

Gaman
(Chickie Hirashima)

Nobody ever outgutted Chickie.

Suppose these new slow-down rules being promulgated by the Indianapolis Racing League don't work.

What if the new generation of econo-banshees being concocted by mainly British, Italian, and Japanese brains don't contain domestic speeds and costs but instead accelerate them?

Well, then, Indianapolis and its 500 will be on the receiving end of the biggest historical joke in seven decades, comparable to when the Speedway tried taking the whimwham out of its thoroughbred Miller and Duesenberg singleseaters by fattening them up and for eight terrifying 500s, 1930 to 1937, forcing them to carry riding mechanics.

What a bloody embarrassment that proved to be.

In 1932, only two years into the experiment, a two-man car set a new 500-mile speed record. In 1933, showing that other teams, too, had discovered had to circumvent the weight penalty of a riding mechanic, the record fell again.

And again in 1934, 1935, 1936 and 1937.

Now the Speedway waved the surrender flag and belatedly ended its two-man adventure/ nightmare.

And it was about time because every year one poor wretch of a riding mechanic didn't return from his ride.

Being a riding mechanic must have been like playing Russian roulette with a loaded gun.

It wasn't even fun: the driver at least had his steering wheel and pedals to keep himself occupied, but a

riding mechanic did nothing but sit like a petrified lump for five brutal hours.

Against all odds, the starkly grim era managed to produce one of the funniest racing stories of all time. Wild man Wilbur Shaw, later to win the 500 three times, somersaulted his Duesenberg, its riding mechanic, and himself completely over the wall. Wilbur got away unharmed; his riding mechanic was dinged up.

Subsequently making his way back to the racing pits, Wilbur grabbed hold of a fresh riding mechanic, informed him it was his turn in the barrel, then took him on a voyage in another Duesenberg. This Duesie, too, almost got put out of the ballpark by Wilbur. Seeing the look on the second riding mechanic's face, Wilbur snapped, "If you think that was something, you should have been here the last time!"

Combat pay of between 3 and 5 percent of his winnings was all a riding mechanic could expect to squeeze out of a tightwad racing driver – providing he lived to spend it!

Lawrence Grover didn't in 1931. Harry Cox didn't in 1932. Bob Hurst and Monk Jordan didn't in 1933, the worst riding mechanic year. Bob Hahn didn't in 1934. Leo Whittacker didn't in 1935. Albert Opalko didn't in 1937.

Yet one incredible individual who did survive the experience and go on to survive other intense ones was Chickie Hirashima, who led a second life as an Indy chief mechanic (500 winner in 1946 and 1960) and a third life as one of the witches of the amazing Meyer-Drake Offenhauser (he assembled the winning motor in 1959, plus those that finished first and second in 1960 and 1962).

He weighed barely 100 pounds and change and stood five feet tall. But when teased about being shorter

than she was by his wife Mollie, who had been imprisoned with Chickie at Manzanar, her husband replied, “So what?”

That was the tip-off about Chickie. He cut nobody, not even Mollie, any slack, and once cleaned the clock of an attacking 6-footer by smashing a chair over his skull.

At the very first two-man race Chickie ever participated in, which was 200 miles of oiled dirt around fogbound Miles Field in the winter of 1934 in Los Angeles, Chickie’s home, he ended up comatose on the floor of the cockpit; Chickie’s jaw got clipped by the flying elbows of the car’s chauffeur Kelly Petillo, another wild man like Wilbur. Kelly still finished first and collected the \$3,500 winner’s prize.

Quite a debut, and afterward at Indianapolis Chickie rode shotgun with all the personnel of the Art Sparks stable, racing’s best, including Rex Mays and Jimmy Snyder, until the murderous two-man era went away following 1937.

Four years afterward, racing took a forced hiatus to accommodate World War II.

While most of his Indy colleagues were off warring, Chickie and the majority of other Pacific Nisei – all good U.S. citizens – got hunted down and locked away in the frozen tar paper barracks of the High Sierra detention gulag of Manzanar.

Chickie was incarcerated there for a year and a day. Released, he became one of the earliest volunteers for the all-Japanese 442nd, the high-risk combat squad whose members got their tails shot off at Anzio, then continued the heavy fighting across the rest of Italy and France, blowing away Nazis clear into Germany.

It earned every commendation for valor on the books, but Chickie never would boast about the 442nd, just as he never boasted about the brain-frying sensation of

being a helpless passenger while flailing 200 times into the eye of Indy's lethal turn one, bricked, narrow, and ringed by killer walls; or for 500 miles helplessly observing flimsy wirewheels flexing, thin balloon tires bulging and making ready to blow out, fragile suspension components heaving and preparing to fracture...

In 1937, when Jimmy Snyder, the milkman, set Indy's savage and everlasting two-man qualification record speed average of 125 mph (160 up and down the straights!) his steely faced passenger was Chickie.

Pound for pound, inch for inch, nobody could outgut Chickie.

Chickie knew gaman. (1996)

Chickie lived to the ripe age for a riding mechanic of 68, succumbing on Christmas Day 1980.