

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Rubber Checks

Corporate ego-trippers beguile Indy 500 drivers by turning them into overnight millionaires...Racing contracts worth hundreds of thousands change hands while chasing a golf ball, or over a game of gin...spellbound engineers exchange dingbat designs for megabuck buyouts...Panicky security measures are installed that could have impressed the CIA...

Those were just a few of the astonishing episodes taking place during racing's Tire War, 1963-1973, a gigantic rubber conflict waged between Goodyear and Firestone that require ten long years to reach armistice.

This was a war of insane costs, irrational desires and mad designs on and off the racing tracks, and back in 1963, when the tire barons first started their big fight, Firestone Tire & Rubber's hold on all racing, not just the Indy 500, was dynastic. Its winning streak in the Indy 500 extended back to the decades when photos of boozy Barney Oldfield, the Goodyear turncoat, appeared in magazine ads with the blowhard quote, "My only insurance is Firestone tires!"

Goodyear, by comparison, hadn't produced any Indy 500 merchandise for 43 years, nearly half-a-century, and, for all that time, its employees were growing more and more impatient listening to Firestone paterfamilias' Harvey and Leonard rubbing it in with



victories gained on what Goodyear considered inferior rubber.

Firestones weren't named "Flintstones" for nothing. Memorial Day after Memorial Day the same Speedway issue Firestones (that looked like black rubber but felt like cast iron) arrived at Indy,

leading to the evolution of an elementary racing technique.

A driver circulated the bricks until his Flintstones grew threadbare. And upon suddenly seeing white canvas – there was no safety liner – the driver either made an immediate panic pit stop or suffered a violent blowout and met the wall. And it was the same for everyone. At the dawn of the tire war, not only was everybody racing on the same sets of iron Flintstones, but also was tooling monolithically identical Kurtis-Kraft, Watson, Kuzma, Lesovsky, and Epperly roadsters, and were all depending on the same Meyer-Drake Offenhauser mill. This was innocent, penny-pinching, hard-racing which the coming economic forces of rubber combat would shatter forever.

Tire-wise, terrible things never happened back then, save for 1956's notorious "May Pop" 500, when the bricked Speedway had just been paved over, and Firestones exploded by the numbers ("Your Flintstones may pop," the garage area adage went, "or they may not.")

By coincidence, company field men just back from duty on NASCAR's deep south tour, were spinning impressive yarns of how Firestone's huge 8:20 stock car specials were making the firm's Indy hardware look tall, thin, and antique. Firestone's management was infamous for being conservative and mulish, and its refusal to certify such product for the Indy 500 drove some of its best field talent to drink.

Sunday, April 21, 1963 was the initial skirmish of Tire War, and its first round was fired not at Indy, but on the mile oval at Trenton. The bright New Jersey sun reflected smartly off the fat sidewalls of the very first Goodyear-shod Indy car, the Sterling Plumbing No. 56, converted dirt-tracker, pushrod V8 Stovebolt oil-burner, its livery a faded Day-Glo orange.

Owner/driver Jim Hurtubise, well-known to the Mate's White Saloon saloon mob back in Indy as "Hercules." or, simply, "Herk," was a giggling free-spirit, who, typically, arrived late at Trenton and time-trialed poorly.

Then, just as the Star-Spangled Banner was concluding, and the rest of the cars were beginning their pace lap, the Sterling Plumbing No. 56, shitbox, appeared.

The spearhead of Goodyear's coming invasion was trailing a haze of lubricant smoke, and Herk could be seen busily rummaging through the contents of a box of sanitary napkins – such filters were perfect for plugging cockpit oil leaks.

The Trenton 100 had taken off. There hadn't been a set of wheels that the Sterling was capable of keeping up with in a straight line, yet Herk's Goodyears did their best work

in the corners: from an unlucky 13th starting hole, the Sterling flew to a third place finish. Ironically, instead of a Goodyear field manager, it was a Firestone man, sly old John Laux – known as the “Mayor of the White Front” (bar) – who’d been Herk’s secret motivator. What Laux most wanted to see was Firestone Racing with its stock car specials. And, as Laux well knew, if Goodyear got its own stockers certified first, Firestone would be forced to follow. Such was Laux’s tricky script.

Two weeks afterward, the scene shifted back to the Indy, where five Memorial Days had to be completed before Goodyear at last could terminate Firestone’s decades-long streak of wins.

The 1963 500 was particularly exciting. In a blitzkrieg attack that caught Goodyear by surprise, Firestone hit the Brickyard with lower and wider rubber, for the invading, revolutionary, mid-engine, Lotus-powered-by-Fords. Such radical Firestones won the ’63 500, plus those of 1964, 1965, 1966, and 1967.

Goodyear, in turn, tried returning fire with flexible new sidewalls that were so unsuccessful they had to be withdrawn in humiliation. But in ’65, a Goodyear car sat on Indy’s pole, and in ’66 a pair of Goodyear cars made the front row, flanking a Firestone car in the center. Chaos followed. On the rolling start, the Goodyear car on the outside swerved in front of Firestone’s car in the middle, whose driver had to jam on his brakes, provoking a ten-car wreck which knocked out Firestone and Goodyear cars alike. Following the re-start, Goodyear continued absorbing grief when two more of its cars collided and left the field; by the finish, Firestone cars were running first and second.

Goodyear, smoldering, and nursing the wounds of all its defeats, concluded – belatedly – that inventing the fastest product wasn’t enough, and that putting Indy 500 teams under contract to use Goodyears, made much more sense economically.

And so, courtesy of rubber checks from Goodyear and Firestone -- who also quickly got into the act -- Indy car racing began growing rich. Not just the big-spending teams were prospering; Tire War seemed to benefit everyone. Say some that even owners of run-of-mill Indy teams, many whose prospects were dubious, got invited to shoot a fast nine holes of golf with one of Goodyear’s big shots, or, perhaps was asked to play some fast hands of gin with some suit from Firestone.

Shortly afterward, the surprised car owner was often stunned to discover that he'd negotiated a whole damn season's worth of free Indy 500 Goodyears or Firestones tires, plus operational expenses for the whole year, paid in advance.

Gradually it dawned on Goodyear and Flintstone alike that they were behaving churlishly making team owners alone rich – why not make the Indy 500's champion drivers rich, too?

Not only could such champions win races, but they'd be invaluable to both corporations as PR flacks just as Barney Oldfeld had been. And, sure enough, the likes of Foyt, Gurney, Jones, young Johncock, and the even younger Andretti, soon were starting up their own teams.

Tire War brought about a whole new, capitalistic, world for Brickyard veterans, and even raw rookies, enabling them to get away with playing runner gigolos. In the 1968 500, Bucknum, a carpetbagger from Formula 1, time-trialed a Goodyear car, got disqualified for being underweight, and, suddenly without a ride, threw himself at the mercy of Firestone, which responded with a piece of equipment filched from Team Andretti; Goodyear, in a fit of pique, next got Bucknum thrown out of the motel room it had been paying for; and then Bucknum was returned to the room, with apologies, after his Goodyear ride was re-weighted, passed, and reinstated, for the 500.

A quantum leap in fantastic anecdotes sweeping Gasoline Alley wasn't Tire War's only contribution to the sport. The influx of mega-dollars not only was making everything predictably exorbitant to buy, but also exorbitantly proficient.

Consequently, the late 1960s and early 1970s became decades of fiendishly high-tech bric-a-brac, most of which blew up in the faces of Goodyear and Firestone: A brazen lot of self-proclaimed Indy car scientists and engineers stepped forward to claim their shares of Tire War's booty. Goodyear capital, for example, paid for the construction of the Antares Manta, an ungainly monster guaranteed by its inventors to top Indy's 200 mph lap; after missing that mark by a mere 18 mph, it was hailed Goodyear's most expensive failure. It wasn't. That distinction properly belonged to a hushed-up and experimental Goodyear turbine which was ruled illegal before it even made its way out of the examination line.

Firestone, too, in 1967, 1968, and 1969, got tarred by failed turbines Much less able to afford failures than Goodyear, because it was by far the smaller corporation,

Firestone's most exotic, expensive, disastrously unsuccessfully, and ruinous examples of technological over-kill was its trio of "Dihedrals," which belonged to the Parnelli Jones self-proclaimed Super Team," which spearheaded the corporation's Indy car attack.

These were freak monsters with stubby wings sprouting from their broad backs in V's. Their English creator performed his work under conditions of top-secrecy, meaning that the Super Team's three star drivers, two Indy 500 winners and a national champion, weren't permitted to observe construction. So that the three Dihedrals could be moved around secretly, the Super Team also went to the expense of spending thousands more of Firestone's rubber budget on Indy racing's first 18-wheel transport.

Early in 1972, during a hysterical Firestone news conference at Ontario Motor Speedway, all three Super Team drivers -- Andretti, Al Unser, and the Harley hog biker Joe Leonard, who'd been converted into an Indy car driver --all salivated over their new toys, dueling to see which of them got to turn a Dihedral's first lap. Unser won and his speed was so slow it was chilling. Andretti, too, managed barely one lap -- in the OMS north turn he had sensed the Dihedral tightening its jaws around his posterior.

Acrimony on the Super Team raged for the rest of that season. With the Dihederal's designer attacking Andretti, Unser, and Leonard for not giving his V-wings a chance, and the drivers professing their dissatisfaction until matters were disinfected with the removal of the V-wings.

The three drivers got their way. Meanwhile, Leonard the old biker, who really knew nothing about Indy cars, motored around cautiously in his own Dihedral, never sensing anything was the matter with it, and won Firestone a national championship, the only thing a Dihedral car ever won.

All the while, Tire War's spending remained profligate. Firestone was exhausting \$17 million a season, and Goodyear was perhaps doling out twice that figure, although nobody would say for sure. And only one notorious ingrate of an Indy-racing personality was raising the dangerous question no one else was -- what might happen to the 500 should Goodyear and Firestone stop spending and pulled out?

The notorious ingrate was Clint Brawner, a bellicose chief mechanic on Firestone's hottest Indy squad, with Andretti its driver. Having served a self-abnegating and un-

glamorous apprenticeship storing up useful information during the Indy 500's most penny-pinching period (a frugal era when money was so scarce that the 500's chief mechanics were forced to use and re-use the same old gaskets, pistons, and even



crankshafts) Brawner, with his trademark Bedouin bandanna and ancient straw hat, was incensed by what he regarded as the excesses of Tire War.

Firestone already had learned that Brawner was the biggest ingrate of all Indy 500 chief mechanics, when it had attempted to gift him with an imported, tour-de-force, four-wheel-drive, Lotus; not only had Brawner tried rejecting the gift, but he'd gloated openly when Andretti had rubbished the machine in a practice crash.

In its place, Brawner had produced his own battle-hardened, four-year-old hybrid rear-engine, the Hawk, which had won Andretti and his Brawner 20 Indy car races, plus a pair of national titles. The rattling-in-its-bones antique also handily won the 1969 Indy 500.

Racing-drivers, Brawner had always stubbornly maintained, were his natural enemies, and he wasn't above fist-fighting with them, if that was what it took to get them going fast. When he felt it necessary, he taped-over out all the instruments on the dashboard so that the morons wouldn't confuse themselves and crash while trying to read them.

So now, to Brawner's horror, he was incarcerated on a team belonging to a racing driver, Andretti, whom Firestone had turned into a millionaire. Because relations between Brawner and Andretti regularly were at flashpoint, agents of Goodyear circled impatiently, waited for the volatile union to blow up so the two could be added to Goodyear's rubber roster. Yet Brawner and Andretti remained with Firestone. And not even a couple of Tire War disasters on the west coast, at Riverside International Raceway, on the long RIR road course, could separate them.

RIR hosted the last meet of the Indy car year, and the opening disaster between Goodyear and Firestone occurred on November 26, 1967. Goodyear's Foyt, previously a Brawner protégé, had the golden opportunity to break up Firestone's powerful Brawner and Andretti alliance and grab Indy car-racing's national title for Goodyear.

... But only if nothing bad happened. And plenty did.

Halfway through RIR's 300 miles, and deep among the switchback esses, Foyt and a lapped back-marker collided. Foyt wasn't injured, but now needed to commandeer another ride. Setting off for the pits on foot, slogging through mud for half a mile or more, he jumped into one of Goodyear's fresh cars.

Andretti, meanwhile, gained the lead, lost it, and once again gained it. And then, to the utter disbelief of Firestone and Brawner, Andretti, with barely ten miles to go, ran out of fuel, gifting Goodyear, and Foyt, with Indy car racing's seasonal championship.

A terrible loser, Brawner immediately protested Goodyear's winning car, the All-American Racers entry of Gurney, naming it a cheater with an over-sized motor. The protest failed. But AAR's counter-protesting Brawner, and making the chief mechanics disassemble Andretti's fuel tank was a particularly malicious trick: Andretti had lost Riverside because Brawner had blundered and supplied him with too little Methanol, not too much.

Brawner smoldered over the Goodyear insult for better than a year, not getting an opportunity for revenge until December 1, 1968, when the Indy cars had returned at Riverside. This time the irreconcilable Goodyear opponents were Andretti and Bobby Unser.

Foyt's desperation act of 1967 employing multiple Goodyear entries to collect championship points – had opened up an entirely new strategy, one only made possible by Rubber War investments.

Unser, Andretti, and Brawner -- Goodyear vs Firestone -- arrived at Riverside with battalions of back-up Indy cars, mechanics, and support drivers. Discord immediately commenced.

Andretti fell into a series of running battles until blowing his engine, which sent himself and Brawner running to the Parnelli Jones/Vel Miltech Team to appropriate its Firestone turbine. Jones tried stalling Andretti by cautioning him that the turbine had blown-out binders and was lapping without brakes. Andretti then had turned for support to Brawner, who, sympathetic to Mario's needs, began fiercely insulting Jones for refusing to surrender the turbine.

And while Brawner and Jones had each stood their respective grounds, lashing one another with colorful expletives right on the raceway's hectic pit road ,, Andretti had jumped into the turbine and sped away.



But Jones hadn't been prevaricating about the turbine being brakeless, as Andretti discovered before completing a lap. In the middle of turn Nine, he couldn't stop without side-swiping and wrecking Jones's second Firestone turbine, plus his own.

Coming to Andretti's rescue, Jones, appearing from nowhere, riding a motorcycle into the middle of all the chaos, gave Andretti a mad ride back to the pits so he could take over the Mongoose, yet another Firestone asset.

But Firestone internecine warfare continued burning bright; while Andretti waited impatiently, and Brawner cursed bitterly, its mechanics delayed making the Mongoose stop. Meanwhile Unser, who'd had an incident-free 300 miles, won Goodyear its second consecutive Indy car crown.

A blizzard of restrictive new rules followed Riverside's 1968 debacle: no more Indy car-switching, no more championship point-splitting, no more etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. It made Tire War circa 1969 seem boring by comparison. Leery of any more incoherent finishes, Firestone, Andretti, and Brawner succeed in accumulating twice the

championship points of Goodyear, and then the Indy 500. But their championship came too late to save the Andretti-Brawner union.

After the 500 was highlighted by Andretti (some claimed purposely) completing a pit stop by running over Brawner – Brawner’s ankle, at least. And not long after, Brawner, in the pits during the Delaware championship meet at Dover, was observed flailing a wheel hammer at Andretti’s helmet.

The shock announcement that Goodyear had won Tire War, and that Firestone, after ten exhausting years, was in bitter capitulation, was delivered on August 8, 1974. Bitter capitulation was fashionable then. On the same evening, Richard M. Nixon resigned from the Presidency.

So, other than money, greed, high-tech “research”, and PR, the question was, what was the true legacy of Tire War? And the answer was raw, blinding, senseless, speed. Having spent the previous six decades barely pushing their averages beyond 150 mph, during Tire War’s one furious decade, Indy cars raced across the frontiers of 160, 170, 180, 190, and finally 200 mph.

Yet the speed legacy didn’t endure. In the disastrous aftermath of 1973’s Indy 500, with its assorted casualties and corpses, the Speedway began working overtime to suppress instead of increase speed. The rule changes so severely emasculated all the exorbitant equipment that rubber dollars had paid for that not until the 1980s did Indy cars slowly start growing back their claws.

Herk Hurtubise, much like Clint Brawner, was committed to the proposal that Tire War was all Goodyear’s fault, and that its unlimited spending had ruined racing, even though, back at Trenton in 1963 Herk been the pioneer who’d unintentionally gotten Tire War started. Hurtubise died in 1989, and no mention of his Trenton exploit appears in Tire Wars, Goodyear’s authorized book, whose title might more rightly have been “The Reign of the Rubber Checks”. -JS