Joe Scalzo's
City of Speed and elsewhere

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Tormented all race long by Team Penske drivers, further victimized by a cross-threaded wing nut on a pit stop, and with the finish of the 1993 New England 200 at New Hampshire International Speedway barely 50 miles away, Nigel Mansell got on the two-way to his squad of Newman/Haas mechanics.

"We're going to have fun for the last 50 laps, boys." he radioed. Hearing this, the men of Newman/Haas, who were one of Indy car racing's most finely-tuned offenses, read through Mansell's pose of British understatement to break the code of what he was really saying and prepared for battle conditions.

And battle was what they got. Averaging 165 mph, Mansell stalked and caught Emerson Fittipaldi and then for good measure he rooted out Paul Tracy.

Then it really began. Caught up in the adrenaline of the fight, Mansell had been well aware of the risks he was taking and their consequences. But now, by raising the stakes and speeds, he was playing by the Ernie Hemingway rules: Fuck the rules and consequences.

Tracy answered the challenge and went right with him. And for those four final fantastically dangerous laps, with lapped cars presenting problems and opportunities, Mansell and Tracy jammed and attacked. Then Mansell broke out of the duel and won the New England 200 by half a second.

Pandemonium followed. All half-dozen Newman/Haas mechanics who had passed the 200 miles frying their palms replenishing Mansel's worn Goodyears, getting knocked deaf by his shrieking Cosworth, and risking getting blown away by burning methanol, went berserk.

Chief mechanic Tom Wurtz, who once got paid to lug mortar shells around Indochina for Uncle Sam, and who had been swapping Mansell's right front tire, embraced Ray Sorenson across from him on the left front. Trevor Weston, the team comedian and re-fueling man, savored the victory with vent man Ken Swieck, just back from laming an ankle at Indianapolis. Out on the pit lane, Tim Coffeen (Tim the Hippie) right rear tire changer, and Tim (Dawg) Homburg, changer on the left rear, were screaming and running toward each other at peak speed.

Mansell had been their surrogate - ever risky swerve, every nervous dart he'd made, they'd been riding along with him. And even though it was another victory, it was more than that. This time their driver literally put his life on the line for them. Nothing moves mechanics more.

Indy cars bristle with technological gizmos. Inside the huge Newman / Haas complex in Chicago, a phenomenal number of hours were required to take one apart, inspect it, then put it back together again right, and this was complex and unemotional work. But combat pit stops during an Indy car race were complex and highly emotional as well as dangerous and the six Newman/Haas mechanics lived for them.

Not all Indy car teams in the Twentieth Century were equal – unequal in terms of money and competence, and unequal in terms of spirit. Mechanics for many on many of the minor teams seemed such robots they behaved as if they were getting paid to waste their time. Or just wanted to see themselves on TV.

Then there were the mechanics of Team Penske and those of Newman/Haas. They were dominant but different. Team Penske mechanics seemed so Prussian and thorough while moving along at march-step that rival mechanics secretly ridiculed them as "the Prussians." By comparison, Newman/Haas mechanics –Wurtz, Sorenson, Weston, Siwieck, Coffeen, and Hamburg – all were come-as-you-are personalities. They talked loudly, had a snap to their walk, oozed professionalism and confidence.

A term suggested itself: warrior mechanics. When not busy preening million-dollar Indy cars, or flying over the tops of pit walls, performing split-second acts of derring-do, Newman / Haas guys got together pumping iron, wailing boxing speed bags, playing intramural basketball, and, to keep their wind up, running in 10K and half-marathons.

They'd been hard workers and crack veterans of almost every type of racing and they enjoyed exchanging war stories about the racing drivers they have worked for and all the series of races they have competed in, from the old Can-Am, to Formula l, to IMSA, to the outlaw dirt tracks.

Tom Wurtz, once affiliated with Team Shadow, recalled the days when George Follmer, the pugnacious insurance salesman, used to give Jackie Oliver a smash in the mouth whether he deserved it or not. Dawg Homburg had riveting yarns about his father, a true racing "Hot Dawg" in Wisconsin. And Tim Coffeen had tall-sounding racing driver tales of his own, particularly about Jan Opperman, the rebel from the counterculture who changed Coffeen's life and earned him his nickname.

Coffeen – Tim the Hippie – was tall, imposing, and barricaded behind sunglasses. He'd been a warrior mechanic through three decades and, at 41, may even have been getting old for the job. Indianapolis born and obsessed by racing, once he was a racing driver himself: Years in the past, before going broke, he'd spent a season residing inside a ramshackle station wagon named "Shakey" while attempting and failing to barnstorm a sprint car.

Nor was racing entirely burned out of Coffeen now. In the recent past, he'd been an overworked member of a skeleton crew of eight mechanics for the under-financed Machinists Union team and elected to race a sprint car at Paragon Speedway the night before the Indy 500; got heavily upside-down; and, though black and blue, did a credible job helping service all four Machinist cars in the following morning's 500.

Men and women of action motivate Coffeen, who has excellent role models within his own family. There was, for example, the uncle who in World War ll was lost in action and kept himself alive for 74 days on a raft, paddling among the Solomon Islands. And also Coffeen's mother, widowed young, who singlehandedly reared Coffeen and his many siblings. As for Coffeen himself, detours as a bartender, tire buster, carpenter, and furniture hauler had taken him far from Indy car racing. But warrior racing drivers – racing drivers who welcome the fight, who accept any invitation to do so, and want their nerves tested – always brought Coffeen.

In that regard, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was what Coffeen considered his great fortune to be working for Newman/Haas when its driver was Michael Andretti. But Michael's ill-chosen decision to depart for Formula 1 left Coffeen and his five

fellow mechanics speculating what life would be like with an Englishman, Nigel Mansell, F1's world champion.

And soon they found out. Mansell won the pole and Indy car race in the Antipodes. Then he went to the mile at Phoenix International Raceway. "Phoenix can bite you," he was warned. He had to, however, discover this fact for himself by - going 185 – punching a hole in the PIR fence. Flinching from lower back pain when he arrived in Southern California for the Grand Prix of Long Beach, he demonstrated that blocking – blocking apparently is OK in F1 – was the only way to defeat Little Al Unser's art of deep-braking. And Mansell continued being astounding at Indy, Milwaukee, Michigan, and elsewhere

So, long before 1993's big adventure at New Hampshire, Mansell had the Newman/Haas boys eating out of his hands. Bursting with admiration, Tim Coffeen declared of Mansell at the time, "He's a maniac! He's a gas man! And he reminds me more of Jan Opperman than anybody I ever worked with!"

Saying this, Coffeen must have realized how strange it sounded. Nigel Mansell and Jan Opperman? Mansell was the reigning champion of the world, the about-to-be champion of Indy cars, and a racing driver celebrated across the planet. And Jan Opperman, now pretty much forgotten, remains the property of a tiny elite, including Coffeen, his reputation hanging on his brief, difficult, astonishing, racing seasons of 1972 to 1976.

He entered racing a bonafide curiosity, and he never escaped such a status. Partied-out, hashed-out, fornicated-out, Opperman was damaged goods from the generation of flower children. Seemingly wrung out and exhausted much of the time, he nonetheless had the energy to motivate, inspire, enlighten almost everybody he came in contact with. He was a racing driver deluxe. But then, just when he was on the brink of attaining wide fame at last, racing devoured him.

Of medium height, long-haired but balding, Opperman never did anything half-heartedly. Born outside Los Angeles, raised in the Pacific Northwest, his earliest ambitions included prize fighting, motorcycle racing, and working as a farrier – an artisan who hammers shoes onto the hoofs of horses. Instead, he drifted into San Francisco and on Haight-Ashbury joined the seemingly insane generosity of exchanging food, money, females, and "laughing grass." But

upon visiting a mysterious hippie institution, the Golden Gate Church, hotbed of spiritualism and séances, Opperman flipped out; caught mono and joined a commune.

In that same commune was a burned-out racing mechanic named "Yogie," who was dreaming of weighing anchor on the straight world and taking a hippie sabbatical of his own. "You teach me how to be a racing driver," Opperman urged him, "and I'll teach you how to be a hippie."

Yogie got him out of California and off to the dreamy farmlands where Opperman strapped on a ton of nitro-methane- burning sprint car for the county fair theater of unlimited horsepower racing. Very few people from Indy cars are likely to understand what such competition was like: No-holds-barred dueling breaking out 100 nights a week in 35 states, usually at night, on dirt tracks so destructive drivers were obliged to wear 10 tear-away lenses over their goggles for eye protection.

Opperman's earliest blunderbusses were shitboxes. One had an engine out of an airplane; it had blinding power but was hard to turn. But an early motorcycle-racing maxim held fast: charge WFO into impossible situations regardless. And Opp started winning.

When not over-busy with his racing, he now lived out on the great, lonely, Nebraska plains, amongst a colony of hardscrabble farmers, one of whom was a soft-hearted religious fanatic who blind-sided Opperman with his holy fervor and converted him into a charismatic born-again Christian – a devout, evangelical, roarer, whose scorching exhortations said ,mainly, "Love your neighbor!"

Opperman was caught in a paradox and probably was in a great deal of psychic pain because there were two Jan Oppermans: the one was preaching God's word to a growing flock; the other –the warrior racing driver Opperman – was doling out humiliating beatings on the race track,

And then he became brilliant. Came the 1970s, he took up residence in central Pennsylvania, occupying a remote old river farmhouse above the Susquehanna, where he landed the hot ride in No.99, the trademark orange Bogar Speed & Show house sprint car, whose prime members became its chief mechanic Ralph Heinzelman his assistant Phil ("Hash") Lash, and, of course, Opperman himelf. The trio evolved into the almighty force which could mobilize and mount a pillaging raid on any dirt track in the country and, usually, win.

Wild scene. American racing's hippest and most passionate fans came from sprint car racing, and all of them were thrilling at the sight of them, one of fan saying, "Dig it, that's a heavy dirt track!," and another one answering, "Yeah, and Jan and Ralph and Hash are going to bring some of it up directly!" Then, sure enough, Opperman in the orange Bogar No. 99, with its violent rat motor V8 and gargantuan, thin-sidewall, drag-racing rubber would erupt around the track blasting soil and rocks into the next county.

Opperman never was satisfied, was forever changing and adjusting the Bogar No. 99 or exhorting Ralph and Hash to: twisting, turning, tuning the suspension; constantly and compulsively experimenting with different rubber; switching from four- to three-wheel dirt braking, which he preferred; fiddling with gear ratios, fuel mixtures, and always totally absorbed with his work and goal of winning.

By 1974, after years of chaotic existence among punchy pugilists, wild bikers, freaky hippies, werewolf spiritualists, fiery holy rollers, fanatical evangelists, and the country's fastest sprint car racers, Opperman, the great non-conformist, chose a radical change of pace.

He trained his attentions on the most conformist, xenophobic, and biggest automobile race of them all, the Indy 500.

Opperman did not go as a provocateur; he just needed money, as usual, and also hoped to get in some Jesus witnessing. Realizing he'd be considered too raw and scruffy for the mainstream, and that in effect he was going behind enemy lines, he was certain of getting a hostile reception.

Arriving at the Brickyard gates, he was wearing his standard regalia, i.e. the "Jesus is Lord" button; the necklace with the bear tooth, gifted him by his deceased young brother, a sprint car-racing statistic; and the zodiac bracelet. Plus the usual dress; the torn and fading jeans; moccasins with holes in them; the orange T-shirt from Bogar speed shop; and the outrageous old hat - another gift from his dead brother - covering his shiny pate.

Holding hands with his five-year-old daughter, Opperman crashed the doors of Vel's Parnelli Jones, Gasoline Alley's wealthiest team, and, after reminding it that Parnelli, too, had come out of sprint cars, persuaded the team to give him the keys to VPJ's third-string racing car.

Having no knowledge of an Indy car, let alone a rear-engine one, Opperman time-trialed poorly, only 32nd fastest, parking himself on the last row. But the race was different. Before a right rear tire punctured and put him out of the running before the 500 was half over, Opperman was running a lap ahead of all his fellow rookies. All the same, the Indy 500 had been nothing special to him: just another ecstatic ride.

After VPJ ran out of budget money to run a third team car, Opperman was obliged to regroup with Ralph, Hash and the dependable Bogar No. 99. This also led to his unusual friendship with Tim Coffeen. Coffeen, just 21, was feeling rebellious after the U.S. Auto Club had vetoed his request for a chief mechanic's license and, still in a rebellious mood, had traveled to PA where Opperman, whom Coffeen knew by reputation and revered, was racing at Reading. Working like a slave, he pitched in and helped Jan, Ralph, and Hash all night. "Thanks for all the help, brother," Opperman, confused, told Coffeen afterward, "but, errr, who are you?"

Coffeen subsequently became one of the many unreformed outcasts, Jesus freaks, and mesmerized racers living off Opperman in those years. Not living off him in the financial sense but living off him in terms of the energy and mystique radiating off him.

Opperman then was 34, and of the opinion that he was beyond it, and that age and wear and tear were eroding his reflexes and talents. Yet he still dared raise the danger level so high that even his wife often turned her face to avoid the anxiety of having to watch him race. "Chicken," he reproached her.

Coffeen never turned his head. And it observed Opperman doing tricks with a racing car – making it float and fly - like nobody else except, later, Nigel Mansell.

Others, too, were watching. Including the operators of Longhorn Racing, an emerging Indy car, championship dirt car, and sprint car squadron who decided that Jan Opperman was the racing driver they most needed.

Longhorn sent Opperman to the California 500 at Ontario Motor Speedway, and this was one of the last trips Opperman and Coffeen made together. First they came high-balling into Indianapolis at dawn, bleary-eyed from a New York dirt track show. Stopping briefly at Methodist Hospital, they visited Steve Schultz, a badly-injured – and impoverished – sprint car friend and Opperman, still the sharing hippie, left behind a hundred-dollar bill. Then they visited Coffeen's home. His nomadic ways had gotten Coffeen sideways with his mother, so Opperman affected a remonstration between them.

Opperman finished sixth in the California 500 and Coffeen performed his vent work. Afterward, to earn a little extra prize money, on the way home they stopped in Los Angeles for a buzzbomb midget meet at Ascot Park Speedway. Competition was tough, including Mel Kenyon, the nonpareil champion. All Opperman could dig up for a ride was an outdated VW, and to make it run fast had to implore its owner to install a screaming gear ratio.

Coffeen remembered the race: "Jan was especially exact about the pit signals he liked. Touching my head meant that Kenyon, who was running behind him, was running the high groove. Touching my waist meant Kenyon was in the middle. Touching my knee meant that Kenyon was running low.

"Well, Jan was leading and running the middle and Kenyon was gaining on him

running high. So when I touched my head Jan moved up high too. And Kenyon immediately dropped low and passed him. To myself I thought, 'Oh, no, Jan will kill me for this.' But Kenyon turned over his car and Jan won again."

But it all ended badly for Opperman and Coffeen back in Indianapolis in the high summer of 1976, at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. Opperman was, typically fighting hard. So hard was he fighting the race's leader that the leader lost control, spun out, and forced Opperman to flip over missing him. The front wheel on another car entered Opperman's cockpit and struck his helmet.

The licensing regulations of racing are lax, and Opperman was permitted two comeback attempts, crashing and aggravating his head wounds each time. For five miserable years, while convalescing deep in the Big Sky country of Montana, on the tumbledown ranch he'd purchased as a sanctuary for wayward kids, Opperman knew more bad days than good ones.

Coffeen, perhaps Opperman's perfect disciple, paid a visit. "I know your face, brother," Opperman said with some embarrassment, "only I can't remember your name."

"Tim ---" "Coffeen!" Opperman cried, in sudden recollection.

Jan Opperman died in September of 1997, aged 58. Even better than being an astounding racing driver, perhaps he is best remembered for being the stalwart born again Christian who truly believed it when he said: "In this world we're all neighbors and, baby, we got to love us all!"