

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### START CHEATING

The cheating –outrageous cheating – taking place in the 1950, 1960, and 1970 Indy 500s may never be equaled. It always began the same way. Up and down the pit road, the instant the Speedway's slow-down lights flashed yellow, all chief mechanics with blackboards began commanding their drivers to ignore the yellow and **START CHEATING.**

That's what happened in 1960, a great Memorial Day for the 500's swindling scofflaws: The Speedway's green lights switch to yellow, and Rodger Ward's Leader Card Watson Offy roadster is holding a five-second lead on Jim Rathmann's (except for the paint jobs) identical Ken-Paul Watson.



So, when conditions go back to green the yellow lights are supposed to have preserved Ward's five-second advantage. Fat chance! Instead, at the green, Rathmann's Watson is pasted all over Ward's Leader Card, and, from the pit road, crew

chief/car builder A.J. Watson is frantically blackboarding:

**"CHEATER RATHMANN"**

... and ordering Ward to cheat more himself. Small wonder that some of the fastest 500s of those decades were conducted under the yellow and won by cheaters.

Indy's problem with cheating was as old and deep-rooted as its 500, and it largely was permitted. Preserving a race-leader's lead during yellow caution slow-downs was merely the Speedway's faith in old-fashioned sportsmanship. And this was based on the Brickyard's belief that its 33 starters were Boy Scouts who behaved accordingly.

**Then things radically changed. After the passing of all those decades blissfully ignoring what was going on, the Hoosier management, to its great humiliation, discovered that yellow light cheating in its 500 had grown into an industry.**

**So, to maintain order and restore sportsmanship, it brought in an ogre named Harlan Fengler, who immediately made himself racing's most erratic, arbitrary and feared rule enforcer.**

**Chief steward of the Indy 500, Fengler was despotic, unpredictable, a savage disciplinarian, and absolutely dedicated to his thankless job. His great power was magnified by the unique stature of the Indy 500 -- the only race able to appoint its own stewards, like Fengler, who were free to create and operate under arbitrary rules. Fengler was fond of bragging that he possessed special prerogatives and relished the privilege of punishing. "I'm running the 500, not you!" was how he lambasted anybody who disagreed with him.**

**In the early 1970s, when the Speedway at last gave Fengler the chop after his stewardship brought ruin, the pandemic of yellow-light cheating still raged. Yet on full view down in the deep south was the obvious solution had Indy chosen to copy it: Bunch up the Indy car pack under the yellow, just like NASCAR stocks.**

**But imitating Bill France's hooch-hauling soaks, was anathema to Indy's Hoosier management. And so, at great expense, it constructed its own, ponderous "Electro-Pacer Lights" system/apparatus, a bizarre Rube Goldberg-like contraption ringing the entire Speedway. Supposed to eradicate yellow-flag cheating, it instead produced great bitter screams of cheating and swindle.**

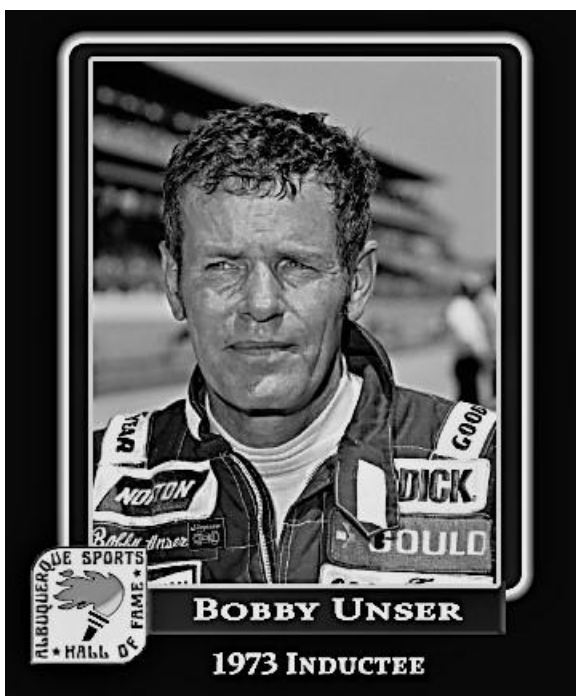
**Up and running in 1973, which was one of history's worst Indy 500's, the Electro-Pacer Lights and its vaunted intricacy and infallibility were explained in a complicated propaganda release:**

***"The Electro-Pacer Lights system links together eight panels of electrically-operated traffic control lights around the Speedway – at intervals of 1,650 feet –in such a manner that there no longer can be any legitimate excuse for a driver to improve his position...For***

*example, if his number is “five” when the yellow light is displayed, he should control his speed so that he will see “five” on every panel as he continues to circle the track. If he sees “four,” he will know that he is running too fast and that he should adjust his speed immediately to avoid penalty. In like manner, if he finds himself in the “six” segment, he will realize he is running too slowly and should make the necessary correction at once...Two spotters working at each light panel will keep a record of the cars running in each of the eight segments and notify race officials at the starting line by telephone in case of any violations....”*

Brilliantly conditioned by years of evading Brickyard yellow slow-downs, the 33 starters, upon being introduced to the Electro-Pacer Lights, did the predictable. The instant they flashed, nobody backed off at the first panel but careened onward to the following one. That way they picked up a free 1,650 feet of Speedway. None of the 33 took seriously the threat of spotters phoning in to tattle-tale. Indy in the seasons of the Electro-Pacer Lights still was the paradise of senior-citizen officialdom, and Bobby Unser, among many, well knew that any spotters were going to be geriatrics with 70- and even 80-year-old eyes.

That Unser, of all Indy drivers, was the first one to realize the rich possibilities of circumventing the vaunted light system, wasn't surprising.



Bobby was canny: His father, a member of the old Pendergast tribe from lawless 1930s' Kansas City, had taught him a thing or three about evading rules. Still, from the 500's first lap, Unser in his 1974 turbocharged Eagle, which was among the lowest and most dubious vintages ever produced at All-American Racers, had been prepared to frown, suffer, hurt, and get his doors blown off. But then he discovered one advantage and proceeded it to nail it throughout the 500 miles.

Discovering it had been an accident. The first time

**the “Pacer Lights” went off, Unser was coming off the fourth corner, flying into the pits for a front wing adjustment His wheels barely stop turning, his crew did its work, and he went zooming up the pit lane to rejoin the Speedway on the second corner where he picked up his first board of the lights. A little later he pitted for a second time, and this was when he made his big discovery and sent up hosannas to the inventors of the Electro-Pacer Lights.**

**Supposed to be adjusted for caution speeds of 80 mph, they were set at 70. So, by booming into the pits with maximum blower pressure...making a fast stop at his pit ... And, Boom!, going out again... Unser, going 80, was overtaking drivers on the Brickyard going just 70... Every pit stop he made, amounted to another free yellow...**

**Johnny Rutherford, leading in the 500’s fastest McLaren, must have wondered what the hell was going on: His mount would be on the third corner, preparing to lap Unser’s Eagle, when the Electro-Pacer Lights lit up. Unser would hit the pits three laps in a row, picking it right up and, on the green, be parked in Rutherford’s mirrors.**

**It was a scenario straight out of “Bullitt,” the vintage car chase movie, with Al Grecco and Bill Hickman, chum of James Dean, in their black Dodge Magnum, staring aghast in their rear-view mirrors, and finding Steve McQueen’s green Mustang they thought they’d been following, now following them.**

**Rutherford won the 1974 and Unser finished second. Newspapers sympathized with Unser reporting: “... had it not been for all those pit stops, that he could have won the 500.”**

**... Knowing well how to keep a secret, Bobby kept his trap shut, but his secret got out, and Indy’s management responded with force: for the 1975 500, it had grim-faced young officials with radar guns stationed up and down the pit lane. But it wasn’t until 1979 that Indy ripped their Electro-Pacer Lights out by the roots. -JS**