

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

HEARST vs RACING

Connoisseurs of what used to be called yellow journalism still revel in the long reign of publisher William Randolph Hearst, and his war-mongering year of 1898. Hearst, according to many accounts, was attempting to stir up war with Spain, and had shipped reporters and illustrators to Havana to uncover Spanish atrocities. When they found nothing wrong going on, got restless with boredom, they wired back that as there seemed to be no war, and thought that should Hearst bring them home.

Hearst wired back: **PLEASE REMAIN...**

YOU FURNISH THE PICTURES AND I'LL FURNISH THE WAR.

Decades later, the habit of war-mongering not yet burned out of him, Hearst tried provoking another war, but this time it was against automobile racing. The hostilities began on March 6, 1934, a miserably sad afternoon in Los Angeles, when the racing-drivers of Legion Ascot Speedway, dressed in black for mourning, were filling into the mausoleum at Forest Lawn to honor Ernie Triplett, the most celebrated of three victims killed the previous weekend when four racing cars ran amok at the Imperial Valley Fair.

Swirling on the edge of all these mourners was a wolf-pack of attack hacks, sob-sisters, and hit-and-run photographers from the Examiner, Hearst's L.A paper, their war cry, "A vigorous campaign against legalized murder on the racing-tracks of southern California!" And the dead Triplett's widow, a picture of bereavement, soon was being buzzed from all sides: the hacks were bumping her, the sob-sisters – reporters, so-called, who almost literally sobbed with victims – were engulfing her, and she was surrounded by all the busybody lens-men.

From the other side of the mausoleum, Triplett's hardliner colleagues observed the behavior of the Hearst press. The hardest hardliner was the one whose incongruous name was Babe Stapp, and whose face was well-scarred from encounters with the crash-wall planks of Legion Ascot and who's back additionally, because Stapp had

gotten careless during one of Legion Ascot's nighttime main events, was imprisoned in a sturdy brace.

Not that Stapp's physical condition mattered all that much. The spectacle of the widow Triplett being harassed caused his hardliner but sentimental heart to open in sympathy and, in the company of fellow hardliners, Stapp charged at the Hearst press. And then, with oaths, punches, and kicks, a pair of Hearst photographers were unceremoniously ejected from Forest Lawn, hurled into a waiting car which sped them across the Hollywood Hills, and finally dumped onto the Examiner's front steps.

Stapp and the rest of the hardliners had blindly walked into the waiting arms of Hearst:

RACERS KIDNAP 2 NEWSMEN, FACE CHARGES

...Gangster tactics that desecrated the sacred soil of the cemetery ... courageous driver whose life was sacrificed... vicious beating of a photographer (a World War veteran)...

There was no tradition of responsibility in yellow journalism, so Hearst and his Examiner used no restraint. The abolishment of automobile racing became, it appeared, as important to Hearst as filling his castle at San Simeon with filched treasures from the world of art.



The Examiner's target was Legion Ascot, which stood on the barren heights behind Los Angeles. Outside of the Brickyard at Indianapolis, Legion Ascot generated greater mystique than any other 1930s' racing track: its succulent racing cars wore the coachwork of Myron Stevens, who'd worked with Frank Lockhart. Its

phenomenal engines were the handiwork of Harry Miller, the German-American clairvoyant, who claimed to be in touch with the spirit world, and whose revolutionary cylinder heads had been plagiarized by Ettore Bugatti; and whose perfectly-timed camshafts and carburetors were products from the formidable brain of Ed Winfield, who, for a hobby, dueled Einstein's theory of relativity.

And then there were the champion racing drivers in the hills near Luna Park: Louie Meyer, Bill Cummings, Kelly Petillo, Wilbur Shaw, and Floyd Roberts, all of whom matriculated to Indy and won the 500, Meyer and Shaw winning Indy more than once.

In addition to the Los Angeles Examiner, Hearst owned 29 other newspapers, plus 15 magazines, making him the most powerful and ruthless publisher in the world. And he had dangerous friends. So, in apocalyptic succession, Legion Ascot was under siege from a county superintendent, and then a legislator, and then the district attorney of L.A. himself.

The superintendent attempted to stop the nearby Los Angeles County Hospital from accepting injured Legion Ascot drivers; the legislator hinted about his plans to re-introduce Bill #5, infamously known as the “ban racing” measure; and the hostile DA demanded that Legion Ascot racing be canceled until Stapp and all the other hardliners turned themselves in, which Stapp and the others did immediately.



None of them were charged with anything, -- although Stapp’s ruminations about yellow journalism, and Hearst in particular, could well have landed the whole bunch of them right back in trouble all over again.

The hostilities went on for two years and, incredibly, it had seemed that Legion Ascot might actually win by default: Hearst’s yellow press was becoming known as the Hearst crank press, and Hearst, nearing senility, was being removed from control. But the hardliners of Legion Ascot went on decimating themselves so briskly that Legion Ascot itself couldn’t survive. Early in 1936 it closed

down. Then an arsonist fired the grandstands. The Examiner’s brutal lead sentence is a yellow journalism classic:

Legion Ascot Speedway burned down yesterday at a great saving of human life.

1958: Seven years after the death of Hearst, and 22 since the immolation of Legion Ascot. By this time the resilient hardliners of Los Angeles had pioneered speed trials across dry lakes, invented the sport of organized drag racing, and had imported amateur sports car racing. Now they were going to professionalize it. A little over an hour from downtown, on the desert’s edge sat Riverside International Raceway, a 200-

mile Grand Prix held across the Raceway's three-mile-long road course, hosted by still another L.A. newspaper, a friendly one, the Times, was going to be the biggest professional race this side of Sebring.

Southern California racing having already experienced the destructive force of a yellow journalist publisher and his vengeful paper, now it was savoring the ballyhooing of an extremely friendly press.

Propaganda and publicity pounded the L.A. consciousness for a full month. And then an army of spectators, some 70,000 strong, descended upon Riverside on a blazing Sunday afternoon in October. After the sun heated the air to a firm 100 degrees -- spectators, finding no shade, little water, and no supplies at the concession stands -- took a royal hammering. Then all the privies over-flowed, everybody started going mad in the heat.

And the heat was certain to pound the assembled racing equipment as well: the two favorites were a screaming 12-cylinder Ferrari 4.1. with a history of vapor-locking, and an equally temperamental team Lance Reventlow Scarab.

Then, as the GP hurtled away, the crowd of 70,000 was treated to its first spectacle, which was a one-punch fist fight, involving the odd-couple principals Reventlow, and the other being old Babe Stapp himself. Following an odd but apparent honorable tradition which turned ex-hardliner racing drivers into tyrannical officials, Stapp was acting as Riverside's pit-area steward.

Upon noticing Reventlow's personal Scarab leaking gasoline, Stapp exercised his steward's privilege by disqualifying it. Reventlow retaliated by spiking his helmet at Stapp's feet. And Stapp, not knowing what else to do, swung a colossal punch in the direction of Reventlow's handsome skull that never landed.

These non- racing frolics provided entertainment superior to anything seen in the GP. The Ferrari vapor-locked on schedule, and Chuck Daigh, in Reventlow's second Scarab, which was threatening to go on the boil, won at a crawl. Afterward, the 70,000 wretched spectators who'd just witnessed their first automobile race headed home dehydrated, sunburned, and confused.

Yet that first Times GP became a bellwether for sports car racing. Over the following three decades, until Riverside (succumbed to urban sprawl in the 1980s) the Times

extravaganza set the standard for road-racing series' like the U.S. Road Racing Championship and its big brother the Can-Am.

The success of the Times GP lit the fire of envy in its old adversary the Examiner, still being published in spite of a plunge in circulation since the halcyon yellow journalism heyday of Hearst. So, naturally, the Examiner again turned to racing, its old dependable whipping boy. But this time the paper, imitating the Times race with one of its own, was choosing to show racing's favorable face. Because the sport seemed to have developed amnesia in the matter of Legion Ascot and its war, so it granted the Examiner's wish.

Riverside, however, didn't host the Examiner's inaugural Grand Prix of March 8, 1959: it was the flat, featureless real estate outside the L.A. County Fairgrounds which did. Sham propaganda in the Examiner transformed a joke parking lot of barely two miles and 11 mundane curves into a world-class road circuit bristling with exotic cars and International, Indianapolis, and even gentlemen amateur names, all jousting against one another for a breathless 150 miles

The shocks started early. A Texas Maserati monolith, its 4.5 liters swollen to a thunderous 5.7, made a roaring passage of almost 140 mph down the narrowing front straightaway which was faster than both of the front row cars, one being the Ferrari 4.9 of international racing's new star Dan Gurney, and the other Jerry Unser's Kurtis-Kraft 500X, which was packing the greatest tonnage of anything in the GP.

A huge unpainted folly, it was so ponderous that it threatened to exhaust teams of mechanics struggling in relays to drag it in and out of the pits. Only kept alive by a hopelessly over-worked six-pack of gasping and slobbering Stromberg 97s, the beast's gross and violent Caddy V8 was gorging itself on high-test and insatiably bellowing for more.

Time-trials involved gentlemen amateurs and hardliners alike. Hardest hardliner of the lot was Tony Bettenhausen, national champion of the dirt and paved ovals where hardliners ooze machismo. It was Bettenhausen's conceit that gentlemen amateurs were a pack of dandies steering a bunch of MGs, everybody plodding along at a whole 50 mph.

Popping off at the gentlemen amateurs, Bettenhausen sniped, "I have been quoted as saying it will take me three laps to adjust to the angularity of the turns of sports car

racing. I was misquoted. It might take me four.” Practicing for the GP, Bettenhausen flung himself into a hairpin curve at a defiant, hardliner-style, 100 mph. And then a pack of traffic going some 40 mph faster engulfed him-- a cordon of gentleman amateur firepower that almost swept him back to his ovals.

Race day dawned sunny and fine. Matters got off to a hot-blooded beginning with busty Jayne Mansfield, displaying herself on deck of an Elva roadster, took a slow celebrity



lap wearing a hypnotically tight-fitting costume and no bra. An instant later, the unwieldy pack of 37 dropped clutches, and, with a belligerent roar, the Examiner GP, with its pack of monsters, was on its way.

Bringing up its rear were the small-bores, assorted Coopers, OSCAs,

Lotuses and Porsches ... in mid-pack came an explosive mixture of Aston Martins, D Jags, Listers, undersized Ferraris and Maseratis, plus an ungainly and broad-beamed apparition named “The Eliminator” ... and then came the leaders, paced by Gurney’s Ferrari 4.9, Carroll Shelby’s Maserati 5.7, and a frightening militia of the unwieldy and lumbering backyard bombs so popular in the California south: a V8 Chevrolet-powered Lister of 5.6 liters was chasing down a 5.5 liter Reventlow Scarab...a mutant 5.5 liter Corvette-powered Mercedes bullied a stupendous 6.6 liter Buick-powered Kurtis-Kraft, which itself was bullying a smaller Buick of barely 5.2 liters...

And taking the lead, beating all its behemoth brothers beneath the turn one bridge, was the true shocker: Jerry Unser’s gargantuan Kurtis-Kraft 500X. Neither hardliner nor gentleman amateur, Jerry, from the great Unser hill-climbing dynasty, and was the first of his clan to range far from Pikes Peak; accustomed to life-or-death choices at altitudes of 14,000 feet -- where one careless swerve meant a tumble of nearly two miles - he was discovering ecstasy on the wide-open spaces of the L.A. County Fairgrounds.



Meanwhile, occupying the GP's third place, just in back of Unser's Kurtis 500X and Gurney's Ferrari 4.9, was a yellow apparatus just as strangely compelling as the 500XR, or even The Eliminator. Called "Old Yeller 1" or oft-times "Ol Yellar 1", the brute was the namesake of a Disney movie about a terrific mongrel hound. And, exactly like the film, Old Yeller 1 was a real

mongrel: a junkyard brew of recapped rubber, cast-off Buick nailhead power, and sleazy coachwork fabricated from Coke and Pepsi boards, and, mongrel bloodlines notwithstanding, it was capable of annihilating any Ferrari or Maserati of far higher pedigree.

The brute's chauffeur and creator was one Max Balchowsky, Lithuanian-American, gentleman amateur; eccentric; and joker, who was as offbeat as his Old Yeller, which mortally wounded itself just as Balchowsky was flying hell-bent down the front straight. Hemorrhaging black Buick blood, and throwing off jagged chunks of nailhead ordinance, she beached herself right at the mouth of the pits.

The following dozen vehicles were lucky and sped through unharmed. But the unlucky 13th, yet another big V8, called a Sadler, and wearing an egg-crate for a body, skidded and flew out of control. Which enabled the V8's operator -- Bruce Kessler, scion to a Beverly Hills bathing-suit fortune, and another gentleman amateur-- to exercise his



curious belief that, whenever a sports car careens out of control, leaping out of its cockpit is, somehow, a life-enhancing act.

Road burns, cracked ribs and a concussion resulted. But Kessler's driverless Sadler entered the pits going 100-plus mph, smashed through bales

of straw, up-ended a timing stand, and, for its last act of destruction, crashed its egg-shell coachwork against a spiffy Caddy Town Car.

Various helpless human beings got seriously bashed around too, most notably a foolish 18-year old male, who, earlier having being driven out of his mind by his first glimpse of Miss Mansfield, had stolen into the pits for a closer look.

After an hour's recess to clean up all the debris, and for the fracture-wagons to scrape up everyone who'd gotten struck down, the Examiner Grand Prix took off for the second time.

The best driver on the track -- he already held the County Fairgrounds lap speed record -- was Ken Miles, Anglo-American and gentleman amateur, who was wheeling-and-dealing a little Porsche RS Spyder. He had had the dwarf machine positioned tenth at the GP's start where it had looked like raw bait for all the swarming, swaying, pitching, antagonistic big V8s. Their armor and bombast might have struck terror in anybody else but Miles, who dismissed the lot of them as impotent monsters, all bluff and bloat.

And he was right. Disintegrating, most of them, from over-heating and ripped-up tires, they had died one by one. Gurney's Ferrari 4.9, devoured a camshaft; Shelby's Maserati 5.7 lost all forward power; and finally his dreadnought Kurtis-Kraft XR500 wore down even the ecstatically brave Unser

Patiently hunting down the few that remained, and keeping them off balance via series of alarms and ambushes, Miles forced capitulation on everything except the last beast that remained, Billy Krause's Maserati 4.5. Maserati and Porsche surged in tandem, dueling to decide the Examiner Grand Prix. But the Maser jumped up in the air and crashed down hard enough to blow out a threadbare skin. His RS a ruin of gouging and pastings, Miles won the Examiner GP.

Re-using the Mickey Mouse circuit at the L.A. County Fairgrounds again was out of the question -- too many deep-pockets lawsuits still were flying around -- so, on April 3, 1960, a second Examiner GP got conducted on the raceway at Riverside. Two of the most conspicuous big V8s from the inaugural were missing: Unser's Kraft-Kraft 500XR, and Old Yeller.

Balchowsky, really hadn't exactly retired Old Yeller; and he'd still retained its cruncher Buick nailhead . But he'd replaced old Yeller 1 with Old Yeller II: gone was the repulsive bodywork and replacing it was a smooth aluminum skin and enormous, yawning, snout.

He'd also replaced himself in the cockpit with none other than Dan Gurney, whose Ferrari 4.9, had, at the previous season's Times GP, been the victim of a savage rear-ending from a V8 Pontiac-powered Aston Martin. Once Gurney and Old Yeller II disappeared while in a widening lead, drama evaporated from the Examiner GP. The new leader, who was ready to drop dead from exhaustion, was Carroll Shelby, who was racing a Team Camoradi U.S.A. Maserati Birdcage.

Riverside was experiencing the usual blast-furnace temps, and 'Ol Shel, his heart always infirm, was about to resort to his practice of slowing down and steering with one hand while he secretly dropped tabs of nitro. Because a traffic bottleneck was building just behind, he politely waved the first driver by. This was a gentleman amateur named Count von Dory. He'd been far behind; Riverside was an intimidating racing track; and Shelby's politeness seemed to disorient the unlucky Count. Missing a corner, he sailed off the track and into the wild and woolly boondocks, where his Porsche dashed itself against a ditch.

Five laps afterward, the second Examiner GP ended, with Shelby its winner. Counting Old Yeller II, 21 fewer automobiles were racing than had started, a casualty rate of nearly 50 percent. The scene was a strange one: Shelby and Lucky Casner, Team Camoradi U.S.A.'s bankrupt owner, were arguing heatedly about whom the Birdcage belonged to. Von Dory was dead.

And not only had this been the final, mercifully last, Examiner Grand Prix, it also marked the last big driving victory for Carroll Shelby. Moving ahead, in coming decades he invented the Shelby Ford Cobra; was enshrined as a legend; and even acquired a new ticker.

His Examiner GP win actually was closer than it appeared: an ever-tightening 40 seconds separated him from the runner-up, Ken Miles, who, in the same Porsche which had won the inaugural Examiner GP, had been on another highly successful big V8 hunting spree.

Few others than Shelby were as great an admirer of Miles, and vice versa, and the Shelby-Miles friendship is the theme of Ford v. Ferrari, the insider movie about the battle for the Sports Car World Championship, which was won by Ford, largely because of the race-driving of Miles.

Real life and Ford v Ferrari both lack a happy ending for this tale ... Just six seasons after he and Shelby had finished first and second in the final Examiner, GP Miles met his untimely end back at Riverside Raceway, when a prototype Ford J Car he was testing junked beneath him.

It had been Shelby who had invited his friend to ditch his pop-gun Porsche and jump into Ford's monster Mk. II machines at Daytona, Sebring and Le Mans. And how the remarkable Ken Miles had gotten his jollies roughhousing those big trucks! -JS

