

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

33 Best

The word “best” can mean many things. Best in this case is simply those 33 Indy 500s of the last century which mean the most to me. What makes them so is difficult to say. With some, it was the personalities involved. With others it was element of surprise. Some were just plain wildly exciting. One or two were almost comic. The best way to put it is, these are the 33 Indy 500s I would most liked to have seen, or to see again.



1. 1960 - Jim Rathmann, Rodger Ward, and the 500 of 500s. Ward, with the race's fastest Watson roadster had all sorts of problems. He killed his engine on an early pit stop, and while catching up to Rathmann's identical Watson got into a senseless skirmish with Tony Bettenhausen. The Brickyard never had seen anything so tense and great as the long Ward-Rathmann battle which followed. After running Ward out of rubber, Rathmann, himself treadbare, won, and his chief mechanic was Chickie Hirashima, although bad sport Smokey Yunick went to his grave swearing he was.

2. 1968 - Bobby Unser, Lloyd Ruby, and the turbine driver Joe Leonard wore out themselves, the crowd, and finally their cars in this lead-swapping 500 that Anton Hulman said he liked better than any other. What was expected to be a turbine run-away wasn't when

Leonard lapped slower than anticipated. He and Unser dueled like the enemies they were, but Ruby possibly had a slight edge on both of them. At 440 miles Ruby slowed, and Leonard's turbine died at 480. With just one gear left, Unser won.

3. 1915 - By getting out and pushing his broken Mercedes across the finish line in 1912, Ralph DePalma made the Indy 500 famous. But defeating Dario Resta this year helped make DePalma's career. DePalma vs. Resta made a strange pairing. Resta never had competed in the 500 before while DePalma had raced in four of the first five. Yet Resta, the British visitor, never quit. He cut a tire, clipped a wall, and still had his crippled and ferociously wobbling Peugeot on the same straightway with DePalma's oil-hemorrhaging Merc by the finish.

4. 1961 - A frustrated pit crew member hurled a wheel hammer at Eddie Sachs' copycat Watson after the late tire stop that broke off at last the long fight between Sachs and A.J. Foyt in another copycat Watson. This was the first Indy 500 win of four for Foyt. It also was the debut of Parnelli Jones who, beginning a long streak of Indy misfortune, got struck in the forehead by a bolt and had to periodically stop to drain his goggles of blood,

5. 1924 - Joe Boyer's and the rest of the supercharged Duesenbergs were ailing, save for one being ploddingly raced by Slim Corum. And victory surely would have gone to Earl Cooper's Studebaker had not the Duesenberg brothers, Fred and Augie replaced Corum with Boyer, the millionaire dilettante who was their attack driver, then set Boyer on Cooper. Boyer devoured the Studebaker and won what was the fastest 500 yet.



6. 1959 - Rodger Ward won this Offy roadster war one year before waging and losing the definitive battle to Jim Rathmann in 1960 – this time it was Rathmann who finished second. Many of the familiar members of the Offy roadster cast – Dick Rathmann, Johnny Thomson, Tony Bettenhausen, Johnny Boyd, Eddie Sachs – were themselves in peak form. Before pounding the wall, Pat Flaherty, absent for three 500s, also jumped into the fight.

7. 1956 - Crazy; Eight different drivers hit walls, including one after the finish and four under a period of yellow caution. The longest period of sane racing between all the yellows was 21 minutes. Mishaps nearly put out the second, third, fifth and sixth place finishers – and Pat Flaherty, in the first A.J. Watson roadster, was the stunning winner. The weather, a fresh track surface and defective Firestones got the blame/credit for this crazy and most exciting of all 500s.

8. 1935 - A nimble piece of racing-car driving by Kelly Petillo, the irascible grocer's son from Los Angeles. After setting new time trial speed records, he was disqualified on a technicality. A connecting rod snapped on his second qualifying run, and Petillo was only 22nd on his third, drop-dead, try. He waited out the faster cars of Rex Mays and Wilbur Shaw, and

was leading during a drizzle which abated with just 35 miles to go. But there wasn't enough time for Shaw to catch him.



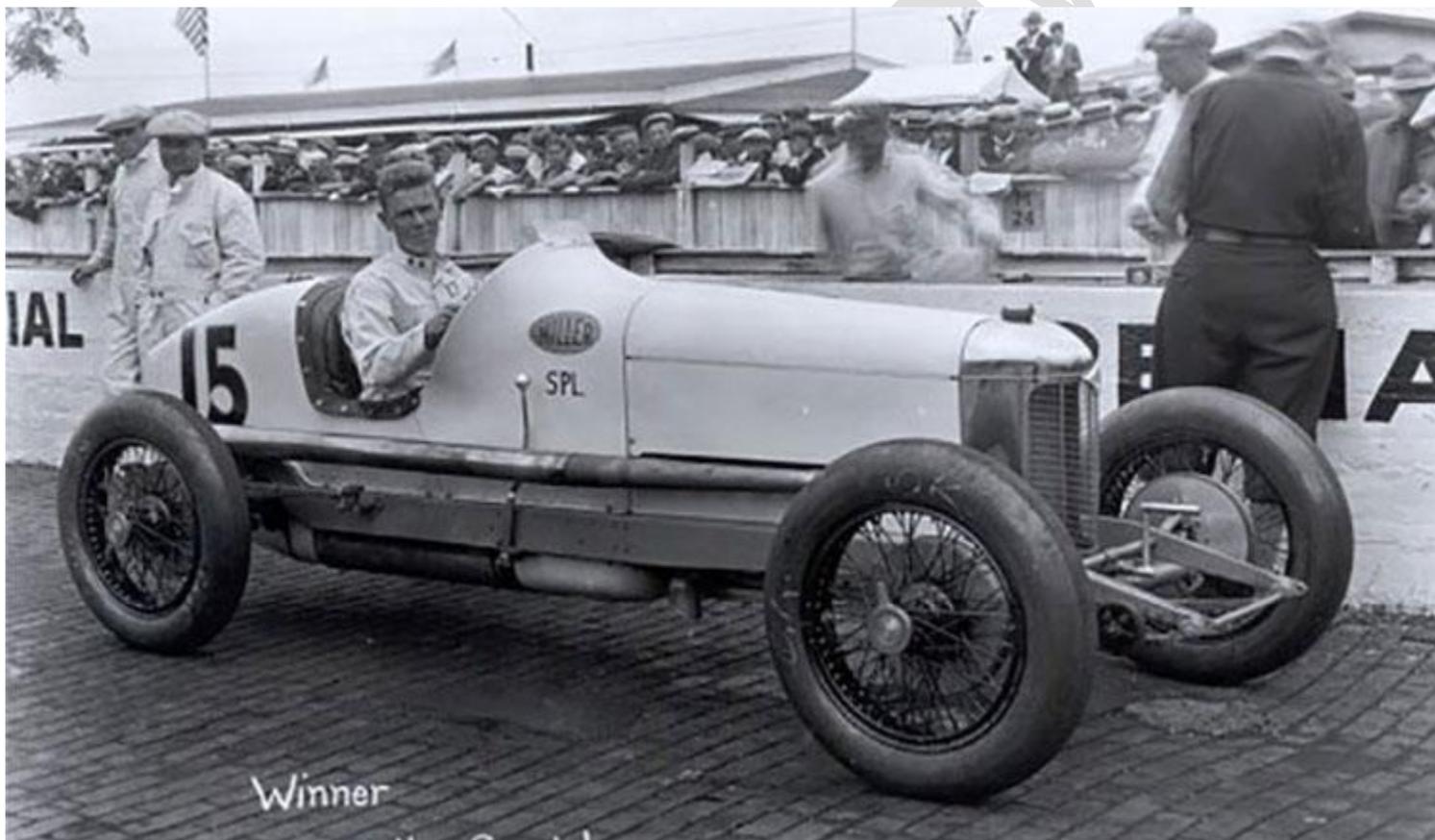
9. 1986 - Passionate racing vs. intellectual racing, His car often maladroit, Kevin Cogan was dancing on a hot stove all 500 long, carrying out the most heroic top lane passes yet seen on the Brickyard. Bobby Rahal, meanwhile intellectual and cunning, matched Cogan's pace by racing with all the emotion of a robot. Rahal won, but it took a drag-race finish and a 209 mph last lap.

10. 1911 - The morning after the inaugural 500, newspapers angrily editorialized that such a scandalous spectacle must never be repeated. Indy's Brickyard was a shambles: thick tire and exhaust smoke still polluted the air; the remains of wrecked cars sat thick on the corners; a riding mechanic was dead; and the crowd of 80,000 remained in stressful shock. Either Ray Harroun or Ralph Mulford had won, the scorers at first weren't sure which, then decided it was Harroun who, summoned to the winner's podium, went into a coughing spasm and asked for something to eat. He never raced again. The winning Marmon Wasp, had, as its uncredited relief driver - even though he was the one who put the Wasp into the lead - Cy Patschke.

11. 1951 - Why was mild-mannered George Salih, chief mechanic for Lee Wallard, violently quarreling with race officials down on the starting line? It was because Wallard, leading the 500 with barely 50 miles to go, had a shock absorber dangling and his car was

about to get the black flag. Salih won the quarrel much as J.C. Agajanian won his 1963 quarrel with the infamous chief steward Harlan Fengler, which preserved the only Indy 500 of Parnelli Jones. Averaging a record 126 mph, Wallard wore out cars other than his own.

12. 1926 - What Frank Lockhart must have looked like careening from 20th starting position to fifth in barely seven miles can be imagined. Except in Los Angeles, Lockhart wasn't yet revered, and it was claimed that the only reason he got to race the Miller originally assigned to Pete Kreis was because Kreis had taken ill. Peter DePaolo, Harry Hartz, and Leon Duray were Lockhart's victims. Rain halted both the rain and Lockhart's rampage at 400 miles, but by then the rookie was five miles in the lead.



13. 1962 Even though he set a new speed record, Rodger Ward, the winner, accused A.J. Watson, his great chief mechanic, of sloppy pit signals enabling Len Sutton to almost catch him. Ward and Sutton, teammates, finished several lengths apart. Eddie Sachs, up from 27th to third, almost blew off both Leader Cards. Nobody else had a prayer as long as Parnelli Jones – on the pole at a controversial 150 mph – was on the Brickyard with brakes which worked; even without brakes, Parnelli finished seventh. For the fourth consecutive 500, it had been an Offy roadster thriller.



14. 1937 - During the 1920s, Ralph Hepburn used to race Harley-Davidson board track motors iron man-style for 300 miles under the abusive sun of Kansas, but he fatigued in this 500. Bob Swanson spelled him for roughly 80 miles, falling three miles behind leader Wilbur Shaw. Then Shaw's Catfish began spraying oil, and a revived Hepburn took over from Swanson. Hep went back to work. He made up the three miles and barely lost to Shaw by 2.16 seconds. Until Gordon Johncock and Rick Mears 45 years later, this one was the closest Indy 500.

15. 1948 - Few people understood how Mauri Rose, diminutive and middle-aged, was able to dominate big front-drive Indy cars as he did. The explanation was that he leaned far forward in the cockpit to put every muscle in his upper body to work steering. Rose also used his brains. This was his third career Indy 500 win and his second in a row. It was a jeweled effort, achieved at the expense of Bill Holland, Duke Nalon, and Ted Horn.

16. 1922 - The furious 500 that fired the frightening and two-year-long Tommy Milton-Jimmy Murphy feud. Milton, stealing the technology of Peugeot, Ballot, and Duesenberg, and benefiting from the money of Henry Ford and Cliff Durant, had had Harry Miller tool up a brilliant new engine just for himself. But Murphy, his arch most bitter foe, somehow got one too. Murphy was fastest of 27 qualifiers; led for 380 of the 500 miles; and won by a two-mile margin. Meanwhile Milton, who didn't finish at all, was vituperative that his new engine had put Murphy instead of himself inside Indy's winners circle.

17. 1957 - Whether or not George Sahil's Meyer-Drake-on-its-side roadster was as advanced as was publicized (it won the following year's 500 too), the distinguished Indy 500 veteran Sam Hanks, who prior to this had never led a lap, raced it vigorously in his 12th and last 500: his winning average speed was five mph faster than Pat Flaherty's standing record. Dangerous opponents pressuring Hanks included Paul Russo in a surprisingly reliable Novi, Troy Ruttman, and 32nd starting Jim Rathmann, who somehow spun out on Indy's pit road dueling his brother Dick.

18. 1921 - One of the Indy 500's greatest giveaways. Slow-thinking Roscoe Sarles, destined for an awful end on the Kansas City boards only 15 months later, lost to the wily, intelligent, sharp-tongued Tommy Milton. Milton was racing Arthur Chevrolet's slow Frontenac and Sarles was wheeling the fastest factory Duesenberg. But Milton, who always treated the Brickyard as a chess board, played tricky games with Sarles all afternoon, roundly defeating him and all the rest of the superior Dusies.

19. 1947 - Twenty-six seasons later, now serving at Indy in an official capacity, Milton behaved at his sharp-tongued best during the awards banquet of what had been a rousing but tremendously controversial 500. Thanks to ambiguous pit signals coming from his car owner Lou Moore, Bill Holland had, late in the race, lost the lead and the win to his talented but unpopular teammate Mauri Rose. Holland, at the banquet, still was seething about it. But Milton delivered a cutting speech which made him seethe still more, pointing out that Holland had lost the 500 because he wasn't paying enough attention. Then Milton turned around and insulted Rose, too, stating that everybody knew that the 500's best driver hadn't been Mauri at all, but Ted Horn, who finished third.



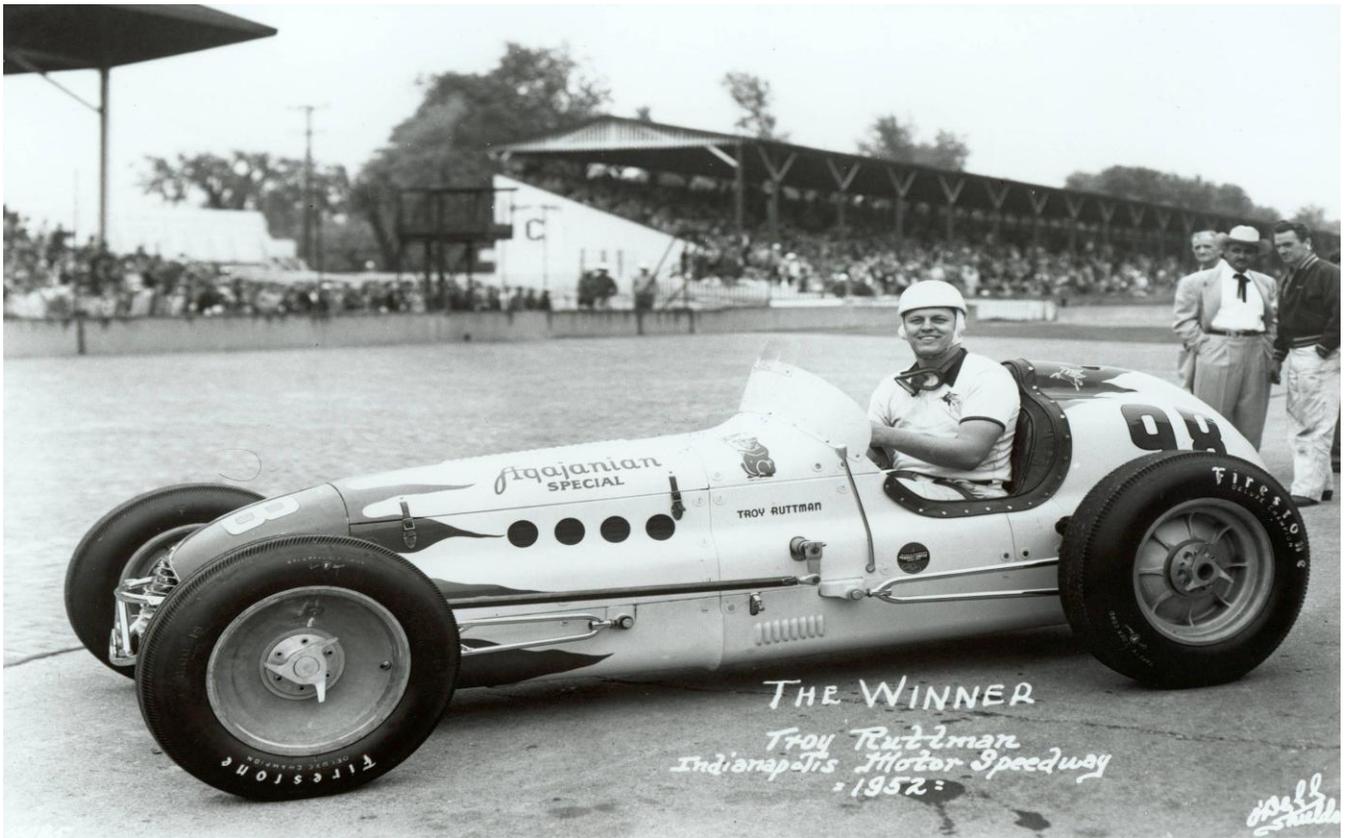
20. 1982 - For its opening 450 miles, this 500 was – barring its crashing and colliding start -- something of a yawner, with Gordon Johncock its certain winner. But the unpredictability of modern Indy cars caused Johncock's Wildcat to lose its handling, and for the second place Penske of Rick Mears to find its own. The last, supercharged, 25 miles were matter of Johncock sliding back to Mears and Mears coming at Johncock. Orchestrating a final lap that was sensational, Johncock won.

21. 1931 - Unsung Louis Schneider won by narrowly beating Fred Frame. But reckless Wilbur Shaw, the future Indy 500 champion of 1938, 1939, and 1940, seized the day. Shaw's car broke down and, after commandeering the car of Phil Pardee, he flew out of control and he and his riding mechanic cleared the northwest wall. Grabbing his third car and third riding mechanic, Shaw engineered a wild skid and, upon seeing his mechanic cringing, delivered a great and funny riposte that has kept Brickyard denizens laughing down through the ages: "If you think that was something," Shaw snapped, "you should have been here the last time!"

22. 1928 - Two future three-time Indy 500 winners –Shaw and Louie Meyer – figured in a notorious car swap. Having raced in relief of Shaw the previous year, Meyer turned the tables and had Alden Sampson go buy him the Miller Shaw was planning to race. Meyer then won the 500 from Lou Moore, who was making his rookie start. An explosion was set off during time trials when dark horse Leon Duray, whose real name was George Stewart, got ahead of Frank Lockhart's qualifying marks: It was as looming a run as Bobby Unser's of 1972.

23. 1946 - Hilarious and horrible. The Indy 500's impoverished racing men took their old crocks out from under tarps following the five war years and nobody could predict if any of them would finish. Most didn't: 24 of the 33 were gone before the end. One of the fastest drivers was Mauri Rose, who'd started ninth yet led the first lap, just as Jimmy Murphy had done from the same position in 1922. The 500's other hare was Ralph Hepburn's record setting bull Novi, seven mph faster than anything else but in and out of the pits eight times before blowing up. Worn-out hulks kept breaking down until the Brickyard looked like a used-car lot. Somebody had to win, and it was the doomed George Robson in an antique Art Sparks six-cylinder.

24. 1952 - When the field of 33 hit the starting line with the leaders already four abreast and ahead of the pace car, the Brickyard braced for a chargers 500 and got it. The three hottest chargers, all Californians, were Jack McGrath, Troy Ruttman, and especially the famed Crazy Russian, Billy Vukovich, who was leading with eight laps to go when he went into the wall. Ruttman, once set afire by his own pit crew, won.



25. 1974 - Among his sprint car racing contemporaries A.J.Foyt, Parnelli Jones, Bobby Unser, and Mario Andretti, Johnny Rutherford took the longest to win the Indy 500. But when he finally did, he did it with flair. Not only did he put “Driving like a USAC sprint car driver” back in vogue he gave it esteemed meaning. Starting sideways – and 25th, he finished sideways. Rutherford showed no mercy. At one point he got going so fast that he split Jimmy McElreath and Pancho Carter – “Splittin’ the butter” a fearless flat track biker named Ronnie Doyle called the maneuver – sending Carter dancing for the infield and McElreath toward the wall.

26. 1925 - Lore has it that after the Duesenberg brothers finished constructing Peter DePaolos racing car in their second-story Indianapolis garage on Washington Boulevard, they discovered they’d made a mistake and couldn’t get it out. So a wall was bashed clear, and yellow No. 12 was lowered to the street and driven to the Brickyard. This was the Dusie, on balloon tires, which allowed DePaolo to crack the 100 mph average for the first time,

27. 1971 - Another giveaway. Peter Revson’s turbocharged Meyer-Drake, the first of the Indy 500’s tall-winged cars, set on pole position at nearly 180 mph. Four mph weaker and four starting positions behind sat Al Unser’s outmoded turbo Ford. But in the same manner that Tommy Milton had flummoxed Roscoe Sarles, Unser flummoxed Revson and won the 500.

28. 1949 - Duke Nalon's tremendous Novi crash and holocaust turned the 500 into a mad scramble among Lee Wallard, Bill Holland, Rex Mays, Duane Carter, Mauri Rose, and the former stunt man Joie Chitwood, who was having his finest Indy hour. Still smarting from the debacle of 1947, Holland won.

29 . 1934 - Mauri Rose might well have captured a 500 seven years earlier than he did, had he not stubbornly turned down relief offers from other drivers, including Wilbur Shaw. As it was, he exhausted himself, and Bill Cummings – who almost was a Steve Kinser figure in his era – overtook him and won.

30. 1953 - A historical correction; Apparently it was not true that Billy Vukovich had the most stamina of anybody else in this most blazing hot of all Indy 500, which wore out drivers by the dozen. By his last rubber and refueling stop, when Vukovich, too, was white as a sheet and looking in need of relief, his mechanic, Crabby Travers, pointed to stolid Henry Banks as a possible replacement. Travers joke so outraged Vukovich – Banks wasn't the Crazy Russian's idea of a racing driver – that he developed the adrenaline to reach the finish as winner (For the record, Crabby disputes this story).



31. 1941 - With 180 miles to go, Lou Moore's No. 16 was buried in traffic, its driver Floyd Davis lagging two miles behind. But Mauri Rose, the fastest driver on the Brickyard, had fallen out and was available for relief-driving chores. So Moore flagged Davis in and sent Rose out. Rose ran down everybody, even Rex Mays, and won his initial 500.

32. 1972 - Because they were equipped with turbochargers and tall wings, all 33 starters had faster qualifying averages than the pole qualifier of 1971. Among the first to go was Bobby Unser, who dropped his ignition. Meanwhile, cutting through traffic to gain the lead, Mike Mosley struck the wall and exited flaming; Gary Bettenhausen, about to win the 500 for himself and his family, cooked his water; and Jerry Grant and Mark Donohue were left to grapple for first. Grant got fined \$72,000 for a chaotic pit stop; Donohue hit the fastest lap and won a bizarre 500.

33. 1985 - Hey, Danny, how'd you do that? An impossible set of skid marks for the length of turn two told the story. Despite the usual month of preparation, and thousands of miles practicing, the 500 boiled down to Sullivan's split-second and fantastic maneuver on the 120th lap when he stunned Mario Andretti, who may have given him the chop – "Danny took the bait," Mario said cryptically – and precipitated the sudden, searing, smoking, 200 mph spin-out that allowed him beat the Brickyard walls and win the 500.

