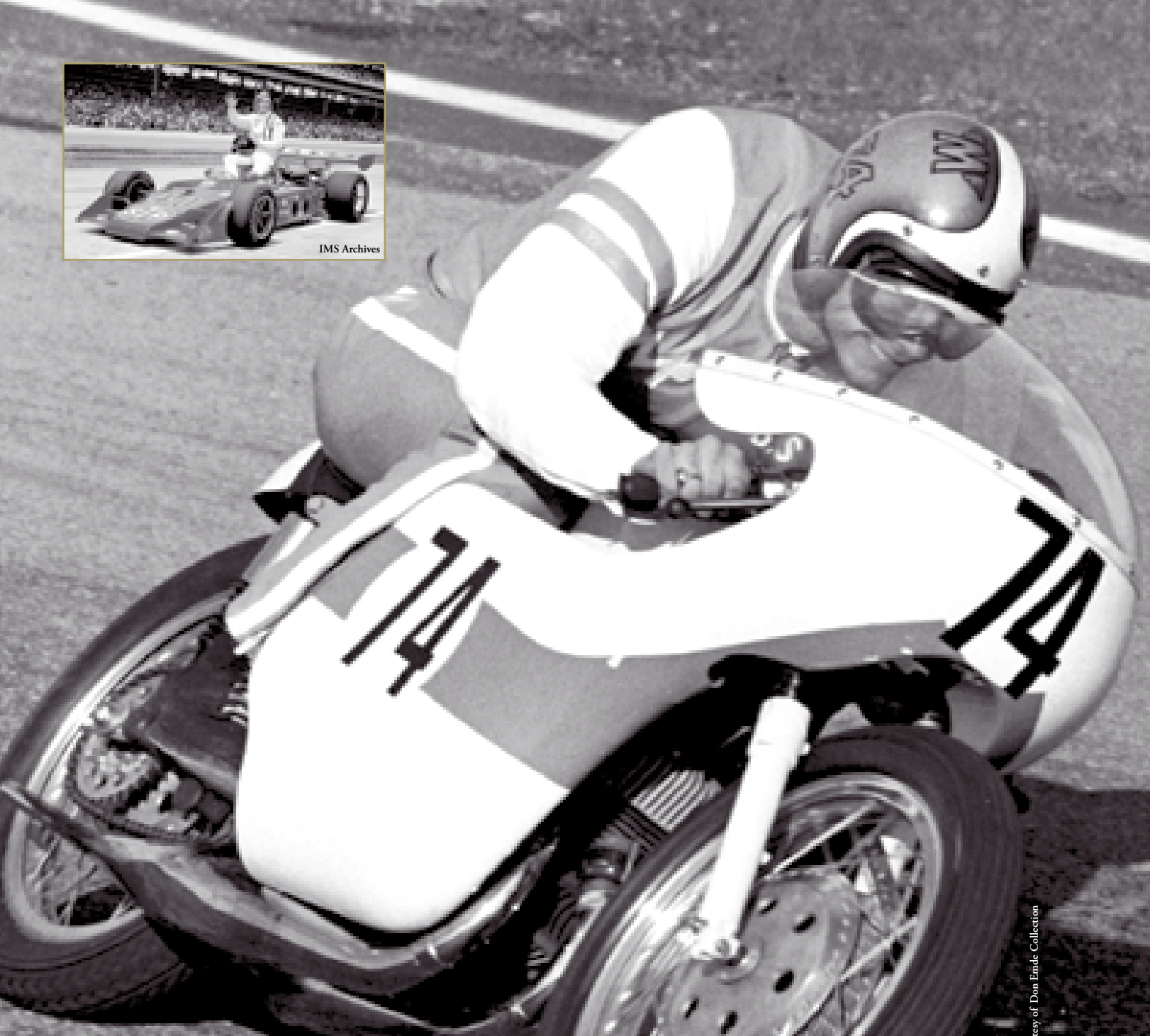




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Courtesy of Don Emde Collection

The Greatest Spectacle ...On Two Wheels

The Motorcycle Racing Exploits of Indianapolis 500 Drivers *story by: Donald Davidson*

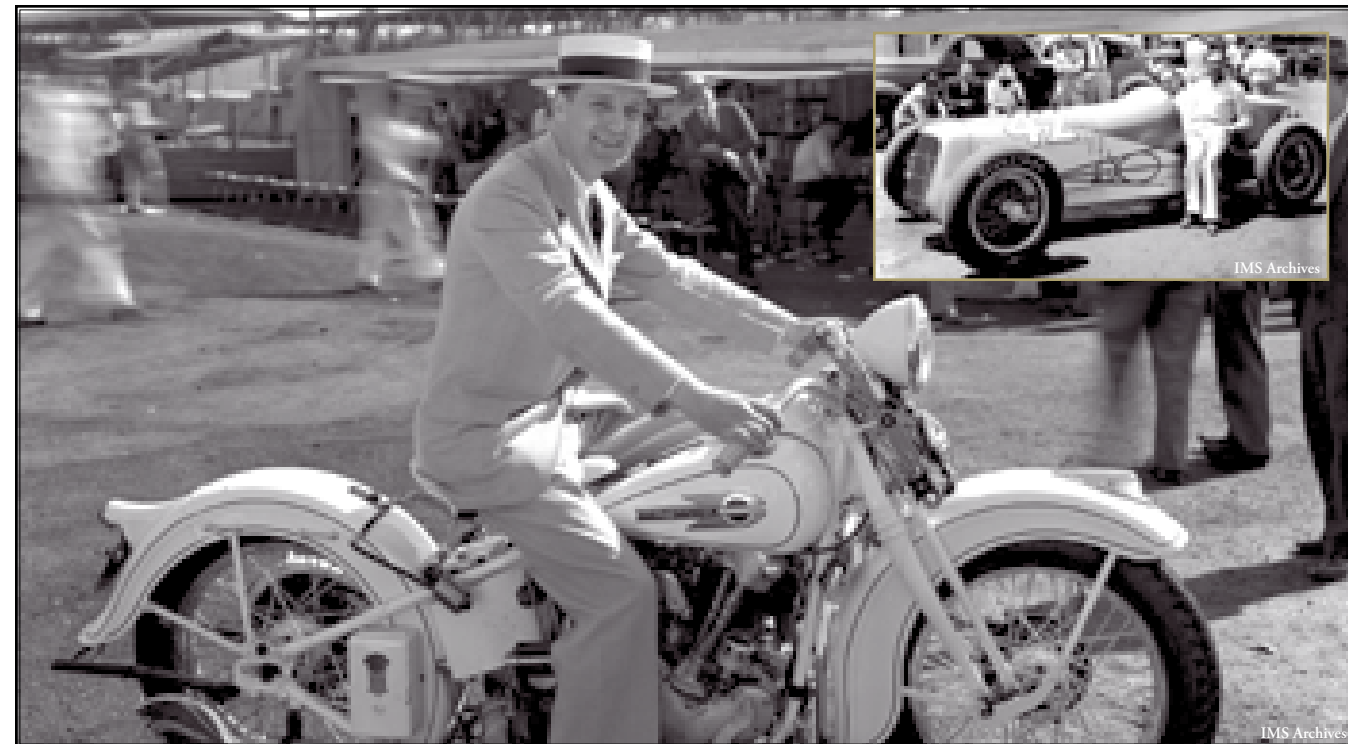
The “crossover” between the Indianapolis 500 and motorcycle racing is likely even greater than one might imagine, and it would be virtually impossible to list all of the “500” personnel who have been involved at one time or another with the two-wheeled sport in its numerous forms.

The most successful in both disciplines unquestionably have been Ralph Hepburn and Johnny Seymour in the first half of the last

century, Joe Leonard and Paul Goldsmith in the middle years and, in more recent times, motocross standout Jeff Ward.

But then there was E. G. “Cannon Ball” Baker, best known for dozens upon dozens of coast-to-coast transcontinental record runs on motorcycles and in automobiles, who raced in the inaugural motorcycle meet at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909, and later drove in the 1922 “500.” Charlie Merz, the third-place finisher

After rain shortens the race, Johnny Rutherford becomes the first “500” winner to walk into Victory Circle. — 1976



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Above: Later the producer of the short-lived Tucker automobile, Preston Tucker was the team manager for the ill-fated Ford V8 Miller racing team at Indianapolis in 1935 (*inset*), and at the time this shot was taken during “500” practice in 1936, he was general manager of a large Packard dealership near the corner of North Meridian and West 16th streets in Indianapolis. The inset photo, incidentally, is of ex-motorcycle racer Johnny Seymour.

Left: Colorful David Earl “Swede” Savage, who lost his life in a terrible accident while running fourth in his second Indianapolis start in 1973 (*inset*), is one of several “500” drivers who had raced motorcycles with success. In addition to flat tracks, TT events and motorcycle speedways in southern California, Swede twice competed in the 200-mile race at the Daytona International Speedway, placing 11th in 1966. In 1968, while already driving for Dan Gurney in Trans-Am and Can-Am sports car events, Swede was still a member of an Evel Knievel stunt troop which performed at Ascot Park Speedway and other such facilities.

for Stutz in the 1913 “500” (and later the “500” chief steward), had been an entrant in the track’s 1909 motorcycle meet, although he apparently did not start in any of the events. Johnny Kreiger, a leading motorcycle racer of the 1920s, competed in the 1932 “500” after having driven relief two years before that.

Not only did Joe Leonard compete in both the Daytona 200 for motorcycles and the Indianapolis 500 during his career, but so did Swede Savage, 1934 “500” winner Bill Cummings and Marty Roth. Marco Greco rode in some 500cc world championship events.

Lloyd Ruby raced motorcycles as a young man, and so did future “500” drivers Danny Ongais, Walt Faulkner, Johnny Mantz, Mack Hellings, Cecil Green, Jan Opperman, Bill Puterbaugh, Sonny Ates, Cory Witherall and countless others.

England’s John Surtees, a four-time world 500cc champion (and later the 1964 Formula One world champion) drove in private testing on at least two occasions at IMS, and was to have driven in the 1966 “500.” A serious back injury in Canada sidelined him, leading to Jackie Stewart driving in his place. Alberto Ascari, the future world champion who drove for Ferrari at Indianapolis in 1952, was a veteran of two-wheeled competition. Attempting to qualify (unsuccessfully) for the “500” in 1946 was Italian grand prix driver Achille Varzi, who earlier had raced motorcycles with success, as had the great Tazio Nuvolari, who was entered in both 1938 and 1946, but who did not compete.

On the other side of the coin, the great American road racer of

the late 1960s, Calvin Rayborn, served at least twice as a race day crew member, either personally for Dan Gurney or for a Gurney teammate. Chuck and Larry Palmgren served in similar capacities (Chuck is actually working for Dan at this very writing, more than 30 years later), as did the AMA champions of 1969 and 1970, Mert Lawill and Gene Romero, plus Babe DeMay and Swede Savage, who, of course, later drove in the “500.” Dan’s first shop “dyno” at All-American Racers, Inc., was set up by Al Gunter (runner-up to Leonard in AMA points in 1957), while Dan’s longtime chief engine builder, John Miller, had won many races in two-wheel competition. Even Dan himself had an occasional go, and continues to be very proud of his ride in the 1958 Big Bear run in which he finished 21st out of over 700 starters.

Stuntman Evel Knievel, who frequently credited J.C. Agajanian with having helped him in his early career, sponsored the car Gary Bettenhausen drove in the 1977 “500” and he also served as an honorary pit crew member for A.J. Foyt in 1978.

And these are just a few of those who had ridden in competition, not to mention the legions of others who have taken their motorcycles to Wally Dallenbach’s Colorado ranch over the years for recreational purposes. 🏍️

The next six pages depict some of the legendary motorcyclists who have had involvement with the “500,” with captions written by IMS Historian Donald Davidson. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to 1972 Daytona 200 winner Don Emde for generously allowing us to use several historical photos from his personal collection.

1977: During April tire tests, Gordon Johncock runs an unofficial lap of 200 mph.



Courtesy Don Ende Collection

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The first of the truly great competitors to make the switch was Ralph Hepburn, who ended up in the halls of fame for both two wheels and four. Hepburn won many races for Harley-Davidson in the late teens and early '20s, perhaps his greatest triumph being the last of the grueling 300-mile marathons to be held on the two-mile dirt track at Dodge City, Kan., on July 4, 1921. In 1923, he served as a crew member for Tommy Milton on the winning car at Indianapolis, and after winning that season's Pacific Coast title, he turned his attention to cars. He drove in his first "500" only 18 months later, and ended up with 15 starts between 1925 and 1946. He had five finishes of eighth or higher, the best being second in 1937 when, sharing the wheel with relief driver Bob Swanson, he missed beating winner Wilbur Shaw by only 2.16 seconds. It remained as the closest finish for 45 years until finally being beaten in 1982. Also third in 1931, fourth in 1941 and fifth in 1935, Hepburn undoubtedly is best remembered for his extraordinary qualifying run in 1946 (*inset*). Driving the first of the hugely popular Novi racing cars, he obliterated the existing records, raising the four-lap mark from 130.138 mph to 133.944 and the single-lap mark from 130.757 mph to 134.449. It was a huge blow to racing when he lost his life at the track in an accident during practice in 1948.



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Although occasionally assumed to be the figment of someone's imagination, there really was a person by the name of "Cannon Ball" Baker. Living most of his life in Indianapolis, Erwin George Baker had a brief career as a motorcycle circuit racer during which he rode in the first meet at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Aug. 14, 1909. He won event number seven, a 10-mile, standing-start sprint for amateur riders. It wasn't long before he began to embark on long-distance record-breaking and eventually to undertake coast-to-coast transcontinental record runs both in automobiles and on motorcycles. Sometime around 1914, a New York newspaper writer nicknamed him "Cannon Ball." He competed in one Indianapolis 500, finishing 11th in 1922 (*inset*), driving a Frontenac Special for the Chevrolet brothers. Years later, Baker served as NASCAR's commissioner from the time of its founding in December, 1947 until his death in 1960.

Producer of the immensely popular Indianapolis 500 yearbooks (1946-68), plus several hundred motorcycle and automobile-related titles, including *Cycle* magazine, Floyd Clymer was an ex-rider. He won the 1916 Pikes Peak Hill Climb on an Excelsior, shortly after having led one-third of the Dodge City, Kan., 300-mile marathon with a factory-backed Harley-Davidson. Riding for Indian at Denver in 1920, he beat his strongly favored teammate Floyd Dreyer (later "Pop" Dreyer) in the five-mile sidecar championship. In the sidecar was teammate Johnny Seymour, who later had six starts in the "500." Later the promoter of countless events, including Indianapolis Raceway Park's 200-mile AMA championship road race in the 1960s, Clymer spent a personal fortune in unsuccessful attempts at reviving Indian after its closure in 1953.



Courtesy Floyd Dreyer, Jr.

The Indian team on the day Floyd Clymer won the 1920 sidecar championship at Denver. From left to right are Johnny Seymour, a leading rider and later a "500" driver, who was Clymer's sidecar man on this day; Albert "Shrimp" Burns, another great early-day rider; hillclimb specialist/team manager "Red" Armstrong; Clymer; and Floyd Dreyer (later "Pop"), who usually was all but invincible in sidecar racing.



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Pop Dreyer was a much-sought-after fabricator and car builder who is seen here off in the distance between two other legends, fabricator/mechanic Myron Stevens and driver Frank Lockhart, while working on Lockhart's ill-fated land speed record car in the Stutz factory during the winter of 1927-1928.



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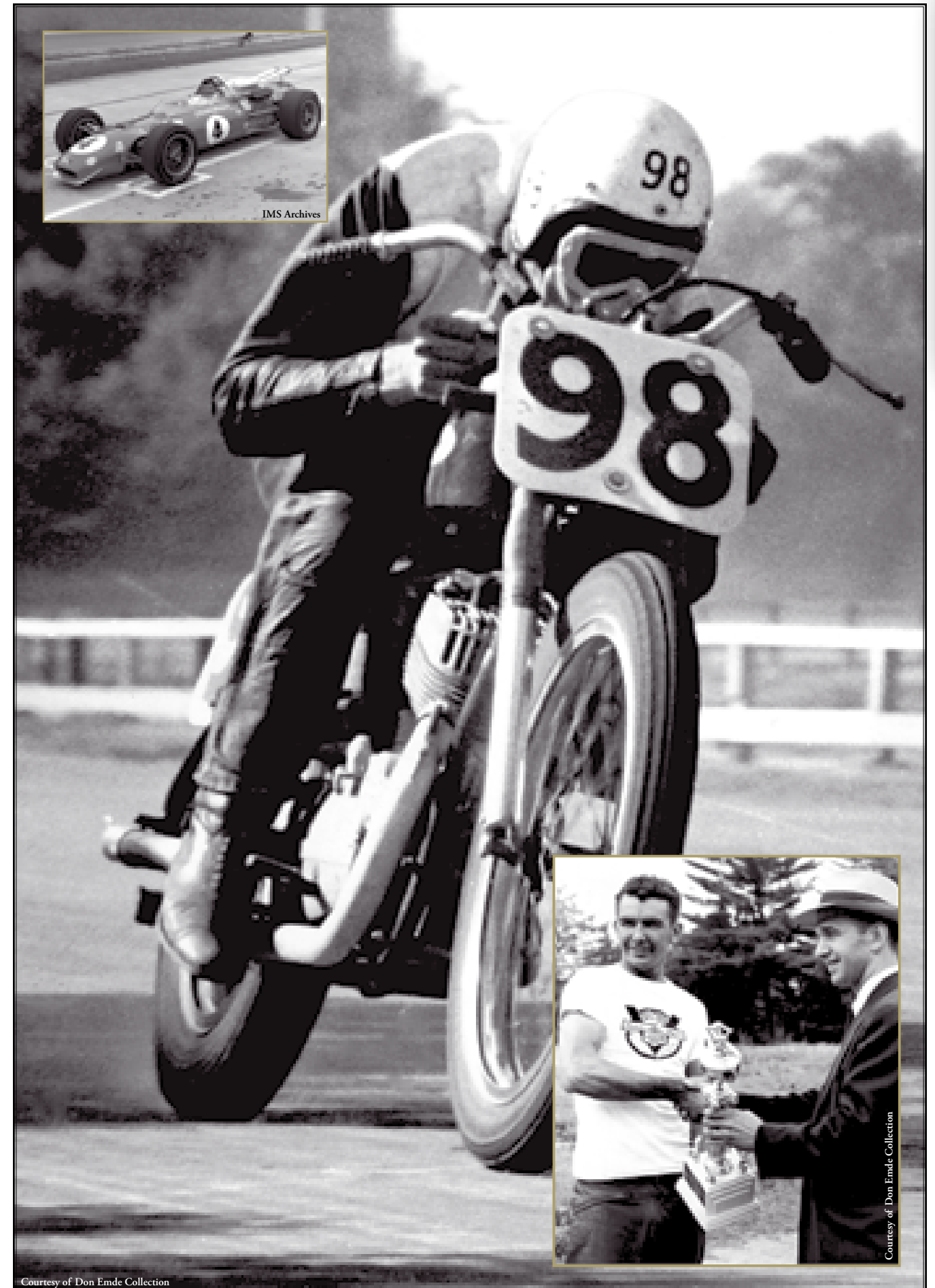
On the day after the 1964 "500," Indianapolis Motor Speedway President Tony Hulman poses astride a Ducati that Clymer (*right*) had at the track.



Above: The great Ralph de Palma, winner of the 1915 Indianapolis 500 (*inset*) and leader of more laps in “500” competition (612) than any other driver until 1987, raced motorcycles in the early part of the 20th century. Seen here astride an Indian in the pit area in 1947 (long after his retirement), he is accompanied by Roland Free, a two-time “500” competitor who had a long career on two wheels. Free gained considerable notoriety at the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1953 when he stripped down to a pair of swimming trunks and lay down on the fuel tank of a Vincent with his feet sticking straight back (for reasons of aerodynamics) in order to power through the flying mile at a world-record 150.313 mph.

Right: Joe Leonard in action on two wheels at Sacramento circa 1960. After several decades of declaring a variety of champions based on single-day events, AMA finally decided for 1954 that points would be offered for a series of major events on road courses, flat dirt tracks and TT so that one overall national champion could be declared. Finishing first and second in the 1954 final standings were close friends and Harley–Davidson teammates Joe Leonard and Paul Goldsmith, both of whom would go on to distinguished careers in the “500.” Joe also won the AMA title in 1956 and 1957, in addition to being runner-up in 1958, 1960 and 1961. He won 27 AMA national events. By this time, Joe was already racing midget cars and modifieds on the West Coast, and through the invaluable help of Goldsmith, he ended up driving USAC stock cars for Nichels Engineering. In the first year for Dan Gurney’s All-American Racers at Indianapolis in 1965, motorcycle enthusiast Gurney invited Joe to join Roger McCluskey and himself on the team. Joe ended up driving in nine consecutive “500s” between 1965 and 1973, finishing third in 1967 driving for A.J. Foyt (*top inset*) and third again in 1972 driving for Parnelli Jones and Vel Miletich. He came within nine laps of winning the 1968 race with one of Andy Granatelli’s controversial wedge-shaped Lotus turbines, and also had strong (but hampered) runs in 1969, 1970 and 1971. He won the 1971 Ontario (Calif.) 500 and the 1972 Pocono (Pa.) 500, winning the USAC national championship title in both seasons over his highly favored teammates, Al Unser and Mario Andretti.

The inset at bottom right is an image that likely hasn’t seen the light of day in over half a century. In it, Joe Leonard accepts the winner’s trophy for winning one of the 100-milers at Laconia (N.H.), circa 1953.



Courtesy of Don Emde Collection

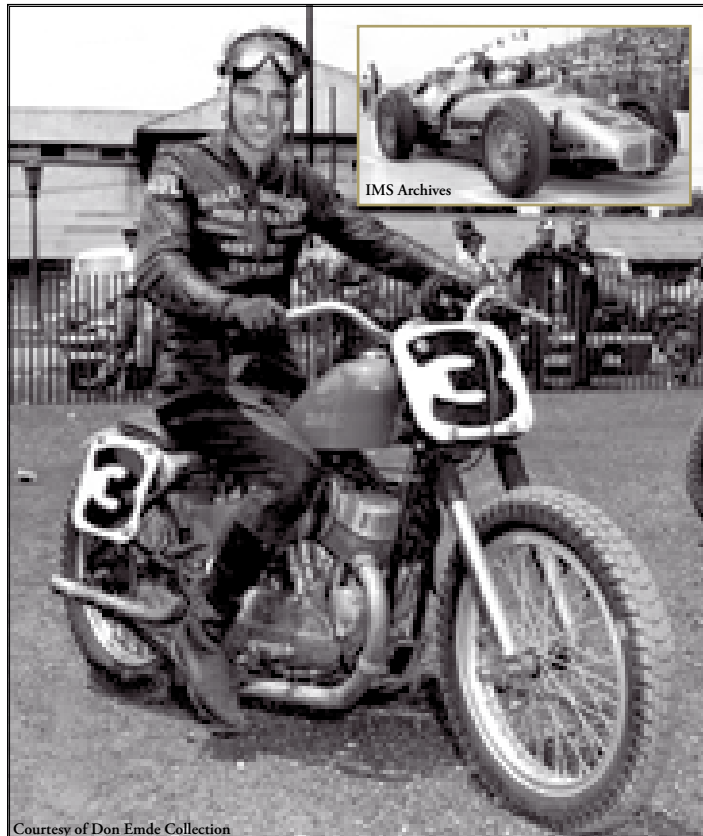


Later honored as AMA Life Member Number One, Joe Petrali won a then-record 49 AMA national titles on dirt tracks and board tracks and at hill climbs. So assured was he of his riding ability that in spite of being allowed multiple runs at hill climbs, the gentle Joe would usually load up after the first run, confident that nobody could beat his time. In 1937, he sped up and down the sands of Daytona Beach at an average speed of 136.183 mph to claim a world record for the flying mile. A longtime friend of Art Sparks (they stunt-rode in several Hollywood motion pictures), Joe was on Art's teams at Indianapolis for several years with Rex Mays, Jimmy Snyder and others. He was on the winning crew for George Robson in 1946 and Sam Hanks in 1957, and when Bill Vukovich took his "rookie" test in 1950, Joe was his chief mechanic. For over 20 years, Petrali supervised all of the land speed record attempts at the Bonneville Salt Flats for both motorcycles and automobiles, including the renowned runs of Craig Breedlove, Art Arfons, Gary Gabelich, Donald Campbell and others. So unassuming and fatherly was he in later years that many were surprised to learn that Joe had spent several years working for the reclusive Howard Hughes and that when the "Spruce Goose" had made its brief (and only) flight in Long Beach harbor in 1947, Joe was the flight engineer.

Top: Joe Petrali at an early 1930s West Coast meet, with Art Sparks (left) and driver H. W. "Stubby" Stubblefield.



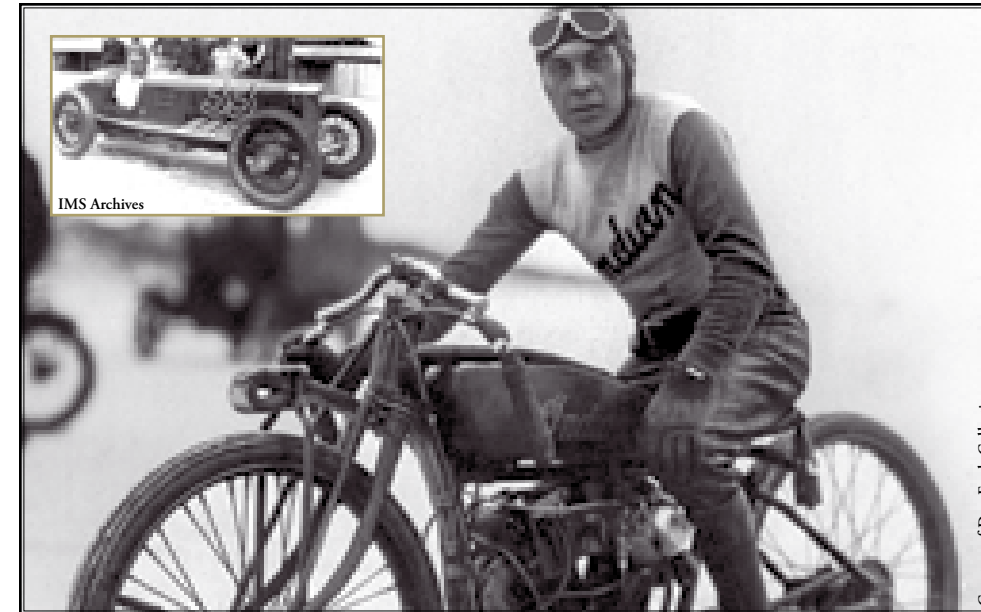
Center: That's Joe in Victory Lane in 1957, directly over the shoulders of winner Sam Hanks and actress Cyd Charisse.



Runner-up to Joe Leonard in the first-ever AMA Grand National championship based on points in 1954, consistent top-three finisher Paul Goldsmith won five major events, including the 1953 Daytona Beach 200 and one of the exceptionally grueling 100-milers at Langhorne, Pa. He became involved with NASCAR and teamed up with Henry "Smokey" Yunick, winning several events, including the last NASCAR Grand National ever to be held on the challenging beach course at Daytona in February 1958. That May, Goldsmith and Yunick came to Indianapolis with an ex-Lee Elkins Kurtis/Offenhauser which had been driven to fifth the year before by Andy Linden. In spite of never having driven an open-wheel car before in his life, Goldsmith qualified for the race (inset). He was involved in a huge multi-car accident on the very first lap but came back to place fifth in 1959 and third in 1960, on both occasions driving Norm Demler's Offy "laydown" with Ray Nichels and Tiny Worley as his mechanics. He also had strong runs in both 1961 and 1963, only to be forced out of potential top-five positions before the end both times.

Courtesy of Don Emde Collection

In one of the greatest finishes in Indy 500 history, Gordon Johncock bests Rick Mears by .16 of a second. : 1982



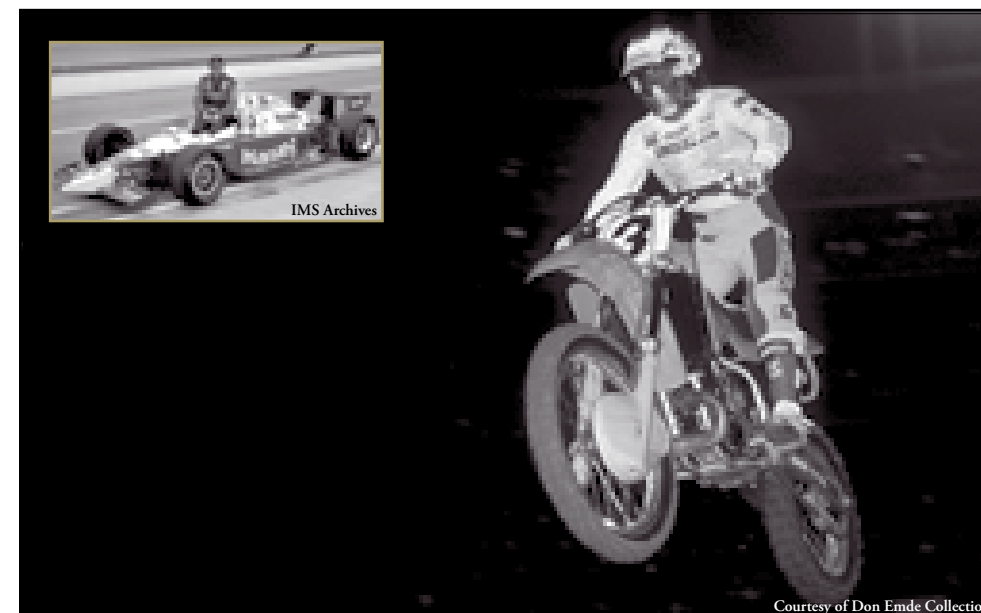
Courtesy of Don Emde Collection

Equally as proficient on dirt tracks as he was on the steeply banked wooden board track speedways, Indian-mounted Johnny Seymour was one of the leading riders of the '20s. In 1926, he covered the flying mile over the sands of Daytona Beach at a world-record speed of 126 mph. He won three national titles in 1926 and four in 1927 before following his longtime friendly rival Ralph Hepburn into auto racing. He had six starts in the "500" between 1928 (inset) and 1936, finishing 10th as a relief driver for Fred Frame in 1929.



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Bill Cummings, the popular local driver who won the 1934 Indianapolis 500 (inset) and two pole positions (1933 and 1937), was a keen motorcyclist who had worked as a motorcycle messenger in his youth. Seen here in the Speedway's garage area in 1936, he was to ride a Harley-Davidson in the very first Daytona 200 on the beach course in 1937, finishing a very creditable 27th out of 86 starters.



Courtesy of Don Emde Collection

In an extraordinary career, Scottish-born Jeff Ward won every major AMA motocross/supercross title, taking the 125cc class in 1984, the 250cc class in '85 and '87, and the 500cc class in '89 and '90, in addition to winning numerous other championships. He then turned to four wheels and competed in seven Indianapolis 500s, earning the Rookie of the Year title for achieving a third-place finish driving for Eddie Cheever Jr. in '97. In '99 he was runner-up to Kenny Bräck in the "500" while driving for Pagan Racing, and placed fourth for A.J. Foyt in 2000 (inset).

1983 : Setting one- and four-lap track records, Teo Fabi becomes the first Indy 500 rookie pole winner since 1950.