

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Lil' Red Rooster

Our story begins with a highway smash-up.

In spring of 1962, in the dead of an Arizona night, across old highway Route 66, on the remote desert near Yucca, Rocky Philipp, one of our three protagonists, and one of the Indy 500's most savvy chief mechanics, had just left Los Angeles in a station wagon and was on his way back to Indy towing on an open trailer the J.H. Rose, an upright dirt championship car soon to create a sensation at Milwaukee.

But Rocky fell asleep at the wheel and nearly rammed into a bridge abutment. And then Rocky; the station wagon and open trailer; and the J.H. Rose, all went swerving off the highway and plunging to the bottom of a dry river bed, where everything flipped over.

Rocky was unharmed; the stooge helper riding along with him had lost a few teeth; the station wagon was totaled and the open trailer badly bent; but the J.H. Rose – so new it hadn't been painted or chromed– was remarkably intact.

Our story continues. A few weeks later, in New Jersey, on Trenton's mile oval of paving, occurred the first 100-mile race of the season and the first for the J.H. Rose, which still was unpainted and unchromed. Even worse, after riding through rainstorms on the open trailer, most of its coachwork was coated with rust. But rusted or not it set a world's record for a mile track; also broke Trenton's qualifying speed mark by four mph, and although losing to A.J.Foyt, Parnelli Jones, Rodger Ward, and Don Branson, it defeated Jim Hurtubise, Len Sutton, and Roger McCluskey.



Which wasn't bad for an Indy car having its maiden race, and it vindicated the wisdom of the inventor of the J.H. Rose, our third protagonist, irascible Herb Porter, who also was the J.H. Rose's co-chief mechanic with Rocky Philipp. The two of them were called the "Racing Associates." Nobody understood how Rocky, who was liked by almost everybody in Indy car

racing, and Herb, who was hated by almost everybody, could be associates at all.

What was terrible about Herb was his temper. Discharging it when he was drinking by sucker-punching whomever he was arguing with could bring disaster - following Herb's disparaging comments about the Japanese, for instance, Chickie Hirashima once KO'd Herb by bringing a chair down on his head.

Yet Herb was widely respected for having the mind of a scientist when he came to inventing fast Indy cars: his "Bent-Engine Eight Ball" Meyer-Drake roadster had rescued Rodger Ward from a life of drunkenness, and, later, almost had won Johnny Thomson an Indy 500. And now, with his J.H. Rose, Herb had struck again.

Our story now features its real subject, the J.H. Rose itself. Named the "Lil' Red Rooster" after Herb and Rocky chromed and painted it fire-engine red in the same flashy hues of their Texas angel, the J.H. Rose Truck Lines of Houston. outwardly it looked like just another nothing upright dirt championship car. But Herb and Rocky had discarded its standard, under-sized, four-cylinder, Meyer-Drake Offenhauser of only 255 cubic inches and replaced it with a radically-modified V8 Chevrolet of 335 inches - a "stovebolt," - enabling the Lil' Red Rooster to discharge a volatile 435 horsepower -- better than 100 horses superior to any antique Meyer-Drake.



It was a cunning idea and the wonder was nobody had thought of it before.

And now our story at last comes to Donnie Davis, Herb's and Rocky's pick for chauffeur of the J.H. Rose. Although Donnie was barely a sophomore to Indy cars, Rocky's and Herb's choosing him had been no accident.

Very few drivers of Indy cars were as yet accustomed to the sudden, twisting, explosion of horsepower and torque that was the stovebolt's alone. Donnie, however, came to Herb and Rocky



very well seasoned. Out in Arizona and the south of California, where almost all sprint cars were stovebolts, Donnie's ECCA – Elloy Cotton Chemical Association – sprinter had been fastest of the whole V8 tribe. And if he could race that fast in a short-wheelbase sprinter Donnie ought to be able to race a long-wheelbase hog of a dirt champ car much faster still – so had gone the reasoning Rocky and Herb.

But there was another, more important quality concerning Donnie: he was stone-cold brave. Take the the 1961 Indy 500, Donnie's first. In the middle of the 500, his Watson roadster, the Dart-Kart, was cranking along as fast as it would go, about 170 mph, when its Meyer-Drake let go so totally that the Watson's hood was ripped loose from its body.

Donnie was unharmed. But after the ruptured Dart-Kart had beached itself against the outer wall, and instead of waiting for rescuers to reach him, he had instead climbed out and triggered a multi-roadster collision by calmly walking across the track without getting hit.

American racing regarded all its open-cockpit, open wheel, Indy car drivers as the bravest and most stone-cold creatures on the planet. So walking across Indy in dense traffic had earned Donnie the mantle of most stone-cold brave of the pack.



And there was more. Donnie, who was so stone-cold that even though he was in perfect health he had almost flunked his Indy 500 physical - his pulse had been barely audible and his heart beating so softly that Indy's physician had almost been unable to find it. Coming to his rescue had been Elmer George, son-in-law, of Anton Hulman; Elmer had delivered Donnie to another doctor who had passed him.

Following Trenton, 1962's next race had been the Indy 500. Donnie had had a good 500, finishing fourth in Herb's Bent-Engine Eight Ball. But the race that Donnie, Rocky and Herb – plus the Lil' Red Rooster – were the most waiting for was Milwaukee's the following weekend.

Milwaukee's mile was more difficult to drive than Trenton's, its corners being flat instead of banked. Donnie time-trialed only ninth fastest, placing the Lil' Red Rooster back on the fifth row.

Milwaukee was a 100-mile sprint, no time for pacing or pit stops. Violent Lil' Red Rooster meets ice-cold Donnie. Get out of the way.

Because an upright dirt car like the Lil' Red Rooster seated its driver out in the open air, while Milwaukee's roadsters planted their drivers deep inside the cockpits, Donnie could be observed working hard all around Milwaukee.

First he'd breezed by Roger McCluskey, Rodger Ward, and Len Sutton; then overtook somebody really tough, Herk; and after that it had been Parnelli Jones, followed by Don Branson.

And then, at 32 miles - making Milwaukee's grandstands erupt with startled surprise - Donnie and the Lil' Red Rooster flew past the king himself, A.J. Foyt, taking the lead.

Nineteen sixty-two was the beginning of Foyt's three-year-long as master of all Indy car racing; nobody ever had passed him the way Donnie had.

And for the next half of Milwaukee Donnie had held off the master, keeping A.J. hopelessly sliding and skidding around behind him.

But Donnie's great moment almost was up. Indy cars still raced on tall, thin, 8:20 x 18s Firestones - "Flintstones" - designed for Meyer-Drake Offys instead of a Stovebolt's extra 100 horses. So there hadn't been enough rubber to accommodate Donnie's long lines of hot black Flintstone out of every corner, which were his signatures.

And with a quarter of the 100 miles still to come, the inevitable occurred : a Flintstone exploded on the right rear of the Lil' Red Rooster, and its roar was nearly as loud as that made by the Paul Russo Novi in the Indy 500 six seasons earlier.

Herb and Rocky had hammered fresh rubber onto the Lil' Red Rooster and gotten it back into the show a hurry, but Donnie still finished only eighth. As for A.J. - winner of the race - his curious reward was a chorus of boos from Milwaukee's grandstands. The crowd, who'd made Donnie their favorite, was wrongly assuming A.J. purposely had clipped Donnie to make his Flintstone blow out.

I was lucky enough to be in Milwaukee for this race - it was one of the most exciting races I ever saw - but after accepting my congratulations Donnie had pointed to the Lil' Red Rooster and exclaimed, "I can't wait to take it to Langhorne!"

Langhorne - it would have to be Langhorne, the only mile-long racing track in America that was circular. And ever since the late Johnny Thomson, Herb's old driver, had, in 1957, done the impossible by lapping its 100 miles in less than an hour, Langhorne had been Indy car racing's fastest dirt track.

Donnie didn't make it to Langhorne – he was killed in a sprint car accident first – but the Lil' Red Rooster would never have made it through the 100 miles without popping more tires first. Later that summer, though, it did show up at Langhorne in the hands of Colby Scroggin, a slow journeyman imported from Los Angeles, but all Colby did was lose control, exit the track and fly off into the infield wrapping the Lil' Red Rooster around the parked pace car.

By then USAC, Indy car racing's sanctioning body and one dominated by Meyer-Drake Offy owners, professed itself fed up with Herb and Rocky's V8 stovebolt experiment. The end had come back at Milwaukee during a 200-mile match when Lloyd Ruby, newest driver of the Lil' Red Rooster, had had its stovebolt erupt beneath him and lay down an oil slick which trapped and wrecked a quartet of Meyer-Drake Offy roadsters. In the aftermath, the Lil' Red Rooster was castrated, its cubic inch displacement reduced by ten percent. Never again was it a threat, although in 1963 and 1964 Johnny Rutherford gave it some good drives including putting it on pole position for Langhorne's last match as a dirt track.

Donnie Davis continues being remembered by those who knew him as racing's most stone-cold brave driver. His New Bremen accident was sad, and unfortunately may have been brought on by his pulling the kind of wild stunt only a stone-cold driver would.

Donnie's car had been ill-handling - running 12th in a field of 14 - but in the hope of picking up a few extra bucks, he'd made a stone-cold bid, coming off the last corner, to pass the sprinter just ahead of him. There hadn't been room, and just past the finish line his car had climbed up onto the wall; gotten upside-down; then had crash-landed back onto its wheels again.

Donnie had been rendered unconscious – was flopped over the steering wheel. Worse, he'd obviously been on the receiving end of a terrific battering because his cockpit roll-over bar had been folded flat. Then medics had carried him off on a litter to an ambulance which had departed Code 3 to tiny New Bremen and its St. Mary's hospital.

Following the ambulance had been Clint Brawner, an esteemed Indy car chief mechanic and Arizona friend of Donnie's who in years past had employed Donnie as one of his stooges. Upon entering St. Mary's Clint discovered Donnie had been placed in an isolation ward room. Listening to a doctor speaking to a nurse, Clint had caught the frightening words "basal skull fracture." And then the doctor informed Clint that Donnie was being transported immediately to the Good Samaritan infirmary in nearby Dayton for "neurosurgical work."

Which had freaked Clint out. And after following Donnie's stretcher to another ambulance, he'd found a pair of guys dressed in white. He'd assumed they were orderlies. and, indeed, one of them was the driver of the ambulance. And the other, who requested that Clint ride along in the back and help hold still Donnie's head, was, Clint assumed, a doctor.

By then it was nighttime. Siren screaming, the ambulance had raced toward Good Samaritan, causing Donnie's head to loll about. Clint had panicked. Should an unconscious patient in a coma with a skull fracture be bumping around like that?

Clint asked the doctor what he thought. "I'm no doctor," came the reply, "I'm a florist – a friend of the ambulance driver." The ambulance had continued racing on, with the driver yelling occasional instructions to Clint and the florist about how to use the oxygen mask on Donnie.

Numerous near-misses with other cars occurred. There were traffic tie-ups. And all the time Clint and the florist had struggled to hold steady Donnie's head.

Once they had arrived at Good Samaritan Donnie was rushed away and packed in ice. Clint never saw him again because he died soon afterward. One of many individuals as distraught as Clint, myself, Rocky and Herb, and Donnie's beautiful young wife Gloria, was none other than Ebb Rose.

The president of J.H. Rose Truck Lines, himself a driver in the Indy 500, and naturally one of Donnie's greatest admirers, had been preparing to fly in from Houston a famous brain surgeon, but it was too late.

Now our story ends with the good news that better than half a century after Milwaukee, the Lil' Red Rooster is one of the choice exhibits inside the Indy 500's Speedway Museum. But you cannot have everything. Donnie's name isn't on its flanks and Johnny Rutherford's is; and Rocky's surname is misspelled.

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