

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

0 22

Here's what seemed like a three-part recipe for losing an Indy 500:

- 1. Evict from the lobby of a plush hotel a year-old March rear-engine racing car;**
- 2. Hire at the last instant a semi-retired old gaffer to race it;**
- 3. Man it with a slap-dash and inexperienced crew whose members include an insurance-claims adjuster, a part-time truck driver, and a fabricator whose specialties aren't dumping fuel or swapping rubber but boring into the insides of turbochargers**

Every odds-maker and Indy 500 handicapper going would have spent two minutes examining this hodge-podge and declared it the 1987 500's biggest long-shot. And rightly so, because in its first and only experience of practicing together, which was during Carburetion Day's final tune-up, the antique racing car, doddering racing driver, and butter-fingered crew successfully engineered ridiculous pit stops slower than two-thirds of the rest of the field of 33.

Once the 500 started, the jittery old racing driver began performing to everybody's worst expectations. First he barely escaped involvement in a big accident on the first corner of the opening lap. Next he fell a full lap behind – the worst thing that could have happened. And then, on his very first pit stop, his inexperienced crew did OK. But the 47-year-old racing driver was struck down with another case of nerves and stalled his engine.

And then, after lots of odd things – very, very odd things – had occurred in the 500's remaining 450 miles, this gang of no-hopes and their doddering driver had conquered the odds and won the Indy 71st 500. And how sweet it was:

The winning 1986 model March-Cosworth enjoyed the satisfaction of being the first year-old racing car to win Indy in 18 500s;

The winning racing driver, Big Al Unser, enjoyed the satisfaction of winning his fourth Indy 500; enjoyed the satisfaction of being at 47 the most senior racing driver ever to win an

Indy 500; and enjoyed the great satisfaction of making all those Indy teams who hadn't bothered to offer him a chair for the 500 look still more ridiculous than they did already.

The power-hungry winning team, Penske Racing, which seemed to hold all of the Indy 500 in its frightening fist, enjoyed the satisfaction of continued its unpopular reputation of conquering and smothering the 500.



The winning manufacturer, England's March Engineering of Bicester, for seasons the busiest and best chassis shop going, but in 1986 suddenly falling on hard times, had the satisfaction of regaining momentum in both the Indy 500 and in the Championship Auto Racing Teams PPG World Series. Eight of 1987's remaining dozen matches were won by March, including the 500s of Michigan, and Pennsylvania's Pocono Raceway.

"March" was the acronym of a quartet of four brilliant blokes, including Max Mosley, whose father, Oswald, used to lead his black shirts tramping around London, and at the time was administrative honcho of the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile, sanctioning body of F1. Most of the five are out of racing today, and some are deceased. Following only middling success in the 1970s, the marque in the middle - and late-1980s, struck a nerve in America, winning better than 50 CART oval and road meets, five Indy 500s (1983-1987), and in 1984 turning the 500 into one giant March commercial with only five of the 33 starters not being March.

Indy 500 teams purchased March models as if they were kit racing cars, which wasn't surprising, because back at Bicester the March management kept catapulting them off its

assembly line by the numbers. Few Indy 500 teams bought just one: 022, for example, began life as part of a multi-vehicle order from Penske Racing, and, in April of 1986, it arrived in Pennsylvania at Reading, the Penske Racing compound.

022's first race was the 500 a month later at Indy. Rick Mears, whose ruined feet with their amputated toes – a weakness of any March was that it lacked foot-box protection, so that when Rick had gone nose-first into Indy's wall his lower extremities had received a pulping – were for the first time in two 500s feeling sound, All May Rick was singing the praises of 022. And after he'd captured the pole at record speed, Rick and 022 became Memorial Day's overwhelming favorites.

But Rick and 022 got all messed up in the raw speed of the laggard Arciero -Lola of the “ Mexican laughing tobacco “ pirate and soon-to-be Federal prison inmate Randy Lanier, and also got stuck back in the dirty air coming off of Michael Andretti's Kraco-March. And then Rick was overtaken in a rush by Bobby Rahal's Red Roof Inn March and Kevin Cogan's Patrick March; he finished only third, a disappointing position he and 022 duplicated a week later in Milwaukee.

There, after breaking down at Oregon's Portland International Raceway, 022 got parked and set aside. For the journey to New Jersey and the annual parking-lot fracas at the Meadowlands, Penske Racing put Mears and Danny Sullivan into new PC-15 Ilmores. Danny's disintegrated and 022 and its Cosworth were made available to him. Danny won the Meadowlands. Rick then climbed back into 022 and went winless through four disappointing domestic and Canadian PPG shows including the Pocono 500. Pocono was the biggest disappointment, because Rick barely qualified sixth fastest. All he'd needed to do was qualify fastest, as he'd done at Indy and Michigan, and he'd have won the triple crown of pole positions proving—by far -- that 022 was Indy car racing's fastest March.

Rick then passed the remainder of 1986 wasting his time on the development of Penske Racing's badly flawed PC-15. 020, in comparison, was dismantled, put into mothballs, discarded into history as just another year-old March, and became an obsolete piece of discarded bric-a-brac occupying the lobby of the Reading Sheraton-Berkshire.

Penske Racing went forward in 1987 with its plans to race no more Marchs and instead field new PC-16s for Rick, Danny Sullivan and a newcomer to Penske Racing , Danny Ongais. Danny was a mute Hawaiian who raced and crashed like a mad man, and only had gotten the ride because his angel, department store tycoon Ted Fields, had paid for it.

The new PC-16 were rolling disasters whose unpredictable behavior throughout Indy's opening week of practicing turned Rick and the two Danny's into three basket cases. Yet

other drivers, too, were trying to knock down walls. No fewer than 25 wrecks were recorded in the first three weeks – at one brutal stage the whole seventh floor at Methodist Hospital was over-crowded with drivers suffering from splintered feet, or dingy drivers who'd had their bells rung, including Danny Ongais. Going out of control on the Brickyard's dry, boiling surface, Danny's PC-16 had delivered a hard clubbing to the outer concrete.

But getting caught with one of its three PC-16 destroyed, and its driver in the fracture ward, and the remaining pair of PC-16s impossible to drive, seemed to make the frightening Penske Corporation more frightening than usual.



Its first step of recovery was to park and forget forever the two wretched PC-16s of Rick and Danny Sullivan -- even though Danny already had successfully time-trialed his. The second step was to restore to racing trim – overnight! – three of the Penske Corporation's year-old Marches, including 022 . The third step was the installation of fresh Ilmores in the Rick and Danny Marches, but to handicap Danny Ongais – perhaps as punishment for his wreck -- with 022 and its slow but reliable Cosworth.

As a result on all this hocus-pocus, Penske Corporation had seemed back in business – almost. Rick, its qualifying gun, parked on the front row, and Danny put himself in mid-pack. But Danny Ongais remained the problem. Just ten days before the 500, medics at Methodist

Hospital pronounced him still too dingy to get his competition license and driving privileges restored until the end of May.

And this was when Penske Racing hired Big Al who, had been existing in a state of enforced semi-retirement, until Roger Penske had cried “Bring me Big Al! Al, of course, could be considered the best driver the Indy 500 had going: owners of other teams often instructed their drivers to spend the 500 miles following Big Al, because, as a three-time 500 winner, he always was in or near the lead.

Indy 500 history would have been different had Big Al instead of saying “Yes” to Roger had said, resoundingly, “No!” And why should he not have, what with Penske Racing’s disgraceful discharging him after he’d already won Penske the seasonal PPG titles of 1983 and 1985? Qualifying only 20th fastest on the final weekend, Big Al immediately joined the field’s 32 others in doing what Indy 500 drivers always do, commit mistakes:

Josele Garza, out-jumping drivers two rows ahead of him, spun out in the first corner; damaged his own car; knocked coachwork off Pancho Carter’s; and caused eight other drivers to scatter, including Big Al and 022;



Arie Luyendyk, one of the leaders, making a routine re-fueling stop, entered the pits too fast, locked up the brakes, smashed into a waiting fresh tire, and wasted his front suspension;

Dick Simon, the oldest participant in the 500, who supposedly was the mysterious D.B. Cooper, who 'd sky-jacked for a million-dollars a 707 jetliner with all its passengers, having the great Indy of his career, got over-excited, then ran dry of methanol;

Danny Sullivan jumping from 16th starting hole into the lead...dropped his concentration...spun out but kept going, which was the same trick he'd pulled in 1985, when he won...and then blew up his Ilmore;

Fabrizio Barbazza, imitating Danny, spun out, kept the engine roaring, and continued;

Gordon Johncock and Scott Brayton both got grabby for positions, and, for passing under yellow slow-down conditions each got docked a couple of laps;

The pit crews of Michael and Little Al Unser set their cars afire;

Leader Roberto Guerrero hit a wheel and tire lost by Tony Bettenhausen the younger, and booted it high into the grandstands where it hit and decapitated a male spectator, and, in the confusion, Roberto lost 55 seconds stalling on his last tire and re-fueling stop;

But, throughout the 500, Big Al was committing the most mistakes a triple 500 champion ever had.

First, after barely missing the Garza melee on the opening lap, he found O22 unbalanced and ugly to keep hold of. So he'd had to slow down. Which was when Mario Andretti, in the lead, took the opportunity to demoralize the opponent he most feared, and lapped Big Al.

Big Al still was bawling himself out for allowing it to happen so his mind was elsewhere when, making his first rubber and re-fueling stop, he dropped the hammer too quickly and killed 022's Cosworth.

Steady and heads-up chauffeuring – vintage Big Al – plus the attrition rate of Rick's and other faster cars – moved 022 forward, although it was drudgery and plain old hard work. 022 lost straight-away steam which wing adjustments couldn't restore. Then Big Al almost blew a second pit stop. Worse, for mile after mile he couldn't escape the erratic clutches of Tom Sneva, who, having walled a pair of March-Buicks, was racing as if he were going for a third.

Meanwhile, in the lead, and running away with the Indy 500 by better than a lap, and after pampering and babying it for 450 miles, Mario had his Lola-Ilmore – he'd praised it as

the fastest car he'd ever raced in the 500 – lunch beneath him. This had handed first place to Roberto Guerrero, who'd squandered it with his blown pit stop. So Big Al and 022 were in the lead and, after the dangerous Tom Sneva had rushed into the wall for a third time. It was all smooth sailing.

Also, Big Al's winning rookie pit crew, losing its butter-fingers as soon as the 500 was flagged off, could enjoy the satisfaction of giving him – despite his own clumsy blunders – eight refueling and tire stops whose elapsed time was the 500's fastest.

Following the 500, Big Al's on-again, off-again relationship with the Penske Racing resumed. He was permitted to race 022 in Michigan's August 500 and finished a strong second. For a reward, he was entrusted with 022 for the Pocono 500. A yellow "oil low" panel light flashed – too late - and Big Al was fortunate to escape injury when 022 touched the wall.

Penske Racing now removed 022's Cosworth, and with it Big Al, and converted it into Rick's Ilmore-powered back-up March. In 1987's final five CART races it finished ninth, fourth, third, third, and fifth.

And this truly was the end of 022, perhaps the most remarkable of all Marches. For 1988 the Penske Corporation's new PC-17 was ready to win. So 022 got stripped down a second and last time, and became a popular exhibit at a Penske Racing's compound in the south of California.