

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

3,015 MILES

Of all the American, English, French, German, and Italian racing marques that have been winners on Memorial Day in the Indy 500, probably the greatest of them all is the Brickyard's big Italian job – an eight-banger with double-superchargers – a 1939 model Maserati 8CTF, which never was intended to set wheels on the Speedway at all, but to get thrown at the Nazi's Mercedes and Auto Unions on the continent.

It raced 3,015 miles in seven straight 500s; won two 500s in a row; was lined up to win a third but instead was eliminated in a smash; won a pole position; took two thirds and one fourth; and after dusting 19 Novis and Meyer-Drake Offys, succeeded in leading its swan song Indy.

The 8CTF's saga began on the evening following Indy's 1938 500, when a pair of very sore losers found themselves seated at the same table and sympathizing with one another.

One of the sore losers was Wilbur Shaw who, racing his own car, had won the previous year's 500 but this time only been runner-up; and the other sore loser was the shady union boss Mike ("Umbrella Mike") Boyle, whose stable of three glitzy Millers had won nothing.

Boyle had plenty of money and Shaw practically none. And so, proposing a ticket to paradise for the pair of them, Shaw promised that if Umbrella Mike traveled to Italy, spent lots of cash buying him a road-racing 8CTF, Shaw would win the 1939 500. Boyle agreed. And, sure enough, thanks to Shaw and Boyle, the 8CTF became Indy's first foreign champion in some two decades.



Winning hadn't been easy. Not only had Shaw, following long pit stops, been forced to spend 500 miles jamming through lapped traffic, but he'd had to conquer the Art Sparks Big Sixes; then Lou Moore's 270 offys; and, (before it turned turtle) the Bowes Seal Fast straight eight of his great rival and fast friend Louie Meyer.

The success – a combination of the 8CTF's mechanical superiority, Shaw's get-out-of-my-way race-driving, and Boyle's dollars off the black market -- carried over in 1940: Shaw won again.

His crashing out of the 1941 running was laid to one of those Brickyard fables that may even be true. In putting out the big Brickyard garage blaze of 1941, firemen washed the chalk markings off Shaw's dozen spare wheels, and he couldn't pick out the bad one he knew was among them, nor was there time to test them. That wire wheel frazzled in the race, popping Shaw and the 8CTF into the wall.

Indy took its forced four-year hiatus to make way for the Second World War, and the Maserati was all repaired and ready for the 500, but Shaw and Boyle no longer were in the picture, and the 8CTF's hot new pedal artist was the decade's icon, Ted Horn.

Already the Brickyard's greatest non-winner, with his string of three fourths, two thirds, and one runner-up, Horn was hoping that 8CTF was cooking for him, too, and it almost was. In 1946, despite losing 13 minutes in the pits, he still placed third; in 1947, after time-trialing for the pole, he and 8CTF made four pit stops to the winner's single stop, yet still took another close third; and in 1948, with Maserati muscle starting to wear out at last, the 8CTF and Horn barely could finish fourth.

This should have ended the 8CTF saga, but did not.

In the 1949 500, dirt track-racing luminary (and future 500 winner) Lee Wallard (after Shaw and Horn the 8CTR's third icon pedal artist,) treated the ten-year-old relic to its stunning last hurrah. Taking off in hot pursuit on the pair of leading Novis, Wallard out-lasting the first, blew off the second and, until staggering to a stop, appeared long-gone in the lead.

The official failure was confetti-ed rear-end gears, but the 8CTF at last had worn out. Yet before going to barn to be treated to some well-deserved enshrinement in Indy's Hall of Fame museum, the 8CTF, in 1950, answered a last call from its fourth icon chauffeur. The two-time Indy 500 winner and legend of the future, Bill Vukovich, aced his freshman test in the 8CTF. -JS