Joe Scalzo's
City of Speed and elsewhere

Six Toe

What's fame? The phenomenal Louis - always called "Louie" – Meyer wins three Indy 500s, four seasonal racing championships, is co-founder of the mighty consortium whose unbreakable Meyer-Drake engines capture 18 500s in a row – making themselves the very sound track of the Speedway – and also win, at a minimum, 300 other Indy car combats, then lives to the colossal age of 91. Yet when his obituary comes due, he is outrageously trivialized as the Indianapolis champion who inaugurated the wholesome practice of swilling down milk in Victory Lane. This is the junk sort of trivia that graveyard humorists love. But let's be honest: Until it read his death notice on 7 October 1 995, the vast majority of the modern Indy car generation never ever thought of Louie Meyer, perhaps never even realized, the giant he was.

Meyer's racing occurred long ago, it was fantastically dangerous racing, and about its only survivor was Meyer. He outlived Wilbur Shaw, his great rival and great friend, who wasn't killed racing, but in a private airplane crash; Dale Drake, first his faithful partner in the Meyer-Drake consortium, and later, after Meyer switched sides and went to work on FoMoCo's four-cam Indy racing engine, his relentless foe; and even June Meyer, his spouse of 65 years, who used to knit her husband skin-tight skull caps and then, for good luck, keep her fingers crossed for Indy's whole 500 miles. Asked once if he still kept in touch with his old crowd, Meyer quipped, with spirit, "Who's around?! Anybody left?!"

He came from sturdy Alsace-Lorrain stock; his father as well as one of Meyer's brothers also lived to be nonagenarians. Born in New York City, reared in Los Angeles, young Louie never intended becoming a racing driver. But when a flu epidemic emptied LA.'s schools, he began bird-dogging an elder brother - a celebrated Model T racer – onto the dirt tracks. The Indy 500 of 1927, became, by fluke, his Brickyard debut. Shaw, also a rookie that May, unexpectedly called for driving relief, and Meyer was thrown a helmet and ordered to take over. Meyer obeyed. He stayed level with the leaders for the rest of the 500, and finished a close fourth, which was judged remarkable.

Better finishes still were coming, starting in 1928,although, at first, Meyer had no ride whatsoever. Then came an emergency telephone call from the brothers Duesenberg, begging Louie to come back to the Speedway and race for their almost-broke team. Even before Meyer could leave L.A., however, creditors had seized the last Dusie, and then the financial backers of another driver bought it. Meyer next located a sugar daddy of his own to purchase for him the rear-drive Miller that the backers of his pal Shaw had been negotiating to buy for Shaw.

Trickery and skullduggery were rampant everywhere in this 1928 500, which was won by Meyer. He proved that he was a chronometer of an Indy driver. After calculating that by spending the 500 miles averaging 100 mph he could finish third – the most optimistic placing Meyer could imagine, his Miller not that hot after all - he was holding third as scheduled when both the lead and runner-up vehicles fell out At 99.482 mph, he won by default. But by mistake the sweepstakes had run an extra lap, 201 instead of 200. Subtract those two-and-half miles, and Meyer might well have nailed, on the button, 100.

The lean and mean 1930s began, and they turned into the most deadly and hard-boiled of all Indy decades. The 500 was governed by the murderous American Automobile Association, which from 1930 to 1937 repackaged thoroughbred Indy cars into lumbering, passenger sedan-based eyesores. This was the infamous "Junkyard Formula," the formula of fatalities. The 3-A was tyrannical. Adding to the mayhem, it revived an Indy species that had gone out of fashion with flagpole-sitting: riding mechanics. The two-man leviathans of Junkyard Formula instantly turned eight high-ranking drivers into statistics, but did an even more lethal job on their wretched riding mechanics, annihilating at least nine.

Meyer, ever the chronometer, went on winning regardless. He finished first in 1933 and again in 1936, in the process becoming the Brickyard's first three-time champion. Neither 500 was a beauty. The 1933 horror show was Junkyard Formula's worst, and such an embarrassing bloodbath that the purse was cut by 40 percent, and the awards banquet cancelled and held out on the sidewalk – Meyer and the rest of the survivors were paid their stipends and afterward told to take a powder. But 1936's was impossible in a different way. A fresh idiocy in the rules mandated that everybody complete the 500 miles burning a stingy 37 1/5 gallons of fuel; Meyer, the most canny and calculating of them all, won just as everyone had expected. But it hadn't been an easy assignment. He broke two of his Offenhauser cylinder blocks practicing, then stayed up the whole night before the 500 repairing his last one. Sleepless, he lined up a distant 28th, then set a new speed record winning his third 500. Refusing to take credit, he afterward complained that he had been in an economy run, not a race.

Meyer's one and only Indy 500 accident happened in 1939, during his final 500, when, forgetting his reputation as chronometer, and possibly trying too hard to win a record-setting fourth 500, he dropped his guard for the first time. After his car clobbered a wooden fence, it tipped over. Though he was belted in, the violent impact ripped Meyer right out of his shoes, and he was throw out. Brickyard lore has it that, while he was limping to the first-aid tent in his stocking feet, he bumped into Henry Ford, an old friend, who offered Meyer a good job if he now promised to quit Indy while still in one piece. Meyer so promised, and his long role as Indy's great, probably only, chronometer, ended.

Meyer captured all three of his 500s using the Miller motor which became, in 1932, the Offenhauser , and in 1946, the season Meyer and a racing associate, Dale Drake, purchased the company, the Meyer-Drake Offenhauser. Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and well into the 1960s, the two partners ran an inspired, penny-pinching, operation whose antique four-cylinder product was the strongest, most successful, and most famous racing engine on the planet. Came 1965, however, and Meyer's old benefactor Henry Ford, and his FoMoCo, broke up the partnership by hiring Meyer to develop and market its new, rival, four-cam V8. Meyer and Drake went to war. Meyer and FoMoCo won the 500s of 1965, 1956, 1966, and 1967; Drake and Offenhauser in 1968; Meyer and FoMoCo again in 1969, 1970, and 1971. But then, just before Dale Drake's death, he and his tiny staff gave the already-stressed-out relic a final, wicked, dose of turbocharging, enabling it to crush mighty FoMoCo for the next five years.

Losing heart, FoMoCo got out of the racing-engine business; Louie Meyer, on the other hand, got into a new program with his son-in-law George Bignotti, chief mechanic supreme, to reinvent the apparently ageless Offenhauser for a last time. The effort failed and so at last ended, after better than half a century, Louie Meyer's great dance with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Meantime, for trivia addicts, here's a free one to go with Meyer's milk-guzzling: old Louie was born with six toes on one foot – no doubt his chronometer throttle one.