

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Frank...

In May of 1960, a clapped-out Meyer-Drake Offenhauser roadster careering along at almost 150 mph rewarded its gadfly chauffeur Jim Hurtubise – “Hercules,” or, simply, “Herk” -- doubly: it gave Herk the satisfaction of setting an Indianapolis record, and it broke one of America’s oldest speed standards.

After a run of almost 33 years, Frank Lockhart’s astonishing lap of 147.229 mph, established on the looming boards of Atlantic City, by Lockhart’s very own pygmy Miller, fell at last. Atlantic City, of course, wasn’t the only toothpick theater where Lockhart established records that were blazing – just a few of the other board tracks he owned were Beverly Hills, Culver City, Salem, Charlotte, and Altoona.



So, too, did he own the bricks of Indy, where he won the 500 as a rookie in 1926, and then parked on pole position the following season with the Brickyard’s original 120 mph lap. And, just prior to running up those big numbers at Atlantic City, he and the same supercharged little hot rod had an adventure in a windstorm on the wide open spaces of Muroc Dry Lake and created dazzling international records of 171.02 mph one- way and 164.85 for two.

Yet Lockhart the stunning record setter, was eclipsed by Lockhart the stunning race driver. Competition during the Roaring Twenties was conducted on a dangerous menu of board, brick, dirt and sand, and Lockhart, even though he was physically frail, had a special technique for each and dominated all four, especially the banked boards.

In 22 timber track starts he won eight and finished in the top five fifteen times. Lockhart, incredibly, made all his magic in the space of barely two seasons, 1926-1928. Over-achieving was what made him, yet ultimately it devoured him. At Daytona Beach, while he was going 200 mph and was in hot pursuit of the Land Speed Record – just about the only speed record Lockhart didn't hold – his midget streamliner the Stutz Black Hawk jumped into the sky without warning and broke up like an egg upon crash-landing. Lockhart was only 25.

He was one of the major racing brains of the 1920s, which was really saying something, because it was the decade of Goossen, Winfield, the brothers Duesenberg, and Harry Arminius Miller, whose engines won 39 Indy 500s.

Though possessing little formal education, Lockhart, who had bright, intelligent, eyes, was said have the mind of a scientist, and the exquisite racing cars he engineered were sophisticated little jewels bristling with wailing blower inter-coolers and other unique touches.

Not much is known about Lockhart's early life, except that he was born on April 3, 1908, in Ohio, probably in Dayton, where the Lockhart family's next-door neighbor supposedly was the father of the Wright brothers of Kitty Hawk fame.

Wright the elder was an inventor with his own modest garage and was young Frank's introduction to science; his early death and the subsequent decision of Frank's mother –Frank had an older brother -- to uproot the family to Los Angeles was, for Frank, fortuitous. L.A. was automobile racing's pulse; a great racing driver of the future could hardly have chosen more congenial surroundings. Goossen, Winfield, and of course the brilliant Miller were just a few of the geniuses in residence

Lockhart's first "racing car" was a rusted Ford T model which he'd rebuilt on the kitchen table. After converting it into a Frontenac bobtail with cylinder heads borrowed from a Chevrolet, he'd proceeded to turn himself loose on every dirt surface from Ascot to Bakersfield.

His racing style was unconventional, even radical. For one thing, he depended on front-wheel brakes only. For another, long before attacking corners, he already had his raging bobtail crossed up and veering sideways on the straights.

Recognizing Lockhart for the rare talent he was, Miller invited him to make the Miller Products Company his home away from home. Miller's was the hottest address in the L.A. colony, and it was where Lockhart absorbed his choice internal combustion education.



In 1926, when Miller decamped with his cars to another Indy 500, Lockhart accompanied him. For the first couple of weeks, he was lost in the crowd, just another of L.A.'s cocky characters whom embittered Brickyard residents Fred and Augie Duesenberg – their products dropped many a 500 to them

– lambasted as: *“Damn cowboys out of California!”*

Lockhart's subsequent time trial and debut was even more sensational than Herk Hurtubise's of 1960. Miller had permitted him to shake down one of the works cars and, with zero education on bricks, Lockhart immediately had lapped faster than the vehicle's assigned chauffeur and even threatened the lap record.

After that, there had been nothing to do but provide him a ride for the 500. Lined up 20th, and totally inexperienced in the art of working traffic, Lockhart found himself separated from Earl Cooper on pole position by six rows of front- and rear-drive Millers and Duesenbergs. And then Lockhart had taken off. Gaining momentum on every lap, in seven miles he had picked off 15 outclassed opponents and was riding a rocketing fifth.

Manipulating the big steering wheel and constantly pouncing on enemy iron, by 50 miles he sat second, but then rain struck, and racing was red-flagged. Came the re-start and Lockhart easily tap-danced into lead, then plunged on to win by five miles. As a reward. Miller offered him the same factory eight-cylinder to campaign for the remainder of 1926. Lockhart, however, proffered a counter-proposal.

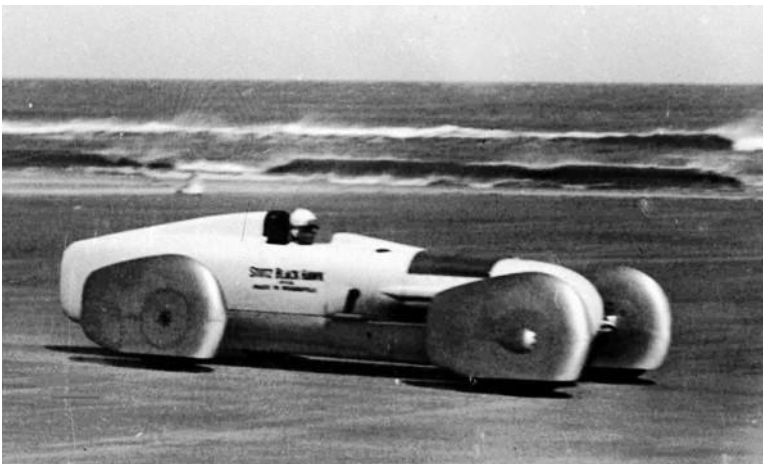
Wanting to create his very own Team Lockhart, he put up some of the prize money to purchase his Indy winner. Miller, financially straitened as ever, accepted. Lockhart later bought a second Miller. And by season's end he'd been operating with such superiority that he'd won the national tour's last four meets in a row.

Continuing at that same pace in 1927, he set off his big blasts at Atlantic City and Muroc; he was already ahead by a lap, and on the verge of winning two Indy 500s in a row, but failed late when his engine popped. Then – disastrously -- Lockhart started dreaming about speed records.

Dream about setting mph records and, ultimately, you start thinking about the biggest one of all: the Land Speed Record. Which was what Lockhart had begun to do. Circa 1927, the LSR had been the property of a pack of rich and daring Englishmen and their LSR leviathans. In 1925, on the sands of Wales, one of these monsters, "Babs," with its gigantic Liberty airplane engine, set an LSR record of 172 mph; crashed; for some mysterious reason got buried there; and ,decades later, was mysteriously dug up all over again.

The disaster proved that the sands were unsound for future LSR exploits, so the speed nobility of Britain began conducting their business on Daytona Beach, where they behaved as though the former colony still belonged to them. Two titled noblemen, Seagrave and Campbell, both beat 200 mph at Daytona; Seagrave going 200, Campbell topping that by hitting 206.

Campbell's Bluebird weighed four tons; Lockhart's Stutz Black Hawk a piddling 3,000 pounds. It was able to fit inside Bluebird's wheelbase.



Lots of engineering prowess had gone into its complex construction, and Lockhart's over-stimulated brain must have been cooking overtime, because first he'd grafted together two Miller straight-eights to create a create a blown I6 (Harry Miller never forgave him for tampering with his pedigree designs); and then Lockhart had raided

the brothers Duesenberg and carried off some of their sharpest artisans (exactly like Miller, the brothers never forgave Lockhart); and finally Lockhart had hit up the struggling Stutz Motor Company for badly needed sponsorship cash.

By 1928 his toy streamliner was ready to confront Campbell Florida's most famous beach. But the Englishman turned a critical eye on Lockhart's creation,, warning that his Black Hawk was so small and flyweight that it was bound to fly. And fly the Black

Hawk did, on two separate occasions, including the first one when it came down in the surf, and the second one which became -- way too soon -- the end of Frank Lockhart.

No ominous feeling, no foreboding, that with his flyaway Stutz Black Hawk he had unwittingly engineered his own destruction, came to Lockhart that last morning of his life. He was, in fact, jubilant. Repairing the Stutz from the first crash had exhausted most of his sponsorship and his racing savings, but he seemed confident that getting the LSR would anoint him the globe's greatest racing driver: a fortune awaited in product endorsements. Lockhart left no successors – he was nonpareil – but his powerful legacy lived on.

Sold at a 1928 estate sale, his matching pair of custom Millers remained so technically advanced they succeeded in the Indy 500 and the American national championship for the following two seasons. And, of course, those fat Atlantic City numbers stood fast through the next 33. -JS