

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

May Pop - Part One

The 1956 Indy 500 was a crazy and crash-plagued marathon: There were ten yellow accident flag pauses for one hour and 11 seconds and 15 seconds in a three hour, 53 minute and 23 second 500, and the longest period of sane racing between all the yellows was only 21 minutes; Eight roadsters and upright dirt cars out of the starting 33 hit walls including one which did so after the finish. Two others laid down long black smears of rubber violently skidding off the Brickyard.



Past Indy 500 winner Troy Ruttman and future Indy 500 winner Jimmy Bryan both crashed – Ruttman prettily into a bed of flowers and Bryan muddily into a creek bed. Another past winner, Bob Sweikert, clipped a wall; Mishaps nearly took out the second, third, fifth, and sixth place finishers; and fourth place had his roadster erupt in flame during what he expected to be a routine re-fueling stop.

Nobody was killed. However, one wildly twirling roadster almost struck down the starter of the 500, and still another succeeded in entering the pit road to clobber a blameless

mechanic; bad Tony Bettenhausen, Jimmy Daywalt, and Al Herman required hospitalization. The Novi Vesta driver, Paul Russo, complained that the Indy walls, newly reinforced over the 1955 winter, were just as hard as the old ones.

So many Firestones popped – blew out – that the 500 was labeled “May Pop Day,” meaning that your Firestones may pop or maybe not, and a record 138 Firestones either popped or had to be changed.



The winner of the 1956 Indy 500, at a slow 128.490 mph, was the racing bartender, Pat Flaherty (1926-2002). Pat Flaherty! His No. 8 John Zink, the first A.J. Watson roadster, was the only vehicle on the Brickyard to complete the traumatic 500 miles without trauma. And not only did Flaherty, the red-haired Irishman, make himself the most surprising winners of Indy's 1950s period, but he didn't luck into his win but dominated, leading 130 of the 200 laps.

Although he started from the pole, no other driver in the 1956 500 had picked Flaherty to finish first and very few had expected him to finish at all. Flaherty had no standing to speak of, except his face and tactics were distinguished: among his peers the sight of Pat Flaherty's pale and deadpan face provoked apprehension because, in his haste, Flaherty bumped into things. And writers chronicling his four previous Indy 500s of 1950, 1953, 1954, and 1955 had employed their worse terms – crashed, wrecked, rammed – describing Flaherty's destructive efforts every year except 1955 when for the first and only time he restrained his worst impulses and stroked home tenth.



So, in 1956, while others were establishing crashing records chasing him, Pat Flaherty also was setting a record: the \$93,819 he earned was \$4,322 greater than the famous Billy Vukovich money mark of 1953. And it was fantastically hard won. Flaherty, for nearly four outrageous hours, was under terrific attack from everybody, but mainly from calm and tactical Sam Hanks, who – just 21 seconds behind – battled Flaherty to the closest Indy 500 finish in 19 years. Afterward, Hanks was flabbergasted that Flaherty had beaten him. His plan, which he had faithfully followed throughout the 500 miles, had been to wear Flaherty down, get him going faster and faster and faster – at one point Hanks was forcing Flaherty to get his Watson cornering on three wheels--until Flaherty did something predictable like getting into an wreck. But all of 1956's almost countless wrecks always were somebody else's, never Pat Flaherty's, and one of them was Hanks' own.

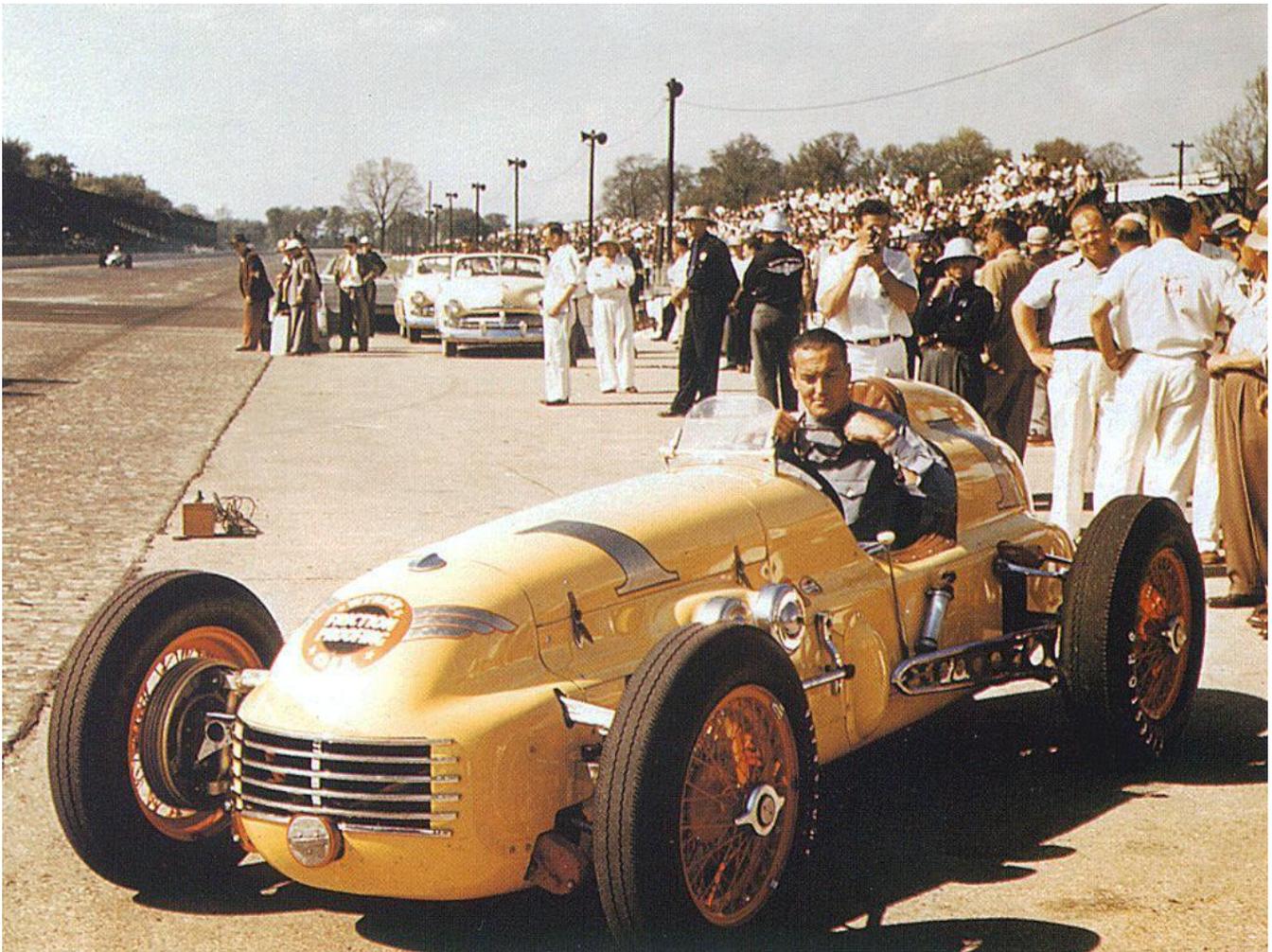


All its almost century-old garages finally got torn down and replaced by architecture resembling Pelican Bay prison, but before that happened, in the 1950s, Gasoline Alley was an over-crowded and volatile madhouse of car owners, racing drivers, mechanics, and 270- and 255-cubic inch Meyer-Drake Offenhauser roadster and upright dirt cars. One of them, the 1957 John Zink No. 5 Watson roadster, was a wonder. Watson, routing the Indy 500 field with its driver, Ruttman until it overheated. Then, in In 1958, Ed Elisian got it lapping at better than 147 mph, parking it on the front row – but smashed it up on the opening lap.

Rebuilt, No. 5 traveled to Italy that summer, and with Jim Rathmann driving, and averaging 166 mph, won all three heats of the Race of Two Worlds at Monza. Sitting idle during 1959 and 1960, No. 5 missed qualifying in 1961. But in 1962, five years and much history old, and operating under a completely different livery and number, its driver Russo out-qualified half of the starting field; after that, No. 5 got a rest

Another roadster which seemed to live forever was a certain 1948 Kurtis-Kraft 2000. Ninth place finisher with a broken water pump in that season's Indy 500, the identically-named upright dirt car placed second in 1949. Then, in 1950, as the Wynn's, it won the 500

despite racing with a cracked engine block. In 1951, as the Jim Robbins, it was runner-up with a holed radiator. In 1950 it finished tenth.



Yet another example of agelessness was the Ray Crawford, a roadster wrecked in 1959; returned to action in 1961 as the Ollie Prather; and then wrecked all over again. Repaired for the third time in 1962 – the Prather now had a Watson front suspension, it overcame the double liability of an inept pit crew and a rookie driver, Jimmy McElreath, to come within one or two botched tire and refueling stops of winning an Indy 500.

Conversely, Indy roadsters and upright dirt cars during the 1950s might remain in service for so long they could turn surly, misanthropic. Rodger Ward won 1959's 500 in another No. 5 Watson, the Leader Card. But in 1961, when it was the Stearly Motor Freight, the front end misaligned at top speed and snuffed out the vivid life of bad Bettenhausen. And in 1955, after the Agajanian, the upright dirt car that in 1952 had defeated Vukovich's roadster, the Howard Keck, Indy 500 winner in 1953 and 1954, returned in 1955 as the Aristo Blue. Already seven miles behind, it snapped a front axle, flew out of control, and pursuing roadsters and upright dirt cars darted all over the back straight missing it: the Sam Traylor upright dirt car, veered right, getting sideswiped by Bardahl, a roadster, which was in turn

was brushed by another roadster, the death Hopkins of Vukovich, leading the 500 as usual, which left the Brickyard and crash-landed upon a passenger car, a truck, and a Jeep.

What was especially intriguing, funny, and even terrifying about the Indy 500's monolithically identical roadsters and upright dirt cars of the 1950s was that throughout the decade, they tortured their drivers in two different ways: the roadsters, with three-digit temperatures registering in their confining cockpits, roasted them; and the big, gross, upright dirt cars, struck by high cross winds, sent drivers veering out on control at 170 mph.

The value of their grossness was that they could fit drivers of all physical sizes. Relief drivers often were necessary, especially in 1953. Drivers, mechanics, spectators and even band members and baton twirlers from Purdue were wasted and collapsed throughout the 100-plus degree morning and afternoon; no fewer than 27 drivers substituted among 15 finishers; only five drivers lasted the full 500 miles; many of the ruined drivers had to be dropped into 50 gallon drums of water to recuperate; and Carl Scarborough - the journeyman who in 1951 had clocked the fastest corner speeds of the 500 - died of heat stroke.



The cratered surface of Langhorne and the iron-hard face of Syracuse that inflicted mayhem on the shocking systems of the upright dirt cars were easy compared to the dilapidation inflicted by the Indy 500's supposedly smooth surface of high-speed bricks. The upright dirt car of Lee Wallard, Indy 500 winner in 1951, finished without brakes, with a badly sprung frame, and no suspension at all. But it was 1954 which produced a show of physical strength and grit not seen in the Indy 500 since 1912, when Ralph De Palma had to get out and push his broken Mercedes clear around the Brickyard to the checkered. And it fittingly featured Bryan, bull of bulls.

During the opening 100 miles Bryan observed his dirt upright Dean Van Lines throwing wheel weights off its Firestones, flexing its strut arms, and going into wheel-hopping shimmies. All this was more or less standard for an upright dirt car But then, at 250 miles, something in the chassis broke and the bricking began beating all the flesh off Bryan's buttocks, as well as fusing his ribs together so he could barely breathe. Bryan almost stopped. But because he was Bryan he kept going and still finished second.



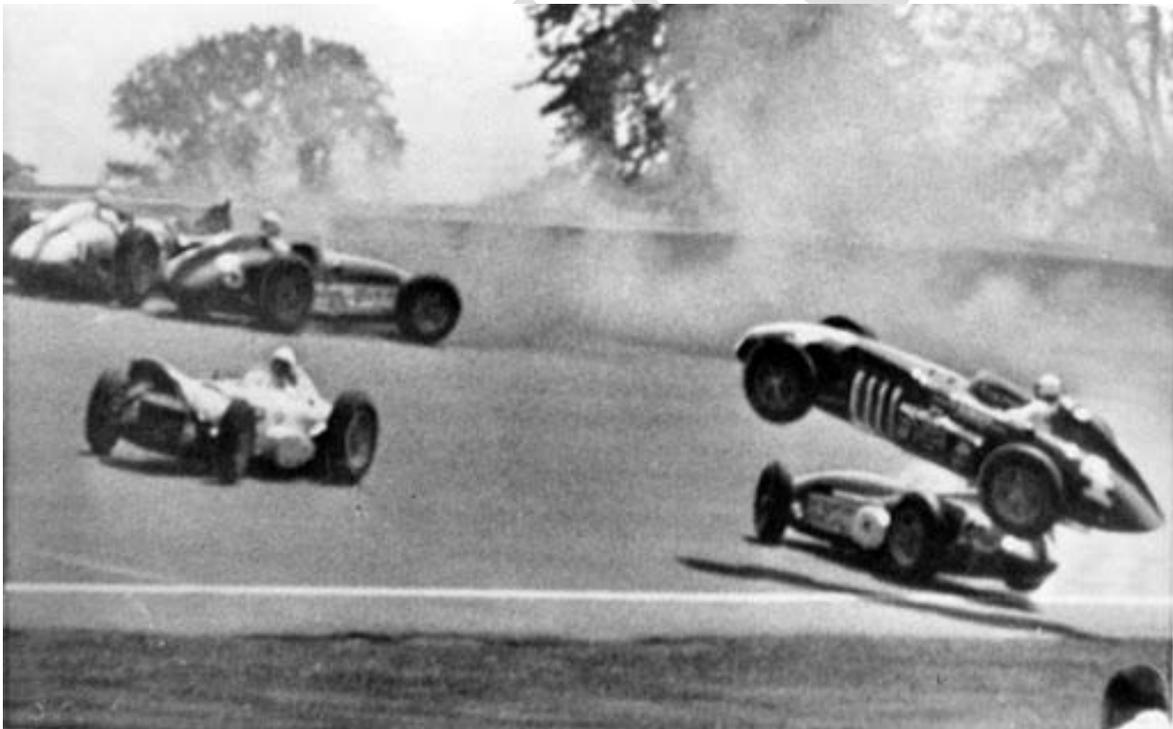
The driver beating Bryan was Vukovich, the first roadster master, Indy 500 winner not just in 1954 but 1953 and near-winner in 1952, which was the opening of the roadster era. It spread quickly. By 1957 not one upright dirt car was left, and for the next three Indy 500s every car was a roadster, variously constructed by Frank Kurtis, Eddie Kuzma, Quinn Epperly, Lujie Lesovsky, and most notably by A.J. Watson.

The formula they followed was simple: lower the roadster so that its Firestones were as high as the driver's helmet; lengthen everything so that the driver would be out of the wind,

reclining instead of sitting; and offset the Meyer-Drake and driveshaft and drop the center to improve the handling.

Nobody could say that the roadsters were without flaw. They were heavy – in some instances weighing close to a ton more than a upright dirt car - and so tank-like that in a big crash they transferred all the impact back to its driver. They were especially evil when their sleek tails were packing almost 450 pounds of methanol. With all that weight and those narrow Firestones, they spun like crazy.

Exactly how unstable a field of 33 fully loaded roadsters could be was demonstrated in 1958 during an Indy 500 accident second only to Vukovich's of 1955 for awfulness. On the third corner of the first lap, Elisian's John Zink 5 touched Dick Rathmann's McNamara Trucking causing Jimmy Reece's John Zink 12 to lock up its brakes and get rear-ended by Bob Veith, whose Kurtis was in turn walloped in the rump by Pat O'Connor's Ansted Rotary. And suddenly the Brickyard started exploding with spinning, roaring, dying roadsters, and the life of O'Connor, another Irishman who in 1956 had been among Pat Flaherty's ablest challengers, was lost.



PART TWO

“Racing drivers are everywhere,” opined Jud Phillips,” one of the great Indy 500 chief mechanics from the 1950s. “They’re like leaves on trees.” The only two Indy 500 drivers who were given credit for knowing anything about roadsters or uptight dirt cars were Manuel Ayulo and Jack McGrath, both their own chief mechanics and both fated to die in crashes;

Ayulo at Indy because he'd exhausted himself and missed too much sleep getting his Peter Schmidt ready and forgot to install its seat belt; and McGrath at the Arizona state fairgrounds in Phoenix when the front axle broke and sent his Jack Hinkle flying.

All the remaining drivers seemed to be judged such ignoramuses that they were certain to bust up the equipment if given the chance. The average chief mechanic tried not to give them one. Certain chief mechanics even blacked out with tape the oil and temperature gauges lest the cretin at the controls confuse himself trying to read them; other chiefs pounded wads of cotton into drivers' ears to spare them the distraction of listening to their bellowing Meyer-Drakes.

And George Salih, Ray Nichels, Jim Travers, and Frank Coon probably never forgave their drivers for the anxiety and extra work they put them through in 1954. Practice speeds were higher than ever before, but as an accompanying plague every fast roadster or upright dirt car couldn't keep its Meyer-Drake together for more than 50 miles. To discover what was going on the four chiefs, who'd never shared a secret in their lives, had to convoke an emergency meet at Mate's White Front, the racers' bar on 16th Street past the railroad trestle. They made a horrifying discovery. Without telling the quartet of chiefs, the fastest drivers, led, naturally, by Vukovich, had changed their cornering patterns; diamonding the Brickyard's four corners, they'd been holding down the throttle longer than normal, over-stressing their poor Meyer-Drakes.



What Salih, Nichols, Travers, and Coon did to stop them was a solution as well as sweet, sweet revenge. Throughout the rest of practice drivers were expected to baby their Meyer-Drakes by warming them up slowly, excruciatingly slowly. All the drivers hated it.

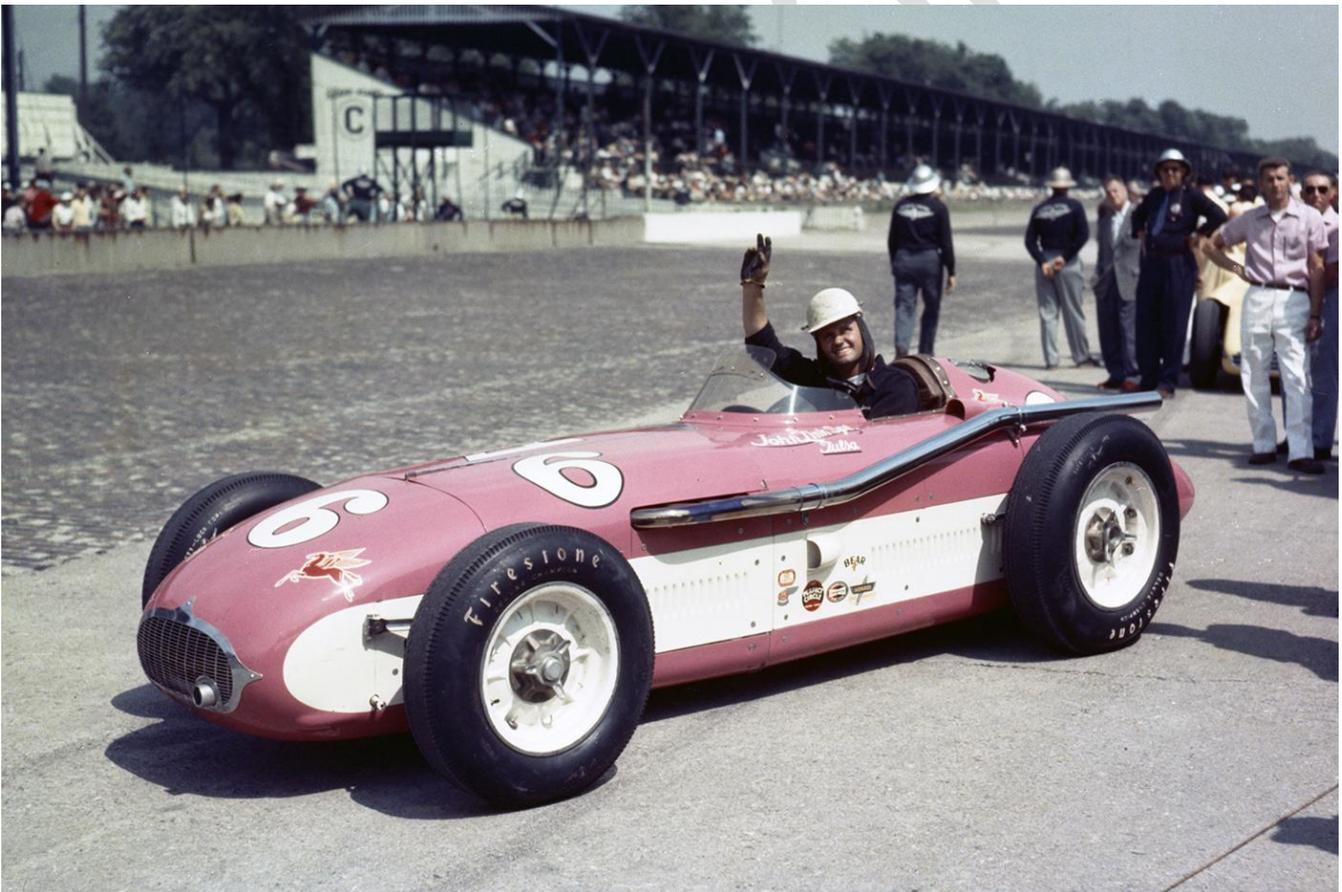
The 1950s at Indy were when it was hard to be a racing driver and hard just finding a ride. Dr. Raymond Sabourin, a chiropractor and Indy car owner, had perhaps the most eccentric method. He insisted that prospective drivers submit spinal X-rays for his examination; and, according to Dr. Sabourin, in 1955, 63 sets were so submitted. But Sabourin shouldn't have bothered with the alignment of spines but the alignment of his own Chiropractic roadsters, which were terrors, except in 1957's Indy 500, when the doctor's driver was canny.

Rathmann, who demonstrated his great cheating resources under yellow caution lights by finishing a tumultuous second by gaining 29 positions in the opening 277 miles.

But a foot of lead and bravery instead of a straight spin was what car owners and chief mechanics wanted. "Bravery" – whatever that meant – was the period's key word. And exactly what it had meant was made clear when Indy cars had hand-operated brakes, and

owners and chief mechanics used to station themselves at the end of turns one and three – the speed turns - watching which driver got scared and went for the brakes first. He who landed the ride wasn't the coward who was braking, but the breakneck like bad Bettenhausen who barreled in the deepest. Speaking of bad Bettenhausen, he survived one of the most intense experiences in Brickyard history. His throttle jammed open, and with one hand on the brake and the other on the steering wheel he'd had no extremity left to bang the kill switch.

A.J. Watson, only 29 when as chief mechanic for the father and son John Zinks, won his first Indy 500 in 1955, the year of the demise of Vukovich, had a lot of trouble with his driver Sweikert. Chief mechanic and driver were quarreling about everything, even the orchid and white color scheme of their roadster which Watson had purposely chosen, calling it "Zink Pink." Sweikert considered it "Okie Pink;" then further slandered the roadster as "the Pink Bathtub."



Sweikert also had nothing but problems attaining qualifying speeds and only did on his third-strike attempt when Watson had the Pink Bathtub juiced to the hilt on nitro-methane. Of course Sweikert subsequently won the 500, but from Victory Circle he mumbled something about "Lucking into it," which maybe he didn't mean, and adding "I knew I'd win the 500 as soon as I had Watson for a chief mechanic," which certainly he didn't mean,

because in 1956 he made the mistake of quitting Watson, and the Zinks, to race in the Indy 500 for somebody else.

Choosing Pat Flaherty as Sweikert's replacement to race the first Watson roadster in what was to be the crazy 500 of 1956 at first seemed to indicate that Watson and the Zinks were out of their minds. Flaherty's most memorable Brickyard drive - and it terminated with a fractured skull and his having to miss the balance of the season - had come in 1953's heat-stricken 500. This was when Flaherty had demonstrated his Irish temper and willingness to root slow pokes out of his path.



It happened this way: As the second-string driver on a team of red-and-silver upright dirt cars belonging a slaughterhouse proprietor named Peter Schmidt, Flaherty had the team's second-string upright dirt car and Ayulo the first-string. It was Flaherty's opinion that his second-stringer was the superior automobile of the pair. And, sure enough, in the 500, after battering the snout of his upright dirt car into something slower, Flaherty was scrambling from 22nd to fifth and was lapping as fast as the leader - the great Vukovich himself. But by then Flaherty's pipe-stem arms, skinny six-foot frame and white deadpan face were wilting in the heat, and at 250 miles he struck the wall almost head-on, leaving a long red smear. Seeing it, Vukovich afterward started called Flaherty "Buffer Red."

In the fall of 1955 Flaherty scored a big upset by winning the Milwaukee's 200 - second in distance only to the Indy 500 - and that was enough for Watson and the Zinks, who reasoned

that if Flaherty could win something 200 miles long he also could win something 300 miles longer.

Watson and Flaherty were old acquaintances. In 1949 they'd been together with Andy Granatelli, Hurricane Racing Club, and before that had been functioning hot rod racers in Los Angeles. So Flaherty astounded Watson and the Zinks by turning them down, saying that he was perfectly content in Chicago, running Pat Flaherty and Swede's Lounge. As for Indy car racing, he was equally content to stay in the roomy cockpit of his Milwaukee-winning monolith roadster of such gigantic dimensions it resembled Ray Haroun's 1911 Marmon Wasp, and was named, ironically but fittingly, the Dunn Engineering.

This last was because he and aged Harry Dunn enjoyed not the usual acrimonious driver-chief mechanic relationship but something of a father-and-son one. Many imploring telephone calls between Watson and the Zinks and the stubborn Flaherty went nowhere. It took a phone call from his brother Jim – crisply calling Pat a moron for missing the opportunity to race the first A.J. Watson roadster – to make Pat change his mind.

The John Zink No.8 was a tremendous improvement over Vukovich's indy 500 champion from 1953-1954. At 1,640 pounds it was 240 pounds lighter, as well as four inches narrower. Pat Flaherty couldn't drive it. Just like all its opponent Kurtis-Krafts, Kuzma, Lesovskis, and Epperly roadsters, the John Zink No. 8 had been crafted with one thing in mind, that its driver – in this case Flaherty – never touch the brakes. Hard braking upset the balance and wouldn't permit the John Zink No. 8 to "take a set." And so, instead of touching the binders, Flaherty was called on to enter the speed corners one and three at a terrific rate of mph and not to lift off the throttle until he was on the verge of crashing. Only when he heard the reverberating boom of his Meyer-Drake, was he permitted could he climb back on the gas.. But never, ever, was he to touch the binders.

Knowing that Flaherty was having terrible difficulties mastering the no brakes business, his friend, Ruttman, tried wiring off the brake pedal so that Flaherty couldn't use it. It didn't help.

Then, amidst wild rumors sweeping Gasoline Alley that Flaherty was about to be fired by Watson, Watson put his driver in a passenger car and ordered him drive all the way to Chicago and back without using the brakes. "I almost killed myself ten times!" exclaimed Flaherty afterward. But this, too didn't help.



Finally, two other friends – Rathmann and his brother Dick – dragged Flaherty into a Gasoline Alley shower stall and treated him to an ice-cold drowsing, knowing this would make him lose his fiery Irish temper. It did. Cutting a blazing time trial speed of almost 147 mph, Flaherty stole pole position from its previous occupant, none other than Jim.

What was to be a 500 of craziness, and had begun with Flaherty on the pole, continued apace with 29 roadsters and upright dirt cars collectively, averaging 142.890 mph, which was faster than the previous Brickyard lap record. And not only was the Brickyard faster, but trickier: thanks largely to the majority of abrasive bricks having been removed and replaced with fresh and slippery paving, a record 16 wrecks took place during practice's opening 24 days, with Len Sutton's double flip down the back straightaway the most vicious. Finally, there was the added joker of rain, which beat down for much of the month. All the inclemency drastically limited practice and time trials, and what little rubber was left on the groove was washed away by rain water seeping through the fresh paving. Rain again poured down the night before the 500; and by morning lakes were in the infield.



(Afterward, when it was far too late, all this fresh and rain-washed paving could possibly be blamed for provoking May Pop day - or perhaps not. In any event. Firestone Tire & Rubber spent years burying the scandal of May Pop day.)

Came the start of the 1956 500 and Pat Flaherty, for a future 500 winner, behaved like a certain loser. Rathmann and O'Connor, the 500's duplicate Irishman, were flanking Flaherty on the front row, and both of them pushed him out of the way in the opening 100 yards. The three of them completed the opening lap at almost 139 miles per hour – five mph faster than the standing Vukovich record – and Rathmann and O'Connor began pulling away from Flaherty, Next to go ahead of him was the bad, black, Kurtis roadster of bad Bettenhausen, and suddenly the John Zink No. 8 had tumbled from the pole back to a tight fourth, its attractive tail a magnet to a pursuing swarm of roadsters, raced by Dick Rathmann, Johnnie Parsons, Fred Agabashian, Russo. Sweikert, and Ruttman.

Up ahead, O'Connor was on a flyer and gunned the past Rathmann into first. As for Flaherty, his thoughts weren't with the enemies ahead of him he could see, but with the big enemy gathering behind him he could not. Watson's blackboard was warning of the fast-approaching dorsal-finned Novi Vespa raced by Russo. And the faster Russo's big red blunderbuss with its screaming and supercharged V8 cylinders burned away its weight handicap of 82 gallons of fuel, the nearer it got to Flaherty. Who was spooked by it.

It dated back to Indy's aforementioned broiling 500 of 1953. The unspeakable chemical fumes belching back off Duke Nalon's Novi into Flaherty's face probably had caused the giddiness that made him crash and become "Buffer Red." So it was disquieting for Flaherty to know that on his bumper was the Novi and Russo, a stumpy and fiery veteran of many Indy

500s who for the first time had better than 700 horsepower – twice that of a Meyer-Drake – at his disposal and an itchy foot to make use of it.

At 30 miles Russo had the Novi fully wound up and was on his way. Continuing to break all Brickyard speed records, O'Connor, Rathmann, Bettenhausen, and Flaherty were still in the middle of their leaders dog fight when Russo caused great confusion by catching and annihilating all four of them with a single pass. ,



O'Connor, Rathmann, and Bettehausen lost ground and Flaherty had all dashboard instruments of the John No. 8 go flat. But he fought on anyway, staying within 50 yards of Russo and the Novi.

And it was fortunate for Flaherty he didn't get closer than that, because the next thing to happen was the shredding and exploding of Russo's overheated right rear Firestone – this was the beginning of May Pop day -- which bounced the Novi off the turn one wall, caught it on fire, and sprayed and scattered broken bits of Novi back onto the

Brickyard.

Russo was unhurt, but the wreck of the Novi brought on a blaze of no-passing yellow lights, precipitating the action that in an Indy 500 always takes the dull certainty out of 90 mph yellow intervals. Which is to say, everybody starts cheating and speeding up to diminish the distance separating themselves from the leaders. And the leaders, out of self-defense, themselves start cheating and speeding up maintaining it.

Lagging down the home straightaway came Keith Andrews in Flaherty's old Dunn Engineering, and scofflaw roadster speeders Bettenhausen, Ruttman, Rathmann and Sam Hanks all bore down on it. And a roadster's inherent inability to remain in a straight line under hard braking was revealed.

The Jones & Maley of Hanks struck the Dunn Engineering which tried to spin out; Ruttman, racing Sweikert's winning roadster from 1955, twirled to the right, just as Hanks was twirling to the left; bad Bettenhausen sped straight up the middle; and Ruttman had the misfortune not to stop twirling until his disabled roadster was parked in a bed of pink peony crowfeet flowers. At almost the same instant a mechanic on pit road named Paul Ryan, who for six minutes had been toiling to repair a broken brake line on Johnny Tolan's perverse roadsterer, glanced up and saw yet another spinning roadster bearing down on him, the eyes

of its driver as white and wide open as sauce pans. They belonged to Johnny Thomson, “bravest of the brave.” Whose tail-heavy roadster continued spinning -- Thomson couldn’t bring it back under control - until it had whirled backwards for the length of the pits, leaving in its destructive wake the prone body of mechanic Ryan with a ravaged leg.



Hanks had done well. Despite the collision with the Dunn Engineering, he’d kept the engine of the Jones & Maley running and proceeded all the way around the Brickyard to reach the pits with a bent axle cocked at a 12 degree angle. And while struggling members of his pit crew passed 53 swearing seconds shoring up the abused front end, their chief mechanic, Salih, argued spectacularly with a body of stewards who were demanding an inspection of the Jones & Maley before allowing it back into the 500.

Still Salih argued – an inspection would take time and rob Hanks of any chance of winning. It was as theoretical and convincing a job as the one Salih had pulled in the Indy 500 of 1951, as Wallard’s chief, when the same stewards were attempting to black flag Wallard because a rear shock absorber was dangling. Through obfuscation - and because Salih seemed to know their rules better than they did - Salih prevailed and Wallard won the 500. So this time, too, Salih confused the stewards and got Hanks into the 500 without losing time with an inspection

With 425 miles to go, newly in the lead was O'Connor, who had Flaherty in his mirrors, and the pair dueled each other without mercy for the following 50 miles. Then Ray Crawford's Mirror Glaze roadster took off in a long, skidding, backwards slide and another round of yellow caution cheating was on.

Flaherty and the John Zink No. 8 were signaled into the pits for fuel and new Firestones by Watson; O'Connor in the Ansted Rotary by Nichels; and Bryan in the Dean Van Lines by Clint Brawner. Most of the rest of the field also stopped. Watson's crew was quickest at 39 seconds, and Nichels' second fastest at 45. Of all the early front runners, only Parsons remained on the Brickyard. He was the new leader under green, with Flaherty looming.

Suddenly Flaherty was getting consumed and shoved back to third by Sweikert who was towing the Bob Estes roadster of Don Freeland, up from 26th starting place, and the Bardahl roadster of Al Herman from 28th. But Herman popped a Firestone right in the middle of the home straightaway and hit the wall so hard it put his wife in shock; and then, after ricocheting off the wall, the Bardahl stopped 30 feet past the race starter whom it had almost run down.

Another yellow! Both Parsons and bad Bettenhausen pitted for Firestones and fuel and one or the other's crew bungled and set their own and their neighbor's roadster afire. Parsons lost lots, a tire, having his fire extinguished but bad Bettenhausen, just because he was bad Bettenhausen, resumed racing still burning. And for the next 30 miles he steered one-handed, hunting for the source of the cockpit fire with the other.

Andrews, in the Dunn Engineering. earlier at the center of the Hanks-Ruttman-Thomson melee, triggered the next yellow by clanking into the pits on another popped Firestone and three good ones. Next to get into the act was Freeland, who produced his own yellow by popping a Firestone, then spinning out for half the length of the back straightaway. And eighteen minutes later Bryan had a May Pop moment. He swerved the Dean Van Lines in and out of a shallow creek bed on the inside of the first turn and arrived back in the pits dripping mud.



Meanwhile. Flaherty had regained first and was pulling away from Hanks, Sweikert, O'Connor, Parsons, Rodger Ward and the Rathmann twins, Jim and Dick. And then, just after Sweikert had passed Hanks and gone into second, came still another yellow, Sweikert's own. After popping a right rear Firestone, Sweikert brushed wall and came banging furiously into the pit on three Firestones – the same as a lot of people.

The 500 was half over and Flaherty, benefitting from everyone else's misfortune, was in control. At 325 miles he made his final pit stop without losing the lead and just two minutes afterward Jimmy Daywalt popped still another Firestone and found the wall.

Eighteen minutes later, with the finish almost in sight, Flaherty's final opportunity to throw away victory arrived, and it arrived when bad Bettenhausen did. Although better than 30 miles behind, bad Bettenhausen showed Flaherty his roadster's nose, daring Flaherty to go wheel-to-wheel.

Bad Bettenhausen didn't think much of Flaherty's driving and couldn't understand how he'd won the pole. Before the start he'd warned Watson what Flaherty could expect: "You tell that redhead that when he hears a lot of thunder, it won't be raining. It'll be me – Bettenhausen!"

Buzzing bad Bettenhausen back again, Flaherty audaciously started around him on the outside, just when another Firestone popped. Bad Bettenhausen's. The mutilated Firestone carcass flew up in the air and soared over the wall to land out on 16th Street; Bettenhausen backed around into the wall and broke a collarbone. Flaherty had barely steered clear.

The near-miss must have spooked him because Flaherty didn't fight back when Freeland, a lap down, passed him. And Flaherty also let Hanks, vigorously encouraged by Salih's blackboard signals, make up a lot of distance. Placing second, Hanks related that his Jones & Malet, showing typical roadster misbehavior, handled better after its accident than before.

Flaherty's victory didn't end the crashing, courtesy of Dick Rathmann and his McNamara Trucking.. Three laps from the finish Rathmann had made an emergency refueling stop in order to make a desperate stab at overtaking Sweikert and Parsons. Instead "the braver Rathmann" got racing so fast that he misread both his own pit board and the checkered flag and created the 1956 Indy 500's tenth caution by walloping the wall after the 500 was over.

By then Flaherty and the John Zink No. 8 were on their ways to greet Watson and the Zinks in Victory Circle. During their trip a spring in the well-used throttle snapped – had Flaherty been asked to do another lap he'd have been unable to.



For a tavern owner the winner asked for and put away an inordinate amount of an inappropriate beverage – the 500 miles had made him thirsty and he consumed four quarts of milk. Nonetheless, photographs of the winner's deathly pale face captured forever the fact that Pat Flaherty looked surprised being there.

Flaherty's share of the \$93,819 won by the John Zink No. 8 was \$37,527, and the IRS quickly helped itself to \$11,763. Almost all of the remaining \$25,000 and change went toward hospital bills Flaherty racked up on the Illinois State Fairgrounds during the Springfield 100 just three months after the Indy 500.

He was in the John Zink dirt car, and off to a slow start until the dirt track began coming to him and he started going really fast. Then Jack Turner orchestrated a lazy spin right in front of Flaherty who couldn't miss him and overturned, with his shamrock helmet getting

torn off and later picked up hundreds of feet from his car. Turner was unharmed. Flaherty's hurts, by comparison, were described as a skull fracture, possible jaw fracture, shoulder fracture, internal injuries, and multiple lacerations.



All the bone grafts and endless operations kept Flaherty out of the Indy 500 for the next three Memorial Days, until 1959, when he was again matched with A.J. Watson whom Flaherty had never forgive for misaligning his car at Springfield, perhaps causing the big accident.

This time he started not from pole but back in 18th. Obeying his theory that permitting the leaders to get away in the beginning brought disaster, Flaherty did the following:

He passed a dozen cars and was running sixth after ten miles; was fifth at twelve; fourth at twenty;; third at forty;; second at seventy; and at one hundred was having a classic Indy 500 roadster battle for the lead with, of all people, Jim Rathmann.'

But by 400 miles Flaherty was exhausted and up against the wall. Upon discovering another roadster suddenly slowing in front of him, he'd swerved to the inside, then veered right, and finally stopped against the inside wall with his fuel tank broken and dripping.

Afterward he was chastised by a vindictive Hanks, who after three years, still hadn't gotten over Flaherty's trimming him in 1956's Indy 500. Railing pedantically, Hanks excoriated Flaherty for failing to stop for a relief driver when he got tired.

It's just a footnote, but A.J. Watson, during Flaherty's wild duel with Rathmann, unofficially caught Flaherty clocking the Brickyard's first 150 mph lap – three Indy 500s before Rufus Parnelli Jones did it officially.