

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Hunter's Week ... The Last Week in May, 1970

No other racing drivers could do what a half-handful of "hunters" used to do in the Indy 500's of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

Those hunters were fearless and even fearsome. Some scared skeptics compared them to kamikaze pilots; "Stand on the gas --do or die!" was the hunter mantra, and the hunters meant it.

Today what a hunter did sounds impossible, yet all those decades ago was routine. Take Al Miller, one of the notorious hunters of them all.

He followed his own script.

Back when Indy qualifying took almost the entire month of May, he'd delay showing up at the Speedway at all until the last week, or when the field of 33 was already full. Then he'd present himself to the forlorn owner of some pathetic car whose assigned driver couldn't get up to speed.

And after Miller delivered his classic hunter's line "I'll put your car into the show or into the wall!" the desperate owner, believing Miller, would fire his assigned driver and hand Miller the car keys.

Al Miller always had to work fast. Time was running out, there was no opportunity for practice laps. So Miller, at a hellish speed, and in a car that was strange to him, got the turbo kicking in on lap 1 so he could blast around the Brickyard and -- without hitting the wall of course -- then brutally bump his way into another 500. Piece of cake. You just had to watch Al Miller doing it to be able to believe it.

If anyone thought that Hunter's Week, 1970, was going to be another entertaining one, they were right.

I knew it was going to be when, on the last week's opening Monday, the instant that I saw Miller, hiding behind his menacing black sunglasses, arrive and set up for business with his helmet, goggles and uniform tucked under his arm.

Besides his Hunter's ability to qualify so tough on the Speedway's last weekend, the most striking thing about Miller – at 46 the oldest active Indy chauffeur --was his baldness, which was why some pit-area wags had nicknamed him "Mr. Clean."

Of course he lacked the reputation of a Foyt, Andretti, or Unser, but this was Hunter's Week, and owners whose cars had yet to qualify for the 500 had the hots for Miller's unique talents as a hunter.

And with good reason.



This was his first day on the Speedway, but already Miller, in a balky turbo Offy which Charlie Glotzbach hadn't been able do anything with was zooming around at 163 mph. But even that wasn't enough speed for Miller to bang his way in the starting field so he took his hunter services elsewhere.

Meanwhile, with the word circulating that Miller was on the hunt, a predictable reaction – panic – had made the rounds among the nervous drivers who had qualified at the back of the starting field or had yet to qualify. Just the threat juiced up their adrenaline, which wasn't helpful in the least. Larry Cannon tasted the wall as did Ates and Veith.

Inevitably the full month of the above climaxed with Sunday's final, all-in, do-or-don't-race, four-lap, ten mile time trials.

Cannon, back in another car, did a slow 164.9, mph and was flagged off the track by his crew. Bill Puterbaugh, also stuck at 164, got the same treatment. Bentley Warren (164.805 mph), Sam Sessions (165.313 mph), Ronnie Bucknum (166.136 mph), Greg Weld (166.121 mph), Lloyd Ruby (168.895 mph) and Kevin Bartlett (165.259 mph) grabbed off the six remaining starting positions.

... And then the fun and games began.

Steve Krisiloff (162.448 mph) the slowest driver in the race, was bumped by Jerry Grant (165.983 mph). Jack Brabham (166.397 mph) bumped Jim McElreath (163.950 mph). Bill

Vukovich II (165.790 mph) bumped Tony Adamowicz (164.790 mph). Sunday's time trials saw McElreath, back in a better car, hit 166.821 to bump Bartlett.



None of these guys except Ruby, the only big star among them, had a hope of winning the 500; their cars just weren't fast enough. They had, nevertheless, completed their assignment: earn a job among Indy's 33 starters on Memorial Day.

Sessions, meanwhile, now was sitting on the bubble, Indy's 33rd starter. Trying too hard to bump him, both Adamowicz and Posey pased the wall.

Then another hunter, Arnie Kepper, soulmate to Miller, entered center stage. His car was mediocre; Miller himself had previously failed to get it going. But now, with barely fifteen minutes left, Knepper came barreling onto the pit lane, grinding gears in his haste. His first lap was 164.7 mph. nearly fast enough to make the show. And he got quicker.

By the final lap of his attempt, the crowd of 50,000, suddenly realizing it was being treated to the amazing sight of an authentic hunter at work, came alive.

Then came the disappointing announcement: Knepper had barely missed out – his speed average of 165.320 was 0.053 mph slower than Session's 165.313.

But Knepper did not yet know this. He must have believed he'd qualified for the 500 because there he was, a big grin splitting his face as he killed the engine and coasted off the Speedway.

One figure disengaged himself from the crowd to greet Knepper ... Al Miller.

There was no mistaking the gesture Miller flashed to Knepper with his right hand -- a curt, maybe even heartless gesture, which must have plunged Knepper into gloom, telling him that he'd failed.

Thumbs down, Mr. Clean had gestured. "You lose, Arnie." From one hunter to another: "Better hunting next time pal." -JS

