

# **Joe Scalzo's**

## **City of Speed and elsewhere**

### **Little Boy**

**During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when I used to go back to Indy every May for the 500, I always made a point of walking up and down the pit road, seeking shadowy faces, phantom voices, out-of step apparitions, fiends and monsters, all from the Brickyard's deep and chaotic past.**

**One 500, for example, I imagined I saw Eldon Palmer, instead of Chevrolet's general manager Jim Perkins, pacing the field. Palmer, a 16<sup>th</sup> Street car dealer with no racing experience whatsoever, got to drive the pace car only because he was Tony Hulman's friend. This was in 1971. Palmer confronted at high speed a grandstand full of photographers, got all sideways, and sent 20 of them to the fracture ward. He later put the wrecked pace car on display in his dealership's show room, symbolizing god-knows-what.**



Five 500s passed. In 1976, Elmer George, son-in-law of Hulman, participant in three 500s, but since fallen from grace, was appointed to chauffeur the Buick pace car and Johnny Rutherford around the Brickyard in celebration of Johnny's victory. And this gave Johnny the odd distinction of being among the last to speak to him because less than six hours later Elmer was assassinated. He'd traveled to Terre Haute to evict his wife's lover from a Hulman home. But the lover was waiting for him with what was reported to be a hunting rifle,

## 500's Elmer George Killed In Shootout

One 500, observing Tom Binford celebrating his 50th silver anniversary as Indy's chief steward, I was reminded of Binford's tyrannical forbearer, senile old Harlan Fengler, one of those retired race drivers who make a nightmare of the lives of modern race drivers. Harlan intimidated and frightened. What finally helped cost him his job was 1973's 500 and its hellish start which knocked out a dozen drivers and gravely injured Salt Walther. Harlan had a thing about race starts: Indy's front row had to be perfectly aligned and it didn't matter to him if the rest of the field was all bunched up and cheating, which happened in this 1973 500, when the starter was waving the green flag while Harlan simultaneously was switching on the yellows. Small wonder things got hellish.

At another 500 I looked at Dr. Terry Trammel, the wizard orthopedic surgeon hired by the Speedway to repair all the blasted lower limbs of those luckless drivers from the 1980s, forced to strap on ground-sucker Marches and Lolas minus foot protection. Surgical business was so good Dr. Trammel could tool around in a Ferrari 308. Less well known is his medical colleague of generations earlier, one "Doc Allen," a gristly quack who smoked foul-smelling cigars and allowed hot ash to drop into open wounds. Doc Allen was as arbitrary and tyrannical as Fengler, and in 1933's 500 managed to create his own calamity.

Doc Allen delayed doing it until the morning of the 500, then dropped the bombshell that Howdy Wilcox was to be disqualified on account of being a diabetic. Howdy had finished second the previous year without ever slipping into an insular coma, so, because Howdy was a popular driver, the other drivers threatened a wildcat strike unless he was reinstated. Whereupon Doc Allen turned for support the Brickyard's owner, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker. A hero of the Great War, Rickenbacker, more than anyone else, had emptied the European skies of Fokkers, Rumplers, and Halberstadts - 26 enemy kills in all. He was a tall, erect man with a flat mouth and assassins eyes. After he informed the would-be strikers that if they carried out their plans he would close the Brickyard forever, something about the eyes made them flee in fear. The 500 - without Howdy - was allowed to go forward.

So go forward it did. This was the third 500 of the lunatic junkyard formula when most Indy cars were bloated eyesores carrying 50 to 60 gallons of oil, three-quarters of which got disgorged onto the bricks. Forty-four of these leviathans were set loose and by the finish two drivers and one riding mechanic were dead. As pique, Rickenbacker cancelled the victory banquet, cut the purse by 40 percent paid the survivors their stipends and - more pique - snarled at everybody to get lost.

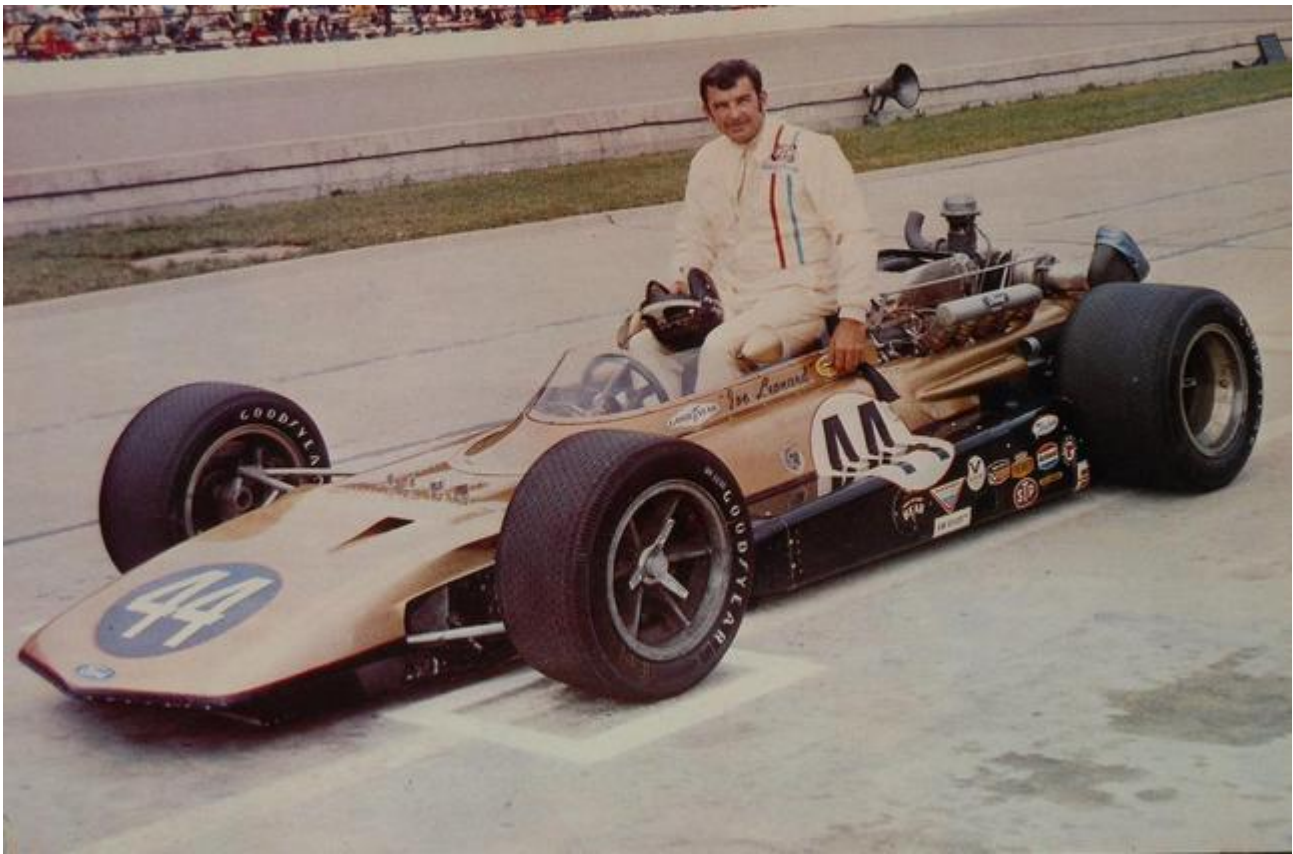
Something great came out of that 1933 500 after all. Howdy Wilcox's Gilmore Special, one of the fastest in the field, was allowed to compete with a substitute driver, who was just as unpopular as Howdy was popular. He was Mauri Rose, a 23-year-old roughneck off the dirt tracks. Made to start last, and under strict orders not to pass another car before getting his

bearings, Mauri instead passed a dozen on his opening lap. One hundred miles later he was up to fourth and worrying the leaders until breaking the Gilmore Special. And Mauri continued racing at this pitch for the rest of his career with his spoils including three 500 wins.



The high-jinks on the pit road of the 1969 500 always deserve retelling. Involved were a Dan Gurney Eagle, the race driver Joe (Pelican) Leonard, the chief mechanic Smokey Yunick, and Smokey's friend from Los Angeles, Mickey Thompson, who'd caught the red-eye from L.A. to come help Smokey after all Smokey's helpers quit.

Pelican Joe, married to a beautiful but theosophy-riddled beauty who the night before an Indy 500 forced Pelican to bed down with his bean facing the moon (reaping full value from its powerful lunar race) was a former brakeless flattrack motorbiker who knew jack about four-wheels. And so, after exhausting themselves putting up with Pelican, and still having him barely qualify at all. Smokey's crew quit.



Race morning Pelican, Smokey, Mickey, and a few hastily-recruited stooges were on a patch of the pit lane all by themselves. Yet Smokey was confident. Pelican might be a lousy qualifier but really knew how to race the 500. So, for 450 miles Pelican was matching the leaders. And with 50 miles to go Smokey set him on Mario Andretti, the eventual winner. But just then a piece of debris kicked up, holing the radiator, and Pelican arrived on pit road with all the coolant dribbling out. And before Smokey could figure out what to do, here came Mickey, fresh from Gasoline Alley, knocking down people who got in his way, arms cradling a fresh radiator.

“Where’d you get it?!” demanded Smokey. “Out of Gurney’s garage.” “But Gurney keeps it locked.” “I broke the door down.” Pelican rejoined the 500 and finished a snappy sixth. Which wasn’t too bad for a moon-struck chauffeur with almost no pit crew. Dan Gurney, however, was displeased.

Nineteen seventy-eight’s 500 found another chief mechanic, Johnny Capels, in more trouble than Yunick. It was the last Sunday of time trials, the hour was late, 5:45 p.m., and Capels’s Mexican Food car was exhausted and its assigned driver had just left the Brickyard in tears. And suddenly Capels saw Mike Mosley, back from another hiatus from Indy, brooding up and down the pit lane like a mental patient. Following four laps of practice Mike told Johnny he was ready to qualify. Johnny thought Mike was deranged and attempted to calm him. “Qualify it?! You’ve only done four laps!”

Then Mike asked Johnny to throw the green his first time past the pits. “You mean,” Johnny asked, “you’re going to leave the pits, come around, and when you come out of Four, you want the green?” “Yes,” Mike replied. “Throw the green then.” And Mike qualified with ease, then raced hard and well in the 500 until burning down a pinion gear. Afterward Johnny concluded that Mike held his breath when racing and was perhaps counter-phobic : a race driver who sought out danger because danger held such fear for him.



Mike’s widow Alice thinks differently. “Mike had all the talent he needed and certainly I’m not the only one to know he was one of the best, fastest, drivers out there,” she says, “his problem was that he had no self-esteem. None. And I never knew why not. Roger Penske had talked to Mike about driving for him once, and of course that would have been the break to make Mike, but instead it terrified him. He told Penske no. He once told me that for him to do well on a team he had to feel that the people on it cared about him. Even loved him. He was a little boy in a man’s world.”

Mike was one of the great Indy car drivers to come out of the 1970s. He also had his share of traumatic smash-ups, resulting in compound fractures and burns in the third degree. “The racing saying goes, ‘If you’re gonna play, you gotta pay,’” Alice says, “and Mike had no problem with that. He accepted it He didn’t have racing in his blood, the way some drivers claim they

**do, and he wasn't racing for the money. He wasn't in it for the glory, either. Sometimes he tried to quit, but he'd been a race driver in the Indy 500 and he was too proud to go pump gasoline for \$6 an hour." On March 3, 1984. Mike was killed in a mysterious highway accident.**

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