

Point by Point

Sierra Madre, December 1990.

Al Unser Jr. and Michael Andretti are descendents of families with strong warrior traditions for settling Indy 500-type car seasonal point championships between themselves, so this season's firestorm was no surprise. Nor was it particularly surprising, historically speaking, that an Unser won and an Andretti experienced a galling surrender. A generation ago, much like his son, Mario Andretti suffered not one but a pair of bitter surrenders.

The first of these was on November 26, 1967, a grim and rain-battered Southern California Sunday at Riverside International Raceway.

Standings leader Mario and some two dozen belligerents set off for 300 ultra-hostile miles in a roadrace named in honor of Rex Mays.

Their automobiles were a sinister mix of Eagles, Hawks and Coyotes, as well as six overpowered and diabolical turbocharged Offenhausers. The belligerents themselves included Riverside homeboy Dan Gurney and everybody's favorite legend A.J. Foyt, who had an opportunity to keep the national title out of Mario's hands if nothing bad happened.

Something bad did. Halfway into the race, among the switchback corners, A.J. was attacked by one of the turbo Offys.

The offending driver was fascinating. He was an antagonistic ex-Air Force bomber crewmember and prisoner-of-war inmate with a shiny bald skull. His name was Krulac, but he had taken the identity of a famous one-legged driver from the 1930s and now called himself "Al Miller."

Not noticing A.J. bearing down on him seeking the right of way, Krulac/Miller smashed up the pair of them.

A.J. was uninjured. He abandoned the carcass of his Coyote where it came to rest and set off on foot, running through mud for half a mile, to try to capture title points with a replacement vehicle. Once he gained the pits he was preparing to take by force Jim Hurtubise's sled, until Herk's was discovered to be an oil-thrower and ruled off the track. So A.J. commandeered Roger McCluskey's Ford instead.

A.J. lagged. Mario, in turn, gained the lead, lost it, and again regained it. But to the utter disbelief of Mario's hardliner of a chief mechanic, the frightening Clint Brawner, Mario suddenly lost all his methanol with 10 laps to go, allowing A.J. to vanquish him as seasonal champ.

Brawner exploded. Such a state of rage did the mechanic work himself into, he next filed a displacement protest against Dan Gurney's race-winning Weslake.

"Oversized?" shrieked Richie Ginther, the ex-sporty car, ex-Formula 1 hombre who was manager of Dan's team. "Your own fuel tank is oversized!" Counter-protesting Brawner and making him disassemble Mario's fuel tank for measurement was Richie's malicious trick; Mario had lost because Brawner had supplied him with too little fuel, not too much. Choleric Clint smoldered for years about it.

On December 1, 1968, the Indy car theater was back at Riverside again. This time the circus's irreconcilable opponents were Mario and Bobby Unser.

A.J.'s employing multiple cars to acquire points opened up an entirely new style. Thus Mario and Brawner arrived with a small battalion of different machines and support drivers. One of the fanatics Mario hired was Jerry Titus, a wild roadracer/magazine editor. Another was John

Cannon, an expatriate European who, in the flyboy tradition of Krulac/Miller, had ridden in a bomber for the Royal Air force.

Discord commenced immediately. Bobby Unser got rammed on the opening lap. Mario, in turn, fell into a series of running battles with Dan Gurney and Mark Donohue until he had an engine failure that set off an explosive chain of events.

Titus and Cannon had previously broken their equipment, so Mario moved to expropriate a fourth machine being raced by Pelican Joe Leonard. But before Pelican could acquiesce, his car owner – none other than Rufus Parnelli Jones – tried warning Mario that Pelican had been circulating without brakes. Mario turned to Brawler for support, and Brawler, sympathetic to Mario's needs, began berating Parnelli for not allowing Mario into Pelican's car. And while Clint and the equally voluble Parnelli stood their respective grounds exchanging fierce insults in Riverside's busy pit lane, Mario jumped in anyway.

It was one of the notorious Indy 500 turbines, and chaos resulted. Mario couldn't get stopped in traffic and got into a crack-up which wrecked Pelican's turbine as well as its sister. Then Mario had a last, unsuccessful, hiatus in Lloyd Ruby's unwieldy Mongoose but had to bitterly concede the driving crown to Bobby Unser.

Harsh new 1969 rules were formulated: no more car-switching, no more point-splitting, no more nuttiness. Leery of any more incoherent finishes, Mario didn't need to win December's Rex Mays 300 because he'd already bagged the seasonal title. Nevertheless, win he did. And this time it was Dan Gurney who ran dry of methanol while leading. That especially delighted Clint Brawler, ever the

hardline combatant, who believed that no grudge should go unsettled.

The Indy 500-type car seasonal championship today is called the IZOD Indy Car Series, matching racing drivers from Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Japan, England, South Africa, Venezuela, The Netherlands, and a handful of Americans whose apparent purpose is to fill up the rear of the point standings. Last October 10, at Florida's Homestead-Miami's Firestone 300, the last race of 2009, two drivers, a Scottish failure from NASCAR, and a New Zealander, settled the campaign by six points in the Scot's favor.