

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Rocky

Racing drivers lead exciting lives anyway, but one Halloween evening back in 1997, Rocky Moran (not the Rocky Moran out of the Depression 1930s who used to crash a quarter ton of Harley hog through flaming walls of timber at 60 mph) decided to do something r-e-a-l-l-y exciting. He took his wife Karla and the kids out trick-or-treating.

Only, some of the other trick-or-treaters out and about that night were child thugs. Result: before Rocky knew it, he was trying to prevent a mob of them from stoning passing cars. It was a mistake, even if Rocky did go six-foot-two, 210 pounds; many of the juvenile delinquents he was confronting looked that big themselves. Additional results: A dozen of the zit-heads swarmed him, and Rocky got hauled away in a meat wagon with miscellaneous fractures, dislocations, and sufficient nerve damage to one arm to require a couple of surgeries.

Much like tragic John Paul, Jr., Rocky Moran was a monster racing driver who, because of episodes beyond his control, ended up a should-have-been. And the Rocky Moran who as a debutant smoked off 18 past and future winners of the Indy 500 is the subject of this yarn.



Commenting on his lean and hungry early racing years, Eddie Sachs once lamented, "I am a great driver," adding, "but nobody knows it but me." After his 11 low-key seasons as a Formula

Ford, Formula 5000,, Can Am, NASCAR, and USAC late-model pilot, the high quality of Rocky's driving was pretty much a secret to everybody in Championship Auto Racing Teams except Dan Gurney's All-America Racers. So, in October of 1981, Rocky accepted AAR's invitation and arrived in upstate New York for a CART road meet at Watkins Glen.

For all of that 1981 season, CART's third, All-American Racers had been annoying the Fat Cat teams with its out-of-step behavior. Everybody else had turbocharged Cosworths, Brit-flavored racing cars, Indy 500 champion drivers and heavy-spending sponsors; All-American Racers, operating on a shoestring, had nothing but one really looking Eagle chassis, plus all the rolling horsepower of a fantastic, two-bit, smoking stovebolt.

Yet even before the Glen, AAR was getting dangerous. Its budget V8 missile had qualified in the middle of the front row of the 1981 Indy 500 and then two weeks later actually won the Milwaukee 150 in Wisconsin. Adding insult to injury at the Glen, Dan Gurney wasn't a celebrity; he was importing a nobody named Rocky Moran.

Heroes gridded against Rocky included Mario Andretti, both Unser brothers, Rick Mears, Tom Sneva, and Johnny Rutherford. Had conditions been normal Rocky might have circulated among them nervously asking for autographs. Conditions were abnormal. Rocky took off in the lead and could have won in a runaway if only he hadn't run dry of methanol.

Afterward, CART's whole galaxy shook, but quickly stabilized. The design of the Eagle was declared illegal. Emasculating restrictions hit all stovebolt engines. Gurney, one of CART's founders, was over time voted out of office, and his name vanished from CART's official biography. And Rocky Moran? His name was reported to have come up at a meeting of CART's team owners when one of the Fat Cat's ripped the organization for allowing a nonentity to come in and leave everybody in his wake sucking wind: "How can I tell my sponsors that my team was beaten by a Rocky Moran?"

Rocky couldn't live down the notoriety of his excellence at Watkins Glen for the following 16 years until the 1989 Indy, when he got to wrap up his career with a drive he considered superior to his scandalous earlier one at the Glen. Unfortunately, it was of the Eddie Sachs sort: afterward, nobody knew about it except Rocky. And why should anybody have, because Rocky had been in the wheelhouse of a three-year-old March, an antique belonging to A.J. Foyt, and wound up finishing a hot 14<sup>th</sup>? But listen to some of what happened:

A battery had failed at the start, so Rocky had had to join the combat with everybody else a dozen laps ahead of him. He hadn't practiced in traffic, so the first time the leaders overtook him, their turbulence had almost made him bite the concrete. Somebody else lost a wheel, which nearly clobbered him. The two-way radios wouldn't work, so he'd had to signal his pit crew for chassis

adjustments by pointing his thumb up or down. And then he'd had an unnecessary pit stop forced on him.



Five miles to go. Locked in the father of all Indy 500 battles, Emmo Fittipaldi and Little Al Unser got each other in their cross-hairs right in front of him and Rocky had concluded that all of them were goners, but all he'd had to do was dodge one of Little Al's thrown wheels. "Bet you were glad when all that was over," I told Rocky. "Glad ?!" Rocky exploded. "I was hauling ass in the Indy 500. A.J. had personally set up my car, and nobody back there did that better than he did. It was faster than two-thirds of the field, and I'd passed most of them. I hated for the 500 to end!"