

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Charisma Kills

Charisma kills. Nobody can say for sure, but it seems likely that having the captivating and swashbuckling moniker “Swede Savage” led to the former motorcyclist’s death in the 1973 Indy 500. Similarly, the demise a quarter of a century earlier of Ralph Hepburn - another lion of the motor-bike who came pirouetting into car racing – surely had something to do with all that powerful charisma that Hepburn belatedly and lethally attained.



“Be careful” was the poignant, and last, message Swede Savage relayed to Eddie Wirth, his closest racing associate, who later successfully took up sprint car racing. It was a highly unusual piece of advice which Wirth surely never had followed. But Swede never had either.

Swede Savage’s story started in the mid-1960s. Taking his motorcycle rite of passage at the nighttime hall of valor known as Ascot Park Speedway, the Ascot announcer Roxy Rockwood

shouted his catchy name into the night. Dan Gurney heard the name and responded – first in admiration, then in friendship. Gurney at this time was just about the hottest racing personality America had going: Formula 1 and Le Mans 24-hours winner and proprietor of All-American Racers, his very own Indy car team and Eagle-building works, backed by Goodyear Tire & Rubber’s millions and millions of dollars.

Meanwhile, Swede Savage’s own motorcycle-racing life was souring. In the Midwest, on a street outside a bike emporium, he ran a Montessa head-on into a car. Head injuries are tricky, and his recovery was protracted. Next he got the opportunity that made his fame and radically shortened his life. He was on a biker ride across the Mojave desert with his friend Gurney and a posse of other cyclists that included a press agent from FoMoCo. Ford was a corporation committed to car racing; discovering hot new talent and creating exciting headlines as a priority. So, upon observing Swede pulling the standard biker caper of blasting through all four gears riding his cycle’s back tire, this agent, not surprisingly, had a brainstorm: anybody blessed with a name like Swede Savage, and who could do mad wheeling tricks, might one day become the greatest headline-grabber of them all.

Without ever meaning to be, Swede Savage had become charismatic Swede, still in his early 20s, had everything come together on a Saturday afternoon in summer when he and Wirth were preparing to travel to the Tulare half-mile for a flat-track match. The phone rang, and out of it came a Ford voice telling Swede to forget about Tulare and instead jet first-class to the Carolinas. Holman & Moody, Ford’s NASCAR arm, had the ex-Freddie Lorenzen fastback Fairlane all groomed and ready for him.



And so Swede Savage's unlikely car-racing career began. By 1973, following brief, furious flings in stockers and open-wheelers, he qualified fourth fastest for the Indy 500. *Car and Driver* published an article guaranteeing that within a couple of years he'd not only be the fastest driver in America but the world. Which was extraordinarily naïve of the magazine. All the article did was infuriate the likes of an established Indy 500 luminary like Bobby Unser. "Swede the best racing driver in the world?!", Unser barked. "He isn't in the top 100!"



Swede's dramatic swath through the racing ranks hadn't been without potholes. Racing for Gurney's All American Racers, he won outright one of his first Indy car competitions. But the win was a fluke, marked by faster drivers falling out. Not so long afterward, at Ontario Motor Speedway, in a Formula Libre Grand Prix that All American Racers was skipping, Swede, feeling his oats, sidestepped Gurney's objections, and competed in the inferior shitbox of another team. He got into a wreck that exacerbated the old head wounds and brought on a severe case of amnesia. Gurney raised the possibility of Swede taking a sabbatical, a suggestion Swede rejected. This led to a parting of their ways.

Swede's 1973 employer was a middling outfit, which fielded a two-year-old Brabham which Swede somehow managed to qualify in the top ten at most races. The sorry outfit also put him inside something called the Antares Manta, whose only distinction was probably being the ugliest Indy car ever constructed.



But relief arrived at last in 1972, when the brilliant George Bignotti began running his own team and tapped Swede as one of his drivers. It was aboard a Bignotti-prepped turbo Meyer-Drake Offy that Swede lined up second row, inside; led the 500 for a dozen laps; and then suffered the cataclysmic crash that led to his sad and early death a month and two days later.

Accounts of what had happened varied. The Brickyard's surface was oily and Swede had fallen behind because of a botched pit stop. He also had been staring into his mirrors at Bobby Unser, who'd said all those so derogatory things about him, and who now was coming up fast. Or possibly the old head trauma had returned and Swede had suffered a black out?

On the day of Swede's crash, Eddie Wirth had been one state away, at a motorcycle shop in Ohio, listening to the Indy 500 on the radio. He was in Indianapolis within hours. He found Swede's wife and infant daughter in the Intensive Care Ward of Methodist Hospital, and stood vigil with them for four days and nights. Swede, who had inhaled fire, was unable to speak, but when Eddie had to depart at last, Swede scribbled his dire "Be Careful" warning on a notepad and pointed at himself. And Eddie Wirth never saw his friend again.

Unlike Swede, who was gone before reaching 30, Ralph Hepburn didn't find charisma until he was in his 50's—a remarkably advanced age for the Indy 500. His great two-wheel period took place during the 1920s, when he wore a cloth skull cap and was Harley-Davidson's star board track trigger. His speeds were insane – in 1921 he was lapping the Beverly Hills boards at 107 mph. which was faster than the four-wheelers of the Indy 500.

Hepburn was unlucky, too. The soaring boards had taught him racing, but all his wipe-outs and narrow escapes altered his constitution. Ralph Hepburn fatigued early. He was a medical basket case who in five different Indy 500s had to be lifted out of racing cars so that younger and faster drivers could take his place.



By 1946, time was running out for him and it seemed that an Indy 500 victory was forever out of his reach. Then he got assigned the chair of the bull Novi. All its rolling thunder and supercharged scream first had blown Hepburn's mind in 1941, when no chassis had been available for the fearsome V8 mill except an antique and ill-handling Miller front-drive. To make up for his lack of stamina, and to semi-control all the Novi's firepower, Hepburn's novel solution had been to wedge a lumber two-by-four beneath the throttle to prevent it from going into the floor. Even with only three-quarter pedal, Hepburn got the Novi going so fast that he still finished a close fourth.

Now in 1946 there was a new and well-behaved Kurtis-Kraft chassis and no longer a need for a plank of wood. Hepburn's qualifying time trail was seven mph faster than the rest of the field and stood through the following five years. Had only the Novi not burned out its brakes, Hepburn would have won the 500 in a runaway.

A whole new career seemed to open for him. The Novi was itself charismatic and Hepburn was the monster's charismatic driver. And so 1947 seemed certain to be a Novi year and a Hepburn year – until the firebrands of the American Society of Professional Automobile Racing, asked Hepburn, the 500's ranking elder, to lead their Indy 500 wildcat strike. After it collapsed, the angry Brickyard declared him ineligible to compete in any future 500s.

Hepburn was home in Los Angeles leading a safe and sane senior citizen's existence when his charismatic past caught up with him in 1948. Back in Indianapolis that May the assigned chauffeurs were spooked and timid about getting their Novis up to speed Throwing up his hands in despair, Lew Welch. Novi team manager, fired both of them and implored, "Bring me Ralph Hepburn!"

And after the Brickyard rescinded his banishment Hepburn reappeared: a stooped and scarred relic of 15 500s with a deathly pale face, a faded tattoo of a board track Harley-Davidson on his right forearm, and a heavy limp, courtesy of an Indy car wreck on New Year's day of 1932. But he still had the eyes on a two-wheel board-tracker - bright and hard. And he bore the heavy charisma of being the Indy 500 pilot capable of taming the Novi behemoth.

He stayed up all night adjusting everything to the identical chassis settings of 1946. And the following morning the Novi was out on the Brickyard screaming the terrifying war whoop that only Hepburn was capable of. But when hr opened it up to peak revs and got rough with it, the monster turned murderer and hurled itself into the wall, annihilating Hepburn on impact.

The accident hit the national wires, and none other than pulp-magazine scandal monger Walter Winchell went on the radio demanding a homicide investigation. No autopsy ever was held, but Hepburn's big crash marked the beginning of the Novi's unbreakable reputation as the hoodoo wagon of the Indy 500. Just like Swede Savage, Ralph Hepburn had paid the heavy cost of charisma.