

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Marijuana

During the 1980s, if you wanted anything built, the best place in the country to have it done was Jackie Howerton Racing Products, whose namesake was constantly in motion, forever answering his ringing telephone.



Ring! “Jackie? Lee Iacocco at Chrysler Motors. We want you to make us a six-wheel lowboy pickup truck prototype.”

Ring! “Jackie? Shirley Muldowney. Can you do some work on my digger?”

Ring! Jackie? “Dr. Steve Olivey (the broken bone merchant who made a fortune screwing back together the blasted and splintered feet of Indy 500 combatants) Can you make a custom muffler for my Ferrari?”

Howerton Racing Products was in Indianapolis and sat among the jungle of competition shops called “Gasoline Alley,” a twisting two-lane byway one mile south of the Brickyard. Being so close to Indy, it was only natural that Jackie would begin attracting clientele from the 500. This was how it began:



“Jackie? This is Don Whittington. Listen, what were going to do is quit paying the Limeys all that money for Indy cars and have you build our own.”

Jackie never had heard of Don Whittington, or his brother Bill, nor had anybody else, so didn't know they but were a pair of car- and airplane-racing swashbucklers from the south of Florida, winners of the Le Mans 24 Hours, and sports car heroes of the scandal-stained International Motor Sports Association, who 'd purchased the road-racing circuit Road Atlanta to use as an aircraft landing strip for their multi-million dollar marijuana smuggling ring, and who both were destined to get sentenced to long terms at Leavenworth.

But there was nothing surprising about Jackie not knowing. Indy's 500 in the early and mid 1980s was being smothered by inexperienced, no accounts like the Mexican ice cream heir whose mother paid Bobby Unser a small fortune to teach him how to be a racing driver, but Bobby could not; the Pillsbury rich kid who looked like Howdy Doody who paid George Bignotti half a million dollars to duplicate Tom Sneva's suspension settings, enabling him to time trial in the middle of Indy's front row but go nowhere in the 500; John Paul Jr., whose on-the-run jailbird father, a "laughing tobacco dealer" just like the Whittingtons, and also accused murderer, who'd paid the mysterious Count van der Straaten hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy Jr. a Brickyard ride, only to have Jr. crunch the wall feet-first and give still more work to Dr. Olney; the southern Florida doper Randy Lanier who ran with the Whittingtons and paid gullible Frank Arciero to give him an Indy ride, and somehow finagled a Rookie of the Year trinket; the newspaper heir who'd rented a ride from Dan Gurney, then belted the wall and was not the same afterward; and bringing the whole ride-buying scandal to the attention of national TV, green Gordon Smiley, who didn't understand the new



phenomenon of ground effects, killed himself in the worst head-on smash since those in the 1940s and 1950s of the Novi V8s of Hepburn and Miller; but the most ludicrous example of all came about when the rookie in his first and only 500 wrecked and brought out the yellow caution lights at the starting line on the opening lap. The rookie's name was Dale Whittington, younger brother of Don and Bill.

Horrified at all the scandalous behavior going on, Robin Miller, attack reporter for the Indianapolis Star, wrote up an expose headlined "Indy 500 Permitting Too Much Driver Mediocrity."

Don and Bill Whittington, along with Randy Lanier, thought, quite naturally, Robin was going after them. Which was why the Whittingtons had their PR flack post a rebuttal in Gasoline Alley: "Don and Bill Whittington have raced airplanes. Is there any question they can race fast machines??"



No evidence existed proving that the Whittingtons or Lanier raced while they were spaced-out, but no evidence existed that they didn't. But in the mid- and late 1980s the Feds began rounding the three of them up and hurling them into the houses of 1,000 slammers:

In 1986, Bill Whittington pleaded guilty to income tax evasion and conspiracy to smuggle marijuana into the U.S. from Columbia and was sentenced to 15 years in prison and ordered to surrender \$7 million in property and other assets. Paroled early, the Feds threw him right

back into the jug, when they discovered he had thousand more dollars stashed in a secret vault in Europe.



In 1987, Don Whittington pleaded guilty to money-laundering, tax evasion, conspiracy to smuggle marijuana into the U.S, and was sentenced to 15 months of hard-time imprisonment;

Also in 1987 Randy Lanier was sentenced to life without parole for importing and distributing better than 300 tons of Colombian dope said to be worth \$168 million. Exactly like Bill Whittington, Randy was paroled. Late reports place him in Florida, counseling other druggies to walk the straight and narrow.

If incarceration is intended to make the miscreant repent his evil ways, then in the case of Don Whittington it failed.

The last time Jackie Howerton heard from him was in the late 1980s.

Ring! “Jackie? Don Whittington. I’m out of prison and just crashed my P-38 Mustang into the Gulf of Mexico. They can’t kill me!”