

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

MONSTER

Bob Sweikert, Jimmy Bryan, Tony Bettenhausen, and Rodger Ward were four of the 20th century's Monster racing drivers, and all of them won Indy car seasonal championships, but the four earned their titles as gifts.

And that was because they rarely had to race against the greatest Monster of them all, Troy Ruttman, who was faster than all of them, but wouldn't race unless he was at his prime, and he seldom was, because too often he was busy dancing with liquor and wild women; too busy going to the Mayo Clinic for servicing the severe case of ulcers aggravated by the tragic racing death of his son; and too busy serving out the long suspensions laid on him by the tyrannical 3A (American Automobile Association).

Dying in 1997, aged 67, Ruttman's most fitting eulogy was delivered by yet another Indy car Monster, Parnelli Jones, who continues to appoint Ruttman "The greatest of us all!"

Had the 20th century not killed off Sweikert, Bryan, and Bettenhausen, that trio of Monsters would have quickly agreed with Parnelli. And so would Ward, who came out of the century alive but who never forgot Ruttman's making a monkey out of him in 1962's Indy 500.

Ruttman was 20th century racing's most brilliant child prodigy, and to get ahead was forced to scramble. He was brought up in a colony of illiterate, destitute, dust-bowl Okie émigrés who semi-existed on a barren patch of rural Los Angeles known as Billygoat Acres.

The year was 1946. Much like a member of the Joad clan in "Grapes of Wrath," young Ruttman had a way with cars. Aged 16, he ran the family heap to the local jalopy races and won. Within a year, he was one of the wonders of the LA scene, alternating between

jalopies, hot-rod roadsters, and midget buzz-bombs at Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood – although Ruttman was so big-boned and husky one of those minuscule buzz-bomb barely could accommodate him.

L. A. buzz-bomb owner A.J. Walker took Ruttman, all of 17, East with him. In Chicago, at Soldiers Field, Troy was destroying (for 86 of 100 laps) the midwest’s fastest open-cockpit heroes – before breaking down.

In Pennsylvania, at driver-devouring Langhorne, the country’s most lethal circle, everybody in the pits came running at the ungodly shriek of an over-stressed buzz-bomb – Ruttman taking his warm-up lap. On the second lap the shriek intensified – Ruttman hitting 109 mph to explode a standing speed record for dirt tracks.

Ready for more exploits the following week, in Oklahoma City, Ruttman discovered his reputation had preceded him, and found the regulars lying in wait. They put him on his head early in the program. Next Ruttman was in Mexico for the Pan American road race. Though radically hoped-up, his ancient Mercury sedan was good for barely 114 mph at sea level and, to increase this handicap, Ruttman, wearing diapers, was half-dead from dysentery. Yet over the tops of mountain passes the only thing keeping up with Ruttman was Curtis Turner’s Rambler, an upside-down bathtub Nash.

Back in the U.S., Ruttman traveled to Indiana and Ohio, so he could show off his moves on race tracks that often as not killed -- Salem, Winchester, and Dayton. Called “the Hills,” they were a trio of sublimely fast sprint car speedways with arching corners propped up against tree-rimmed slopes. Getting a single corner wrong on any one of them meant taking a violent swerve up the lip of the banking; a smash into and over crash walls cobbled of flimsy planks; and a either three-story plunge into the ground or impalement on one of the trees, which were named “widow-makers,” because that’s what they did.

Ruttman’s debut at Dayton came in an under-size buzz-bomb with its wheelbase elongated and ballast added so it could compete as a sprint car. He won. And then he became first to lap the sinister walls of Salem in under 20 seconds. Winchester so delighted him that he decided to share those delights with a racing comrade, Cecil Green, a death-before-dishonor Texas leatherneck. As a Winchester debutante in No. 98jr, Ruttman’s 220-cubic-inch Meyer-Drake sprinter, the Agajanian Special, all Green

was expected to do was survive one qualifying lap, much like he'd survived, during the Second World War, in the battles of Bougainville, Luzon, and the New Guinea Islands.

But Green lost the gamble and met his end flying out of Winchester. Green's out-of-the-ballpark ride so terminally unhinged the next driver, Bill Mackey, taking his time-trial, that Mackey, too, catapulted himself out of Winchester, his car landing within three feet of where the Agajanian had fallen. Such was the cost of combat on the Hills.

As was inevitable, Ruttman came to the Indy 500. Such was his progression: he raced his first 500 in 1949, aged an illegal 19, in an old iron that lost its brakes, then its water pump, and which sat in the pits for 40 minutes.

The following year, 1950, he was warming up at 130, 131, 132, 133, and finally a record 134 and into the wall. In 1951 he qualified sixth but wore out his car in 195 miles. And, in 1952, averaging 128 mph, he won the 500.

This was a classic Memorial Day. A third of the starting field was made up of warriors from LA and the Pacific Coast where Ruttman had made his bones in jalopies, hot rods and buzz-bombs. It was an Indy 500 for Monsters: at the green flag the front row already was surging four abreast! Ruttman was chauffeuring the Agajanian Special No. 98, a full-sized, 270-inch, replica of 98jr, and his chief mechanic was the legendary Clay Brooking Smith, who'd ridden shotgun with him in Mexico, tactition Smith ran a considerably more sophisticated operation than most chiefs.

Planning on Ruttman making only two fueling stops, Smith had him burning an 80-10-10 blend of methanol, gasoline, and nitro-methane. But the pit crew performing the second stop has a hiccup and set Ruttman afire.

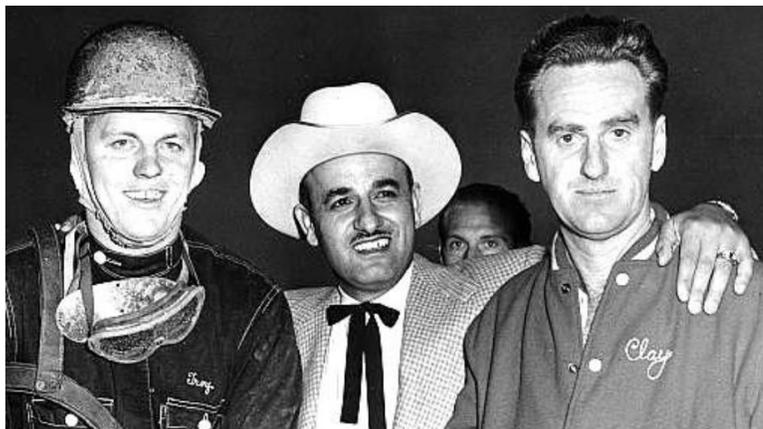
Describing why he hadn't shut down the engine and abandoned ship as the invisible flames rose, Ruttman explained "I knew I'd never get the engine started again. And I knew if ever I was going to gamble with my life this was the time, with a strong car in the Indy 500." His crew knocked down the blaze, the 500's leader, Billy Vukovich, popped the wall with eight laps remaining, and Ruttman aged 22, became one of Indy's youngest winners. This prompted the irascible Vukie to send Troy his warmest congratulations: "*Ruttman, you ignorant Okie, I just gave you \$100,000!*"

As Indy 500 champion Ruttman discovered hitherto unknown pleasures such as big bucks, broads, booze, and a bacchanalian existence. It was the start of his decline, and things got

worse. Out in Iowa, at a sprint car meet in Cedar Rapids, Ruttman was badly injured-- his right arm took a hammering -- in what was the most devastating spill of his life. No. 98jr was all repaired after Cecil Green's Winchester wreck, but still wasn't right, and, after its steering fell apart, Ruttman went on a wild ride. First 98jr. battered down a wooden rail; then plunged down an embankment; then crashed into and through a heavy diamond-mesh fence, and at last stopped upside-down next to a light pole and alongside some railroad tracks.

Aggravating the pulverized arm by returning to racing too soon, Ruttman underwent additional surgeries. He also made the major mistake of loaning a sprinter --not 98jr -- to a friend who entered it in an unsanctioned race. And when Ruttman, naively, confessed to the bully-boy 3-A he was suspended indefinitely.

So here Ruttman was, barely 23 years old, his peak seemingly over, he exiled himself near one of his old haunts, Salem Speedway, down in the Indiana south, splendid with

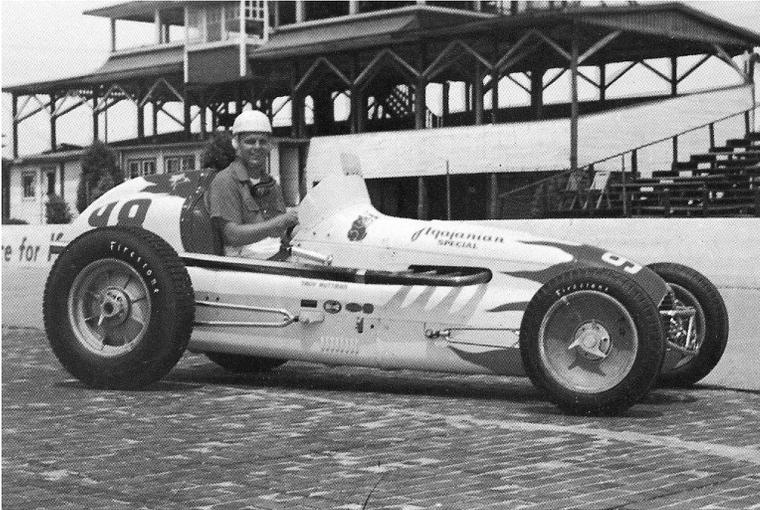


farmlands, apple orchards, maple and sassafras trees, laying in sufficient scotch, bourbon, and vodka, for the country's fastest racing driver to forget his suspension and other problems.

And then, seeking Ruttman's coaching, Wally Campbell, a fellow racing outcast, arrived at Ruttman's door. Campbell, a product of Langhorne's harsh speed tradition, had dancing eyes, spiky hair, a riot of tattoos, and at the Indy that May had gotten thrown out of the Brickyard by the same 3-AAA tyrants who'd castrated Ruttman because they were scared of mister Campbell and alarmed by his driving.

So they'd ordered him to go to the Hills and have Ruttman teach him how to be a racing driver. But before Ruttman could coach Campbell something went very wrong.

Campbell's sprinter went pitching backwards out of Salem, landing, exploding, and burning in a hay field. All Ruttman could do was invite everyone to his home; kill a chicken for dinner; hold a wake for Wally and get everybody drunk. Blemishing his career, Ruttman took part in long-distance farces held in the middle of the Bonneville Salt Flats, and went to Europe to race in the Formula 1 tournament, where the only rides open to him were slow and doggy.



Still, whenever his old spirit moved him, Ruttman put on display his Monster skills and the other drivers had no chance. With his suspension at last rescinded, he was back in the Indy 500 in 1957, when, before over-heating knocked him out, he was leading the 500 and was the first pilot of a A.J. Watson roadster to blow off the big

Novis. In the 500 of 1962, hurtled a weak Meyer-Drake from nowhere into a close second place right behind leader Rodger Ward - - whom he'd dueled with many times and knew he could make flinch, which Ward did.

In 1964, on the New Jersey mile at Trenton, Ruttman poked the nose of his Watson roadster in the wrong place, got cut off, over-turned, and he and the Watson skidded along on their tops for two city blocks. Less than a month afterward, in the Indy 500. Ruttman was drawing abreast of the American Red Ball Special, a rear-engine funny car, just as the Sears Allstate machine, another back-engine funny, spun around in front of both of them, and the American Red Ball and the Sears Allstate colliding and blazing up. The flaming horror engulfed Ruttman and he felt the heat and heard the concussion as the American Red Ball bombed into the Sears Allstate.

All that the saga of Troy Ruttman, Monster, needs now is an upbeat ending, but there isn't one. The Indy 500 already was dangerous enough without the new threat of fire, so Ruttman made the 1964 500 his last. But his hard times continued. For going public with his concerns about racing safety, he was condemned widely for attacking the sport. -JS