

THE BLACK THRILLER
(Lujie Lesovsky Indy 500 laydown roadster)

Throughout the dinosaur age of Meyer-Drake Offenhauser roadster at Indianapolis, Lujie's often were among the fastest. What madness led him to screw this one up so badly?

A highborn lady racing car owner, Carita Ortiz Boden, one of the Delaware du Ponts, spent lots of money preening her Lujie Lesovsky laydown Meyer-Drake roadster for the 1960 and 1961 Indy 500s and then watched it miss the show both years. In frustration, Mrs. Boden retired the wretched laydown to the family estate, threatening to plant red geraniums in it.

She ended up doing no such thing. On the other hand, had she gone ahead with her threat of turning an Indianapolis car into a flower box, she would have been doing what creative racers often do – which is to exercise the liberty of utilizing a race car for an incorrect purpose.

History is rich with idiosyncratic examples. Inspired by a reward of \$10,000, one Bob Osiecki took an old Kurtis-Kraft and married it to such wrong components as a set of airplane wings and a 413-inch, 15-to-1 compression Chrysler with a supercharger on top. Texas tycoons Hap Sharp and Alan Connell, with more Coopers, Maseratis, and Ferraris than they knew what to do with, also played the wrong-use game: Sharp lifted an engine from a Maserati and dropped it into a Cooper; Connell removed the V-12 from a Testa Rosa and shoehorned it into a Birdcage. Not to be outdone, over in Los Angeles, the operators of the pocket-rocket Campbell Special, which started life as a rear-engine with a popgun motorcycle engine, put the Campbell on steroids with the installation of a roaring, red meat V-8 ballbuster Chevy.

Results were mixed, but with wrong usage, it's not results that matter; it's the passion and lunacy of the game. Sharp's Cooper-Maserati flew, Connell's Ferrari-powered Birdcage Maserati bombed, and the Campbell Special put its stuntman chauffeur on his gourd. As for Osiecki's Mad Dog IV apparition, it snorted and grumbled and hyperventilated to what was claimed to be Daytona Speedway's first 180-mph lap.

In Connecticut, a 1959 run-what-ya-brung grand prix around tiny Lime Rock was a wrong-usage extravaganza. A rinky-dink Offy midget looking like something out of Mickey Rooney's film "The Big Wheel" shellacked a dubious Maserati Formula 1 as well as a locomotive Aston-Martin that was invented to lumber up and down Mulsanne at Le Mans.

And at the 1958 Missouri State Fair in Sedalia, all the other conformists arrived for the afternoon's stock car 100-miler on the fairgrounds dirt track with conventional Fords, Chevys, Pontiacs, Studebakers, Hudsons, even one Edsel An imaginative visitor from Nebraska named Loyal Katskee surprised them by entering a Ferrari 121 sold to him by Gentleman Jim Kimberly.

Its dollar value probably exceeded the combined field of Detroit iron. And the aluminum Ferrari coachwork came under attack from flying earth send up at it by a pair of ill-mannered Fords who chopped down hard at the start. But the lead Ford had to make a pit stop and consequently suffered a heartening defeat to wrong usage when Katskee succeeded in winning by a Ferrari's length.

Lujie Lesovsky, meanwhile, built many Meyer-Drake roadsters attesting to the glory days of Indianapolis during the dinosaur era. But the Kelso Auto Dynamics he created for the aforementioned Mrs. Boden wasn't one of them. Painted matte black, it earned the sobriquet

of “The Black Thriller” among drivers for its sphincter-tightening habit of wanting to spin not to the right, as usual, but to the left. In two fearsome years, it never hit the wall, but here was no good reason why not.

Femme owners at the Brickyard were nearly nonexistent and Mrs. Boden was a high-end du Pont to boot. Unimpressed, the all-male population of Gasoline Alley universally reacted to her as if she didn’t know what from Shinola.

Mrs. Boden let the men take her money run the show. She really had no choice, since her sex outlawed her from Gasoline Alley anyway. And for two years, this doyen of dough sat up in the grandstands observing her benighted black Lesovsky belting around for test lap after test lap, its different drivers all white-knuckled and wringing wet, its Meyer Drake sobbing and its tall tires speaking, as the saying went, “the Voice of Firestone.” All to no avail.

Finally, after 900 hard but useless practice miles, the Lesovsky came unglued. A flailing connecting rod blew the face off the Meyer-Drake block, came close to mangling the drag link steering, and then the Kelso spun out in its own oil slick.

Whereupon Mrs. Boden gathered up the expensive debris, vowing revenge on Indianapolis and its male culture by turning her Black Thriller into a geranium pot. Only she didn’t go through with it. Following its passage through various ownerships, the Kelso Auto Dynamics – all restored and waiting for anybody who might be crazy enough to want to drive it – now is one of the inhabitants of the fabled basement of Indy’s Hall of Fame museum.

Too bad Mrs. Boden didn’t actually plant those flowers because it would have taken the cake for wrong usage of an Indianapolis roadster. As it stands, that honor belongs to yet another venerable Indy roadster called the Jones & Maley – second place finisher in 1956 – which passed many frozen winters outdoors as an advertising prop rusting and rotting on the roof of a building. (1996)

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