

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### “ Much Advertised Race Car Hoax”

His name was John Robin Herd (1939-2019) and he was one of the founders of March Engineering. The last time I corresponded with him he was home cooling it on the Midlands, no longer involved in Indy car racing at all, and about to embark on a fresh career as owner of a professional soccer team. That was back in 1995, and, had he lived, by now he'd have become the big guy of world soccer. Herd knew nothing about Indy car racing, either, and yet soreheads so were growling, “American participation in the Indy 500 ended with the playing of National Anthem!”



For a record five Mays in succession, 1983-1987, nothing but a March won at Indy, and all of them properly belong in somebody's hall of fame museum. I am referring to the Cummins Holset Diesel of 1987, the year-old relic that won the 500 after having to be hijacked from a hotel lobby; the Miller-American No. 5, winner in spite of a white-knuckled spin in the middle of turns one and two; the Pennzoil No. 6 of 1984 which won by out-lasting the careening Master Mechanic No. 9, another March; the Texaco No. 5 of 1983, which almost got blocked

out of winning; and the Budweiser Truesports No. 3 of 1986, survivor of a grim shoot-out with the 7-11 No. 7.

But why settle only for winners when you can have it all? Back in Oxfordshire, at the March works in Bicester, Herd had his artisan kicking the little ground-suckers off the assembly line by the numbers. Rare was the Indy 500 when March didn't rack up at least half of the starting field, except in 1984, when Herd, playing it fortissimo, went for 33 of the 33 and fell only four cars short. But, again, why not grab everything? During the Marsh seasons, the marque also had an exclusive to manufacture mini-Marches for the junior varsity American Racing Series.

Much like Robin Herd, I, too, used to pass my months of May at the Brickyard, writing up the 500 and looking at all the Marches pointing at each other. It only happened a few decades ago but it seems like a century. Herd left March at the close of the 1980s, and his name has been diminishing ever since, just like the names of the stereo radio team, the pizza pie team, the Albuquerque cowboy team, the Machinist team, the winery team, the Mexican food team, and all those other dead Indy 500 squads who were big March customers during those go-go-go 500s and who seemed clueless about what really was going on and what Robin Herd was doing with them.



But in 1994, had any of those duped former March buyers crossed the Atlantic to attend a private party thrown to commemorate what would have been March Engineering's silver anniversary, they'd have discovered at last what had been going on. The party was sparsely attended. March, in the hot years at Bicester, had had upwards of 30 very talented and devoted slaves toiling away on the over-worked assembly line satisfying the Indy 500 pipeline.

Yet only about twenty old Marchmen showed up for the tell-all gala, which was written up in a sharp and very funny story by a Fleet Street pen named Mike Doodson. According to Mike, the chardonnay was chilled, expensive, and plentiful, and the reminiscences were dominated by Robin Herd and Max Mosley, who'd been March's co-founder and head propagandist before Max was bailing out to move to Paris to run the Federation Internationale de '1 Automobile (two of the other good blokes who lent their initials to the March marquee were a longtime man-about-racing named Alan Rees and Graham Coaker, now deceased, an aircraft boffin and used-car dealer with an iron-lot.



**Alan Rees, Max Mosley and Robin Herd**

It all sounded like great fun, and Robin and Max, and all the rest of the Marchmen well-deserved their own celebration party because what they had pulled off in Indy 500 after Indy 500 was epic. I still love the scale of it; a dodgy little UK outfit whose acronym is indecipherable to Yanks but which Europeans believe meant “Much Advertized Race Car Hoax” show up at Indy and almost overnight eclipses such tried-and-true Brickyard monopolies as A.J. Watson and his Meyer-Drake roadsters, Dan Gurney and his All-American Eagles and even Harry A. Miller and Fred and August Duesenberg and their wonderful supercharged Miller and Dusies.

Taking no prisoners, March, in barely seven campaigns, also skunks an additional 50-odd Indy car matches, including the 500-milers of Pocono and Michigan. Even Roger Penske, Mr.

**Unfair Advantage himself, had to abandon his own high Llama vehicle vehicles and capitulate to March.**

**So sprawling and dominating was the whole caper than even when the statistics were wrong, they were amazing. For example, I had read reports claiming that in the 1984 500, Marches finished first through thirteenth when it really was first through fourteenth. And March didn't fill up Indy's entire front row on one occasion as was sometimes reported, but three times. However, after re-reading the Mike Doodson report on the March party, and seeing that Robin Herd had calculated that the number of March Engineering employees and ex-employees who were serving prison time, or about to begin serving prison time, was 37, I disbelieved. It was one March stat that sounded inflated, but wasn't.**

**I never knew if Robin Herb's tally of March trouble-makers included Max Mosley's ancestor, the would-be fuhrer Sir Oswald Mosley, whose admirers used to jackboot around in their Black Shirts provoking riots in 1930s Londontown. But here in the U.S., the only March miscreants I first could think of were the go-for-the-good-time Whittington boys, Bill and Don, brother felons who were vital to the March saga, and their southern Florida cocaine crook friend Randy Lanier. Came to reflect, though, there also was March Engineering's original American distributor, who had to be hunted down and locked up for rooking an employee pension fund; plus some other March clients who got put inside for torching a bowling a bowling alley or something. Surely there were others.**



**All this guilt by association didn't mean that March itself was a brigand outfit, or that in the Indy 500 it ever did anything out-and-out criminal, but during its short life March did attract some fairly flaky fellows. Something was up: while March was making history having its**

products throwing a stranglehold on the Brickyard 500, there was another, secret, history going on.

Under the veneer of British refinement, super-salesmanship and brains, plus the guise of space-age technology, along with wind tunnels, high tech carbon fibers, ground effects, under wings and other miscellaneous March gizmos and expensive bric-a-brac, a cold-blooded tale of financial profit and 1980s greed was winding like clockwork. March buyers like the stereo radio team, the pizza pie team, the Teamsters team the Albuquerque cowboy team, the winery team, and the Mexican food team all were being plundered.



No new news so far. Ever since racing was invented, the main idea and objective, especially at the Indy 500, has been to find somebody stupid enough to pay the ever-exploding costs. And owners of racing teams and their sponsors generally fulfill that destiny until they're milked white.

What was different this time, what gave the whole March adventure wings and separated it from being just another run-of-the-mill racing rip-off (aside from that, for a change, owners of racing teams in the 500 were not having it stuck to them by their own countrymen, but by a tribe of highly-civilized Brits – was that March was not acting on its own. It was a

member of a four-way conspiracy. One of its co-conspirators was USAC, the United States Auto Club, sanctioning body of the 500; a second was CART, Championship Auto Racing Teams, sanctioning body for all the other Indy car matches; and a third was no less than the Indy 500 Speedway itself. And what was unique about this conspiracy, and made it beautiful from Robin Herd's point of view, was that none of March's three co-conspirators ever realized that they were co-conspirators at all.

The game was speed paranoia. Prior to the arrival of March, the Indy 500 qualifying mark of 200 mph had rested in the record books. Then lap records suddenly jumped by almost 30 mph. It wasn't that all the drivers suddenly had grown 30 mph faster, it was that all the Marches had. No longer, for instance, did an Indy driver have to be as skilled as before: even a rookie with no experience, like the one who was a duplicate for the puppet Howdy Doody, could pay \$1 million dollars to purchase a ride in a March, and then put it on the front row of his rookie 500.



But this was a mixed blessing. A March was so easy to drive, relatively speaking, even when the Brickyard's four corners were barely 60 feet wide that it took all the skill out of driving a March. "You just stick your foot in it and steer," complained the great two-time Indy champion Gordon Johncock, who announced his retirement from racing because racing no longer felt like racing.

And, at the same time, whenever a March hit the wall, it would be traveling so fast that injuries passed back to its driver were apt to be horrendous. Only one March, the Intermedics of 1982, ever killed itself, going head-on into a crash wall at 200 mph. Because the noses of the Marches were criminally vulnerable – equipped with no foot protection whatsoever - broken feet, splintered ankles and fractured legs became the norm, hospitalizing Johnny Rutherford and Rick Mears to name just two multi-500 champions.

Finally, after Marches continued telescoping into the concrete, and grotesquely mangled bones and pulped limbs became symbols of the demands the marque was laying on its operators, something happened at last. Brilliantly concluding that its Marches were going too fast, Indy, USAC, and CART informed March customers that their automobiles were in effect outlawed. And then a fresh set of rules and specifications mandating that March manufacture defanged and castrated product was faxed to Bicester and Robin Herd.

But then, having reached an agreement with Herd promising that he would stop building faster Marches, the Brickyard and the two sanctioning bodies had to agree that they'd all been flummoxed by Herd, who merrily continued turning out Marches that went faster and faster. Indy 500 after Indy 500 is was the same: new and “slower” Marches blew away speed records and had to be outlawed and replaced. It was, however, too late to pull out of the deal. March was the one concern supplying Indy cars in such volume.

For Herd, mass-producing big-ticket Indy cars with a shelf-life of one season meant obscene profits, particularly when March jacked around with the dollar-to pound sterling exchange rate. And March inflated prices every Indy 500. During the big, rich, seasons prize and sponsorship monies also rose, of course, but next to speeds the biggest number were March costs.

Take 1984, a relatively inexpensive year compared to the torrential costs to come. Minus a turbo-powered Cosworth V8 or Buick V6, a March sold for roughly \$135,000. “But that’s only Plain Jane, the bare bones,” objected the late Andrew Kenopensky, the volcanic champion of Indy car racing’s underfinanced proletariat, as well as the boss of the underfinanced Machinist Union team. “Next,” Kenopensky went on, “you add \$18,000 for freight duty. Then \$40,000 for an under wing for mile tracks; then another \$40,000 for the Speedway kit; plus the wheels, tires, and the Cosworth. Then add at least another \$30,000 to rebuild everything to make the bastard safe enough to do two laps around Indy without breaking. You end up with almost 300 large invested in a piece of junk!”



**Kenopensky was to live long enough to see far more serious nickel-and-diming. Once Lola, another UK carpetbagger, crossed the pond and got into the chassis game, Kenopensky and the other Indy car owners found themselves being whacked 300 large for a naked frame.**

**That behind all the speed paranoia, smoke-and-mirrors and high tech, all the Marches were nothing but Jerry-built kit cars was one of Kenopensky's loudest complaints. In particular he pointed to 1987, when his brand new March got upside-down, snapped its space-age rollover bar on impact, and ground to a stop with its turbocharger waste gate and half of Pancho Carter's helmet worn in half. But what had truly made Kenopensky raise an aria happened in 1985, with the arrival of the Machinist Union's compliment of new Marches and the discovery that none of 1984's wheels, gears, half shafts, side pods, and front and rear wings fit – March had spent the winter making them obsolete. I can still hear Kenopensky going off like an alarm clock: "I've got 16 sets of useless wheels worth \$30,000! I've got another \$80,000 worth of junk wings and side pods! March even ground the ring and pinion gears differently! Robin Herd is picking our pockets! This is madness!"**

**Cosworth engines, Hewland transmissions, and all the visiting redcoat engineers and mechanics with visas and green cards also were objects of Kenopensky ill-will, even though the Machinist Union team depended on them. Still, when Kenopensky was inveighing against**

the dire economical consequences of the dollar buying more racing product and information from the UK than it could at home, he could wear you out.

As for Robin Herd, not only was he a smarty boots, but he had a keen sense and feel for the culture and environment of the strange community where he and March were trafficking, and where March, to the fury of Kenopensky, won the Louis Schwitzer Award for “refined aerodynamics, safe chassis, and carbon fiber weight reduction.” Indianapolis in the 1980s was prepared to extend all good will to the British Empire in remembrance of the shifty Colin Chapman, his trick Lotus-powered-by-Fords, and especially to the amazing Scot pedal man Jimmy Clark. Tapping into the prevailing anglophilia, Herd, between March selling session, pronounced himself an “honorary Hoosier,” and purchased an Indianapolis home.

Indy, however, can be a strange place and the Hoosiers themselves a fickle tribe when it comes to outsiders. For sneaking a sip of OJ in victory lane instead of the customary milk, Emerson Fittipaldi never regained his popularity. Similarly, Herd – anglophilia notwithstanding – realized that too much loose gossip about a guest Englishman with a charming smile and manners who was moving more Indy cars than Ford moved Tin Lizzies might not go down too well. Calling attention to himself wasn’t in the best interest of March so most of the time Herd chose to make himself invisible.

As one example of how invisible Herd truly was, throughout the 1980s I experienced just one Robin Herd sighting. It occurred while I was talking to someone in Gasoline Alley just as a tall man with long legs blew past. “Who’s that?” I asked the person I was talking to, who happened to be Andrew Kenopensky who replied, That’s the erudite, debonair Robin Herd,” and added quickly, “Probably on his way to pick somebody’s pocket.”

But writing up the Indy 500 in the 1980s without mentioning Herd’s name was like doing it in the 1980s without mentioning Meyer-Drake, so I wrote up many entertaining fables about Robin, including this one from 1984:

“The situation with the 29 Marches in tomorrow’s 500 seems akin to an orchestra of 29 musicians all playing the same instrument to the same sheet of music, racing on essentially the same tires, the same engines (27 Cosworths, two Buicks), the same volume of fuel and the advantage should go to the team the orchestrator conductor favors The conductor in this case happens to be one Robin Herd, a tall, seldom-seen Briton who is March’s chief designer”

Music conductor – that was a good angle. Unfortunately, I was a year behind the times, because Herd actually had designed his last March in 1983; subsequent Marches were the work of others. Early on, Herd had tumbled to the fact that sales was his calling. Sales, plus being March’s good will ambassador and information conduit to all the March customers (March never fielded its own factory car.) Visiting, say, the stereo radio team, Herd would hear all about its chassis secrets and then thoughtfully pass them along to all the other March teams, to the delight on everybody except the stereo radio team. Then, if necessary, he would

**make amends to the stereo radio team by tuning up his sophistication full blast. But Herd's fence-mending skills weren't successful with the more uncivil March clients. "It's goddam hard keeping secret from Robin Herd," Don Whittington, narcotics felon and crucial March customer , once complained to me.**

**I wasn't gunning for Herd when I had my one and only brief interview with him and I was way out of my depth. Quoting John le Carre, "The privately educated Englishman is the greatest dissembler on earth - nobody will charm you more glibly, disguise his feelings better, cover his tracks more skillfully - nobody acts braver when he is frightened stiff, or happier when he's miserable - nobody can flatter you better when he hates you..."**

**The closest I came to having Herb admit to anything was when I prodded, "You guys, you March engineers, really were uncontrollable, weren't you?" A slight pause. "Essentially." "And any rule change dreamed up to slow you down would have failed." Another pause. "Perhaps. Probably."**

**But then for some reason Herd dropped his defenses and gave away the whole March hoax. "You have to understand," he said earnestly, "everybody was saying that we had such marvelous sales acumen, that we were taking advantage, that we were so clever, and it was all crap! The situation with March in the Indy 500 happened by accident."**

**Well, not quite. Marijuana money gave life to March! In the late 1970s, the dangerous duo of Whittington brothers, swashbucklers from the Florida Everglades, arrived in Bicester with a suitcase full of dollars and became the unlikely saviors of March Engineering which at this time was running on empty. Its early showings in Formula 1 had faded, and the March credibility had taken a serious hit after Herd and Mosley had gone to the Guinness Book of World Records with a cock-and-bull account of March constructing an entire F1 car in a week.**



**Bill ,Don and Dale Whittington**

**Came the start of the 1980s Herd was the last of the four partners left and prepared to accept financial help from any quarter, even if it was the Whittingtons. Following an eventful period flying old P-51 bangers goosed to 151 inches of turbocharged boost the brothers were anxious to buy Marches to race in the Indy 500. Herd obliged them. Unfortunately, almost as soon as the Whittingtons were settling in for what they expected to be a long run in the Indy 500 the bulldogs of law enforcement stepped in to roll up the real source of the brothers income, which was a million-dollar drug-smuggling gang.**

**Stung by this, Herd vowed to accept no more drug money, but instead took money from the biggest drug gangster of them all, Randy Lanier, indy's 1986 Rookie of the Year.**

**After March posted only four Indy car wins in 1988; one in 1989; and none in 1999 it was gone from the Indy 500 game in 1990 – and Robin Herd was glad! All his work as super-salesman had trashed him and turned him into a burnt-out case.**