

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### It's Me -- Bettenhausen!

When Tony Bettenhausen II died in the crash of his private plane in the spring of 2000, he became the last bearer of a dynastic Indy 500 surname on its way to extinction. Also caught up in the family hex were the two other Bettenhausen brothers, Gary and Merle, Gary dying in bed, without warning, and Merle, badly wounded, in a crash. Tony I, patriarch of all Bettenhausens, who courted foes and glory, and in his heyday was open-wheel racing's conqueror, rough-rider, national champion, and legend of the Speedway, in 1961 initiated the clan's jinx, by foolishly dying while running a fool's errand in a Shitbox.



Tony I's rivals, all Indy 500 champions, which was about the only thing he wasn't, were Ruttman, Vukovich, Sweikert, Flaherty, Ward, and all of them knew what hell was like: hell was having Tony Bettenhausen smeared all over the back of them demanding passing privileges.

But it was the slow-pokes of championship racing – its disgraced Cost-and-Collect merchants -- who feared Tony the most, and with great reason. C. and C. merchant Reece, getting lapped at the Arizona State Fairgrounds, wouldn't or couldn't swerve out of Tony's way and was sent home with smashed ribs and lung punctures. Upstart Hoyt, in retaliation for robbing Tony of the pole-starting position, was fortunate not to get bulldozed out of the way on the opening lap of an Indy 500. At still another 500, when Flaherty with his flaming red hair and prototype A.J. Watson roadster, also robbed Tony of a pole, Tony previewed the sort of treatment Flaherty could expect: "You tell that redhead when he hears lots of thunder, he'd better not look up to see if it's raining – it'll be me, Bettenhausen!" This time everything backfired. Flaherty was just as fast as Tony was, and before finally catching Flaherty and getting to attack, Tony had had to speed through 400 miles worth of C. and C. merchants. Bang! went one of his Flintstones, and following the blow-out, Tony clubbed the outside concrete and absorbed heavy trauma.

Pre the Second World War, Tony had developed his chops as the youngest, and most aggressive, torpedo among a hot tribe of 110 Offy midget flyers out of Al Capone Chi-town, who raided and pillaged everywhere from Soldiers Field in Illinois to the dreaded velodrome of decapitations at Nutley. From there, Tony, racing dirt-track Indy cars at the classic 100-mile distance, became a monster. The whole tournament fell briefly under his domain when the Meyer-Drake consortium, builders of the Offenhauser, tapped him to chauffeur an Offy midget stretched to accommodate a screaming experimental Meyer-Drake with a supercharger on top. After two Tony runaway wins, all of M-D's customers were preparing to mutiny, so it retired the trick mill and turned over Tony and everything else to Bellanger, a rich sportsman and Bettenhausen fanatic.

It was 1951, and Tony was slammin' all year, swamping eight of 15 title matches and storming to the season's national championship. The difficulty now was, what was he going to do for an encore? Tony had used up so much of himself steamrolling this one campaign that for the rest of his career he seemed to be recuperating in a sort of on-again, off-again retirement. It was more "off" than "on." In 1958, the senior participant and slightly-past stud warrior in a five-driver brawl for the national title, Tony, for the second time in six seasons, became U.S. titlist. Aged 43, but running right over all the kids anyway, he showed in Los Angeles that he hadn't lost all his old Chi-town licks by making himself the oldest winner of Thanksgiving's Grand Prix classic for pip-squeak 110 Offys.



By 1961, the Indy 500 remained the big match Tony never had won, and most wanted to. This was natural, after his 14 previous strike-outs. His downfalls always had been due to: 1) a misunderstanding of the priorities of preserving his racing car and himself through Indy's 800 turns and 200 laps; 2) really rotten judgement in racing car selection. On two occasions he said "no thanks" to the Meyer-Drake roadster that won on Memorial Day; another time he rejected the ride that finished second; and once, when he got the seat in the previous year's winner, he sped straight into a heat wave that KO'd himself and two other relief drivers. Then, in 1961, came Tony's great opportunity to win the 500 and to break through the Brickyard's 150 mph barrier. He had Hopkins, another rich sportsman and Bettenhausen fanatic, spend a lot of money

buying him the low-belly laydown Epperly roadster that that year had speed on everything. Then everything got interrupted on the Friday afternoon before weekend time trials when Russo -- known as "Dago," an old buccaneer and pal of Tony's from the old Chi-town era --had requested, as a favor, that Tony test-lap his three-500s-old Watson roadster, which was ill-maintained. Just as Tony was hugging the wall honking down the front straightaway the chassis misaligned and Tony was precipitated into the outer concrete for the last, fatal, time

Tony Bettenhausen I bristled with bravado. The dangerous slogan he lived and raced by -- "My head says No, but my foot says Go! (it's later than you think)" backfired and turned lethal at last. He should have said no to Dago.

