

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Dario Resta

In 1993, two famous racing drivers, Michael Andretti and Nigel Mansell, changed addresses. Andretti, then near the peak of his career in Indy cars, crossed the Atlantic to Europe to join the Formula One tour.

And Mansell, the reigning World Champion, abandoned F1 to come to America to try



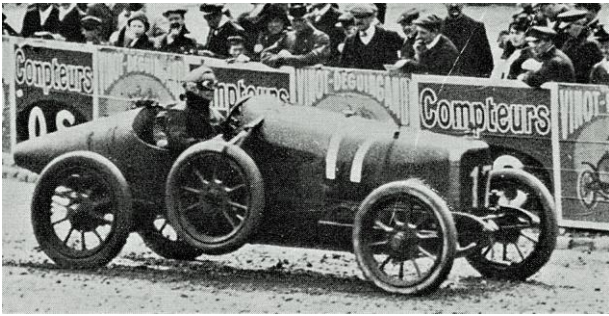
his luck with Indy cars. Europe caught the good end of the exchange, America the bad. Andretti's aborted, disastrous visit was a horrible embarrassment not only to himself but to all those who'd been hallucinating that U.S. drivers still were world class the way Mario, Michael's iconic father, was.

By comparison, the Mansell of Indy cars proved to be as overpowering as the Mansell of F1, except probably more so: doing battle royal on ten road courses, two Superspeedways, and three ovals, he made himself champion and Indy Car tournament sensation with five wins, five second and thirds, plus lap records and glory galore.



Yet Mansell wasn't the only fast Brit to stand American racing on end, even though you have to go back to 1915-1916 to find the first one. He was the great Dario Resta, who accomplished things Mansell couldn't, including conquering the Indianapolis 500. Mansell, in time, had his popularity fade, but Resta's never did.

**Grief on both sides of the Atlantic was equally deep on September 2, 1924, when Resta met his end as he hurtled along in another world speed record attempt at Brooklands.**



**career.**

**The Resta who came from the long ago, and who refused to lay down in any race, was born in Italy, then raised, nationalized, and educated in London. Verifiable facts are hard to come by, but apparently he apprenticed in roller-skating and pugilism before, in 1907, launching his racing**

**When Resta wasn't busy attacking Brooklands, and setting sprint and endurance records, he could be found campaigning Sunbeams on the continent. He was a dashing, wealthy, well-bred dandy – Resta even wore a necktie while racing – and also found time to operate D Resta Co, the famous London agency which selected and purchased horseless carriages for the well-off.**

**Then, in 1915, Resta's life changed dramatically. Manpower shortages brought about by the Great War led to Resta's emergency hiring by Peugeot's American importers, who shipped him off to San Francisco for a pair of 300- and 400-mile grands prix that were part of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition celebrating the opening of the canal.**

**Championship racing in the U.S. was in this era a rousing international struggle with domestic marques as Marmon, Maxwell, Mercer, National, Stutz, and Dusenber; battling the Germans (Mercedes); the Italians (Fiat); and the formidable French (Bugatti, Panhard, Delage, and, naturally Peugeot).**

**Not only did Peugeot possess the brightest high-tech, but with Resta it probably owned the best driver. Resta's instructions were to win.**

**Eight decades afterward, the movie star who owned Mansell's Indy Car team delivered identical instructions to Mansell. Yet compared to Resta's, Mansell's had been much the easier assignment.**

**His competition amounted to, basically, a menu of ex-Formula One has-beens or never-beens from Brazil, Italy, Columbia, Sweden, and Holland, plus a tough Canadian, and the one halfway decent American, Al Unser Jr.**

**And once Mansell discovered he could overcome Unser's deep-braking maneuvers by blocking him, winning was as simple as taking candy from children.**

**Resta, by comparison, was confronting, America's first generation of racing drivers, a real rogue's gallery of wild men. Among them:**

- **Teddy "Terrible Teddy" Tetzlaff, winner of Santa Monica and Tacoma who, three days before gambling-ravaged Tacoma, got kidnapped for ransom by the gamblers, rescued by the police, then afterward declared he was throwing in his lot with the kidnappers, who were not such bad guys;**
- **Barney Oldfield, winner of Venice and Tucson, ex-bicycle racer, braggart, barfly, saloon keeper, and original test driver of Henry Ford's 999, and under contract to the mountebank promoters J. Alexander Sloan and William Pickens, who lied that Oldfield was "Master Driver of the World;"**
- **Earl Cooper, winner of Santa Monica, Corona, and Tacoma, star chauffeur of the Stutz team, assisted by Reeves Dutton, a genius of a riding mechanic, but handicapped by a despotic boss, Harry Stutz;**
- **Eddie Rickenbacker, Duesenberg hero, former garage floor scrubber, car salesman, traveling daredevil, winner of Sioux City, Omaha, Providence, Sheepshead Bay and Ascot, future air warrior and top gun in the Great War;**
- **Bob "Wild Bob" Burman, fast but ill-starred, racing a duplicate Peugeot to Resta's, and glitzing up the scene with a choking-big diamond stick pin, winner of Lowell, Kalamazoo, Oklahoma City, and Burlington;**
- **Ralph de Palma, twice national champion and winner at Santa Monica, Elgin, Milwaukee, Kalamazoo, Des Moines, Minneapolis, Chicago and Sheepshead Bay. Italian-born, just like Resta, first he'd manhandled a gigantic Fiat, which he'd traded in for a Mercer, and then for the big Mercedes which was destined to become the worst enemy of Resta's Peugeot.**

**Mansell in 1993 faced 15 Indy car oval and road starts, all on pavement. Resta in 1915 faced an almost endless 27 oval and road competitions on pavement, cement, bricks dirt and boards.**

**Three of them, at San Diego, Glendale and Ascot had already been contested when he arrived in San Francisco, but he was off to a ripping start, winning both the 402-mile International Grand Prix and the 303-mile Vanderbilt Cup.**

**Venice, Tucson, and Oklahoma City were next, but they were small-beer meets so Resta chose to skip them, preferring to prime himself for the Memorial Day Indy 500, where he knew that de Palma, who'd started in all four previous Indys, and should have won in 1912, would have his Mercedes cocked and waiting for him.**

**Not that Resta found the Brickyard at all intimidating; he was well accustomed to Brooklands' high banks, and Brooklands was faster. So, harboring no freshman inhibitions, Resta was free to engage de Palma in a 500-mile-long-war that was duplicated in 1993 by Mansell battling with a Brazilian and a Dutchman, which concluded with Mansell a close (but wounded) third after brushing a wall.**



**Resta and de Palma already were running first and second at 100 miles. No other competition was close. Always in sight of each other, they'd already obliterated all speed records, and were preparing to continue their nerve-biting chess match through the next 100 miles.**

**Whereupon de Palma had suddenly made a breakaway move and opened up a lead of 40 seconds. Resta had been more than up to the challenge, but just when he'd succeeded in slicing de Palma's lead in half, his Peugeot cut a tire and caught a wall. Upon re-emerging from the pits with a new shoe,**

**Resta found himself at the wheel of a cripple with four inches of play in the steering.**

**But instead of lessening the pressure on de Palma, Resta increased it. de Palma's overstressed Mercedes hadn't liked it. With barely five miles to go, a connecting rod snapped and the Mercedes began gushing oil. Frantically reducing his speed, and probably fearful that he was in for a ghastly replay of 1912 – when he'd also broken down while in the lead, then jumped out, began pushing the overweight Merc to the checker, and still lost – de Palma had anxiously held on. He won the six-hour thriller, but not by much, because Resta's furiously wobbling Peugeot was nearly back on the same straightaway by the finish.**

**Having passed with full honors his initiation to bricked race tracks, it was time for Resta to take his blue-for-France Peugeot to the top of the high-walled board tracks, which were uniquely, hot red-blooded, American. Board track builders ripped-off the idea of lumber speedways from bicycle velodromes, and all that was required was an army of carpenters hammering away for five days and nights until, presto ... instant race track.**

**Chicago's two-mile long timber monster, called Maywood Speedway, was far faster than Indy, and it was if Resta had been born to win there. In June he'd won, then returned, seven races later, in August, to win again. Came October, at high on the looming boards of Sheepshead Bay, Resta really wound up the Peugeot; and won at an average of 105.39 mph, which was even faster than Brooklands.**

**In November, America's 1915 tournament concluded in San Francisco. The second most exhausting tour ever, it had swung from west coast to east coast four times. To compete in all 27 races would have been a geographical impossibility, but despot Harry Stutz had bullied Earl Cooper into racing 14 times; and after Cooper scored his fifth victory of the campaign in 'Frisco, he'd defeated Resta for the U.S.'s National title by 460 points – not a big margin. Cooper had won five times, but Resta had actually tied him, also winning five.**

**Pleased, his Peugeot angels returned him to combat in 1916, when sanity returned to domestic racing and the schedule was pruned to 15 meets. Aided and abetted by the collapse of Cooper, who was unable to win a race; the similar collapses of Tetzlaff and**

**Oldfield; the Corona crash and death of Burman (extra-ghoulish members of the crowd pilfered his diamond stick pin off the corpse); the erratic wheelmanship of Rickenbacker; and de Palma's temporary Indy black-balling, Resta became the first foreigner ever to capture the American national championship (and it took 73 years for the Brazilian, Emerson Fittipaldi, to become the second).**

**Back at Maywood Speedway, Resta won twice, and he also won at Omaha, Santa Monica, and the 500 at Indy –cut to 300 miles because of Great War considerations. His Brickyard winning margin was better than two minutes – almost two laps – but his paltry average of 84 mph suggested that Resta probably wasn't trying too hard.**

**But Resta and his unknown riding mechanic – riding mechanics never received credit, except for Eddie O'Donnell, who'd somehow reinvented himself into one of board track's fastest wheelmen – both certainly tried hard that June; winning the first of Resta's two Maywood extravaganzas. The 300-mile main event saw an 29 lead changes in the opening ten miles between Rickenbacker, Wilbur D'Alene, and O'Donnell, Rimming Maywood's tall boards in a howling pack, the trio was caught and engaged first by Resta and his Indy-winning Peugeot and next by the big Merc of de Palma. Lashing along in each other's slipstreams, the famous pair left Rickenbacker, D'Alene, O'Donnell, and everybody else far, far behind. But de Palma had his Merc go soft, so Resta and his almost-unbeatable Peugeot --averaging close to 100 mph-- won what was arguably the best duel of board track racing's epic era.**

**It was pretty much Resta's last big America moment, too, although in later seasons he sporadically returned to the U.S. and, as late as 1923, managed to park a Packard on the outside of the Brickyard's first row.**

**As for Resta's Peugeot chariot, some of the fame achieved by the potent little hot rod surely wasn't the kind that its Yankee distributors had been hoping for. Not once but twice did it end up getting counterfeited.**

**The first time was immediately after the end of the Great War, when the management of the Indianapolis Speedway grew petrified that post-armistice economic conditions would prevent its Brickyard from filling a full starting field, and so commissioned, probably illegally, the construction of several bogus Peugeots.**

**One of these fakes somehow managed to win Indy's 1919 500. The second, far more notorious, copy-cat job, was when Peugeot's trick double-overhead-camshaft design became Harry Miller's major influence when the master was inventing his Miller-Offenhausers, winners of an unequaled four-and-a-half-decades worth of Indy 500s.**

#### **DARO RESA PEUGEOT SIDEBAR**

**A 1948 wildfire raged across rural Woodland Hills, just outside Los Angeles, burning down a ranch containing the 32 irreplaceable classic racing cars of the Lindley Bothwell collection. Naturally the devastating loss left Bothwell bereft, and so, to try to cheer Bothwell up, a fellow vintage antique collector charged him a pittance – only \$3,000 – for one of racing's wonders, the Dario Resta Peugeot.**

**The following year, when the Resta Peugeot was 35 seasons ancient, and Resta's victory at Indianapolis was 33, and the last time the legendary vehicle had raced at all was in the late 1920s, on the Beverly Hills boards, Bothwell proved he was a man of action.**



**He asked for, and was granted permission, to bring the Peugeot back to the Brickyard so he could make a daredevil assault on the all-time "Peugeot" speed record, set in 1919 by one of the phony Premiers.**

**In his quest for the lap record, Bothwell enjoyed valuable advantages that even Resta hadn't had. One of them was that the inventor of the thundering Novi V8, Bud Winfield, was supplying advanced engineering on the**

**subject of timing.. Two other edges were that the Peugeot was wearing wider tires than Resta's originals; and that its front suspension was new and improved.**

**But, perhaps the greatest advantage of all was that Bothwell, for his driving tutor, had acquired the priceless services of silver-haired Ralph de Palma, Resta's great foe from**

**the 1915s and 1916s. One thing de Palma must have remembered was that the Peugeot tail end was light and skittish, warning Bothwell to beware of over-steering.**

**Bothwell almost wore everything out by logging between 1.000 and 1.500 miles of practice. Then he had his original riding mechanic quit on account of nerves. But Bothwell didn't stop until he had what he had what he wanted – a new Peugeot Indy lap record of 103.250 mph. -JS**