boy, they just zing when they're supposed to. Parnelli Jones was one helluva racer. Probably the best the U.S. ever had. Yet

On Al Unser: "Al would drive for anybody if the money was high enough."

with all his talent he never used it up. He's the one guy who could have been our best Formula One racer. He's a better road racer than Mario. He's a better road racer than Stewart. He's a better road racer than anybody I've ever seen run, but he won't pursue it.

"I've watched Parnelli run the sprinters, midgets and everything else and just make them behave like babies. Just did magic with race cars. He's smart, too. Now he's using (Continued on page 132)



Mark Donohue



Jerry Grant



Mario Andretti



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BOBBY UNSER (Continued from page 47)

his talents toward making a successful racing team, but not with himself at the wheel. He had a tremendous amount of desire to match his talent at one time, but not any more."

Bobby's eyes lit up as if suddenly reminded of something pleasurable. "Ever watch Cal Rayburn ride a motorcycle? If you get a chance to see a national road race for cycles, go watch him. You'll see a man with desire beyond anything you can imagine. He stands out from everybody else because of his ability. He works at it all the time. He's the best in the States. Of course, he went to Europe, too, and just blew them cats off."

Perhaps without either of us realizing it at first, Bobby Unser had begun to appraise the other members of his trade. The one young driver to make the biggest impression in 1972 had been Mike Hiss, rookie of the year at Indianapolis. Hiss had finished all three 500-mile races, placing seventh, sixth and second. Bobby Unser had contributed somewhat to Hiss's success, since Mike was driving a secondhand Eagle. When Hiss first arrived at Indianapolis, Bobby had given Mike a guided tour of the track in the pace car. I asked Bobby what he had told Hiss.

"The only thing you try to tell anyone is how to stay alive and help keep somebody else alive. You tell them the basic procedures and safety. You can't tell a guy how to go fast. Besides, I'm not out at Indianapolis to run a school for race drivers. Mike has a tremendous amount of talent, but he's gotten so much publicity that it may end up hurting him. All the drivers know when somebody who really shines arrives. Mike is careful and thinks well, but he is no charger yet. He's doing a good job, but—"

"But it's not like the year Mario Andretti arrived as a rookie at Indianapolis and sat in the front row," I suggested.

"Oh, Lordy no," Bobby agreed. "Far cry from that. Mike may be just as good as Mario someday, but in the year 1972 he simply did a sanitary job, and that's all. But the press really picked up on him. I've seen other guys fall that way. I watched Billy Vukovich damn near retire from racing. The

press built him up so high on account of his Dad having won at the Speedway, that it got to the point where the poor guy barely could make the show. In his mind he decided he was good, and he didn't work at it. If you read too much how good you are, pretty soon you forget about the work you're supposed to do." Bobby paused, reminded of another driver. "Swede Savage—" he began.

Swede Savage had been Bobby Unser's teammate a year earlier, and after one championship victory at Phoenix had been acclaimed by the press as the next racing great. *Car & Driver* magazine deified Swede, selecting him as one of the ten best drivers in the world. Shortly after that article appeared, Swede ignored some good advice from his friends and accepted a ride in an uncompetitive Formula A car for a race at Ontario billed as a showdown between the best American and European drivers. While trying too hard, he drove the car into the wall and almost killed himself—although a mechanical defect may have contributed to the accident.

"He wasn't among the top ten in the world," said Bobby. "If you looked the world over, you wouldn't even have put him in the top hundred, and there aren't that many good race drivers around. When Swede was running for us, he could take Dan's knowledge, and my knowledge, and get his car moving pretty good occasionally—but not during a race. The year he won Phoenix, he absolutely inherited the thing. It was like the year Jimmy McElreath won at Ontario. Everybody dropped out and he was left in front.

"But now here's the great Swede Savage. Suddenly he's got a reputation and he's not ready for it. Supposedly the press can't hurt the veterans. They're used to it. It would never bother Al or Mario or Foyt, but it might bother somebody like Swede or Hiss. When I was starting, I had a lot of pressure because I was driving one of the Novis. Andy Granatelli's press crew generated a lot of publicity for the cars. The fans loved them because they were so loud. So any driver in a Novi attracted attention. But by the same token the cars were an unknown quantity. The Novi wasn't ex-

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pected to win races, but it was expected to go fast. Well, I made it go fast, but I didn't win any races.

"A driver has to be smart to know what car to take. You have to look at your career, especially when you are coming up. I'm not saying hold out until you get Al Unser's car or Mark Donohue's car, but I know drivers that have decided their rides on who paid the most. Al has done it. Mario has done it. I've never done it. I've always gone for what I thought was the best race car, taking money into consideration, but not just looking for that alone. Al would drive for anybody if the money was high enough—it would make no difference. If the money was right, Mario would switch to Good-year.

"I always thought Sammy Sessions had some talent," said Bobby. Sessions won the USAC sprint car championship in 1972 and placed fourth at Indianapolis. "But he always worried whether he was going to get a deal or not. I taught Sammy how to run sprint cars on the dirt. I can remember when he couldn't even miss the show and do a good job of it. But Sammy has hurt his career because he hasn't properly chosen the cars offered to him.

"Greg Weld, who possibly should have been a better driver, just couldn't get with it. A lot of drivers have had a chance and just didn't grab at it, or maybe they should have stayed still a while until they learned enough to accept the one good ride when it came along. Hiss, I think, took a chance when he drove for Penske."

Mark Donohue was sidelined by injury at the Ontario 500, so Roger Penske offered

Mike Hiss a ride in the McLaren that Donohue had driven to victory at Indianapolis. Hiss crashed the car in practice, but later finished second in the race. "Mike was lucky," Bobby explained. "Had he driven the same car that way at Indianapolis, it probably would have marked him as a failure. At Ontario he came on strong because so many cars dropped out. But if you start looking at where he was running the race had most of the cars finished he would have placed way back in a potential winning car. That would have looked bad. He finished second, so the ultimate record looks pretty good.

"There are some drivers who will sit there running a lap behind and all of a sudden find themselves in second or third place. Mel Kenyon is a perfect example. Mel is at the point now where he admits this is his way. But the type of driver I am, if I had to stroke to win, I would retire. I could have a bad car and continue racing knowing I might improve it or get a better one. But to start a race and sit there waiting for the hot dogs to drop out isn't my way. It isn't Mario's way, or Al's. Foyt and Donohue are chargers, too. That's why car owners pay more for this small group that supposedly excels above the others."

"We're now going 200 mph," I commented. "Is there any limit?"

"There's no limit," Bobby responded without hesitation. "Why would there be? It's just a number. Back in the pioneer days, they probably would have put you in an insane asylum if you had suggested 200-mph laps on a track, but we're doing it.

"They would have committed you only

three years ago," I commented.

"I whacked off the first 170-mph lap at the Speedway in 1968," said Bobby. "I've got records like that all over.

"The turbines had such an advantage on us that year, yet we beat them to it. Didn't pay a damn thing, hardly. I think \$1500, but it meant a lot to me, because I did something no man had done before. I naturally felt bad when Jerry Grant wiped off the first 200-lap last year at Ontario, because that really should have been mine." Jerry Grant, Bobby's teammate, had become the first Indy driver to crack the 200-mph barrier, hitting a 201.414-mph lap while qualifying for the Ontario 500 in September 1972. He averaged 199.600 mph for four laps. Only the luck of the draw had given Jerry the opportunity to qualify before Bobby.

"Now if Mario or someone else had run the 200 first, it would have been different. But I made it possible for Jerry to run that fast. He couldn't have devised it himself. If we turned Jerry loose on his own, he wouldn't know where to start. He knows nothing about a chassis."

Bobby had finished his breakfast. He looked at his watch and said it was time for him to head for the track. I figured the interview had ended, but Bobby insisted I drive out to the track with him. He still had some talking to do, particularly about his 1968 victory at Indianapolis. Joe Leonard had led the Indy 500 with eight laps to go, but was unable to finish after a fuel pump failed.

"About that '68 race," said Bobby, obviously wanting to set the record straight. "Joe never would have won. Did you ever notice how many laps he led in that race?" I conceded he had a point.

"He sat on the pole," Bobby continued. "No question about it, but he had a tremendous horsepower advantage with the turbine. At least twice as much and closer to three times as much. But Lloyd Ruby led more laps in the race than Joe did. And I led more laps than the two of them combined. A lot of people, because Joe was leading toward the end of the race, think he automatically would have won if his fuel pump hadn't failed. Not true.

"I had lost three-quarters of a lap on two pit stops. This is total loss, because my gearshift broke and all I had was fourth gear. But I led the most laps, turned the fastest lap in the race, and even though Leonard was leading toward the end—considering how much faster I was running and the distance behind—theoretically I would have caught him even if he hadn't broken.

"It would have come down to the white-flag lap. That would have put us even. It would have been a question of my passing him on that last lap or not. He was in clean air and I was running in traffic and I could run faster in traffic because of slipstreaming. That would have given me another advantage that we don't even measure. According to past times, I would have passed in half a lap once I hit his slipstream. So Joe never had the race cinched even without dropping out." Bobby paused and smiled: "I was glad to see him drop out, though."

Joe Leonard competed on the same team with Bobby's brother Al and Mario Andretti. "They were competitive toward the

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end of the year," said Bobby. "Weren't worth a damn, earlier. I felt sorry for those guys. They have two supergood drivers in Al and Mario. Leonard is good sometimes. There are times when Joe gets on it and really shines. Other times he looks bad.

"Mario has been a long time without a win. Helluva driver. I look for them to be much more competitive this year than they were last, because now they're taking it more serious. Last year they had the big sponsor, big money, lots of press. I think it caused them all to sit on their dead asses. They inherited the name Superteam, and it sunk them. Now they're through with all that and are down to where they want to race. The publicity can come from winning."

George Bignotti, acknowledged by many to be Indy's top mechanic, had served as crew chief for the Superteam. In the last dozen years Bignotti had shared in five Indy 500 victories: twice in 1961 and 1964 with A. J. Foyt; once in 1966 with Graham Hill; and twice in 1970 and 1971 with Al Unser. At the end of 1972, Bignotti formed a new racing stable with drivers Gordon Johncock and Swede Savage. "I personally didn't think Bignotti gave anything to that team last year," commented Bobby. "They got to the point where they were fighting too much among themselves: George, the drivers, the mechanics. George had a piece of every car. There comes a time with Bignotti where all he thinks about is money. But George has a new challenge now, and I think he will do much better."

In between championship trail races, Bobby Unser competes on the USAC stock-car circuit. His luck there had been similar to that in the champ cars: every weekend another track record and another DNF. At a Milwaukee stock car race in September, I had been standing near Turn One early in the race when Bobby came down the home straightaway, well in the lead. His engine suddenly exploded in a cloud of smoke sending him skidding out of control. Miraculously—or perhaps because he possesses superb driving skills—he avoided hitting the wall. "I had to save that car three times," Bobby recalled.

"I race stock cars because it gives you something to do and keeps you sharp. I don't enjoy running in NASCAR so much, because it's like a different system. In NASCAR you see more good drivers than at USAC, but it's a different set of rules. It's not just the carburetor plate—the entire frame of the race car is different. USAC is loose. They don't have as many rules and don't change them every week. NASCAR, jeez, they get you choked down like a horse you're trying to break. He's so wild you can't break him, so you choke him where he can't breathe. Then he only can buck so much. That's the way they do at NASCAR.

"It's run under a czar, Bill France. He's running a dictatorship, instead of a club. One person makes all the rules. I'm not too sure that's bad either, since their racing is extremely successful. The few times I've gone down there they've treated me nicely, but I sometimes wonder if I went down more competitive how nicely they would treat me."

"What about Foyt?" I said. "He went down and took some of their money."

"Yeah, but Foyt was sent in. Ford Motor Company is big in NASCAR so Foyt got his foot in the door real hard. They very

much respect A.J. Foyt. You might even say they are afraid of him. They are not going to mess with Foyt too much.

"Did you hear about Bobby Allison?" Bobby suddenly asked. "He just ran 190 at Ontario, first crack out of the box, which totally surprised me. One hundred and ninety mph—just bang! Now that had to be a hell of an achievement—maybe not to him, but to me. I've never seen a NASCAR driver come up and hit it like him.

"The NASCAR drivers made a big deal about us breaking the world record for a closed course at Ontario. I was down in Charlotte in October and I talked to Bobby Isaac, who previously had held the world record in a stock car at Talladega, and the poor guy actually acted like I whipped him because I went 201 and he had been just a tick slower. It was a big thing to him. Well, I could take away one-third of my horsepower and still beat him by ten mph.

"See, we did it at Ontario, which is a comparatively flat track. Talladega has high banked turns. At Michigan, where they run 160 mph, we ran 199.8 mph. I came back and told Dan, 'Jesus Christ, if them \$!#!!) go down there and set up a car to run at Talladega and bust our record, that's *it!* Just load that sonofabitch on a trailer. We are going to take it to Talladega and I'll warm that sonofabitch up faster than they *ever* ran! When I finish with them one time, they won't screw around the next time!' And that's the way I feel.

"They actually were comparing their cars to ours as far as speed, and that's utterly ridiculous. We are like in the space age and they are running in pioneer days. I'm not saying which is the best spectator sport, it's just that our cars are so much faster there's no way to compare the two."

"How fast could you go?" I asked Bobby.

"I have no idea. I told Dan I wouldn't want to see how far I could go with it. I'd just blast off a 220 or 225 and just drop it. That would put the record so far out of reach they wouldn't talk about it again."

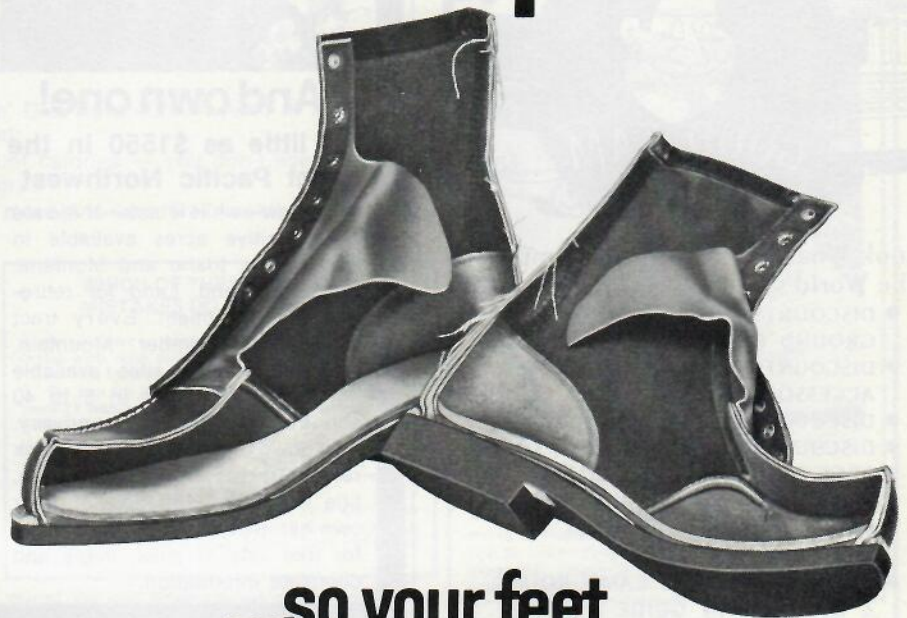
We arrived at Phoenix International Raceway and drove around a dirt road outside the track to get to the back entrance.

I had time for one final question: "Do you think you can win the 500 again?"

"I never make predictions like that," said Bobby. "I've seen so many times when somebody has a tremendous advantage and everything in the world goes wrong. I don't think we're going to be able to retain the total advantage I enjoyed in 1972. The other teams are going to work harder than ever. Mario just went 197 mph at Ontario in his new car. In this business it's hard to stay on top."

The track cleared and we drove into the infield. Terry Arfons spotted us and announced that a batch of tires, delayed at the Cleveland airport, finally had arrived. "Time to go to work," said Bobby. He walked over to a nearby van and donned his driving suit. He stood for a moment talking with his mechanics by the side of Eagle, the world's fastest racing car—at least for the time being. Climbing into the cockpit, he pulled on a helmet decorated with the name "Bobby Unser" and the picture of the bird for which the car is named. The engine fired and he drove onto the track, slowly at first, then faster, faster, and up into the fastest path—the groove. **T**

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