

# Joe Scalzo's

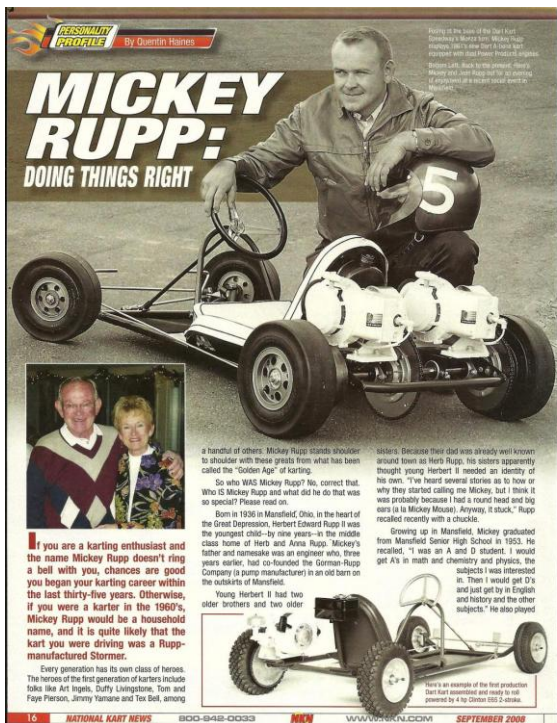
## City of Speed and elsewhere

### USAC Sprint Car Driver

The two A.J.'s – Watson and Foyt – were together on the paved half-mile at Indy Raceway Park, where Foyt was supposed to be testing Watson's 220 Meyer-Drake sprint car. This was during the summer of 1961, and also present was one Mickey Rupp, a jockey of go-karts whose sister was married to Watson's brother. Foyt was late getting to the test so Watson tossed Rupp Foyt's helmet, saying, "I know you race go-karts, but do you think you can be a racing car driver?" Smelling opportunity, Rupp accepted the challenge, took one quick joy ride - and equaled IRP's lap record.

Not at all surprisingly, now the thing Mickey most wanted to become was a racing driver, but first of all he had to raise a family of a wife and four kids; launch a small but ambitious business manufacturing go-karts, snowmobiles, and mini-bikes; and of course continue starring in the almost-secret world of kart racing.

But by 1964 he was 28 – old for a sprint and Indy car driver – and couldn't wait any longer, even though he had no credentials whatsoever. He still was only a go-kart pilot, and go-karts, at this time, were held to be nothing but roller skates sounding like raspy chainsaws. Meaning that any USAC – U.S. Auto Club - racing team offering Mickey a ride would have had to be out of its mind.



**PERSONAL PROFILE** By Quentin Haines

## MICKEY RUPP: DOING THINGS RIGHT

...of all the boys of the dirt track, Mickey's name is the one that has become the most famous. He has won more championships than any other driver in the history of the sport. He has been crowned "King of the Dirt Track" several times. He has been named "Driver of the Year" by the International Karting Association several times. He has been named "Driver of the Year" by the International Karting Association several times. He has been named "Driver of the Year" by the International Karting Association several times.

**So who WAS Mickey Rupp?** No, correct that. Who IS Mickey Rupp and what did he do that was so special? Please read on.

Born in 1936 in Mansfield, Ohio, in the heart of the Great Depression, Herbert Edward Rupp II was the youngest child – by nine years – in the middle class home of Herb and Anna Rupp. Mickey's father and namesake was an engineer who, three years earlier, had co-founded the Gorman-Rupp Company (a pump manufacturer) in an old barn on the outskirts of Mansfield.

Young Herbert II had two other brothers and two sisters.

Because their dad was already well known around town as Herb Rupp, his sisters apparently thought young Herbert II needed an identity of his own. "I've heard several stories as to how or why they started calling me Mickey, but I think it was probably because I had a round head and big ears (a la Mickey Mouse). Anyway, it stuck," Rupp recalled recently with a chuckle.

Growing up in Mansfield, Mickey graduated from Mansfield Senior High School in 1953. He recalled, "I was an A and D student. I would get A's in math and chemistry and physics, the subjects I was interested in. Then I would get O's and just get by in English and history and the other subjects." He also played

Every generation has its own class of heroes. The heroes of the first generation of karters include Duke Dale Art Inghis, Duffy Livingston, Tom and Faye Pearson, Jimmy Yarnes and Ted Bell, among

Here's an example of the first production kart ever marketed and made to roll, owned by a 4th Grader (1952).

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So Mickey did the only thing he could. Spending huge - \$12,000 was a fantastic sum – he purchased a sprint car of his own, and it was a great one, the taut and truly beautiful Konstant Hot Special, which had just won two consecutive USAC seasonal titles. Built by the great Jud Phillips, one of the two original TMC ("Too Much California") kids – A.J. Watson was the other – it was regarded as the first really modern sprint car. And Mickey would need all its muscle, because he'd be confronting, among many, Foyt, Parnelli Jones, Don Branson, Jud Larson, Mario Andretti, Johnny White, Jimmy Maguire, Chuck Hulse and Bobby Unser who

**memorably declared, “Anybody who races a USAC sprint car has to get nicked – to fall by the wayside.”**

**Having already passed the 100-stitch mark in go-kart racing, Mickey well knew what getting hurt felt like, and he was unmoved at the sight of gore. Yet even by the lethal standards of the era, his very first sprint car race, on May 3, 1964, at New Bremen, in Ohio, was intense.**

**During warm-ups, even before time trials began, Bud Tinglestad, Al Miller, and Bobby Black all got upside-down and Black flew out of the ballpark and landed on his top in a corn field. Came the 15-mile feature and Bob Wente’s Wynn’s, Mario Andretti’s Gapco, Jimmy Maguire’s Venezia Brothers, and Chuck Hulse’s Fike Plumbing all piled up together in a collision and massive jam which started when Andretti struck Wente, causing both Maguire and Hulse to brake and somersault many times; Maguire later had to have an arm amputated; and the braining absorbed by Hulse kept him out of the Indy 500. All this happened on the same day!**



**Once the 15-mile feature re-started Mickey, still feeling racey, was beaten only by Larson, White, and Andretti. But on the hour and a half drive back to Mansfield, their home, his shaken wife Nancy spoke not one word, none.**

**“Racing like a USAC sprint car driver” was the highest accolade going so Mickey went on racing sprinters, despite having to put up with the usual rookie hazing: on the steep walls of deathtrap Salem, Foyt buzzed him so hard he almost put the tail of his car into Mickey’s**

**cockpit; returning to Salem another time Mickey ran over somebody's exposed wheel and his car jumped so high in the air that he could see the tops of Salem's notorious widow-maker willows; and, back at New Bremen, Mickey rammed into Steve Stapp so violently he first dislocated Stapp's shoulder and then performed an injury-free rollover of his own, which concluded with Mickey landing on his wheels, engine still running.**

**This was the way a USAC sprint car driver made his bones, and in 1965 it took Mickey to the place he most wanted to be, the Indy 500, even though the only automobile assigned to him was the Chapman Meyer-Drake roadster, one of Watson's ancient ironclads. Seeking tutelage, Mickey went to Parnelli Jones, Einstein of the Watson roadster, who lectured him, "Don't be a hero. If you spin, don't try to save it, lock it up." Ignoring Parnelli's warning, Mickey went back to what he did best, "Racing like a USAC sprint car driver," and spun 'round and 'round for the length of a football field while he was in the middle of what was supposed to be his rookie orientation test.**

**This last little adventure convinced Mickey that he'd had a belly-full of sitting up straight in front-engine sprint cars, and even laying down in Indy roadsters, and that he'd better go back to his rear-engine ancestry with go-karts. He didn't have far to look. Counterfeit Lotuses, phony Brabhams, hybrid Lolas, and other Yankee copycat rear-engines like the Gerhardt were all the rage in 1965, the fourth year of the Brickyard's funny car revolt. Establishment sprint car and roadster soldiers found such mutants impossible to drive, and a lot of teams, like tiny Central Excavating out of Cleveland, were struggling. So Mickey approached owner Pete Scalavi with the memorable pitch, "You've never heard of me, but I can kick A.J. Foyt's ass!"**





**It was the right thing to say to the right team. A decade earlier, another rookie, Crazy Russian Vukovich, had said something similar and Central Excavating had given him the driver's chair. Mickey, with a minimal amount of practice, time-trialed in the middle of the pack, 15<sup>th</sup> fastest. Then he charmed Central Excavating into adding the world's stiffest anti-sway bar; into tightening down the coil springs until they barely compressed an inch; into dropping the shock absorbers to the top of their bumps; and into radically lowering the chassis until Mickey's tush was nearly skimming the track. Running amok with tradition, Mickey had transformed an Indy car into a glorified go-kart.**

**“In go-kart racing,” Mickey once declared, “you learn to love racing wheel-to –wheel with people” But once the 500 started and he cleared traffic it was clear that the only people that Mickey was going to be racing with were Jimmy Clark, Parnelli and Mario, the three leaders. Jimmy was the world champion; and Parnelli and Mario were, just like Mickey, graduates of the school of racing like a USAC sprint car driver.**

**And Mickey didn't care - he tore after the trio in his under-powered Meyer-Drake like a kamikaze hunting for a battleship. Jimmy, who'd lapped him, got re-passed when Mickey unlapped himself. And then Mickey went after Parnelli and Mario. Mario's two mechanics, Clint**

**Brawner and Jim McGee were horrified at the spectacle of this Mickey Rupp, whom they'd never heard of before, gaining on Mario at the rate of half a second per lap.**

**Riding in the caboose of fourth place for 100 miles, Mickey wasn't surprised to find himself growing stronger instead of weaker. And the rigors of 500 miles posed no threat – only the previous season, at Willow Springs, in the high desert of southern California, in the broil of summer, he'd won a go-kart marathon of that distance.**

**At Indy's 450 mile mark, trying to alert Mario to the tremendous hell Mickey was about to raise just behind him, Clint and Jim couldn't think of anything else to do but blackboard RUPP COMING.**

**Then Mickey's throttle linkage began vibrating apart, and, over the concluding 35 miles, he tumbled backward to sixth, where he finished. For additional punishment, just as Mickey and his still-suffering wife Nancy were departing Gasoline Alley aboard one of Mickey's mini-bikes, Mickey and Nancy got dropped by some guy in a Triumph sports car who wasn't looking. Mickey scolded the guy, claiming, "I just raced 500 miles without a scratch, and look what you did to us!"**

**Mario barely edged him out for Rookie of the Year honors and then, just one week after the 500, at Milwaukee, Mario and Mickey were at it all over again, this time having a wheel-to-wheel battle for fourth place, which Mickey was winning, until a straggler forced him wide and Mario slipped past on the inside.**

**Mickey suddenly had Indy car racing by the throat – Mario, who really liked him, had Mickey added to Firestone's testing squad – and Central Excavating, for 14 seasons a no account team, was dreaming about winning the 1966 Indy 500.**

**Whereupon Mickey blew it all off. His five minutes of fame truly had been enough, and, besides, he had the responsibility of taking care of the 150 employees busily manufacturing Rupp Dart Kart go-karts, mini-bikes, and snowmobiles, with sales of 75,000 mini-bikes and 35,000 snowmobiles annually. Damn it all! A great racing career was ruined by somebody behaving reasonably.**

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