# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

**Hudson**

**Seven decades ago, during the pioneer years of stock car racing, nothing could stop the fabulous Hudson Hornets and their fabulous racing drivers.**

**Dick Rathmann for instance, " the braver Rathmann," of the Rathmann brothers, himself and Jim, was one of the fastest Hudson drivers, as well as the toughest: should his Hornet need fresh tires and a tank of gasoline, he stop randomly in somebody else's Hornet pit stall and threaten its mechanics with a pounding unless they serviced him; strategy always worked.**


**But Rathmann was in a jam on a 1951 afternoon in California for a 250-lap race on the Oakland dirt track. Only one week earlier he'd been racing in the deep south where'd blown up his Hornet. A fresh one was available in Chicago, but only if Rathmann re-built it, because it had been in a rollover. So, after first making the long**

**drive to Chicago, Rathmann was forced to spend three sleepless nights repairing the replacement Hornet and then had had to set out towing to Oakland in a blizzard.**

**One hundred miles from Oakland, Rathmann's tow car expired. Unwilling to miss the race, he hastily roped the dead tow car to the back of the Hornet, and arrived in Oakland so late that qualifying laps already had begun. And Rathmann scarcely had time to buckle on his helmet when his gas tank broke off. Which might have been a problem to somebody else, but not Rathmann: he simply approached the driver of another Hornet, told him he was taking his gas tank, and did.**

**Rathmann took his place at the back of the bulky 26-car starting field. Typical of the drivers of this era who raced Hudson Hornets, Rathmann had a heavy throttle foot, and his Hornet, typical of the breed, handled superbly on Oakland's greasy half-mile bull ring. Burying his foot on the gas, Rathmann plunged deep into the corners, making his Hornet, spring to life.**

**Fourth by 23 laps, Rathmann steadily and relentlesly overwhelmed the iron that was ahead of him, first an Oldsmobile - then a Plymouth - and finally the leading Dodge, which he overtook on the 126th lap, and which fought back, wallowing in and out of the holes and ruts. But the rougher Oakland became, the better Rathmann's Hornet seemed to handle, so that all the Dodge's driver could do was let Rathmann go.**

**Rathmann had gassed up on the 23rd lap; he decided to make no more pit stops, and to gamble that he'd have enough gas to complete the race. But his charge from the back had burned up more gas than he'd anticipated, and his fuel supply was dangerously depleted. Knowing this, Rathmann slowed down to conserve fuel, but with barely three laps to go his Hornet was blubbering in the corners. So he'd had two choices: 1) pit for more gas and have the Dodge pass him; or 2)stay out on the track and risk running dry and not finishing at all.**

**It was a matter of win big, lose big. Rathman kept going. And as he crept under the checkered flag his speed had dropped to 30 mph, and the Dodge was nowhere in sight. So closely had Rathmann timed things that he ran completely out of gas in the middle of his victory lap. Rathmann had to wait several hours before his win was declared official, because a poor sport Plymouth driver had protested it.**


**Rathmann's dramatic come-from-the-back victory was impressive, just as was the great history of the Hudson Hornet in pioneer NASCAR and American Automobile Association championship meets. It was a matter of numbers. Hornets earned NASCAR seasonal titles in 1951, 1952, and 1953, three in all, and won a total of 79 races. Matters in AAA were equally impressive: three-in-a-row - 1952, 1953, 1954 – national championships for Hudson.**


**The Oldsmobile 88s, Buicks, Chryslers, Plymouths, Dodges, and Cadillacs, and other high-bodied marques presented images of brute force, but the Hufson Hornet, lower and more streamlined than anything else, was no brute. It was long, low, wider than it was high, and its style of construction was unique. Hudson named it the "step down design": by recessing the floor to the bottom of the frame, the factory could also lower the body, which was married to**

**the frame in a single unit. Other Hudsons were constructed this way too, but the Hornet was the most tenacious-looking of the lot.**

**An automobile that may have lived before its time, the Hornet, and Hudsons in general, never attracted the buying public, only America's racing drivers. A lower car meant a lower center of gravity, more stability and, most important, greater speed. Tim Flock, the most superstitious of all Hornet drivers, once said that the Hornet's lower center of gravity "Gives you the stuff you pray for when you're taking a turn at 90."**

**Also a Hornet had precise steering: once a driver committed it to a corner, a Hornet went where it was pointed. It had strong front and rear anti-roll bars to prevent pitching, plus plenty of suspension options. Superior handling helped make the Hornet's reputation, but the Hudson factory also added power. Always performance-oriented – between 1932 and 199 Hudsons owned 120 stock car records – the factory went against the grain, choosing a seemingly out-dated flathead six-cylinder while else was going with overhead valve V8s.But with a displacement of 308 cubic inches, it was America's largest six-cylinder. The huge engine block was cast from chrome alloy, the pistons were shaped like big tin cans, and the long stroke measured 4.5 inches. Thanks to Marshall Teague, Hudson's greatest driver, and its top mechanical innovator, the six-cylinder flathead, hot already, was gifted with dual carburetion, a trick exhaust manifold, high-compression cylinder head, and other goodies.**

**Hindsight gained from the last half century or so makes it easy to see why the flat- riding Hornet was able to blow off heavier, higher-bodied stocks like the Olds 88s and the high-powered Chryslers, which pushed their front ends so disastrously that they burned out the tires.**

**So radical a departure from what stock car racers were used to was the Hornet that its initial acceptance was slow; once the Hornet started winning, however, practically everybody wanted one, until starting fields became saturated with them – nine Hornets were in the top 20 at the 1951 Detroit show alone.**

**The Hornet drivers included Rathmannn the superstitious Flock, who was obsessed with omens; Herb Thomas, whose rule-bending mechanic was Henry ("Smokey") Yunick; Frank ("the Rebel") Mundy an ex- stunt driver whose real name was Francisco Eduardo Menendez; and, of course, Marshall Teague.**


**It was Teague, who had raced Hudson hot rods before the war and had a fierce affinity for the Hornet, who gave the model its first big win, in 1951,on the sands of Daytona Beach. And it was Thomas, a soft-drawling southern said by Rathmann to be the only driver who could punch as hard as he, Rathmann, could, who gave Hudson its first seasonal NASCAR championship, also in 1951. Thomas, a former Olds 88 driver had been lured to the Hornet camp by Flock, who'd explained, "The Hornet takes a corner like its on railroad tracks. No Oldsmobile will do that."**

**So NASCAR's 1952 s season was to be a three-way scrap between Thomas, the defending champion, Flock and Teague, all in Hornets. It began at Daytona; Thomas had agreed to chauffeur a Hornet belonging to Teague, but once the 200 laps started, didn't have a prayer. Neither did anybody else. Starting 13th, Teague took just one four-mile lap to pass all the stocks ahead of him, Including the Hornets of Thomas and Flock. Averaging a record 84 mph Teague won his second Daytona classic in a row. Spectators peering through the sandy haze could made out the words painted on both sides of Teague's Hornet: "Fabulous Hudson Hornet."**

**So fabulous were the Hornets that by the end of 1951 they had won 27 NASCAR races, including six in a row; Olds and Plymouth, the runners-up, won but three matches. The great Flock who, with the equally great Curtis Turner, practically invented NASCAR, then had Big Bill France banish him to oblivion, was seasonal champion for 1952, although Thomas, who**

**always raced with an expression of serene contentment on his gaunt face, nabbed the final four.**


Racing News

1952 VOLUME XI, ISSUE 6 • ALL THE WEEK'S RACING NEWS IN ONE PLACE!

FLOCK WINS AGAIN!

TIM FLOCK'S 1952 HUDSON HORNET TAKES THE PRIZE!

**Flock was perhaps the most superstitious racing drivers who ever raced. He was convinced of the power of white horses – mares – and described his pre-race ritual thusly: "Every time I see a white mare I spit on my right thumb, touch it to my left index finger, then smack my right fist into my left palm. And every time I've seen a white mare I've won the race."**

**Flock also wore and won from race to race what he described as his "lucky" shirt – Thomas, also superstitious, once offered him $500 for it. But Flock's luck was changing. The following year,1953, after a night of riotous partying with Turner, he was sleeping on the ground in the infield of the South Carolina dirt track of Spartanburg, and was run over by a truck. Injuries kept him out of NASCAR for two years, and when he returned to racing it wasn't in a Hornet but an ice-box white Chrysler 300. Flock never should have left the Hornet. The owner of the Chrysler was a tyrant who put him on a leash and made him conform to a strict curfew.**

**With Flock gone, and with Teague having quit NASCAR to campaign his Hornet with AAA, Thomas had no trouble winning NASCAR'S 1953 seasonal title, but Teague was dominating the headlines; by October he was AAA's new champion, winner of seven of its races: Hornets, all told, won every AAA match but one.**

**His Hornet snapped at him just once, early in 1953, at Carrell Speedway in Los Angeles the rear axle snapped flipping Teague. Overeacting, the AAA banned all Hornets until the axle problem was fixed. Within the hour, Teague was on the phone to the factory, telling it that the Hornet's rear axle must be strengthened. Such drag had Teague with Hudson that a reinforced axle immediately was made available not just to Teague but all Hudson drivers**

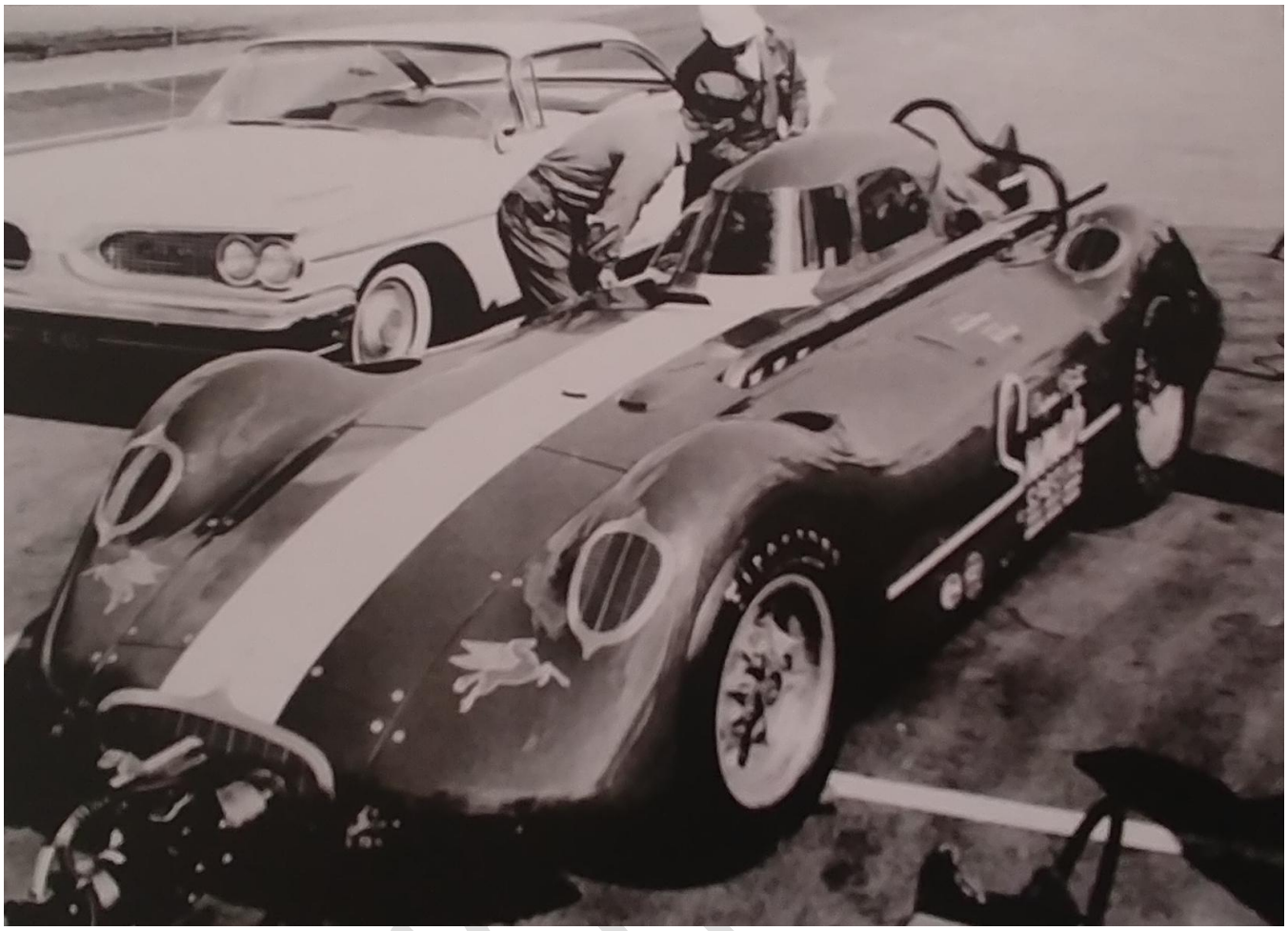
**Teague was something of a guinea pig, deliberately racing hard to expose weaknesses in the Hornet design; he fell out of many races on account of this. Meanwhile Rebel Mundy, more cautious, was winning the AAA championship by capturing seven races, finishing second three times, and ending up among the top five on 17 occasions.**

**But by 1954 Teague's Hornet not only was bulletproof but faster than any other. The factory claimed its XR police engine developed roughly 170 horsepower but it was believed that Teague had tacked better than 100 horses to that – small wonder that Teague, piling up 2,320 points, won Hudson its third consecutive AAA title.**


**Teague never had such a big season again. The following season, 1955, Hornets and all the other makes were out-muscled by the Chrysler 300s of Mundy in AAA and Flock in NASCAR. But although he never raced Hornets again, he hung onto them until the end, which came in 1959, at the new Daytona super- speedway, when he was killed trying for a world's record in a Sumar Special streamliner.**

**Having difficulty getting the Sumar up to speed, Teague had telephoned for help to the brightest brain he knew, the old Herb Thomas mechanic Smokey Yunick, who' d been Teague's friend when Hudson was contesting the Mexican Road Race. But Yunick turned out to be a false friend. His Best Damn Garage in Town was in Daytona, close to the super-speedway, and he might easily have driven over instead of refusing to help, advising Teague to save his life by parking the Sumar, because it sounded like it was trying to somersault backwards. Less than an hour, later Teague's widow was on the phone sobbing that Teague was dead.**

**The widow Teague kept her late husband's Hornets until the early 1960s, before selling one of them to a pair of Italian twins so fresh off the boat they barely spoke English. Mario and Aldo Andretti launched their respective careers in it, although Aldo's was much shorter than Mario's.**

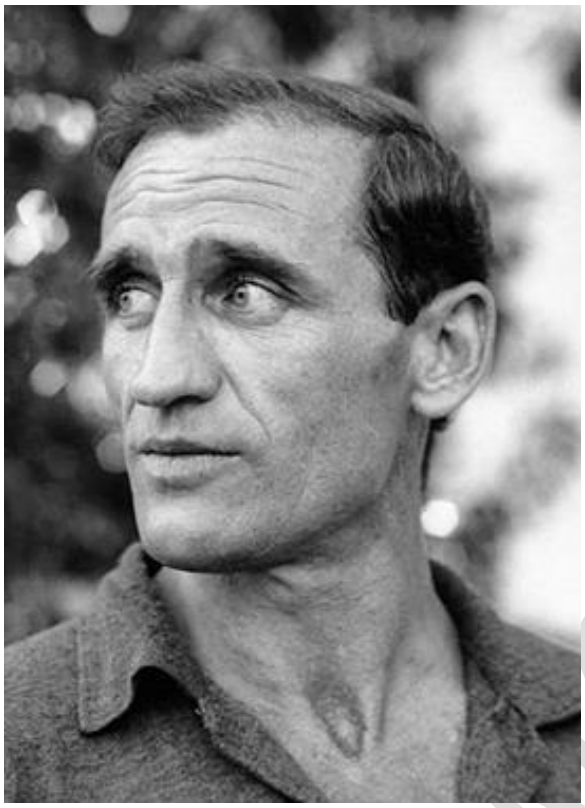


**Meanwhile Yunick, chief mechanic for Thomas, who later was to play his ugly role in the demise of Teague, also was a critical factor in the Hornet's final hurrah. This was in 1954, in South Carolina, at Darlington, the "Black Lady" of NASCAR tracks, and Yunick's favorite. Thomas, in 1953, had made a mockery of the competition, he and Yunick winning a dozen races out of 38 starts, and finishing in the top ten 32 times. The roar coming from Thomas' Hornet was audible above all the other stocks at any racing track and particularly Darlington, and, as everybody knew, it was because Yunick was flim-flamming the rules without getting caught as usual. But this time NASCAR moved on him, ordering the engines of all competing cars torn down for inspection before time trials. Yunick's and Thomas' Hornet failed to pass inspection. And Yunick had just three days to build Thomas another engine. This time the desperate inspectors impounded it, then wrapped it in steel banding so that Yunick couldn't monkey with it. But Yunick and Thomas won Darlington's 500-miler anyway.**

**Another full tear-down was demanded, this one inside a bare and over-heated shack with a dirt floor. Seated in their private observatory tower, suspicious NASCAR inspectors scrutinized Yunick's every move. The engine, of course, had been another blatant cheater, but Yunick, by setting off fire crackers , sufficiently distracted the inspectors to remove the cheater parts without being noticed.**

**Still another group mesmerized by the Hornet were the men and women beatniks of The Beat Generation, the ones written up by Jack Kerouac in his incredible book "On The Road." Praising them, Kerouac reported:" The only people for me are the mad people who are mad to live, mad to be saved"**

**And the maddest of them all was Neal Cassady, camouflaged by Kerouac as "Dean Moriarty," while Kerouac disguised himself as "Sal Paradise." Moriarty, an ex-car thief , jailbird,and stud, was motivated by a hunger for kicks, rocket be-bop jazz, and sex. At one point Dean tells Sal his simple philosophy: "We're gonna go and go and go and never stop 'till we get there! " "Where we gonna go?" Sal asked. "I don't know, but we gotta go! "**



**In the spirit of all the other fabulous Hornet drivers, Dean Moriarty drove really fast. Setting out from the west coast to greet Paradise on the east coast, Sal asked Dean how he got there so quickly: "Ah, man, that Hudson really moves."**

**While traveling across the continent with him Sal described Dean's driving: "At a narrow bridge that crossed one of those lovely little rivers, Dean shot precipitously into an almost impossible situation. Two slow cars were bumping over the bridge; coming the other way was a huge truck-trailer with a driver who was making a close estimate of how long it would take the slow cars to negotiate the bridge, and his estimate was that by the time he got there they'd be over. There was absolutely no room on the bridge for the truck and any cars going in the other direction. Behind the truck cars pulled out and peeked for a chance to get by it. The road was crowed and everybody exploding to pass. Dean came down on all this going 110 miles an hour and never hesitated. He passed the slow cars, swerved, and almost hit the left rail of the bridge, went head-on into the shadow of the un-slowing truck, cut right sharply, just missed the truck's left front wheel, almost hit the first slow car, pulled out to pass, and then had to cut back in time when another car came from behind the truck to look, all in a matter of two seconds and leaving nothing more than a cloud of dust instead of a horrible five-way crash with cars humping in every direction and the great truck humping its back in the fatal red afternoon of Illinois with its dreaming fields."**

**Finally unable to keep up with the wares of the Big Three in Detroit and Dearborn , little Hudson toppled over dead in 1957.**

**RIP  the fabulous Hudson Hornet!**