

Hills of Death
(Salem, Winchester, and Dayton)

From *Stand On The Gas!*

Like I always said, if you go to the hills and say "I'm not scared, "you better watch out. You be scared. – Larry Dickson, before a spring 1972 race at Salem.

No dirt track can match the speed and danger of the paved speedways at Salem, Winchester, and Dayton. With awe, but little affection, all the drivers refer to them as the "hills." Through the years, too many sprint cars have tumbled off these hills.

The corners are steeply, ominously banked, and propped up against tall earthen slopes. Lap averages exceed one hundred miles an hour. By controlling his better judgment and by using the banking, not the brakes, to scrub off speed, a driver can barrel up onto the high walls nearly full tilt, something that's impossible elsewhere.

But speed doesn't come without a price. At Salem, Winchester, and Dayton, the price is extracted in car fatigue (tremendous gravitational forces crush the suspension almost flat), driver discomfort (his body is jerked and pummeled so much he wants to vomit but can't), and, worst of all, mental fatigue and terror. A driver doesn't see much going so fast, but he can't miss noticing the tops of tall trees outside the track. They flash past in a sinister green blur.

Years ago it was much worse. A skidding car automatically swerved to the top of the banking, smashed into and over the crash wall, then fell three stories to the

ground or impaled itself on the trees. Either way, the driver died.

Since then sprint cars have grown stronger, and the protective roll cages make a driver seem “kill-proof.” Crash walls at the hills have been reinforced as well. The last out-of-the-track fatality occurred in 1970, to Gill Hess, but during 1970 alone, two drivers proved it was possible to crash headlong out of Salem and survive.

Perhaps the day of the hills is finished anyway. The unique design of these three tracks never caught on elsewhere, and they no longer play decisive roles in deciding the USAC sprint car championship. Winchester and Salem scheduled only four races apiece during 1973, and Dayton has been bankrupt and padlocked since 1970.

Also, few drivers seem intimidated by them anymore, certainly not like the terrorized drivers of twenty years ago. Probably the younger ones haven't been racing long enough to know about the grimness of the 1940s and 1950s when the hills were their bloodiest.

None of the three tracks exercised a monopoly; all killed in their turn. Things grew so dark that nowhere in racing were there more lethal places than the sunbaked but blood-stained hills during summer when the sprint cars arrived.

Dayton had the most perpendicular walls, Jim Rigsby plunged over and off them in 1952 and died. And earlier driver and spectators alike were slaughtered when Gordon Reid's car left the track, ripped through the wire fence separating the crowd from the cars, and plowed up the main grandstand. Four people were killed, including Reid, and dozens were maimed and hurt.

Winchester, just across the Indiana state line from Dayton, was the oldest of the lot, advertised as being constructed in 1916. The paving was rutted, and the whole

place was rimmed by flimsy wooden crash walls, painted red, white and blue. Mike Nazaruk speared one of them with a wheel, uprooting it, but wasn't injured. Less fortunate in 1951 were Cecil Greene and Bill Mackey, whose speeding cars hurtled free of the track within moments of each other, during separate qualifying attempts. Neither driver survived.

Out roared the next driver to qualify, Duane Carter, who steered and swerved around the rim of the banking at a speed of ninety-six miles an hour, a new record. People had expected Carter to be unnerved by what had happened to Greene and Mackey, but Carter never had nerves. Later that terrible day, he polished off the afternoon's thirty-lap feature as well.

It was said that the crowd became restless and shocked after the double accidents, then quieted and returned to its picnic lunches. Today, picnicking on the high grassy infield continues to be a tradition at both Winchester and Salem.

Racing at Salem often meant violent death in the country. Like most villages in gorgeous southern Indiana, Salem is encircled by rolling green farmlands and apple orchards. Only one narrow, twisting road pierces quaint, drowsy downtown Salem and its numerous churches. Out near the village outskirts, in an appropriately hilly area, is the race track. High in the sassafras and maples that overhang the backstraight and its well-scarred crash walls, birds chatter. Beyond the backstraight and a low fence of barbed wire is a brief strand of woods, and then the green of an eighteen-hole golf course. Years ago, in 1947, on a warm Sunday in summer, citizens in droves turned out to witness the brand-new speedway's grand opening. The fire department was handling publicity, and the mayor was just arriving to perform the flagging duties.

Breathless with excitement, the grandstands stood up, but before the field of cars had made it all the way around the first banked corner, one of the drivers had flipped to his death.

In 1949 Tommy Mattson and Chick Barbo refused to line up properly, then locked wheels and burst over the south banking, their spinning, smoking cars crashing down in an adjacent parking lot one behind the other. They, too, perished.

In 1954 little Wally Campbell was killed at Salem.

The year 1956 claimed the reigning sprint car champion, Bob Sweikert.

Murderous as the hills were, the dazzling sight of sprint cars speeding high on the bumpy banking became intoxicating and addicting to the fans – and, surprisingly, to a handful of special drivers. They all were raving mad and sustained themselves on drugs – so the popular rumor went.

Actually, they were a strange mixture of older veterans (Rex Mays, Ted Horn, Duke Dinsmore) and another vigorous, younger breed of daredevils, many of whom had already lived through the fiercest kind of combat during the Second World War. Jimmy Daywalt, for instance, after bailing out of a burning plane, had been sprayed by machine-gunners on the ground. Joe James had operated the tail gun and radio on a B-29. Mike Nazaruk, the battling Marine, had stormed ashore onto countless gory beaches in the South Pacific. Duane Carter had experienced the London Blitz. (Old-timers were quick to recall a similar phenomenon that occurred after World War 1: All the warriors returned home to drive race cars.)

Some of the fastest drivers were so youthful they'd missed out on the war, among them the ill-fated Mackey,

only 21. But no driver of the hills was younger than 19-year-old Troy Ruttman, who'd fibbed about his age to secure a license, nor more experienced than Carter, 34, known to all the youngsters as "Pappy."

Carter was older, alright, but age wasn't all that made him so special. His career, before and after the war, had been spend racing in America, New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, and France, in all sorts of cars. Such experience had made him tough, thorough, sure of himself, and disciplined.

"I race for a living," Carter said thoughtfully. "Racing is my business, my only business, and to do it well I have to win. That means leaving nothing to chance."

Carter was so thorough, it was claimed, he once took the precaution of checking out where his sprint car might land, should it ever go tumbling off Winchester's deadly banking. And he was so disciplined that he wasn't unnerved by what he saw – piles of broken concrete.

Carter admitted he never enjoyed Salem, Winchester, or Dayton, but did make lots of dough racing sprint cars. His financial arrangement with Frank Funk, venerable owner and promoter of Winchester, was that he always be shipped a thousand dollars beforehand to guarantee his appearance.

Too bad Troy Ruttman lacked Carter's cool nerves and discipline. Had he possessed such qualities, no one, Carter included, would ever have beaten him. Even without them, Ruttman was almost impossible to defeat because he chose to fight longer and more ferociously than anyone else.

"Ruttman backs down for no one," Carter once conceded in admiration.

And Joe James declared, "I'd rather be anywhere than one car length ahead of that Ruttman on the hills."

Ruttman was a big, powerful teenager who weighed 220 pounds. The track, the type of car – none of that mattered; he always fought harder and usually won. His was a natural talent. He was racing champion of California at 15. The second lap he ever made at Langhorne, when he was 18, resulted in a record of 109 miles an hour. The first lap had been for warming up the engine. The first time he raced on the hills, in 1949 at Winchester, he won – driving a stretched out midget car against full-size sprint cars. And Ruttman nearly won the 1951 Pan American Road Race in a tattered old Mercury sedan borrowed from a used car lot.

Still marveling about Ruttman, James sighed, “Troy must have ice water for blood.”

Hardly, for Ruttman was the most jittery of drivers. The hills gave everyone the jitters, but not as severe a case as they gave him. Ruttman existed on a regular diet of buttermilk, mashed potatoes, and special pills; the night before a race, preparing for another rousing battle with Duane Carter, his ulcers often had him sobbing from pain.

Salem, 1951. A typical Ruttman/Carter battle.

Carter qualified first, hitting 97 miles an hour.

Ruttman, when it was his turn, wound up his engine even faster: 99 miles an hour. The grandstands were starting to come to a boil.

The sprint cars the two men were driving were curious antiques by today’s standards. The tires were high and narrow, yet bloated with forty pounds of air pressure. The suspensions were so stiff it hurt the stomach, particularly Ruttman’s. Like all cars that raced on the hills, they’d been gutted of all superfluous weight, such as roll-over bars and safety equipment of any kind.

But their violent little 220-cubic inch Offenhauser engines had sufficient power to flash across the banking with Ruttman and Carter each daring the other to dab the brakes first. That was where guts came in.

“Take it easy on me today, Pappy,” Ruttman called to Carter, his companion on the front row. “Don’t you give me a tussle now.”

Carter looked over to reply. Ruttman, sick as usual, was vomiting out the side of his car.

The green flag! Carter, getting a jump, arrived on the banking with a blast of noise.

A deeper burst announced Ruttman.

They battled for the full thirty laps, biceps flashing in the sun, chasing each other up and down the banking, until they were lapping slower cars. Sweat, more from nervous strain than physical exertion, poured from both drivers. Coming off the final banking at ninety, a foot apart, still on the ragged edge, Ruttman and Carter were smoking the tires.

Ruttman won. The tight duel had consumed barely ten minutes. Pulling into the pits, Troy tapped the brakes, causing his car to slew around and stop. The “western slide,” as it was called, was Ruttman’s trademark, and the grandstands roared at the sight of it.

Holding up his fingers to allow the sweat to blow away, Ruttman grabbed a fresh bottle of buttermilk. Then he dashed over to congratulate Carter, the one driver from the hills for whom he had respect or regard.

Glory seemed in store for young Ruttman, along with unlimited victories. He captured eleven sprint races during 1951, and became AAA Midwestern champion. By now he was racing championship cars as well, working for Carter’s former boss J.C. Agajanian. In 1952, ulcers and all,

Ruttman became the youngest winner in the history of the Indianapolis 500. He gave his age as 22.

The prize money was rolling in now, but as fast as it rolled in, Ruttman was faster at spending it. He was great on the racetrack, but an unworldly naïve child off it. A series of catastrophic mistakes, and several personal tragedies, were about to rupture his apparently limitless career.

He mangled an arm at Cedar Rapids in a sprint car race. Then while convalescing in California during 1953, was suspended by the AAA for entering a car belonging to him in an unsanctioned race. A younger brother was killed racing the same year.

By 1954 Ruttman felt like attempting to win Indianapolis again. But he wasn't sufficiently recovered, and he was flabby and out of shape. Later he cussed out an official and was fined twenty-five dollars.

The worst thing that ever happened to him was when he managed a track record qualifying back at Salem, but simply couldn't keep up in the main event and finally nearly blacked out. Afterwards he looked dazed, shocked. "These hills scare me to death now," he admitted to mechanic Jud Phillips in a sad, puzzled voice. Ruttman's two years away from them had ruined him as a driver there.

Faster and faster Ruttman plummeted toward oblivion. His marriage floundered, his weight skyrocketed to a puffy 285 pounds, and again the AAA suspended him.

Reinstated once more, Ruttman showed up at a few insignificant races. Then he vanished for a long time. Word circulated that he no longer had ulcers, but had become an alcoholic. He made several half-hearted stabs at regaining his squandered skills driving stocks, championship cars, and even sprint cars once more.

But whatever he had possessed once was gone. Ruttman had become a pathetic also-ran.

At one time Ruttman, still a young man at 34, suddenly announced plans to resume racing regularly again. Then following a high-speed roll-over during a 1964 championship car race at Trenton, New Jersey, he just as suddenly announced his retirement.

“Racing today is too much speed, not enough safety,” he mourned. During his daredevil hill days, he had dismissed both things.

He had dissipated his career, and most of his money; and no one, least of all Troy Ruttman, seemed to know how or why. He took what money he had left, moved to Detroit with his family, opened a motorcycle shop, and went into the business of building tiny go-kart racers.

The personal misery that had been hounding him, though, would not stop. Friends in 1969 were saddened to read that Ruttman’s youngest son, Troy Jr., 21, had died attempting his first race at Mt. Pocono, Pennsylvania. His death car had been a modified Indianapolis roadster raced years earlier by his dad.

Ruttman’s arm was stilled chopped up from the Cedar Rapids crash, and the nerveless Duane Carter was easing back on his sprint car racing, contemplating a life of ease as the owner of a stable of sprint cars. Imposing new names moved to power on the hills.

Joe James was one of them. He streaked to the Midwestern championship for 1952, took his trophy home to California, and was killed at San Jose following a freak accident while the yellow caution light was on. He had savored his hard-won title for exactly one week.

Pat O'Connor took over in James's absence, earning successive championships in 1953 and '54, both times barely holding off Bob Sweikert.

"I wish Sweikert wouldn't drive so fast," O'Connor was heard to complain.

"That works both ways," Sweikert retorted.

Before coming to the hills, Sweikert never had it easy, working as a used-car salesman, as a grease monkey in a garage, doing bit parts in movies. California was where he'd become a racing name, on a high-banked oval in Oakland.

But the hills of the Midwest came to be the places he loved. For that love, Sweikert eventually paid the heaviest price.

Starting in 1955, his driving reputation was unremarkable. Then he won the biggest race in the world, the Indianapolis 500, by five miles. But Sweikert realized most people ascribed his winning to the death that year of the great two-time winner, Billy Vukovich, who'd crashed while leading.

"I guess some people will say I lucked into this," Sweikert mumbled as he accepted the winner's check of \$100,000. Not that he had any thought of refusing it; money, after what he'd been through, was too dear.

He used up some of the money by adding another sprint car to his private team. Its driver was youthful Jerry Hoyt. Hoyt was soon killed at Oklahoma City, but this sobered Sweikert only briefly. Now that he'd won so much, he wanted more. He continued cramming more and more races into his schedule, and became one of the first flying race drivers, showing the others how much extra money could be made by using airplanes to get him to different races on the same weekend.

“The more you race, the more money you make,” he insisted.

One busy weekend Sweikert raced on the hills of Dayton Saturday, made a celebrity appearance at the annual Soap Box Derby in Akron Sunday morning, then flew by chartered helicopter to Pennsylvania to race a sprint car that afternoon. Ill from the choppy flight, he was persuaded to let Jiggs Peters handle the car. But Peters appeared to be dawdling, so Sweikert jumped in the car himself and, though weak, won. He was determined to please.

Sweikert never got used to the fuss people made over him as an Indianapolis 500 winner, and how they suddenly kowtowed to him. A friend attempted to pick up a dinner check at a restaurant, but Sweikert snatched it away.

“Before I won the 500, no one picked up checks for me,” he laughed. “But now that I can pick them up myself, everyone wants to.”

Besides the 500, he sped to victory at Syracuse, du Quoin, Langhorne, and Milwaukee in the championship cars, becoming national champion. In sprint cars he was Midwestern champion, winning nine races, most of them on his favorite hills.

Unslowing, Sweikert rocketed into 1956. He raced sprint cars in Florida, but after being beaten by some unknowns, flung his helmet across the infield in disgust. He finished third in the twelve hours of Sebring in a D Jaguar, then raced his sprint car at Dayton the next day. His plans to drive factory stock cars for Mercury unfortunately fell through; had he done so, he might have quit those damned hills.

His friends, Johnnie Parsons among them, nagged him to stop racing there. “Bob, those are dangerous hills,”

Parsons argued. "I wish you wouldn't drive them. If you go out the ball park, you've had it – completely."

Sweikert laughed; the hills had always been good to him. "John, there's money there. And it's easy for me. That's why I'm racing at Salem this Sunday."

Parsons thought Sweikert to be "a beautiful man," considered him witty and charming. He also enjoyed Sweikert's dialect jokes – even though Sweikert was never able to get those dialects right.

Right to the end Sweikert was able to joke, especially when the laugh was on him. On that last afternoon of his life at Salem, he committed an absurd driving error and spun out in company with Eddie Sachs and O'Connor during a heat race. Visiting the press box afterwards, Sweikert glanced over the shoulder of a reporter typing out an account of the three-car tangle.

Grinning, Sweikert reached over and, above the story, hunt-and-pecked the word "squirrels." This was his whimsical way of disparaging his skills. In sprint car jargon, nothing is lower than a "squirrel."

Then he went to his car, and while grappling in the main event with a driver named Ed Elisian, later to become infamous, Sweikert suddenly veered toward the crash wall along the outside of the first corner banking. His yellow car rode the wall for a distance, then flew out of the track into the air before dropping like a stone into the green trees.

It was over in seconds. Sweikert's fatal fall was the most violent in the history of the hills; and his pretty yellow sprinter was mutilated from the force of it. Seven years passed, and in 1962, while workmen with chainsaws were clearing the area of trees to build a private airfield next to the track, something dropped from one of the limbs, hit the ground and bounced. It was a tire and wheel, rusted with age, off Sweikert's car.

With Sweikert gone, Pat O'Connor, a two-time titlist already, took over as the most popular name of all.

The fans who flocked to the hills had liked Ruttman for his fight, Carter for his age, Sweikert for his humor, but they revered Pat O'Connor for another reason. He was an Indiana native, a Hoosier just like them. He had been born and lived in nearby Mt. Vernon. His chauvinistic fans believed him to be the fastest driver in the world.

O'Connor, in addition to being handsome and clean-cut, was a terrific driver, especially up on the hills which were called his "secret weapon." Certain other drivers, Mike Nazaruk and Don Branson among them, who bore scars from pressing O'Connor too closely on the banking, wondered how "clean-cut" he actually was. Yet there was no doubt O'Connor was fast in a racing car. Firestone took him to Italy in 1957 to test tires on the high-banked, two-mile-long oval at Monza. O'Connor's thunderous Indianapolis roadster bounded all over the banking. He averaged better than 170. The buffeting shook the observing towers so violently, men prepared to leap out. Never had a driver negotiated Monza so audaciously or run so high along its wall. Later, somewhat apologetically, O'Connor admitted he had to drive harder, though not faster, in a sprint car at Salem, Winchester, and Dayton.

Yet by now, after so many years of running them, O'Connor might have been tiring of the three hills. He's been champion three times. European racing teams, stunned by what they'd seen at Monza, begged him to join them. Factory stock car racing teams in America beckoned with lucrative contracts, as they'd beckoned Sweikert. And, around Indianapolis, it was predicted that Pat was a

certain winner of the 500; he'd already won the pole position once.

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the racing and social spectrum from Pat O'Connor (hero) was Ed Elisian (bum).

Though the two drivers knew one another slightly and had both raced sprint cars on the hills, no two individuals could have been more dissimilar. Pat O'Connor was a gifted and entertaining speaker at banquets. Ed Elisian was barely understandable, and may have been slow-witted. O'Connor always dressed nattily. Elisian dressed in grease-stained roustabout clothes. O'Connor was well-scrubbed and slim. Elisian, stock and powerfully built, was an oily kind of man. O'Connor was well-liked, even loved. Elisian was universally despised. Driving techniques varied most of all: O'Connor seemed smooth, a beautiful driver. Elisian was heavy-handed, tense, and inaccurate, particularly in a quick-handling sprinter.

"Braver than Dick Tracy," was the way one racing official remembered Elisian from his beginner days in California.

Rodger Ward referred to him as "A brazen driver."

He seemed too brave for his own good, and for others. Drivers who made contact with Elisian had an unfortunate way of being hurt, or worse. Red Renner tangled with Elisian at Ft. Wayne and suffered broken jaw. Elisian, thrown clear, was fortunate enough to survive the wreck with only a fractured arm and road burns. And it was widely held that Bob Sweikert, who hated Elisian ever since they'd first raced together in California, had crashed to his death at Salem because he couldn't stand the sight of Elisian in front of him and had attempted to prevent it.

Elisian was an admirer of the late Vukovich, although he lacked Vukovich's talents. During the 1955

500, Elisian watched Vukovich's burning car flip off the track, and did not hesitate. He swerved his own car into the infield, sprang out, and sprinted toward his idol's burning car screaming, "I've got to get him out, I've got to get him out!" But he was too late. At the time Elisian was hailed a hero. Later, however, his own reputation became very bad. Among other things, he seemed to habitually write checks that ended up bouncing. And he was a compulsive gambler. Duane Carter, newly appointed Director of Competition of the new U.S. Auto Club, which had replaced AAA, angrily called Elisian into his office.

"What about all these bad checks, Ed? You're giving all the other drivers a bad name."

Elisian laughed at Carter. Why, he declared airily, those checks were nothing. Chicken feed. Just last week he'd lost an additional \$10,000 to some gamblers up in Chicago, and he had no idea how he was going to pay up. Still laughing, he strolled out of Carter's office.

Carter didn't know whether to believe Elisian or not, but felt that in any case Elisian must be suspended from racing and allowed to tidy up his life. Others in the USAC, mainly the president Thomas Binford, thought otherwise. Let Elisian keep racing. Maybe that would give him the impetus to straighten out. So, following a hearing, Elisian was not suspended, merely placed on "probation." Later Binford said that Elisian was allowed to race for two reasons: 1) the courts agreed to postpone Elisian's trial provided he would agree to make restitution for all the bad checks, and, 2) Elisian agreed that he would contribute all his Indianapolis winnings toward making up the debt.

Elisian next got the chance to drive for wealthy Jack Zink at Indianapolis, the same Zink who'd given the wonderful Jud Larson his first important ride. With a car

like Zink's, Elisian must have sensed he finally had a chance to win, to clear up all his debts – a chance he could not waste.

His early practice speeds for the 1958 "500" were awesome – and alarming. He hit 145 – faster than the one-lap record – then 146, 147, and finally 148 miles an hour. In his heavy-handed desperation, Ed was skidding and sliding the heavy roadster through the corners like a sprint car, a technique no one had tried before at Indianapolis. Oddly, it worked.

The evening before the race, Pat O'Connor, starting in the second row behind Elisian in the front row and thinking about him, late at dinner with driver Paul Russo. A sensational rumor (later proven unfounded) was sweeping the city that car owner Zink had just promised Elisian a thousand-dollar bonus for each lap he led. "Paul," the nervous O'Connor remarked, "the only thing I'm worried about in the race tomorrow is getting through the first lap without a spin."

On the opening lap, in the curve after the back straight, a spin occurred. Elisian, fighting wheel-to-wheel for the lead with Dick Rathmann, touched wheels with the other driver at 160 miles an hour. The tires of his fuel-heavy roadster lost traction and broke loose with a shriek. Or perhaps it was Rathmann who brushed Elisian; there was ugly controversy about that. In any case both leaders lost control at the same instant, their cars suddenly shot twisting and spinning across the raceway, and in the grinding, roaring tumult that followed, seventeen machines wrecked. Pat O'Connor's burning roadster flipped side-over-side, then slid along on its back. O'Connor apparently was already dead when flames finally lip up the cockpit.

Confronted by reporters afterwards, Elisian stubbornly denied he'd done anything wrong. His own car was totaled-out along the wall.

"I've had these hot dogs spin in front of me and run me through walls at other tracks," he cried in a voice choked with emotion. "I liked O'Connor as well as anybody."

Reporters rushed to file their stories and left Elisian slumped against the pit all, alone.

An anguished Duane Carter, who had urged earlier that Elisian be barred, now suspended him indefinitely "for the safety and well-being of himself and his competitors."

But Thomas Binford, backed up by the USAC's board of directors, quickly overruled the suspension. "We're not in a position to blame an accident on Ed Elisian," he declared tersely. "We don't have enough proof."

Elisian eagerly resumed his disputatious career in a sprint car at New Bremen. There was another fiery pile-up, this time involving himself and a young rookie, Jim Davis, who was killed on the spot.

Now Binford and the USAC board, without consulting Carter, announced Elisian must be suspended. Enough was enough. But not on account of the New Bremen accident, but because Elisian had told off a cop and his operator's license had been revoked!

"It seems illogical that Elisian should be able to drive on the track, but not the highway," was the brief explanation

Duane Carter went directly to Binford when he heard. "You're really something else," he declared sarcastically. Carter was flabbergasted that Binford could blithely overlook all that Elisian had done, yet suspend him for so picayune a thing as not having an operator's license.

For that matter, Elisian still remained an enigma to Carter. He couldn't decide whether Elisian's dumbness was for real or a front.

But Binford, more than anyone else, felt sorry for Elisian. Even though Binford – a moneyed, cultured sportsman who served as USAC president without salary, doing it merely out of love for racing – had finally suspended him, he still wanted to help the ravaged Elisian get to his feet again. And so, to pay off Elisian's outstanding gambling losses, Binford, driver Elmer George (son-in-law of Indianapolis owner Tony Hulman), and A.J. Watson (owner/mechanic of Elisian's sprinter), all kicked in a couple of thousand apiece to settle what was left of the debts.

Elisian, close to tears, never forgot this kindness; but Binford, George and Watson were not fools – they expected Elisian to pay them back when he could. Later Binford had the “macabre thought” that it might be prudent to insure Elisian's life. Following much paperwork, a \$10,000 insurance policy was taken out on Ed Elisian, race driver, with Binford, George and Watson the beneficiaries.

Meanwhile Duane Carter had already been far too outspoken about Elisian for his own good. Binford fired him from the USAC post the following year, making Carter, in a way, still another casualty of the bizarre Ed Elisian saga.

The biggest casualty of all, so far as the grieving fans were concerned, was Pat O'Connor, whose like they were sure they'd never see again, particularly on the hills.

For some, it was too hideous to contemplate. O'Connor, why typified all the best in racing had somehow died at the hands of Elisian, who seemed to typify all the worst.

Elisian's suspension was ultimately lifted, but not in time for him to compete in the 1959 "500."

For a while, it appeared he'd be invited to join an Indianapolis team whose star driver was Rodger Ward. But Ward threatened to quit the team if Elisian were added. Later Elisian confronted Ward in front of the Firestone office inside the Indianapolis track.

"I ought to knock your head off, Ward," he growled, adopting a boxer's crouch.

Ward braced himself. "Take your best shot, pal," he replied. "It'll be your last one, too."

Elisian slowly wandered away, muttering to himself.

Later, contrite, Ward explained he felt badly about queering Elisian's attempt to join the team. But, Ward added, "When a driver is down and out, he has to fight back himself."

Still later, Elisian and a young Texan named A.J. Foyt got into a shoving, cursing fist fight. This terminated when Foyt ripped the shirt from Elisian's back.

That summer at Milwaukee, Elisian's Offenhauser roadster bounced off the wall, flipped over, and pinned him beneath it. For an instant there was silence on the track. Then, suddenly, the car exploded in flames and no one could reach it.

Sixty gallons of highly volatile fuel were aboard, and it took nine minutes to burn.

Elisian was 32 years old. He had never married, so there were few to mourn him, except Binford, George and Watson. And today, I have discovered, one can still get into heated arguments as to whether or not Elisian was totally at fault in the celebrated Pat O'Connor crash of 1958.

Many years after I wrote this, I had second thoughts about Ed Elisian, whose racing name – given to him by Billy Vukovich – was Smokey. This is from my book Indianapolis Roadsters:

“I still don’t think people know what to make of me,” Ed/Smokey admitted in a 1959 letter to his parents only a month or so before his death. “I mean, unless they actually meet me in person, I must be the bad, the very bad!, so-and-so they have read so much about.” And Smokey was right; a lot of people did think he was “bad.” Not by nature friendly anyway, his burly physique and swarthy complexion seemed vaguely menacing, as did his confusing, introverted personality and mournful eyes. There was furthermore the scandal of his gambling, and the crucial role he shared with Dick Rathmann in bringing on what was dinosaur Indy’s worst accident. So all this made Smokey a villain; and to some a villain is what he has posthumously remained. Maybe he deserves to be. And yet...

As I compose this, I stare at a picture, a photograph of Smokey snapped right after he’d completed “Ed Elisian’s Midnight Run,” one of the lesser burlesques of the 500 of 1955. Final qualifications had closed down with Smokey, who’d gotten a bad call from the chief steward Harry McQuinn on his first attempt, being denied a second chance. So J.C. Agajanian, using his clout, stood tall for a fellow Armenian and declared that he’d withdraw his own entry unless Smokey got a second shot. Whereupon Smokey proceeded to successfully requalify under late-afternoon skies so dark that one of his mechanics celebrated the occasion by posing for the picture holding a hurricane lamp. But here’s the thing: mechanics and other drivers in the photo are whooping it up and celebrating

the excellence of Smokey's accomplishment, and Smokey himself is the only guy not laughing or at least grinning. I have never, ever, seen a picture of him doing that, and I believe I know why.

Some years back, for reasons I never completely understood, my own personality and hold on life began deteriorating. And in a matter of weeks I'd spiraled into a state of utter despair and self-loathing. Just dragging myself out of bed some mornings became an accomplishment. And it turned out I had turned into that one tortured American out of five who had gotten laid low by clinical depression. Various psychiatrists, different medications, and mainly the bedrock support of family and friends brought me around again, but it was a terribly painful haul. Depression's causes and effects are still not fully understood as we head into the next century; in the fifties they were hardly acknowledged. Smokey Elisian, I believe, was a chronic sufferer of this terrible affliction, yet never had access to the shrinks or magic potions to bail him out of it. I don't suppose he ever realized what was wrong. Maybe that does not excuse all the dumb things he did, but for me it helps explain them.

Unlike Pat Flaherty and Dick Rathmann, Smokey wasn't a product of L.A. but of San Francisco, which in the late forties had an almost equally strong hot-rod scene. The 500 of 1954 was Elisian's first, and he didn't do well, requiring the assistance of a relief driver. Later that same year he got all beat up in a sprint car spill at Ford Wayne, Indiana, and afterward accepted a lift home to the coast from Billy Vukovich, in the Dodge pace car Vookie had won at the 500.

All dinosaur drivers admired Vookie; Smokey, what with the special nickname Vukovich had given him and all, worshipped him. In return he got needled and verbally

abused the same way that Vukovich gave it to everyone else, but that didn't stop Smokey from aping his idol's most vivid mannerisms, including walking around glaring and squeezing had rubber balls with both hands. Vukovich's 1955 demise left Smokey bereft, and perhaps this was when depression began biting him. He remained in so much despair that he never made it to the Victory Banquet afterward to receive a sportsmanship award for having spun his own car out of the 500 to try and rescue the dead Vookie from his crashed and flaming Lindsey Hopkins Kurtis-Kraft.

A.J. Watson always had a weakness for hairpin employees – he had Fat Boy Ewing as his tin man, remember – plus he enjoyed giving hard-up drivers a hand. In 1956, with its victory at Indy, the John Zink team of Watson, Jack Zink, and Pat Flaherty and the John Zink 8 was riding high. So, for a 200-miler at Darlington, Watson got the nod from Jack Zink to have Smokey put on Zink pinstripes and race a second Zink machine, the team's upright dirt tracker. It was the same automobile in which Flaherty subsequently suffered debilitating injuries at Springfield, but at Darlington Smokey did a good job of bringing it in fifth, just behind Flaherty in the John Zink 8. With Flaherty hurt, the Zink team was suddenly down to one chauffeur, Smokey, so following Springfield Watson repaired the upright for Smokey to race in a no-points curiosity show on Dayton Speedway's high-pitched half. It became the only championship meet Smokey ever won, and afterward he looked as confused and mournful as ever.

Difficult as it was for a driver to get into Watson's doghouse, Smokey managed it at the next race. It was 250 miles around Milwaukee, and what happened might have been pathetic had it not also been so painfully comic.

Continuing to experiment with different drivers, Watson had Dick Rathmann in the John Zink 8, Smokey back in the upright. He got in only as an alternate starter, but once the race began his attack-on-sight mentality kicked in hard as ever: In 7 miles Smokey passed a dozen cars and went from 26th to 14th. Next he bumped into two other cars, got black-flagged, but was permitted to rejoin the race.

Then the laugh-riot began. To get a stronger grip of the wheel, Smokey, prior to the start, had wrapped it with the contents of a 200-foot roll of friction tape. And during one of the yellows he observed that the tape was unwinding and began rewrapping it. But he couldn't complete the job before the green came out again. So, with loose tape billowing all through the cockpit, Smokey raced along awaiting another yellow, whereupon he got busy wrapping again.

Watson noticed him doing it and had Larry Shinoda give him a pit board ordering him to stop and concentrate on the race. All Larry could think to write was "Quit It." Smokey ignored the board and continued wrapping. Larry lost his patience and gave him the finger. Smokey gave him the finger back. This situation continued through the 154th mile when Smokey – still steering, wrapping, and flipping off Larry – lost his concentration and backed into the south turn fence, where the fuel tank split and a flash fire started up.

When the John Zink team pulled out of Milwaukee that night, it left Smokey behind.

Playing amateur witch doctor, I think this may have been when Smokey's mental state took another turn for the worse. Whose wouldn't? He looked up to Watson almost as much as he had Vukovich and now Watson had decommissioned him. Smokey, apparently, was already a

gambler of long-standing, but the next year, 1957, he became a compulsive and self-destructive one. Whether it was getting into day-and-night poker marathons for high stakes in the casinos of Las Vegas or Reno, or just pitching pennies in dives, he couldn't or wouldn't make himself stop. In Chicago some professional gamblers pointed a gun at him, and this was when the rumor started at the 1958 Indy that the Mafia itself was after him.

But other things were occurring in 1958. Originally envisioning a three-dinosaur entry, the John Zink team was in chaos. Pat Flaherty was supposed to have been in the new John Zink 16, Troy Ruttman the year-old Zink 5, and either Jimmy Reece or Jud Larson the John Zink 44. But Flaherty couldn't pass his physical, and Ruttman was driving for J.C. Agajanian. So Reece got re-assigned to the Zink 16 and Larson remained in the Zink 44. And A.J., who still had a soft spot for Smokey, and respect for his throttle foot, assigned him the Zink 5.

Jud Larson was a dirt track icon who didn't like racing on anything but dirt. Jimmy Reece was an Okie crony of Jack Zink's who'd made a career of being a coast-and-collect merchant. Not using any brakes – which was standard at Indy – felt so unnatural to him that the Zink team took the precaution of rigging up to the Zink 16's cockpit a second brake pedal made out of wood. And then Jimmy was informed that whenever he took the Zink 16 so deep into turn 1 that it scared him, he had permission to push the bogus wooden pedal instead of the real thing. Jimmy named it the "Oh, Jesus!" bar – the first words that came to him when he tried it.

Smokey, then, was the Zink team's unlikely new leader. Never in his career had he ever had a race car like the John Zink 5 under him, and his speeds shook everybody up. By Wednesday afternoon, two days before

time trials, he was hammering the Brickyard at 146.914, unofficially quicker than Flaherty's standing records.

Until Dick Rathmann made his own dramatic appearance in the McNamara Motor Freight car, Smokey had the glory to himself. Then on Friday morning Dick went out for only his second shakedown cruise in the McNamara and got above 147 – so delighting Lee Elkins, Floyd Trevis, and the entire McNamara crew that everybody took the rest of the afternoon off and adjourned to the White Front.

The John Zink 5 was back inside its garage being worked on with its hood open when Smokey arrived, distraught at now being only second fastest, and ordering all the Zink mechanics to close the hood NOW because he was going to go out and blow off Dick's speed. Lapping at 144, then 145.148, he concluded the three-lap bing with a how'd-ya-like-that? 148.148.

All speeds were down the next day when it was official, but Smokey still managed to clock the top lap of time trials, 146.508. And Dick in the McNamara Motor Freight won the pole position by exploding Flaherty's four-lap speed record with a 10-mile run of 145.974.

Smokey and Dick were the two drivers destined to bring on the most ghastly wreck of roadster Indy, yet off the track got along famously. They were even lodged together in the same flophouse dormitory, a downtown Indianapolis institution of clean living called the YMCA. Still, there were extremely bad vibrations about what was going to happen come Memorial Day when they both got it on. Another "Smokey" – Smokey Yunick – thought he overheard Elisian saying that if he led the 500's opening lap it would settle all his gambling worries, causing Yunick to conclude that Smokey must have had an enormous wager riding on it. Pat O'Connor, starting on the second

row, had a nervous conversation with Paul Russo and expressed concern about what type of agenda Dick and Smokey might be planning directly in front of him. The writer Angelo Angelopolus quoted A.J. Watson as saying the Zink team was starting Smokey on scuffed Flintstones and only a half-laden tank because they expected him to go for it early. And on the morning of the 500 Dick claimed that Smokey arrived with the veins of his neck throbbing with anticipation and intensity, plus chain-smoking when he was normally a nonsmoker.

Matters were exacerbated even further by Indy's ongoing experiments with confusing new starting systems. Instead of being marshaled along the front straightaway as usual, everybody was lined up single file along the pit lane. The first roadster to move onto the track was Dick's McNamara Motor Freight, then Smokey's John Zink 5, and then Jimmy Reece's John Zink 16 – the front row. But somehow the pace car emerged next, followed by the rest of the field. So, when the front row came past the starting line all by itself and well ahead of everybody else, the starter had to vigorously flag Dick, Smokey, and Jimmy to catch up. Dodging and weaving their ways through 10 rows of dinosaurs, the trio didn't become aligned in positions until they were crowded together on the northwest corner coming for the green.

It was a ragged start. Dick led around corners 1 and 2 and then down the backstraight toward the third corner. Arriving there going 170, he had Smokey on his inside elbow also coming at 170. Throughout the month, the two had always practiced by themselves and never confronted one another on the track. But now it was roadster bravery versus roadster attack-on-sight mentality. The result was that the McNamara Motor Freight and the John Zink 5 were well past the point of crashing before Dick or Smokey

would consent to lift. And by then the John Zink 5 and the McNamara Motor Freight both got sideways and began sliding backward across the groove.

And while the two of them were busying wrecking one another, along came the John Zink 16 and Jimmy Reece to finish the job. Locking up its brakes in the middle of the racing groove and plugging up the track, Jimmy's John Zink 16 got rammed from the back, whereupon other roadsters also began exchanging body blows, including Pat O'Connor's Sumar, which tipped over. And then Indy burst its seams with skidding, bashing, out-of-control roadsters until the demolition finished with O'Connor dead, Jerry Unser in the McKay Kurtis-Kraft over the wall, and the 500 emptied of seven of its drivers, including Dick and Smokey.

Smokey's great opportunity had deteriorated into Smokey's great disaster – "Fuck, it's the story of my life," he was heard to mumble bitterly – and everybody wanted him punished.

"For the safety and well-being of himself and his competitors," the U.S. Auto Club first tried pulling his competition license, but chickened out from blaming Smokey alone for the melee. Still wanting to hammer him, the sanctioning body next did an investigation and discovered that, lo and behold, Smokey had been commuting around city boulevards with a suspended driver's license. Grounding him from racing on the strength of that, however, was just too vast a stretch. No roadster driver was so saintly that he wasn't hell-on-wheels on the streets – including Rodger Ward, the most discreet of the lot, who'd once lose his license for racking up as many citations as Smokey. So at last the U.S. Auto Club used the notoriety of Smokey's gambling debts to kick him out.

Smokey went home to California, got in more hot water for passing a hot check, then was in and out of the clink for failure to report for fingerprinting to the probation office. Broke, he agreed to engage in more speed wars. Against Dick!

In what became a series of hippodrome freak shows, Smokey and Dick climbed into some rag-top late-models and were instructed to make like pro 'rasslers having a grudge match. The rag-tops they raced, and the backwater tracks where they raced them, looked more precarious than roadsters and Indy itself. All the debasing hype and hokum at last wore out in West Memphis, Arkansas, where Smokey and Dick and the freak show promoter almost had to sell the promoter's Caddy to raise funds to get out of town. And when Smokey returned to the Bay Area he got landed on by marshals who extradited him back to Indiana on still more bad check charges. Released again, he returned to the coast and went to work doing everything from driving dump trucks to working at his brother Al's rug business. And he continued wondering how he was ever going to satisfy all the hard gambling characters who had him in hock.

Gambling is reputed to be the hardest vice to eradicate, worse than booze. Somehow, Smokey managed it. Impressed, the likes of Watson and Thomas Binford, president of the U.S. Auto Club, kicked in a couple of thousand apiece to settle Smokey's debts.

Meantime, back at Indy were car owners, chief mechanics, and especially drivers who remembered the 1958 500 and lived in fear of Smokey being reinstated to race at Indianapolis again, ever. But Smokey still was Indy's one lap record holder, he'd gone faster in a roadster and come closer to the vaunted one minute lap than anybody else and had even told Dean Van Lines that if the team

ordered him a new Watson dinosaur for 1960 he'd simultaneously beat 150 and set it on the pole. Believing Smokey, Dean was having one tooled up by Fat Boy Ewing (Eddie Sachs instead of Smokey would make it famous), Everything was going better now and, judging from a letter to his parents, so was Smokey's depression: "I have gained some esteem and self-respect over the past few months and I seem to gain more every day...I do have so much to live and look forward to!"

On August 30, 1959, his ride at Milwaukee, the Travelon Trailer, a Watson copy which later made the headlines with Jim Hurtubise, hit an oil slick on the 29th mile and got fatally upside-down and on fire.