

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

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On the afternoon of November 27, 1971, Northwest Orient Flight 305, a Boeing jetliner, was between Portland and Seattle when a soon-to-be-famous skyjacker named “D.B. Cooper” handed a note to a flight attendant saying he had a bomb and that Flight 205 had to stop in Seattle where he must be paid a ransom of \$200,000 and given a pair of parachutes. All his demands were complied with. Flight 305 took off again and, upon landing in Reno, D.B. Cooper was nowhere to be found. Somewhere over the snowy wilderness of the Pacific Northwest he and the extorted \$200,000 had parachuted out of Flight 305, and D.B. Cooper became a folk hero.

This D.B. Cooper was never – has never – been found. But in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s an out of the ordinary Indy 500 racing driver with a shiny skull named Dick Simon used to titillate the 500 claiming that the FBI had questioned him to see if he, Dick Simon, was D.B. Cooper. Certainly he had some of the right qualifications: In his youth he’d won a college scholarship for ski-jumping and nearly won a spot on America’s Olympics squad; and had parachuted as a member of a sport team and scuba-dived to great depths. His FBI interrogation took place in White Plains New York, but the Feds made no pinch.



After qualifying 10th for the '74 "500," Simon lasted but one lap in his Eagle/Foyt with a burned valve, collecting \$14,551 for the effort.

Tom & Bob, in the 1990s called the smut jockeys of Indianapolis radio, once made a mean spirited song about a straight-talking young woman who feels persecuted because every year she gets into the 500 office pool and draws Dick Simon’s name. The song “Dicked, Again,” had her reviewing, with frustration, Dick Simon’s dire history of never completing the 500 miles despite 17 attempts and only landing among the first 10 twice.

But lousy finishes seldom hampered Dick Simon. Throughout his racing career he was a competitor of such smothering confidence and vanity that he lectured his own mechanics on the subjects of his race-driving and fighting fitness. All the same, it seemed impossible that disappointment didn't park the Dick Simon Racing Team long ago. In addition to all the poundings inflicted by the 500 itself there was the additional melodrama of having to qualify. In 1981 and 1982 Simon couldn't get up to speed, wild and futile time trials notwithstanding. In 1971, he couldn't either. So he took the unsporting measure of commandeering the qualified machine of teammate, a used-car salesman named John Mahler. The two never spoke again.

And 1986 was more hairy still. Following the great accomplishment of qualifying a pair of Dick Simon Racing team cars on the opening Saturday, the roof caved in – a technicality involving turbocharger pop-off valves resulted in the disqualification of both runs, the roller-coaster began. With the baker's dozen or so Dick Simon Racing sponsors mutinous, one team Cosworth was re-qualified by Raul Boesel, Simon Racing's fastest chauffeur and apparently the only one being paid a salary. Then it was Dick Simon's own turn. The Brickyard surface was baking, his Cosworth was mischievous, and Simon, making a kamikaze run, touched the outer wall twice – afterward the Speedway had to be closed for an inspection crew to sweep the groove of chips of cement. And Simon's was barely the 33rd fastest average anyway; afterward he got bumped from the field.

Reward mixed with anti-climax followed. Sadistically, barely 48 hours before the 500, one of the qualified starters was demolished in a crash. For the first time in modern memory an alternate got to start, and it was Dick Simon. Next came the anti-climax: Simon squandered the windfall by coming in only 14th.

Dick Simon, was one of the oldest Indy drivers, and became a fixture of the 500 at the awards banquet of 1983, when local boosters announced an annual \$5,000 award for the 500's oldest driver. Simon, then a mere 49, won it, about the only thing he ever won at the Brickyard, then proceed to win it for the following five 500s as well. Indy's worship of age isn't new. Indianapolis, after all, is a city two centuries old; its Brickyard and its 500-mile race are better than a century old; and before getting bought out by the Penske Corporation, the Hulman dynasty ruled for more than half a century. A famous exchange at the 1983 500 showed the way the wind used to blow at Indy. Al Unser Jr., who had just completed his controversial freshman 500, mildly complained that Indy had no award for its youngest driver, and senile and



frightening Joseph Cloutier, the Speedway's septuagenarian president was moved to respond. "Your complaint has been heard, he snarled at Unser Jr, from the podium. "Here's five bucks."

Apparently this wasn't supposed to be interpreted to mean that the Indy 500 thinks its veterans are 5,000 times more valuable than its precocious freshmen. But with the exception of its million-dollar racing cars, declared obsolete after one 500, what Indy values most it what endures, such as the namesake of the Dick Simon Racing Team. Getting off to a late start by not arriving at Indy until he was in his mid-30s – which was packing a lot of nears for a beginner – Simon spent a quarter-century-long sprint catching up, changing racing cars, engines, mechanics, drivers, even wives – he had four.

Simon never slowed down. Wearing track shoes, slacks, a white shirt and a red tie, he seemed to be here, there, everywhere...traveling at high speed on his golf cart making the short trip from the pit lane to Gasoline Alley... conducting inspections of his racing cars... conversing anxiously with team engineers and mechanics, gleaming head bobbing, hands gesturing...conducting radio and TV interviews, including damage control: should anybody say something derogatory about the amazing bag of Team Simon's drivers which many people did, Simon went on the air delivering immediate rebuttal.

Most important of all, and like any other Indy car team owner who was in his right mind, Simon ceaselessly and compulsively catered to the whims and needs of all his sponsors. He certainly was one of the first Indy team owners of his generation to realize that even if it wins a little prize money, a team can stay financially afloat on the good win and donations of its sponsors. Simon's Indy sponsors through the 500s have ranged from motels to batteries, from antacids to shoes, from stereos to soap.

Maintaining such good will can be difficult if any Indy team goes 500 after 500 without a victory. Simon has done it, partly because of his charm – he made a very charming team owner. At one of his last Indys, for example, while other drivers were putting on their race faces and contemplating the coming 500-mile-long torture, Simon, by comparison, had on his happy face while sipping sparkling water with his champagne-guzzling sponsors.

How successful was Dick Simon? Barring Indy 500 victories he possessed everything all the top 500 teams did: a tour-de-force racing headquarters that bristled with high technology and an inventor of racing cars, transport, and personnel. It also deployed the usual state-of-art techniques of press agency to inflate accomplishment, disguise mistakes, and weave a connection with reality that is highly tenuous. "Dick Simon Racing," explained a press release, "has a history of giving a ride to Indy car hopefuls who need to log time before

finding their way to the winner's circle" Wrong verb. Renting, leasing, commissioning, perhaps, but never was a stick of equipment from Dick Simon Racing given away for free.

Dick Simon, however, didn't invent the rent-a-ride program at Indy or elsewhere, The tradition is at least as old as millionaire Joe Boyer, who in the 1920s came to the Brickyard when it still was a brickyard, and purchased for \$27,000 a ride with Louis Chevrolet. But Dick Simon Racing surely was the first Indy car squad to rent out rides on so international a scale. American, Dutch, Finnish, Japanese, French, Italian, Brazilian, and British male and female wannabes with deep-pocket sponsors all did business with Dick Simon Racing, and the all-time roster of Dick Simon's rental drivers is in the dozens.

In 1983, Dick Simon Racing qualified five drivers for the 500, at the time a record for quantity, and its most interesting member was Stephen Gregoire, a young Frenchman, whose patron, a Parisian businessman, had rented him turbo Buick with five times the firepower that Gregoire was accustomed to. It was a mastodon on a squad, and the best the quintet could finish was fourth, sixth, 13th, 19th and 25th.

And Boesel, Dick Simon Racing's 36-year-old star, almost ruined the team's long string of non-success. First Simon and his engineers coached Boesel onto the 500's front row. Then they schooled him in the trick of out-jumping the two other front row starters, Mario Andretti and Arie Luyendyk, once a Simon rental. And for the opening 17 glorious laps Dick Simon Racing was leading the Indy 500.

A legacy of grief continued dogging the team. Upon making entrance to the pits for refueling, Boesel ran afoul of stewards with radar guns who robbed him of his lead with a penalty for speeding. A later penalty plunged him even further behind. And then there was nothing to do but spend the remaining hundreds of miles furiously overtaking, until Boesel was a rampaging fourth when the 500 finally finished.

Unsatisfied, Boesel was still sufficiently angry to shout at his county man, the 500 winner Emerson Fittipaldi and Team Penske that he was the Indy 500's true winner, because the twin penalties had been unjust. It was a watershed moment: the Dick Simon Racing Team with one of the Indy 500's sorriest records screaming defiance at Team Penske whose record is the Indy 500's best.

Following Indy, the Dick Simon Racing Team and Boesel continued to fight it out on the national championship Indy car tour. Capturing the pole position at the Wisconsin State Fairgrounds in Milwaukee, Boesel finished second after being in the lead with 30 miles to go. Throwing more scares at Team Penske and Newman/Haas, the dominant Fat Cat teams, Boesel took three more runner-ups, before the Dick Simon Racing Team fell back to earth. Inertia took hold, and Boesel plummeted to fifth in the national Indy car point standings.

Dick Simon's Indy 500 career started in 1970, when he exhausted the month of May working up to qualifying speeds, then squealed into the field by time-trialing on the last row. Following numerous distractions and much pit stop time squandered, he was just completing his 410th when the winner was completing his 500th. Simon's highly original seasons as an Indy 500 driver had begun. Here were a few of it especially novel moments:

- **Indy, 1976: Laying waste to decades of hoary tradition, Dick Simon Racing Team fielded an upstart team with a green racing car and a lady driver – a superstition-debunking outfit which broke so many taboos that all that was lacking is for it was to be issued the outlawed No, 13.**

- **Riverside Raceway, in California, 1982: Traveling at better than 175 mph, Simon over-**



turned. Subjected to a massive battering, he staggered free of the wreckage groggy but otherwise undamaged. Removing his helmet so that spectators pouring a can of cold beer over his perspiring pate could bring him to his senses, he suddenly took off running at top speed. He'd spotted an approaching TV news crew and needed to plug his sponsors.

- **Indy, 1983: Late in the 500, in middle of another botched pit stop, Simon noticed that his friend, the school-teaching-racing-driver Tom Sneva, the leader of the race, was being bottled up by the father-and-son Al Unsers. Deciding that that wasn't very sporting, he prepared to re-enter the marathon to take on father-and-son on Sneva's behalf. But Sneva shot ahead on his own and Simon didn't need to play his avenger.**
- **Michigan International Speedway, 1987: After qualifying a shock fifth fastest, Simon fractured his right wrist in a fall from a motor-scooter As if to establish once and for all that his physical condition truly was superior to all his younger, non-athletic competitors, he contrived to take on the punishing G-loadings of the Michigan bankings by, in effect, steering for three hours and 500 miles with one hand, and, just when he was within 14 miles of doing so, his machismo aggravate his injury. Forcing himself anyway, he went to Pennsylvania and completed the 500 miles of Pocono until pain parked him. Still pushing macho to the max, Simon next entered Nazareth, where a big pile-up emptied the speedway of the leader of the race and himself.**

- **Phoenix International Raceway, 1988: Simon's swan song as an Indy car driver.** Luyendyk, the year's rental driver, was leading, Simon was holding second, and it was the finest hour of Dick Simon Racing. When it was time for the first methanol refueling stop, so focused on the task at hand was Simon that, even as he flew out of control and prepared for his car to clobber the wall he saw the opportunity to gain for Luyendyk a strategic advantage -- a split-second before Simon personally lit up the PIR caution lights, mechanics in the Simon pits heard the voice of their boss barking "Pit Arie pit!" But the strategic advantage was squandered when Luyendyk finished a distant tenth.



With all signs pointing to strong 1989 season anyway, instead it turned into yet another disastrous year . A sidelight of 1988 had been Dick Simon Racing's strong bond with Cosworth, a bond which bought the team factory assistance in the combat against the factory Chevrolet Ilmore V8. But the engine war seemed to be escalating accidents and injuries so, for 1989, a fresh rule curbed speeds by dropping turbocharger boost; but the only speeds curbed by the rule were those of Cosworths, which also were robbed of their superior fuel mileage.

Simon decided he'd been tricked and cried swindle. And when the opponent Ilmore teams next began lobbying for extra allotments of fuel, Simon, successfully lobbied loudly against the allotments and the Ilmores, belonging to the Fat Cats, didn't get more fuel. Not that it mattered: Ilmores won 13 races, including the Indy 500. And when Simon tried obtaining for Dick Simon Racing an Ilmore of its own he was turned down. For railing against the Ilmores, Dick had Dicked Dick..

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