

memorably declared, “Anybody who races a USAC sprint car has to get nicked – to fall by the wayside.”

Having already passed the 100-stitch mark in go-kart racing, Mickey well knew what getting hurt felt like, and he was unmoved at the sight of gore. Yet even by the lethal standards of the era, his very first sprint car race, on May 3, 1964, at New Bremen, in Ohio, was intense.

During warm-ups, even before time trials began, Bud Tinglestad, Al Miller, and Bobby Black all got upside-down and Black flew out of the ballpark and landed on his top in a corn field. Came the 15-mile feature and Bob Wente’s Wynn’s, Mario Andretti’s Gapco, Jimmy Maguire’s Venezia Brothers, and Chuck Hulse’s Fike Plumbing all piled up together in a collision and massive jam which started when Andretti struck Wente, causing both Maguire and Hulse to brake and somersault many times; Maguire later had to have an arm amputated; and the braining absorbed by Hulse kept him out of the Indy 500. All this happened on the same day!



Once the 15-mile feature re-started Mickey, still feeling racey, was beaten only by Larson, White, and Andretti. But on the hour and a half drive back to Mansfield, their home, his shaken wife Nancy spoke not one word, none.

“Racing like a USAC sprint car driver” was the highest accolade going so Mickey went on racing sprinters, despite having to put up with the usual rookie hazing: on the steep walls of deathtrap Salem, Foyt buzzed him so hard he almost put the tail of his car into Mickey’s

cockpit; returning to Salem another time Mickey ran over somebody's exposed wheel and his car jumped so high in the air that he could see the tops of Salem's notorious widow-maker willows; and, back at New Bremen, Mickey rammed into Steve Stapp so violently he first dislocated Stapp's shoulder and then performed an injury-free rollover of his own, which concluded with Mickey landing on his wheels, engine still running.

This was the way a USAC sprint car driver made his bones, and in 1965 it took Mickey to the place he most wanted to be, the Indy 500, even though the only automobile assigned to him was the Chapman Meyer-Drake roadster, one of Watson's ancient ironclads. Seeking tutelage, Mickey went to Parnelli Jones, Einstein of the Watson roadster, who lectured him, "Don't be a hero. If you spin, don't try to save it, lock it up." Ignoring Parnelli's warning, Mickey went back to what he did best, "Racing like a USAC sprint car driver," and spun 'round and 'round for the length of a football field while he was in the middle of what was supposed to be his rookie orientation test.

This last little adventure convinced Mickey that he'd had a belly-full of sitting up straight in front-engine sprint cars, and even laying down in Indy roadsters, and that he'd better go back to his rear-engine ancestry with go-karts. He didn't have far to look. Counterfeit Lotuses, phony Brabhams, hybrid Lolas, and other Yankee copycat rear-engines like the Gerhardt were all the rage in 1965, the fourth year of the Brickyard's funny car revolt. Establishment sprint car and roadster soldiers found such mutants impossible to drive, and a lot of teams, like tiny Central Excavating out of Cleveland, were struggling. So Mickey approached owner Pete Scalavi with the memorable pitch, "You've never heard of me, but I can kick A.J. Foyt's ass!"



It was the right thing to say to the right team. A decade earlier, another rookie, Crazy Russian Vukovich, had said something similar and Central Excavating had given him the driver's chair. Mickey, with a minimal amount of practice, time-trialed in the middle of the pack, 15th fastest. Then he charmed Central Excavating into adding the world's stiffest anti-sway bar; into tightening down the coil springs until they barely compressed an inch; into dropping the shock absorbers to the top of their bumps; and into radically lowering the chassis until Mickey's tush was nearly skimming the track. Running amok with tradition, Mickey had transformed an Indy car into a glorified go-kart.

"In go-kart racing," Mickey once declared, "you learn to love racing wheel-to-wheel with people" But once the 500 started and he cleared traffic it was clear that the only people that Mickey was going to be racing with were Jimmy Clark, Parnelli and Mario, the three leaders. Jimmy was the world champion; and Parnelli and Mario were, just like Mickey, graduates of the school of racing like a USAC sprint car driver.

And Mickey didn't care - he tore after the trio in his under-powered Meyer-Drake like a kamikaze hunting for a battleship. Jimmy, who'd lapped him, got re-passed when Mickey unlapped himself. And then Mickey went after Parnelli and Mario. Mario's two mechanics, Clint

Brawner and Jim McGee were horrified at the spectacle of this Mickey Rupp, whom they'd never heard of before, gaining on Mario at the rate of half a second per lap.

Riding in the caboose of fourth place for 100 miles, Mickey wasn't surprised to find himself growing stronger instead of weaker. And the rigors of 500 miles posed no threat – only the previous season, at Willow Springs, in the high desert of southern California, in the broil of summer, he'd won a go-kart marathon of that distance.

At Indy's 450 mile mark, trying to alert Mario to the tremendous hell Mickey was about to raise just behind him, Clint and Jim couldn't think of anything else to do but blackboard RUPP COMING.

Then Mickey's throttle linkage began vibrating apart, and, over the concluding 35 miles, he tumbled backward to sixth, where he finished. For additional punishment, just as Mickey and his still-suffering wife Nancy were departing Gasoline Alley aboard one of Mickey's mini-bikes, Mickey and Nancy got dropped by some guy in a Triumph sports car who wasn't looking. Mickey scolded the guy, claiming, "I just raced 500 miles without a scratch, and look what you did to us!"

Mario barely edged him out for Rookie of the Year honors and then, just one week after the 500, at Milwaukee, Mario and Mickey were at it all over again, this time having a wheel-to-wheel battle for fourth place, which Mickey was winning, until a straggler forced him wide and Mario slipped past on the inside.

Mickey suddenly had Indy car racing by the throat – Mario, who really liked him, had Mickey added to Firestone's testing squad – and Central Excavating, for 14 seasons a no account team, was dreaming about winning the 1966 Indy 500.

Whereupon Mickey blew it all off. His five minutes of fame truly had been enough, and, besides, he had the responsibility of taking care of the 150 employees busily manufacturing Rupp Dart Kart go-karts, mini-bikes, and snowmobiles, with sales of 75,000 mini-bikes and 35,000 snowmobiles annually. Damn it all! A great racing career was ruined by somebody behaving reasonably.

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