

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Number 98

So what would it be this time? A chemical explosion that drops flaming detritus into the pits and sends its jinxed driver, poor “Roof”—Rufus Parnelli Jones - to the burn ward? A flying Dzus fastener that hits Roof dead-bang in the face and covers his head with gore? A pin-hole puncture which takes out the brakes? A leak in the oil reservoir which sprays slippery black 50 weight onto all the opponent front-engine Meyer-Drake roadsters?



All this mayhem was inflicted on one wretched A.J. Watson roadster, the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 - the disputed winner of the 1963 500 – which was constructed in 1960, one of A.J.'s best vintages. He built four, all identical. and in addition to the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 they were the Ken-Paul, the Leader Card No. 1, and the S-R Racing. The S-R Racing never did much, but the Ken-Paul and the Leader Card 1 fought one of the longest sustained battles of the Watson age, won by the Ken-Paul. As for the Agajanian Willard Battery, its green rookie driver with his girl's name, Lloyd Ruby – subsequently known as the greatest driver never to win an Indy 500 - it finished a ho-hum seventh.

The next year, 1961, its owner, J.C. Agajanian, the Los Angeles racing promoter and rubbish collector whose lucky number was “98,” decided to go with another rookie, Roof, whom Aggie had observed on TV seasons before, winning L.A. Jalopy Derby hooligans. Nineteen Sixty-One was when the the hex on the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 began. The aforementioned Dzus fastener struck Roof in the mug and a wound opened, which winds lashing through the open cockpit quickly sealed. Roof, of course, was the hard guy of hard guys, and matters wouldn't have been all that bad except the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 proceeded to drop a cylinder. Three extra pit stops and three sets of replacement spark plugs later, Roof, originally one of the 500's leaders, got flagged home a well-beaten 12th.



In 1962, the Agajanian Willard Battery No.98 became, thanks to Roof, the first Watson to officially top 150 mph on tall and skinny Firestones and 18-inch wheels. Its glory was brief. Roughly halfway into the 500, while the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 was leading by almost two-and-a-miles – a lap – all of its hydraulics dribbled out and Roof was obliged to complete the remaining 250 miles without brakes. Consequently his rubber and refueling stops were impossible: before coming to a stop, the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 first had to bounce over wheels and Firestones laid out by the pit crew; and then Roof had had to grind along the pit wall before getting stopped. All this misery notwithstanding, Roof still finished seventh.

In 1963, the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 again started from the pole; Roof again raced so fast he made all the other drivers look like idiots; and Roof won he 500 – a huge, inflammatory victory Because of the big free oil bath supplied by the Agajanian Willard Battery, many an irate enemy team and driver seemed ready to rumble with Roof afterward. Eddie Sachs did, and got decked.

In 1964 the Agajanian Willard Battery No. 98 got its name and colors changed to the Agajanian Bowes Seal Fast No. 98, as well as a face lift (cowling streamlining); fresh hormones (a dorky-looking ram air scoop); lower, fatter rubber; and was put on a diet. At a saving of 90 pounds its monster fuel tank got re-constructed out of thin-gauge aluminum rather than boilerplate steel. This cost Roof burns to the second degree. During the first of two planned pit stops, and immediately after the pumping in of six dozen gallons of high-test aviation fuel and methanol, violently spiked with nitro, there was a spark and everything lit up. A reverberating explosion split open the tail of the Agajanian Bowes No. 98, ripped its lightweight and fragile tail into several pieces, and everything flamed out.



Twenty-eight years afterward, in 1992, as part of the pre-500 hoopla, the Agajanian Bowes Seal Fast No.98, fully restored and looking great, took a slow and nostalgic lap of the Brickyard. Parnelli was its cautious chauffeur. And, sure enough, the hex was still in, and the Agajanian Bowes Seal Fast No. 98 made a spectacle of itself for the final time by throwing two separate fits of mechanical temper. The old beast barely completed the lap at all.