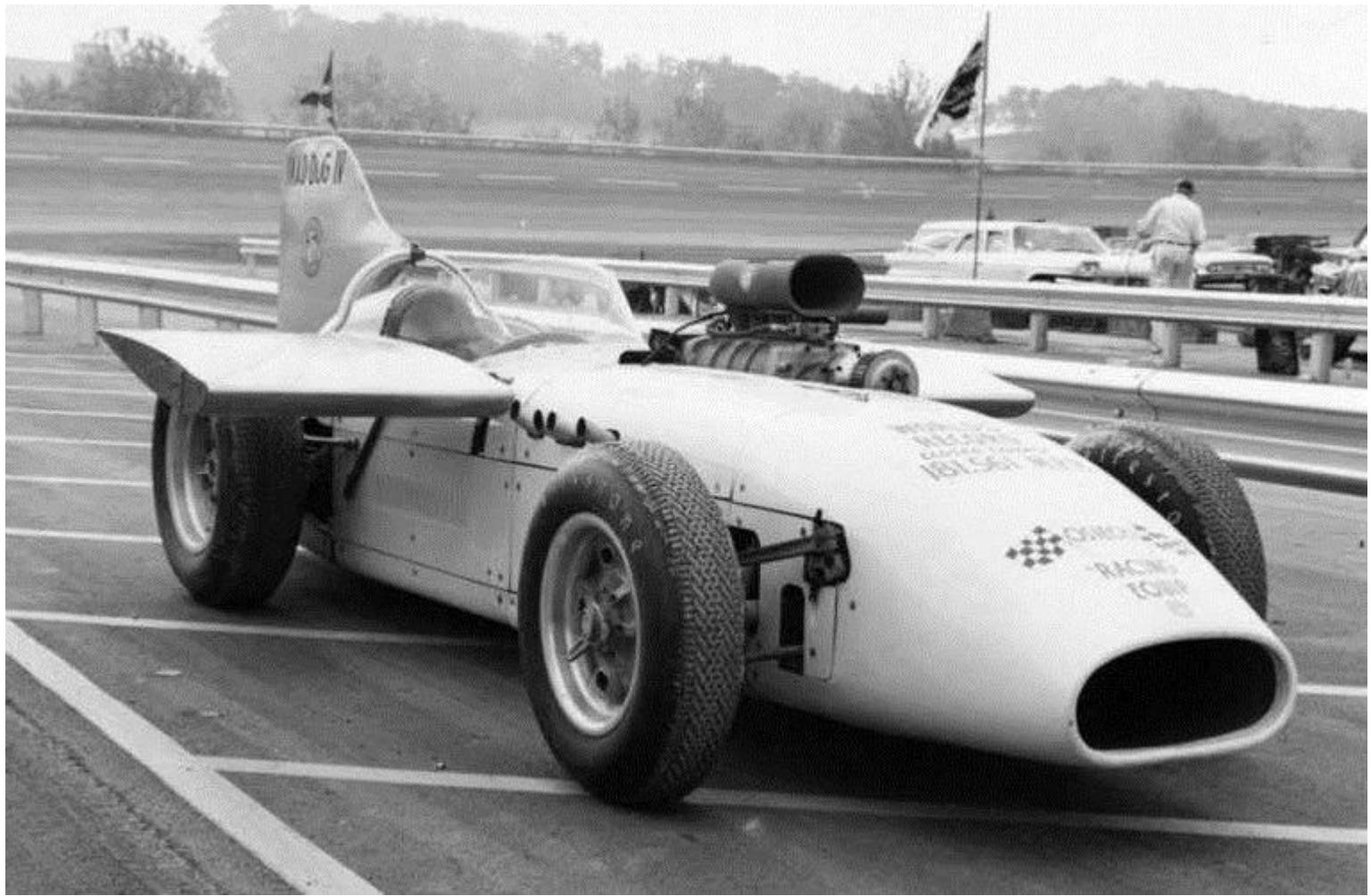


# **Joe Scalzo's**

## **City of Speed and elsewhere**

### **Mad Dog**

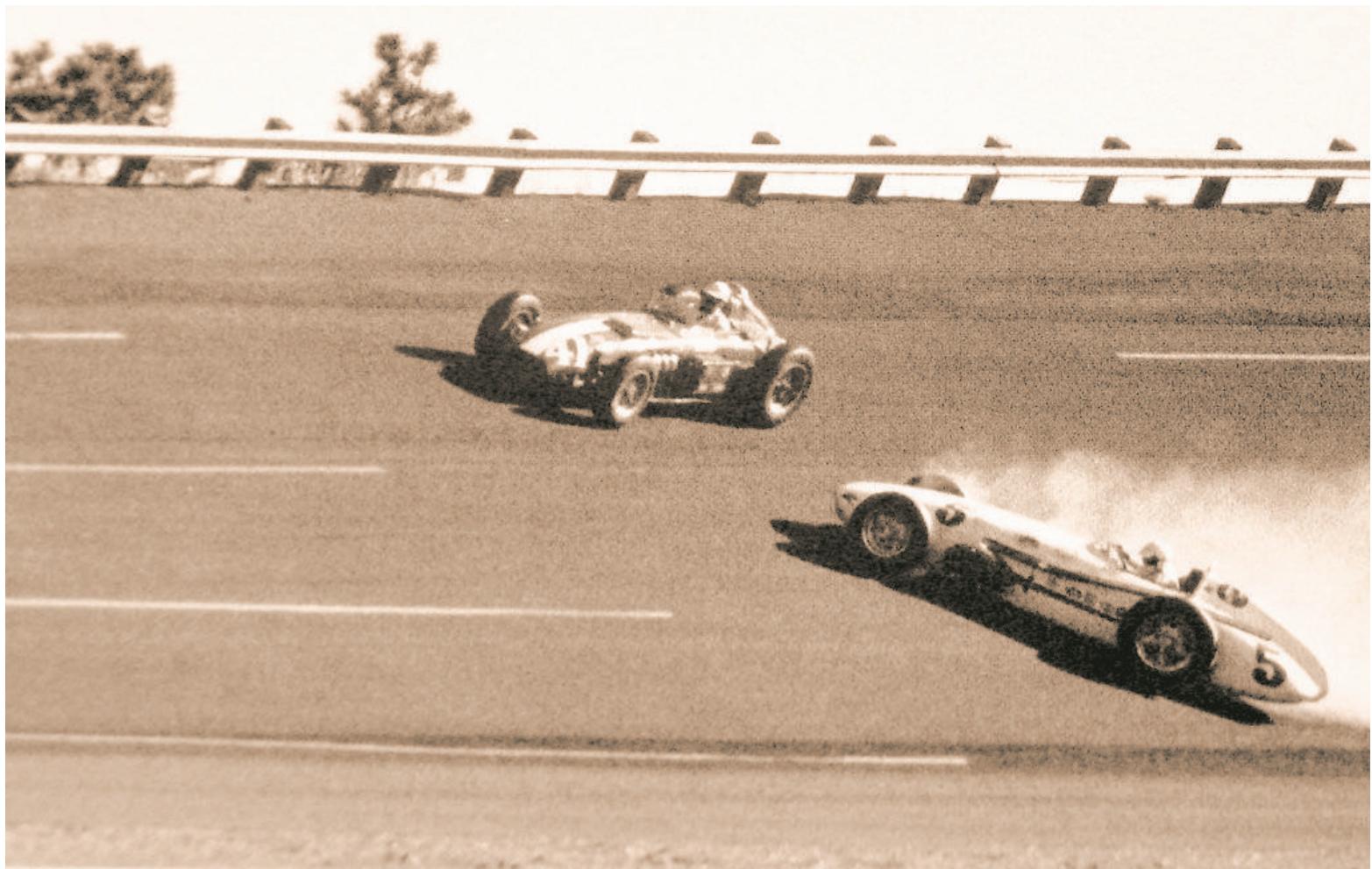
Raging around Daytona International Speedway's tall and ominous walls at three miles per minute to win a cash jackpot of \$10,000, the be-winged and dorsal-finned creature called "Mad Dog IV" looked and sounded – its frightening and gut-ripping motor was a Top Fuel drag racing mill, and could be heard clear to downtown Daytona Beach, six miles distance – like a monster that only a mad man could drive. And if it hadn't been for three crashes and three deaths in less than a year, Mad Dog IV never would have been born.



The first unfortunate deader, in the Indy 500 of 1958, was Pat O'Connor, in the Ansted Rotary Kurtis-Kraft. A Hoosier beloved by all the Hoosiers, it had been O'Connor's fatal misfortune to time trial on the outside of the Brickyard's second row, with Jimmy Reece's John Zink Watson directly ahead of him on the outside of the front row. Reece was a jittery racing driver, notorious for over-using his brakes: just as the McNamara and Zink Watsons of Dick Rathmann and Ed Elisian were cracking up next to him, Reece, typically, hammered the binders; and, with the track blocked and nowhere to go, O'Connor had turned over and been killed.

Reece himself was the second unfortunate deader. Losing the ride with John Zink's team following his notorious Indy 500, he'd found a fresh chair with George Bignotti and Bignotti's Bowes Seal Fast Kurtis. Well aware that Bignotti fired drivers who didn't "race hungry," Reece, at Trenton that fall, was running at the front when Johnny Thomson arrived. Nobody in Indy cars was braver than Thomson but Reece tried out-braving him anyway, and with disastrous results: clearing a crashwall, Reece's Bowes flew completely out of Trenton. Reece's demise broke up Thomson. "I was only trying to worry him," he explained afterward, disconsolate. "I didn't mean to kill him."

George Amick was the third unfortunate deader. George Bignotti, at the beginning of 1959, had no Indy cars – Trenton's out-of-the-ballpark flight had broken in half the Bowes – and, of course, no racing drivers. So he hired Amick, who, as a rookie, had taken second in Indy's 1958 500. Next he changed roadster marques, going with an Epperly laydown, and it was this sensational Epperly, qualified by Amick at better than 175 mph, which occupied pole position for the season's opening Indy car meet at Daytona, which also happened to be the new super-speedway's first race.



Daytona was designed not for lightweight and open-wheel Indy cars but for Big Bill France's heavyweight NASCAR stocks. And a concern that Daytona's tall banking leveled off too quickly and put air underneath the Indy cars was justified when Daytona's fastest car, Amick's Bowes, flew up in the air while careening off the second corner; somersaulted spectacularly; and, once again, Bignotti was shed of both Indy cars and racing drivers.

Reacting to the Amick disaster quickly, perhaps over-quickly, the U.S. Auto Club, sanctioning body for Indy Car racing, banned its men and machines from ever competing at Daytona again. And this

infuriated major domo France who, hating USAC for branding his brand new super-speedway unsafe, and to give it some legend of its own, put up a cash prize of \$10,000 to whomever could clock Daytona's first 180 mph lap and live through it.

The sum of \$10,000 was like \$100,000 today. Even so, its members were reluctant to defy the USAC ban because it might result in their getting blackballed from USAC's biggest match, the Indy 500. So, for a long time, it appeared that France's \$10,000 was safe.

Finally there appeared the first aspirant to go after the 10 G's, and it wasn't a racing car at all but a high-propulsion jet-powered projectile from the cabbage patches of rural Ohio, the junkyard home of Art Arfons, later to become famous for dueling Craig Breedlove for the 600 mph Land Speed Record. Art's high-propulsion F-46 warhead produced 32,000 quivering horses – more than enough, in Art's rough estimation, to take it well beyond 180 mph clear to 220 mph or more. Trouble was, who was Art going to get to drive it? Art wouldn't, and Art, co-ranked with Johnny Thomson, was arguably the bravest man on the planet, so that was that.



So 1959 and 1961 passed. And then, in 1961, a wild hair and seat-of-the-pants engineer named Bob Osieki entered the picture. So far he'd designed and constructed a trio of leviathans, each one named "Mad Dog," and all three failures. And having already spent \$25,000, Osieki would be in the red even if he captured France's \$10,000. Yet his obsession to beat 180 mph knew no limits: spending still more money, he bought a discarded 1958 500 Kurtis-Kraft which ironically and perhaps ominously happened to be the Kurtis that had killed Pat O'Connor.

Because he had no engine, Osieki did something his fans considered completely in character. To develop the ungodly thrust to make Mad Dog IV travel three miles a minute, Osieki got hold of a 413-cubic inch, fuel injected, 15:1 compression, hemispherical chamber, drag-racing, V8 Chrysler; paid

the horsepower guru Ed Iskenderian to bolt a drag-racing-style supercharger on top of it; and next all Osieki needed to do was lasso a mad man willing to pull Mad Dog IV's trigger.

Curtis Turner and Dick ("the Braver Rathmann") Rathmann both came to Daytona to examine Mad Dog IV and left immediately. A daredevil all the way from Britain, Brian Naylor, got going 157 mph, and then, spooked, also left. During February and May, two others who came, looked, and said "no way," were Buck Baker and Tiger Tom Pistone. But the one mad man who stayed was named Larry Frank, ex-prize fighter; ragtop gladiator; and connoisseur of sprint car combat on the deathtraps of Salem, Dayton, and Winchester.

Larry Frank was 29, a 14-year journeyman, and, as a survivor of racing's most lethal forms , finding himself strapped inside something named Mad Dog IV didn't surprise him: he considered himself a good but unknown racing driver in need of acclaim, and Mad Dog IV might win him some.

Frank's first blurring test lap – the din of the Top Fuel blower almost vibrated off his ears and eyes; convinced him that Mad Dog IV could beat 180 mph. Its problem wasn't that it lacked power but that it had too much, and Frank had to proceed with unheard-of caution. He wore thin boxing shoes and balled up his toes to jab at the throttle gingerly. He never fully uncoiled his foot because he didn't need to - even at quarter-throttle along the straightaways, Mad Dog IV, according to Osieki's calculations, was exceeding 200 mph. But while negotiating the vast Daytona bankings. Frank had to slow to what felt like a crawl, so he suggested to Osieki that they examine the old Kurtis chassis. And when they did, they discovered a torsion bar bushing rusted shut. It was not a rewarding sign.

Frank fretted. Mad Dog IV was stuck at 166 mph – a tantalizing 14 mph from the France's \$10,000 jackpot. And because Osieki wasn't going to do anything about its chassis, Frank decided he was going to have to uncoil his reliable, righteous, throttle foot. He informed Osieki he was "going to see the tach needle standing on end" or go home." What that meant was that the cockpit tachometer was going to be pegged at 6,000, more revs than ever had been turned before. And the wild ride that followed lasted for 2,100 swirling feet – defeating by a full 159 feet the Ralph Ligouri Novi spin-out mark at the Indy 500.

Six-and-a-half football fields! Seven full spin-outs! And while it was occupied with such activities, Mad Dog IV further amused itself hitting things. It clobbered its nose, ruptured its radiator, and threatened to impale itself on a telephone pole. Feeling every impact, counting every spin, Frank escaped unharmed.

Osieki took Mad Dog IV in for repairs, and it returned with three new and eye-catching appendages. One was a towering dorsal fin on its tail and the others were a set of aircraft fins sprouting from each side of its cockpit. According to an engineer at Georgia Tech, the trio of fresh appendages would promote stability and prevent future spin-outs. Frank examined the wings skeptically and suspiciously. They were at jugular height, which was to say, if they ever snapped off and entered the cockpit, Frank would have to look for a new head. He drove a slow reconnaissance lap and afterward sharply informed Osieki that Mad Dog VI felt no different with the wings than

without them. Then he evacuated Daytona and returned home to West Virginia to brood, his dream of racing glory and riches smashed.

The end of Mad Dog IV was strange. Just two months after Frank abandoned the project and still was in exile in West Virginia, news reached him that Mad Dog IV and its replacement pilot Art Malone, drag racing's "Green Kid," had reaped the \$10,000 by lapping Daytona at 181.561 mph. Frank was immediately skeptical that any human being could be 14 mph braver than himself in the same diabolical car. Knowing how infamous Bill France and his NASCAR were for cooking the books and rooking the results, Frank wondered who'd been working the clocks during Malone's speed run.



Curiously, following Mad Dog IV's record run, France lost interest and barely publicized it at all. That 1961 summer saw him fighting Curtis Turner, Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters, a battle he and NASCAR won, and girding himself to become manager of the racist George Wallace's presidential campaign, a battle France lost.

As for Osieki and Frank, Osieki in 1964, died of a heart attack when he was barely 42, and Frank, in 1962, finally had his one big NASCAR moment, at Darlington, winning the Southern 500. Fireball Roberts, David Pearson, Lee Roy Yarbrough, Little Joe Weatherly and Cale Yarborough all fell behind Frank, who, with five miles to go, only had Richard Petty and Junior Johnson left to pass. Then, just as Frank's independent Ford blew a tire and broke a tie rod, Petty himself blew a tire and crashed. The Darlington champion appeared to be Johnson. Eight long hours after the finish, however, NASCAR took away the win from Junior and the almost-unknown Frank was declared the winner in a controversial re-count. Larry Frank accepted the win, but wondered if Darlington's scorers were the same ham-handed crew who'd muddled Mad Dog IV's fraudulent trip around Daytona.