

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

DODGER

For a long time, Indy car racing's most hated player was Rodger Ward, a.k.a. Rodger the Dodger. Ward had earned the hateful alias because of triggering, but somehow avoided involvement in, two of the most infamous and fatal accidents of the 1950s, the first resulting in the death of Clay Smith, Einstein of Indianapolis mechanics, and the second, Billy Vukovich, America's Nuvolari. Smith died on the mile dirt track of Du Quoin, Illinois. This was the 100-miler where Ward, running last in a bad and brakeless Kurtis-Kraft, was getting lapped by the race-leading Agajanian Kuzma, when the two cars touched. Ward, flipping, was precipitated into the signaling area right where Smith, chief mechanic of the Agajanian, was standing. Smith was highly



popular, Ward was not. So, afterward, Smith was mourned and Ward hated.

In May of 1955 all of Indy car racing's men and women were camped out at the Brickyard, gearing up for another 500. Ward, wrestling yet another evil Kurtis, the Aristo Blue, named after a Los Angeles chinchilla farm, again was the Dodger, crashing his way into the center of things. Just as Vukovich and

his Hopkins Kurtis, the leaders, were lapping them, Ward and another Kurtis, Johnny Boyd's Bardahl, cracked up in the middle of the back straightaway. Vookie, traveling at better than 170 mph, clipped the Astro Blue, then met his demise flying out of the ball park.

This was the end for Ward: his career seemed finished. He was blackballed, couldn't find rides, and, with nothing better to do, started drinking. Had not the maverick chief mechanic Herb Porter, and the master Offenhauser roadster builder A.J. Watson, taken him in hand, Ward was well on his way to a life of drunkenness. Porter put him

into his off-the-wall Walcott, “the bent-engine eight ball”; and taught Ward, a dirt track driver, him how to race on pavement at Milwaukee and Trenton; Watson loaded Ward up with Leader Card Specials, and, in their six Indy 500s together, Watson and Ward won two and, in the others, never landed out of the top three. As Indy car racing’s greatest geezer chauffeur – he was now in his 40’s -- Ward next stuffed A.J. Foyt and the rest of the younger, faster, hot dogs out of double seasonal national championships.

No longer was he Rodger the Dodger

In 1940, when Ward still was young, and long before he decided to become a racing driver, Ford Motor Company killed, just three model years after its introduction, the V8-60. Nobody seemed to be buying it. But one highly satisfied champion of FoMoCo iron was the doomed desperado and career criminal John Dillinger, Public Enemy Number One, who throughout the 1930s stole Fords to use for robbing banks. “Dear old pal,” Dillinger wrote to Henry Ford, praising his products for their rocket acceleration, and how effortlessly it one out-ran carloads of cops, all of them shooting at him at once. But Ward was the champion of the ragamuffin, iron-block, flathead V8-60, often ridiculed as the “Buzzbomb” or the “Shaker,” because all eight of its tiny slamming pistons buzzed and shook. This was in the early 1950s. Ward was living in Los Angeles and racing midgets at glamorous Gilmore Stadium, where his Buzzbomb of choice was the explosive Edelbrock V8-60, and this was when the V8-60 was better than a decade ancient.

Yet to those Gilmore teams too financially pinched to afford a custom, pedigree, full-race, 110 Offy, the Buzzbomb was a highly attractive alternative. To purchase one, there was no need of visiting a Ford dealership; all one needed do was visit a junkyard, pay \$25, and drag home a V8-60. Many of Gilmore’s fastest V8-60 Buzzbombs including the Edelbrock, started life that way. Following judicious primping and preening, porting and polishing, boring and stroking, the junkyard refugee could develop 125 horsepower, which equaled the output of the hottest Offys, A really fast V8-60 like the Edelbrock was identifiable by its exhaust note, which was decidedly non-Offy, and often by its nose and hood. A flaw of the engine was its tendency to overheat when run really hard, which was the only way Ward raced. So the result usually was a huge, reinforced radiator, plus so many louvers for cooling that a V8-60’s hood might resemble a slice of Swiss cheese. That’s the way that the Edelbrock -- all tricked out and juiced to the hilt

with exotic fuels -- looked on the hot summer evening of August 10, 1950, when Ward, at peak form, made it the only non-Offy ever to win at Gilmore.



Years afterward Ward got his mitts on another quick Buzzbomb, the Ken Bren 110 Offy, which first he used successfully mess with the sports car crowd, led by George Constantine the Greek, in a Formula Libre show at Watkins Glen, and later, with less success, against the Formula 1 gang at Sebring. Reminiscing, Ward once

declared that out of all the single-eater and stock car sleds and boxes he ever wrestled, the Edelbrock was by far the hottest.

Joining the Air Force so he could go fight in World War Two, Ward spent the war in the cockpits of P-38 fighters, teaching himself to fly in the style of Ray Crawford, racing's great ace. Upon getting discharged, Ward started racing out on the west coast, in midgets like the Edelbrock. Of course where he most wanted to be was where everyone did, Indianapolis, so he could reap the 500's riches and glory.

Getting to the Speedway, however, first meant surviving the savage kindergarten of 100-mile dirt track races, which was where Indy car owners hunted for talent. One of Ward's first dirt starts was in 1951, on New York's Syracuse mile, and the meet was so horrible it now sounds halfway funny. The smash of the match started when one-legged Bill Schindler, leading the race, swerved to miss an ambulance, then simultaneously broke his steering and hit a concrete wall. A second car immediately struck Schindler's, and, while a third car was spinning to miss the second, a fourth went somersaulting into the sky to avoid hitting the third. In addition to Schindler, the relatively uninjured drivers were Jack McGrath, Buzz Barton, and Chuck Stevenson.

Andy Linden, the ex-pug who always seemed to be in the middle of trouble, achieved a broken ankle. Linden also was indirectly held responsible for triggering the melee. A few laps earlier, after his car died on one of the corners, Linden had abandoned it and, while crossing the track, had gotten run down by another car. Either too numb or scared to move, he'd laid there on the ground while the race continued regardless. Henry Banks, the most softhearted of all Indy car chauffeurs, had, finally, driven his

car into the pits, unbuckled and climbed out, then suggested that something really ought to be done about poor Andy, still prostrate on the track. The stewards dispatched an ambulance, traveling in the wrong direction, and this was the meat wagon that Schindler had swerved to avoid.

Mystery, meanwhile, has for better than seven decades surrounded Detroit's Independence Day 100 of 1953. No one knows why it remains on the books for lasting 51 miles yet really lasted 76, or how Ward won. It was the second of Ward's 26 championship scores, and the one he least liked to claim. Additionally, it was the roughest and worst Detroit of all. First the dirt surface blew up, literally blew up, in the faces of the drivers. Next, cars began bounding, jumping, dancing, performing leapfrogs over one another and making all drivers acrophobic. With his shock absorbers destroyed, Johnnie Parsons, the early leader – a physical and emotional wreck, tried showing his ruined palms to anybody willing to look at them, but hardly anybody would, for they were too occupied observing the strange spectacle of Ward and wild Allen Heath – Heath's specialty was knocking down crashwalls – dueling for first. Almost fittingly, the pair were inside Detroit's two worst cars. One month earlier, at Indy, in the most heat-ravaged 500 ever run, Ward's M.E. Walker had roasted three different drivers, Ward among them. And in that same 500, Heath's McNamara Motor Freight had succeeded in sending its regular driver into full cardiac arrest. At 51 miles, the horror show was interrupted to civilize the track by dumping water on it. After this, Ward, Knothead, and the rest of the shell-shocked drivers were ordered back to their pulverized cars, of which only nine of the starting 18 still were alive, many just barely. The drivers, quite naturally refused to go, even with 30,000 angry spectators poised to riot if they didn't. Racing only resumed after stewards promised that the standings at 51 miles would be official and all everybody need do was parade slowly around. Yet even parade lap speeds were sufficient to rip a wheel off Ward's leading Walker and impale it on the fence; and then, at 76 miles, another luckless driver, Ernie McCoy, got on his top and became another visitor to Detroit's fracture ward. This last catastrophe was worthwhile only because it forced the race to be stopped for good. In the aftermath, instead of explaining why leader Heath had lost, and why Ward – his Walker still hanging on the wall – had won, everything was buttoned up and has remained one of Indy racing's most absurd secrets.

The 1950s ended. Violent accidents, hard times, and bad habits, decimated racing, taking down almost every Indianapolis and dirt track hero except Ward. So, just as

the 1960s were kicking in, he was being confronted by a whole new galaxy of young and dangerous faces: first A.J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones, Herk Hurtubise and Bobby Marshman; and then Johnny Rutherford, Mario Andretti, Gordon Johncock, the brothers Unser, and more. None of them liked Ward, and all of them were cheeky enough to call him “Old Man” to his face. Secretly, though, they were very scared of him, because he knew more about racing and its stratagems than they did, and relished screwing up their minds by getting inside their brains, and then pulling the big con job,

How? Well, because he no longer was capable of “Out-Dick Tracing- them,” as the old Brickyard saw went, Ward had to out-think them by playing dirty tricks. Foyt – judged by Ward his worst threat – was on the receiving end of most of them. This, for instance, was Ward, just before the start of another dirt track 100, staring in phony terror at A.J.’s tire combination, then lecturing him must be of his mind to race on such rubber. Another time, after Foyt carelessly allowed Rodger to shake down his Sheraton Thompson, judged Indy’s best Meyer-Drake roadster, Ward informed Foyt that he found it ill-handling. No greenhorn, Foyt was keenly aware of what Ward, the



wily old gentleman, was attempting to do to his head, but somehow got sucked in in spite of himself.

Actually, the fat was in the fire between them at their very first race together, which was 1951’s Springfield 100 during the Illinois State Fair. Then a rookie of 22, Foyt had asked Ward which of two cars available to him he should race. And Ward, perhaps for the first time in a career of dissembling, gave A.J. the information straight. Whereupon Foyt, not wishing Rodger to think he was stupid, or had just fallen off a hay wagon, automatically selected the opposite one. This was the slow crate that Ward, while in the process of winning again, lapped time after time, always flipping off Foyt when he did.

This happened to be the Springfield that Rodger hadn’t conspired to win on his own, but with the services of a co-conspirator: Elmer George, who was a rags-to-riches Dust

Bowl emigre, son-in-law of the owner of Indianapolis, jilted lover, and bad luck loser



fated to get shot dead in a gun battle. George and Ward both had done well in time trials George qualifying second fastest, Ward fourth quick. Flanking George on the front row pole position, having broken a five-year-old Springfield record to get there, was young George Amick, a firecracker, expected, at the drop of the green, to run away with the race. Ward did not want that happening. And so, conspiring with George, he suggested

that, at the start, George keep Amick all pinned up. George did exactly as he was instructed. Biting on Ward's bait, he swerved low to plug up Amick, causing the top groove to break wide open just when Ward needed it. Ward disappeared and won in a runaway. Afterwards, he might have been ashamed at how he'd flummoxed poor George, but wasn't. That was racing.

Indy car racing biggest switcheroo occurred in the 1960s, when front-engine roadster dinosaurs were replaced by rear engine funny cars. Ward at first liked the funnies, believing them superior to the dinosaurs. Indeed, in 1964, in what was probably the



most calamitous of all 500s, he raced Watson's copycat Rolla Volstedt funny car to a close second place, and should have won, but for a colossal re-fueling blunder. Ward lost his affection for Indy's funnies in 1966, when a maniac of a supercharged Offy so scared him that he announced his retirement, saying the sport no longer was fun – as if racing at the horror houses of Syracuse and Detroit had been.

Ward died, aged 83, in 2003, and a couple of years earlier we'd shared our final conversation. Having just gotten home from another 500, I'd witnessed the usual curious episodes, the best by

far being the qualifying run of a visiting Italian, Teo Fabi. Having wrapped up his time trial, Fabi was interviewed and asked how the 10-mile adventure had gone. His reply, in perfect English, went out over the public address. The Italian volunteered that his automobile had gone loose around turn one; pushed through two and four; and had had some other abnormality around three. Before the words were out of Fabi's mouth, all the engineers and chief mechanics of the next teams in line to qualify found it in their interest to use Fabi's info to eradicate oversteer and understeer in their own sleds by taking out trim; screwing three more degrees of wing into their noses; and then, of course, their drivers had proceeded to go plaster Fabi by time-trialing faster and shoving him several rows behind them on the grid. When I told this anecdote to Ward, he'd groaned, rolled his eyes, slapped his head in disbelief, and demanded to know if all modern drivers were as honest and accommodating as this Italian?! Did all of them spill the frijoles that way?! Obviously he must resume racing at once.-JS