

# **Joe Scalzo's**

## **City of Speed and elsewhere**

### **BLAM!**

**Ready, aim, blam! Load little Mauri Rose into the open chamber of a behemoth Indy car, and he turned into a live round. Bracing his gristly, bony, shoulders and skeletal elbows against the frame rails for support, Rose was a runt of a broken-nosed bone rack with a bad attitude. Even though he looked tiny rattling around in their vast cockpits for a Memorial Day's deadening 4-and-a-half hours, nobody except his peers, Louie Meyer and Wilbur Shaw, juiced the monsters of the Brickyard's front-wheel-drive epoch harder.**

**Meyer won his trio of 500s in 1928, 1933, and 1936; Shaw got his three in 1937, 1939, and 1940; Rose's big years were 1941, 1947, and 1948. Meyer did a dozen career 500s; Shaw 13; and Rose topped both of them with 16, every one of them a rip-roarer. Midget Mauri loved the Speedway.**



**His 1933 inaugural 500 says it best. This was the season of the largest field in the history of the Brickyard, 42 bulky two-man cars. Rose hadn't been among them until he was put in as emergency replacement for Howdy Wilcox, a diabetic who'd been disqualified for health reasons the morning of the 500. Wilcox was as popular as Rose was unpopular, and the rest of the field protested so vigorously that they had to be bullied back into their machinery.**

**A ragged 500 followed, with two drivers and their riding mechanics killed. Rose, alone, seemed unperturbed by the melee he'd helped create. Ordered to start 42<sup>nd</sup> and not to pass another driver before getting his bearings, he overtook a dozen on his first lap. Forty-one laps later, he was up to fourth and about to give the lead cars a flogging, when his own car broke.**

**The following season, 1934, Rose was leading the 500 in a Leon Duray dreadnought that Shaw had described as the Brickyard's worst. Finally it wore out Rose, but only Wild Bill Cummings slipped past him, so Rose, continuing his hot driving to the finish,**

completed the 200 laps runner-up. Then, for six 500s in a row, he chauffeured a series of half a dozen bad cars. In 1935, the first one of them conked out completely; in the second, in 1936, Rose finished fourth, but had had to surge from the last row to bring it there; the third, in 1937, greased the bricks by snapping an oil line; the fourth, in 1938, sheared a supercharger; in the fifth and sixth, in 1939 and 1940, Rose couldn't finish better than eighth; and in 1941 Rose at last was able to win.

Just because it featured Mauri Rose, a mad scenario unfolded. Following a morning blaze in Gasoline Alley that roared through 24 of the stalls incinerating three of the 33 starters, Rose had started from pole position in an Orsi Brothers Maserati. But the import was fragile, and after only 65 miles, had broken down on him, sending Rose tramping up and down the pit lane hunting for and finding a fresh ride to jump into, the Knock-Out Hose Clamp Special, whose assigned driver, Floyd Davis, had been stroking along 12<sup>th</sup>.

After Davis had gotten thrown over the side and Mauri installed in his place, Rose was expected to gun a slow car -- whose throttle was sticking and which was ill-handling to boot -- ahead of 11 other drivers, including, Shaw and Rex Mays, in 300 miles. But Mauri was the life of the party! It only took him 200.

Indy 500 drivers of the Rose era wore no belts or harnesses, and Mauri's reward in 1946's 500 was bruises and abrasions when he crashed and got tossed onto the bricks -- his smallness saved him. Came 1947, however, aided by a controversial pit signal, he captured his second 500, this time in Moore's front-wheel-drive Blue Crown Spark Plug Special ; and in 1948, he won his third. Mauri, however could he hard to live with, as when he instructed Moore, "When I'm off the track you run the show, but when I'm on it, I do."



So, in 1949, after a severed magneto strap plummeted Rose, with eight laps to go, from second to 13<sup>th</sup>, Mauri, feeling the car owner had betrayed him, pitched a temper tantrum, and walked out on Moore.

His Brickyard ride for 1950 was with moneybags oil man Howard Brighton

**Keck, and more Mauri madness arrived on schedule: lining up on the front row, Rose discovered \$3 in his uniform pocket, and, being a tightwad, handed the dough for safe-keeping over to his co-chief mechanic Crabby Travers. But Crabby, who, with Frank Coon, the Keck's other co-chief, later opened Traco, the great Los Angeles engine house, next had all of his clothing, along with Rose's three bucks, get burned up during a botched refueling stop. Prior to the blaze Rose had been leading as usual, so he resumed racing anyway, finishing third.**

**It was a great comeback. Unfortunately, in '51 the Keck car threw a wheel and landed top of Mauri in an infield creek bed. Once again his smallness saved him, but being upside-down in an Indy car wasn't how Rose intended to terminate his career, so, after one last 500, he wrapped up things by doing everything from bossing Chevrolet's back-door racing program to going to UCLA and earning an engineering diploma. Dying in 1974, aged 74, Mauri no longer was capable of muscling the Brickyard's brute front-drives, but could throw off one-handed pushups by the dozen.**

**Rose was born in the community of Columbus, Ohio, and fate never treated him kindly: his mother died when he was a child; his father walked out on him about the same time; and he was obliged to start working at 12.**

**First becoming a proficient repairman of Hupmobiles and Chryslers belonging to the village's coppers and bootleggers, he quickly and earnestly began training for the Indy 500 as a rough-and tumble dirt track driver. His apprentice wounds included a dislocated jaw, fractured collarbone, and a nose broken twice, the first time in a roll-over, and the second time by a country doctor who used his fist to set it straight, more or less.**

**Rose once said that his first 500 win of 1941 was his greatest, even though he had to share his laurels with Floyd Davis. The victory also was marked by the unexpected return of Mauri's skip-out father. The old man had been absent from his son's life for decades and wanted to make amends. "Turn over management of your racing career to me, he proposed, and I'll hook you up with Barnum & Bailey..." presumably where Mauri, in a midget car, could earn the pair of them a pretty buck by performing loop-the-loops around a pair of circus elephants.**

**Mauri, in reply, exploded. Better fade –fast! -- he replied to his parent; otherwise he just might commit patricide. They never saw each other again. -JS**

