

Jerry, Indy Racing Fan

May 29, 2016, the Sunday preceding Memorial Day, marked the 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 car race. Except for one year, when Val and I were on a trip to Russia, I've attended every year since retirement 15 years ago. Our son Alan got me initiated, later bringing his own son David. It was David's 8th Indy car race, which meant he went to his first race at age 5. Alan has gone for more than 20 years. But our experience pales in comparison to that of Gerald "Jerry" Foster, Alan's father-in-law. Except for missing just one, Jerry has attended every race since 1958, when he was 14 years old. The only way for any of us to surpass Jerry's record is for David to keep going the rest of his life. David turned 14 this year, and his interest may turn to girls, so keeping the tradition of his grandpa Jerry may not be guaranteed.

Jerry grew up in Bellwood, IL, a near western suburb of Chicago. His father Oscar Joseph, or OJ, was a railroad engineer, who spent his entire career with the Chicago and North Western Railroad. (The C & NW was bought out in 1995 and no longer exists as an independent railroad.) Most of his work was during the days of the steam locomotive, when the fireman, under the supervision of the engineer, had to shovel coal into the firebox of the locomotive. Toward the end of his career, he transitioned from the coal fired steam locomotive to diesel. OJ's route took him to Iowa and Wisconsin, sometimes taking the young Jerry with him. Perhaps from boredom or a gregarious nature, OJ loved to blow the train whistle whenever there were people along the track or in houses nearby who were waving at him. OJ may not have realized it, but his career encompassed perhaps the golden age of American railroads, before the interstate and jet planes. You traveled on passenger trains with colorful names like California Zephyr, El Capitan and Super Chief. OJ's employer, C & NW, had a train called City of Los Angeles. Years later, Jerry met some people who had lived on the route OJ traveled, and they remembered the whistle blowing engineer.

The Fosters had next door neighbors who were fans of IndyCar racing. There are three types of cars involved in the major motorsports - Formula 1 or F1, IndyCar and NASCAR. They are as different as night and day. For now we'll confine ourselves to IndyCar, which is older than either of the other leagues. The highlight of this league (officially Indy Racing League) is the Indianapolis 500, consisting of 200 laps around a 2.5 mile oval race track called the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. There is a town named Speedway, which is the actual site of the race track, a town surrounded but separate from Indianapolis. Originally built in 1911, they have been holding the Indy 500 race annually, always during the Sunday before Memorial Day. Because of some missed years, the 100th race fell on 2016. The Fosters' neighbors, Charlie and his son Thomas, invited OJ and Jerry to join them in going to Speedway. They flew from Midway down to Indianapolis for the race. Jerry was bitten by the racing bug. Like most young men of his era, Jerry longed for his own car. But not just any car.

Those were the glory days of Detroit. Imports were negligible and the first foreign nameplate manufacturing plant would not break ground for another 20 years, in the middle of Ohio. Cars were heavy, with chrome plated bumpers, big engines measured in cubic inches, not liters, fueled by leaded gas, no seat belts or emission controls. General Motors alone had more than 50% market share (down to less than 20% today). By the time he was out of high school, Jerry

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was ready for his first car, a Mustang. Thus began a lifelong love affair with cars and motorsports. Have a question about engines and chassis of race cars? Ask Jerry. He can tell you about spoilers and drafting. He can explain that not all four tires of an IndyCar are identical, explaining why. Jerry went to other IndyCar races in Wisconsin, Illinois, Arizona and California, as well as NASCAR and F1. (F1 ran races at the Speedway for years but was discontinued.) Jerry and his wife Nancy relocated to Phoenix, AZ a number of years ago. But he still drives or flies in for the Indy 500.

Jerry's grandparents came from Europe, but the exact origin is uncertain. Family lore was that they came from Austria. But until the breakup of the Austro Hungarian empire after WW I, this empire encompassed, besides Austria and Hungary, what is now the Czech Republic, Slovakia, northeastern Italy, parts of the former Yugoslavia, extending into Romania and Bulgaria. Jerry sometimes referred to himself as the Big Bohunk, indicating the area of Bohemia in what is now the Czech Republic. Jerry, we'll have to do some DNA testing to really be sure. And Bohunk is a politically incorrect term.

Jerry has a heartwarming story to tell. Nearing the end of his career, OJ was involved in a train accident which caused derailment. The circumstances remain murky, but OJ was suspended without pay, leaving him with no income and a family to support. A Jewish man, whose family owned a string of now defunct department stores in Chicago, came to the Fosters' aid. Without solicitation, he approached OJ, handing him an envelope full of cash. It was enough to tide them over until OJ was able to return to his position at the end of the suspension.

Our group of racing fans, which meets annually for the Indy 500, includes Rodger Ward Jr., whose father Rodger Sr., was a two time winner of the race. Rodger Jr. has an electronic parts business. Jerry happened to answer the phone at his employer Cherry Electrical Products when Rodger called. Of course the name rang a bell with Jerry. He knew exactly who Rodger Ward (Sr.) was. Ever the smart aleck, Jerry said his name was Jim Rathmann. (Rathmann is an IndyCar driver, a contemporary and fierce competitor of Rodger Sr. Rathmann edged out Rodger Sr. in the 1960 race that is one of the most competitive and exciting, ever. It reversed the 1959 results. Think of it as the Ali-Frazier of IndyCar racing.) The conversation rapidly morphed into racing and another lifelong friendship was born. The business seemed to be secondary at that point. Rodger and his wife June had a large home west of Indianapolis, with enough space to have as many as a dozen of us stay during race weekend. Later on, June and Rodger built a newer place on an adjoining lot, including a warehouse. The warehouse was the bachelor's quarters where Alan, David and I usually stayed. Another regular fan drives all the way from Massachusetts, setting up a pup tent by the pond in Rodger's property. Another of Rodger's friends flies in from California. The other year, we were joined by a retired Navy chaplain who serves as one of the chaplains in the track. Yes, they hold religious services the morning of the race. He travels the race circuit towing a little trailer, not much bigger than a pickup truck bed, which serves as his bedroom. We are an eclectic bunch.

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On race day, we congregate at the Speedway home of Leo Thompson, only a couple of blocks from the track. Athletes and entertainers may have their pre-event rituals. But race fans have their own. Leo provides coffee and rolls, but my unscientific survey indicates that Bloody Marys and Screwdrivers outnumber the coffee drinkers. Like other homeowners in Speedway, Leo allows parking on his yard and driveway. The same people return year after year. You better have a reservation. One of our favorite pre-race pastimes is hanging out by the curb, watching humanity go by. After the race, there is a repast of hamburgers, sausages and hot dogs, salads, beans and of course dessert. Rodger or Leo do the BBQ honors.

Even Leo's house has a racing pedigree. The house was once owned by none other than Jim McElreath, who passed it on to his daughter, who had married Tony Bettenhausen Jr. Tony Jr. belonged to a family of race car drivers. Between Tony's father Tony Sr. and his brother Gary, the trio raced the Indy 500 more than three dozen times. Although they had respectable finishes, the Bettenhausens don't have a single Indy 500 win to their credit. McElreath did have some top five finishes. That demonstrates what a great accomplishment it is to win the Indy 500.

I am very fortunate to be part of such an intimate group of Indy 500 fans. Of course I don't have motor oil in my circulatory system, like Jerry probably has. One year, Rodger had a long sleeved white shirt sewn with the words "*NW Vista Section 6 Wace (sic) Team, too dumb for Formula I, too smart for NASCAR.*" NW refers to the section, at turn 3, where our group always sits. But we all move on. Rodger has sold his beautiful property, located in the middle of farmland, relocating to his original home state of California, in the oceanside enclave of Manhattan Beach.. Leo is preparing to sell his own property in Speedway, and moving southwest..

Where do we go from here? As Rodger might say, only the Lord knows. But Jerry, Alan, David, me and the others will be returning to hear those immortal words, "*Lady (or ladies) and gentlemen, start your engines.*" It is not the race, it is friends, family and memories.

Mario E. Orosa

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