

Tiernan Racing Fans

My earliest racing memories were from the Milwaukee Mile where my dad, Terry "Monk" Tiernan took me to the June and August races. The June race was the "Rex Mays 150" and the August race was the "Tony Bettenhausen 200". Every year we would pile up in the family car and drive up for the two events. It was a tradition involving my dad, Margie (stepmom), Grandma Magdalen and Grandpa Matthew Tiernan, Uncle Jimmy Tiernan, and me. Those early memories got me hooked on racing and especially the cars and drivers from the Indianapolis 500. I remember very early on my dad talking about the Indianapolis 500 and as he described the event, a certain reverence appeared in his tone as if the place was something very special. That made an impression on me and I started to think of IMS (Indianapolis Motor Speedway) as some sort of racing "oz".

For many years my dad would make the trek down to the first weekend of qualifying when there were 4 distinct days of timed attempts to make the race. I believe he started going to qualifying every year beginning in 1966. That is also the year his father died and I remember him telling me how cold it was at qualifying that year and that he had to make many trips to the concession stand to get coffee to keep his dad warm. His dad passed in August in 1966 I believe. After his dad passed he started up a new tradition with his brother Jimmy and some work friends.

The annual trip to Indy qualifying was probably a good excuse for Monk, Uncle Jimmy, and their pals to get away from the family and partake in a little adult fun. Nothing too outrageous but some frosty beverages, off color jokes, and whatever racing action they could find not only at the Speedway but at places like Indianapolis Raceway Park, The Indy Mile, Anderson Speedway, and the Terre Haute Action Track. The Friday and Saturday night USAC races became traditions unto themselves back in those days.

My very first Indy trip involved the first weekend of qualifying for the 1969 500. I was 6 years old and we met his friend Wayne Bennett in Ft Wayne and we all drove together in Wayne's car. It was around the time that the 1969 version of the movie "Romeo and Juliet" was out and we listened to the soundtrack of that flick pretty much the entire time we rode from Ft Wayne to Indy (and back). It was also raining the whole time we drove from Ft Wayne to Indy. We pulled into the infield on pole day morning and parked most likely on the back stretch. All I remember was seeing the safety trucks running around the track in an attempt to dry it off so that qualification attempts could be made. I also asked Monk "are they racing trucks"? That year was unique in that the only pole day qualifying attempt was made by a driver named Leon "Jigger" Sirois, whose crew waved off his time thinking it was too slow. It turns out that if the crew had "taken" the time Jigger would have been on the pole because of the rain. We watched the telecast of

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the 500 at our local movie theater via closed circuit tv that year and seeing Andy Granatelli kiss Mario Andretti in victory lane was memorable. I loved the STP "pajamas" that the pit crew wore. On a related note, Rodger Ward Jr. spotted Jigger sitting a couple of rows ahead of us in turn 1 during qualifying a few years ago and we all shook Jigger's hand. That was cool.

The next trip to Indy for me was 1976. My Uncle Jimmy and Monk owned an infamous establishment in Waukegan, IL named "TnT lounge" (Tiernan and Tiernan). The exploits that went on at TnT's would require another essay in order to do properly describe the place and the patrons. One night during early May a patron was sitting at the bar and asked Monk if he wanted to buy tickets to the 500. He bought them and decided to take me. We drove down the morning of the race and walked to our seats. I could tell that Monk was not happy with the seats because we were in probably the 4th or 5th row up from the main straight. During warm up laps all we saw were rear wings going by. He decided that we needed to see the start of the Indy 500 regardless of where our seats were. He took my hand and we walked up the aisle as far up as we could and kneeled down in the aisleway. One of the people seated next to us told my dad "you can't do that". Monk told him that "I want my son to see the start of the Indy 500". It became contentious but the guy backed down and we saw the start. I could not believe how fast they went by! I don't remember much else about that race except that we decided to leave because it started to rain. A good decision because the race ended early and Johnny Rutherford was declared the winner. We heard that on the radio heading home.

1977 was a very special year for me. That was when I became one of the "big boys" and was invited to Indy 500 qualifying weekend for the first time. Several of the regulars on the Indy trip were not happy that kids would be present but my dad insisted that "if my son is not welcome than I am not welcome". Unfortunately the weather did not cooperate as most of the first weekend of qualifications was rained out. Nevertheless the speed that I saw during fast Friday that weekend were enough to make an indelible mark on me. For the race, a local travel agent organized a bus trip out of Waukegan and a large contingent of the Tiernan family made the trip down for the race. It was really hot but the race was good and it looked like Gordon Johncock was going to win until his turbo offy blew up. AJ Foyt was the first to the finish line to become the first driver to win 4 500's.

I went to every Indy qualifying weekend from 1977 through 2014, with the exception of one which I missed because of college finals. My favorite part of the weekends were hearing the stories and seeing some of the things that went on in the stands and in the

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snake pit. Tom Terwall, one of my dad's friends who came to qualifying every year, used to cook bratwurst in the stands in this little sterno device. We'd bribe the yellow shorts patrolling the area with a hot brat and he left us alone. We ended up calling that guy "Buford Pusser" after the main character in Walking Tall. Every year Buford would find us and ask "where are those bratsworths". Cooking in the seats would never fly today...

My son Bryan, now 22 started coming to Indy when he was 12. My other son James, now 18 started when he was 10. The Tiernan Indy tradition will hopefully be carried on by those 2. Bryan knows more about racing nowadays than I do. My wife Myrta has made the trip to the 500 as well, although she is not as big a race fan as the rest of us. Margie makes the trip to the 500 every year as well. We really enjoy the camaraderie that goes on race weekend. We have always appreciated the hospitality shown to us by Rodger and June Ward, who welcomed us into their home for many years on qualifying and race weekends. Race morning we park at Leo Thompson's house and enjoy a few cocktails before the race. Most of the people there come every year and it is fun to catch up with them before and after the race.

Needless to say the Indy 500 is the Tiernan's "Super Bowl" and is the event and experience we most look forward to every year.

Mike Tiernan
January, 2017

Editor's note: Monk passed away in 2012 after a brief illness. Besides his eclectic career, he was a former Marine and wrestled competitively in college and in the Corps. Like Jerry Foster, Rodger Ward Jr. and the rest of the "senior" (experience, not age) race fans, Monk knew all the subtleties about race cars. We all miss him.