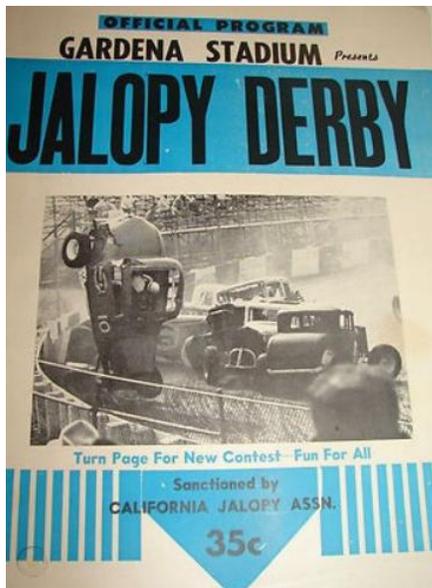


Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Hooligan Hell

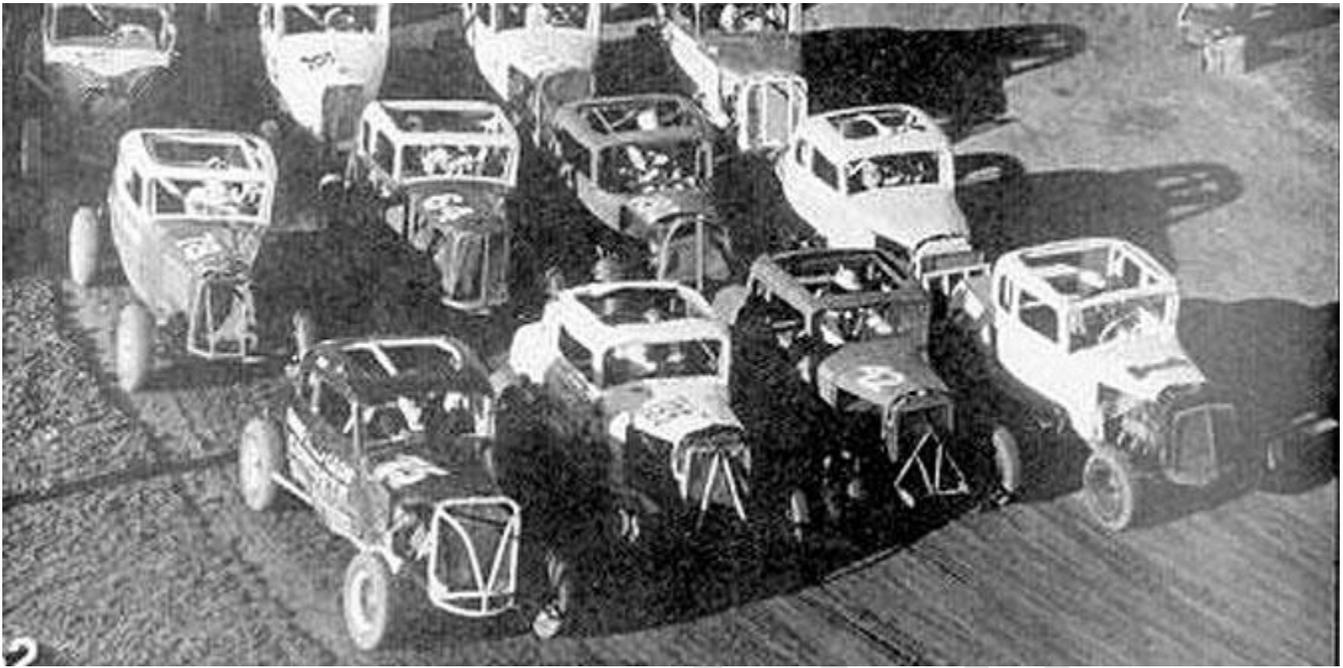
The moniker “Jalopy Derby” used to be the mocking nickname of a wonderful slice of Los Angeles television: as many as 200 steel junks showing up every Sunday afternoon at Gardena Stadium with only 18 survivors making it into the main event. I miss it whenever I think about it.



Gritty Gardena was, without argument, the most low-life speed emporium in the whole L.A. basin. But don't be misled. Jalopy Derby was a bargain basement race-driving academy teaching red-meat aggression and various other invaluable licks to future Hall-of-Famers like Rufus Parnelli Jones and Herk Hurtubise.

Unsuspecting individuals like myself who became exposed to too many Jalopy Derbys as kids got warped into racing fanatics for life.

Jalopy Derby's hottest and rawest racing, though, seldom took place in the main event but during the amusing parlor game preceding it. This was “the Hooligan.” It was a melee open to all last-chance losers willing to throw the kitchen sink at each other for the privilege of snagging a back row slot in the main event.



Rare was the Hooligan that made it all the way around the first lap without serious stuffing followed by mass invitations from all the belligerents to take it to fist city. Great stuff, although to enjoy it, it helped to have an infantile weakness for rioting racing cars and comic battery.

And, after I grew up and became supposedly wise and civilized and kicked the Hooligan habit for an even worse sports car-racing addiction, I thought I was forever finished with watching Hooligans. I was incorrect. The greatest Hooligan I ever had the privilege of witnessing wasn't at some lowbrow Jalopy Derby but a hoity-toity professional Grand Prix for sports cars.

October, 1961: The high-and-mighty Los Angeles Times newspaper and its charities used to invite big-shooters from overseas – Moss, Brabham, McLaren – to its annual high-toned GP out on the desert's edge an hour from downtown at fabled Riverside International Raceway. It always was L.A.'s sports car race of the year, and, prior to 1961's running, had been captured by three succulent examples of the front-engine persuasion: a Reventlow dung beetle Scarab; a caterwauling Testa Rosa Ferrari; and a Typo 61 Maseratis, one of those mouth-watering four-cylinder Birdcage models that sounded like a Meyer-Drake Offy.

But this Times GP under review was marked by the really rotten turn of wideworld events known as "the rear-engine revolution." As a result, all of L.A.'s great family of front-engines – even all our clumsy, wonderous backyard bombs - were getting the bum's rush. All of the GP's fastest lap times got gobbled up by nimble, sophisticated, engines-in-the-tail-jobs like Lotus 19s and pointy-tailed Monaco-model Cooper-Climaxes.

No front-engine had a prayer of making the GP unless they went the Hooligan route. Not that the prim and proper stewards of the GP would dirty themselves by naming the match that. They named it the “consolation race” or something namby-pamby like that. But anybody who was Jalopy Derby literate could see that the scramble had “Jalopy Derby” scribbled all over it.

On the other hand, the measure of any outstanding Hooligan wasn't just its jalopys but the rogue's gallery of desperados steering them – wild characters committed to nothing short of murder in the first degree to charge and careen themselves out of the lowly Hooligan Hell into the big GP. Riverside had 23 such desperados.



On pole was “Iron Lot,” (Chuck Sargeant) who in everyday life really did operate a used-car business. But he was on so dangerously a short fuse that he looked like he was strapping himself into the electric chair instead of his gorgeous but obsolete red-and-white Maser Birdcage. It was a sad story. After a great year on the iron patch, Iron Lot had moved enough metal to purchase the famous Birdcage that had won the Times GP of the previous

season. But the smooth-talking scoundrels who'd sold it to Iron Lot had neglected to inform him that front-engines were dead as dodos. So, instead of his expensive tubular buy being his automatic ticket into the GP, it had caused Iron Lot's deportation into Hooligan Hell.

Next to Iron Lot in the middle of the front row, fresh off the dirt tracks of sprint car racing, and equally desperate was “Mighty Mite,” (Bob Edmison) all five feet and change of him. He was twisting the tail of an amazing crossbreed of a canary yellow gull-wing Merc whose engine had been replaced by the biggest, loudest stovebolt V8 ever cooked up by hot-rodding's Keith Black.



While out taking practice laps, Mighty Mite had been cutting along at 175 mph, with all flags flying, when his crankshaft ruptured into three pieces, punching serious holes in the engine block. Coming off 24 sleepless hours of repair labor, Mighty Mite and the rest of his crew had flat mouths and eyes as hard as ball bearings.

The third occupant of the first row was a late-arriving guest, but the Hooligan field filled up without him. One of its many guests was “Thelonious Monk,” (Don Hulette) who, when not racing, pounded pianos, and who, the prior year, had done Riverside's switchback esses in a flaming Lister. For the Hooligan he had a lumbering mechanical masterpiece of a bright red red plastic Maserati which the afternoon before had lost some coachwork that had blamed Thelonious Monk on

the noggin and rung his bell. Another Hooligan occupant was “Matinee Idol” (Bob Bondurant) a handsome devil and lady killer who was in a wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing green Corvette whose handlers had made really fast by opening things up with a bore of four inches and half-inch on violently-stroked crank.



Yet another Hooligan guest was “Skip-a-Long,” (Skip Hudson) who was out of amateur sports car racing, and was bringing with him the fastest vehicle in the Hooligan, an enormous scarlet Ferrari whose shrieking V12 cylinders had, back in its home Italy, scared silly all the Meyer- Drake Offys at Monza’s Race of Two Worlds. Hoping to get a rolling start so he could carpet-bomb all his Hooligan brothers ahead of him, Skip-a-Long was

lining up last.

And here at last came the front row’s mystery guest, in yet another shrieking scarlet Ferrari, but this one fronted by the North American Racing Team, an arm of the Scuderia Ferrari itself. And after announcing his arrival with a skull-pounding blast that deafened Iron Lot and gave Mighty Mite and his 24-hours-with-no-sleep crew fried brain pans, the Ferrari screamer’s baby chauffeur immediately launched into a strategy conference with his entourage of valets and bodyguards in agitated rat-tat-tat Spanish. This was none other than “Ricardito” little Ricardo Rodriguez.

The world’s first child Formula 1 star was an unlikely player to be part of Hooligan Hell, and, as a matter of fact, he wouldn’t have been part of such a convention of psychopaths had not Scuderia Ferrari dispatched him to the Grand Prix with a great barge of a prancing horse better suited to a 12- or 24-hour enduro. Hot-eyed Ricardo, however, had the look of somebody who could “Hooligan” if he had to.



Riverside’s turn one was shaping up as the most ominous corner on the planet; only the Hooligan’s top six won transfer tickets into the Grand Prix, so all sorts of evil conspiracies were being plotted. All 23 starters were essentially clueless as to how they were going to cram down into turn one without swapping paint.

It already was a jackpot of bad motives, but to stimulate matters still more – to strike the proper note of Hooligan conviviality – there was a last exchange. His noggin still apparently clanging, Thelonious Monk paid an erratic

visit to the front row to warn Mighty Mite that unless he got his stovebolt Merc out of the way it was going to take a plastic Maser straight up its tail pipe. Mighty Mite leered right back – there was much puffing and blowing – until Thelonious Monk was led away.

V8s rumbled. Ferraris shrieked and caterwauled. Iron Lot's Birdcage came to crackling boil. Then all 23 of the Hooligan's belligerents roared away. In Italy barely a couple of weeks earlier, at Monza on the opening lap of the Italian Grand Prix, Ricardito and his Ferrari Formula 1 had raced without a scratch through the calamity that had obliterated dashing German nobleman Taffy von Trips. Yet in Riverside's Hooligan he only made it to the middle of the switchback esses without having his Ferrari get cold-cocked from behind by Iron Lot's Birdcage. Iron Lot, however was a guy who couldn't catch a break: he himself got taken out by unavoidably T-boning, and knocking out of commission, Mighty Mite's swerving Merc Stovebolt.

Just as with Jalopy Derbys of the prior century, once its first lap was safely negotiated, and the Hooligan pack cleared out, the result was anticlimactic. But there'd been one ringer in



Riverside's Hooligan and he was "Joe College." He was a 20-something Lehigh grad racing the sole rear-engine in the field, a sassy red Monaco Cooper that easily would have qualified on the GP's first or second row had not its brilliant mechanics initially retarded its magneto by 90 degrees. Mistake corrected, Joe College easily won the Hooligan. Yet of all the other Hooligan players under discussion, Thelonious Monk was the only one to make

the GP.

Continuing his winning ways, Joe College came off the GP's rear row to mow down everybody but Brabham, McLaren, and Jim Hall to finish a close fourth. And then Joe College returned to Riverside's GP in 1962 with a mountebank sports car that really was a thinly disguised Formula 1 car. He won the GP in a runaway. But Iron Lot, Mighty Mite, Ricardito, Matinee Idol, and Thelonious Monk, Skip-a-Long, and their front-engine dinosaurs had vanished into history, soon to be followed by Riverside International Raceway itself.

Joe College? He was some fringe figure named Roger Penske.



DO NOT