

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Say What?



Ray Harroun had just spent almost seven hours having his carcass beaten raw as he and his Marmon Wasp galloped across the Indy 500's three million bricks while winning 1911's inaugural 500-mile sweepstakes. Called upon to say a few words for posterity, Harroun went into a coughing spasm then, meekly, asked for something to eat.

Winning for France in 1913, a merry wino named Jules Goux, after almost passing out from the delayed effects of guzzling what seemed like oceans of champagne, including bombarding and baptizing his crew with bubbly during pit stops. Had he not been tanked, he confessed, he'd never have completed the 500 miles.



Fast-forward 40 years to 1953's furnace 500, which cooked three-quarters of the starters. The winner was Billy Vukovich, best known as "the Crazy Russian," who hailed from central California with all its blazing vineyards. And when an especially brilliant interviewer asked "El Loco Russ," as Vukovich was known south of the border in Mexico, if the heat had been stifling, the curt answer he received was that Indy 500 heat was nothing, NOTHING, compared to spending a central California summer plowing behind a tractor

Two years afterward, in 1955, anxious Bob Sweikert, Indy's 500 upset champion, didn't answer a Victory Circle question but asked one of

his own: “Who got hurt?” Which left to the crew of interviewers the somber task of informing Sweikert of the identity of the victim of the catastrophic wreck on the Brickyard’s back straight. And, of course, it had fatefully been the Crazy Russian himself.



No 500 winner ever better rehearsed a perfect Victory Circle salutation than old Sam Hanks. And rehearsing was something Hanks had had ample time for, for he was a campaign veteran of 11 Indy’s who’d yet to lead his first lap. Yet he’d also passed most of those uneventful May’s making lots of loot skinning alive all comers during Gasoline Alley’s marathon sessions of gin rummy.

So, upon at last getting his long overdue checkered in 1957, Hanks was planning on driving into Victory Circle and crying “Gin!” Unfortunately, the weight of all those losing

500s so broke him that he cried real tears instead.

Unexpectedly finding himself in victory circle in 1966, winner Graham Hill confessed,



“I’m a bit surprised to be here.” And the Englishman wasn’t the only person surprised, because he’d been one of the 500’s greatest long-shots. Taking a fast swig of cold milk. Indy’s tradition winner’s beverage, Graham gagged, then hungrily kissed the trophy queen.

Thirty-seven years ago the most shocking words ever spoken by the winner of a 500-mile-long -race were delivered not at Indy at

all, but in Michigan, up on the high banks of Michigan International Speedway. The shocking words: “I love you.” They were uttered with great sincerity by a handsome, quiet, beanpole of a 23-year-old rookie named John Paul, Jr., who, exactly like Ray Harroun, had just won the very first Indy car 500 he’d ever competed in. And, the same as with Harroun, it hadn’t been easy. Junior’s left ankle and foot still were wounded from the fracturing they had absorbed just three months earlier at the Brickyard, and he’d had to wheel out to the starting line on crutches. And then on the final corner of the last lap he’d had to out-duel and out-brave the multi-Indy 500 champion Rick Mears, who, trying too hard not to lose to an indy car novice, went into the fence.

Junior’s “I love you,” radio and TV message was meant for his own racing driver father. John Paul Sr.-- previously the two of them had teamed together to win such major

International Motor Sports Association 24-hour and 12-hour sports car enduros as Daytona and Sebring. But Senior missed watching Junior win the MIS 500 because he was several



states away, in Kansas, rotting inside Leavenworth Federal Prison. As one of the first professional crooks to turn a dope-smuggling ring of racketeering into an apparatus for funding racing, Senior, who had shot and tried to murder a Federal witness, was about to start serving what is known in the criminal trade as a “telephone number” – 15 years. Junior was wishing his father good-bye.

But his calling attention publicly to his pariah parent had everybody speculating about what now would happen to Junior’s promising career. And, in fact, a sponsor’s name did disappear from the flanks of Junior’s MIS 500-winning Cosworth, a second-hand Penske. Yet, to the surprise of many, Indy car racing didn’t run out on Junior. By the beginning of 1985 he still was such a star on the rise that he was under contract to the big pizza pie team which later lost the championship of the PPG Indy Car World Series by barely a point.

Junior sacrificed this ride because the other shoe had dropped. Years before he ever went racing, his felon father had put him to work unloading the family fleet of marijuana boats. And, equally incriminating, it was John Paul Sr.’s hundreds of thousands of dirty dope dollars which had purchased Junior his MIS 500-winning Penske.

Subsequently convicted of one count of drug trafficking, Junior sat inside a minimum security prison on an Air Force base in Alabama for two years and two months, Released in 1988, he never recanted his positive sentiments about his scofflaw father: “I love my dad...But he could have done it a better way.”

Returning to racing in 1989, Junior competed unsuccessfully in four Indy 500s with slow cars, then enjoyed a decade of glory in the Indy Racing League and with all marques -- Jaguar, Porsche, Nissan, Toyota, Pontiac – of IMSA. But in 2001, while Junior was testing the telemetry of a new Corvette GT-1, his feet didn’t feel right, and, to get them diagnosed, he visited the Neurological department of the University of California at Los Angeles . There he received the worst news possible.

He had contracted deadly Huntington's; a savage and incurable disease resulting in the deterioration of brain cells, leading, over an agonizing long period of time, to possible death. Now starting his second cruel and brave decade of rehabilitation, Junior still is undergoing treatment from UCLA.

"He's very smart," was one of several nice things that Junior was quoted as saying about his father, and, indeed, the senior Paul had had to be very smart to receive a scholarship degree from Harvard; followed by a master's degree in business; followed by great success as a mutual fund manager; followed by millionaire's status as a drug-trafficking sports car racer.



After one of his criminal associates had ratted him out, and Senior tried and failed to shoot him dead, he pled guilty to attempted first-degree murder and got sent to Leavenworth. And it was while Senior was in the middle of serving his 15 years in the Big House that he demonstrated what a career criminal he was; sentence in proved what a career criminal he was: with the assistance of another dangerous inmate, he sprayed a mixture of hot sauce and Pine Sol into a guard's eyes, then escaped over a 12-foot fence.

Recaptured, Senior was paroled in 1999. Before the FBI could move in on him for his role in the suspected murder of a mystery woman named Colleen Wood, he disappeared. And he's never has been seen since, although one sighting placed him in the Fiji Islands.

There's no record of his ever paying a visit on bed-ridden John Paul Jr. Senior destroyed Junior in two ways: first he ruined his career as a racing driver, and, second, he trashed his health - himself a likely carrier, he probably passed on Huntington's to undeserving Junior, who died, just before Christmas, in 2020.

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