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USAC Stock Cars

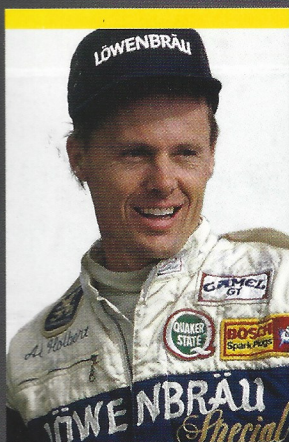
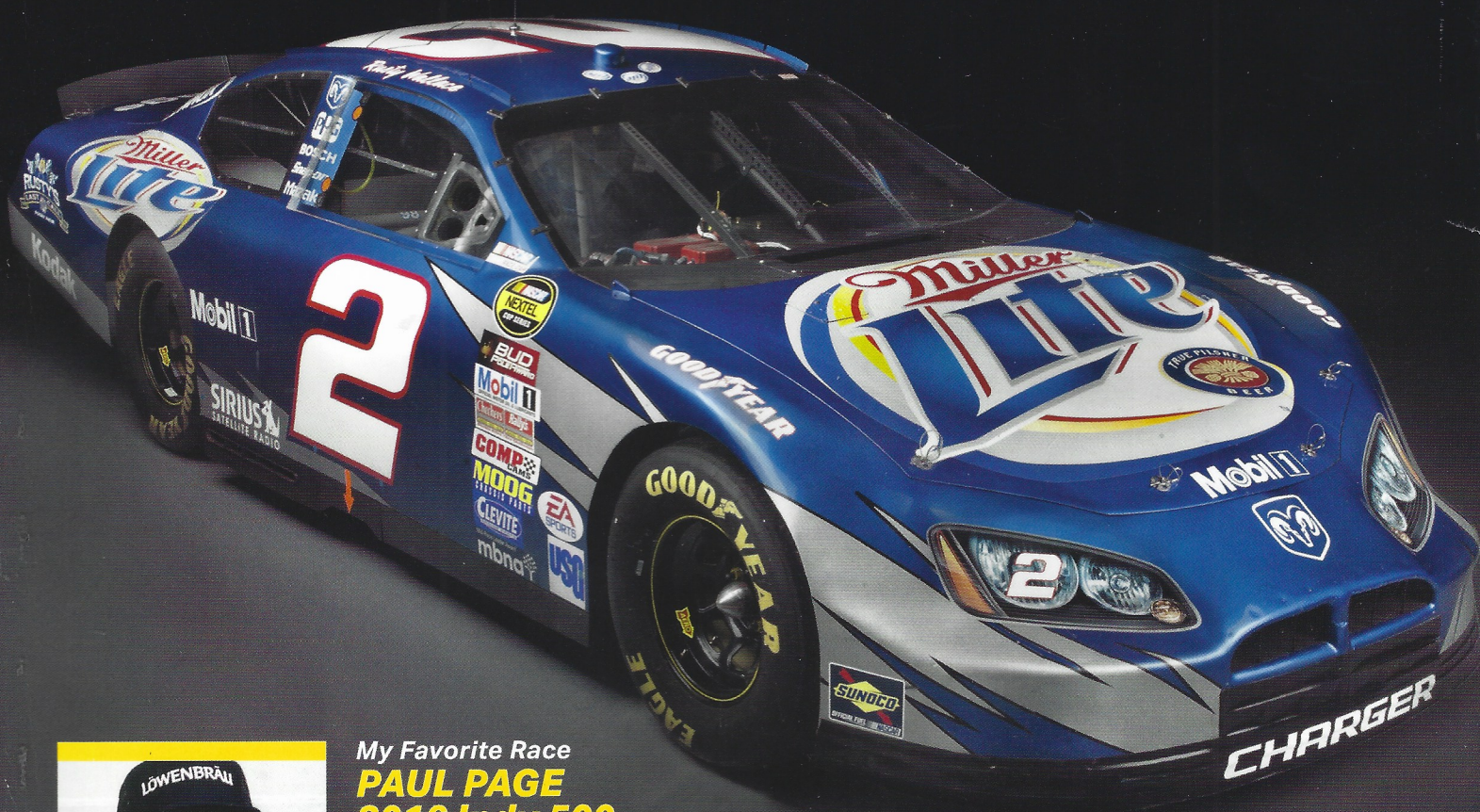


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My Favorite Race
PAUL PAGE
2016 Indy 500

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PAUL PAGE

2016 Indianapolis 500

BY GARY WITZENBURG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY IMS

PAUL PAGE, BEST KNOWN AS the long-time “voice of the Indy 500” on radio and TV, earned his first opportunity to call that famous race on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Radio Network in 1977. Then, that December, he was nearly killed in a frightening helicopter crash.

Page started as a DJ, then moved to news with Indianapolis’ WIBC Radio and was reporting news and traffic from a chopper every morning and afternoon. “We had just passed over the Speedway and were over the high school,” he relates, “when the pinion gear that drove the main rotor disintegrated. We didn’t have any autorotation, and we hit really, really hard. I got thrown out and tumbled on my left leg, which shattered. I had blood all over me, and they were not sure that I and one other guy would live. Working part-time as a paramedic, I knew a lot about emergency care, and without looking at it, thought I had a small fracture. But when I got to the hospital, I discovered that I had a massive open fracture. My foot was essentially up alongside my knee.” Ouch!

But he recovered and went on to a sterling, four-decade radio and TV career calling not just Indycars but a wide variety of motor (and non-motor) sports and doing his share of race driving when he could. He did play-by-play for the Indy 500 first on radio, then TV, then



“That team did an incredible piece of work, and Rossi was smart enough to listen to what Bryan Herta was telling him on the radio, essentially to run 180-mph laps.”

radio again, from 1977 to 2016, and a whole lot more. His favorite race? The 2016 Indy 500. Really?

“For me to pick a favorite race was all but impossible,” he says, “but in 2016, I was just finishing up. I had gone back to radio after

television, and that day we were going to do what Sid Collins and I had planned in 1977. I would start the race, then hand it over to the guy who was going to take over from me, Mark Jaynes, who does it now.” Sadly, Page had not experienced that ’77 hand-off because Collins had committed suicide after a diagnosis of ALS.

“I called the start, then handed it over to Mark. That is one thing that makes it significant for me. And it was the 100th Indy 500, a rookie won it on fuel strategy, and my son, Brian—an aerospace engineer who went to work for Derek Walker in high school then was hired by Team Green, which later morphed into Andretti Autosports—was doing fuel management on Rossi’s car. That team did an incredible piece of work, and Rossi was smart enough to listen to what Bryan Herta was telling him on the radio, essentially to run 180-mph laps. He put his trust in his team and did that, and they won the race for him.”

Jaynes was doing the play-by-play while Page was “in the old-guy emeritus role” mostly looking at strategy and tactics. Off the air, he was pointing out lap speeds and saying, “Watch this guy.” Then on the air, he said, “Keep an eye on Rossi,” figuring they

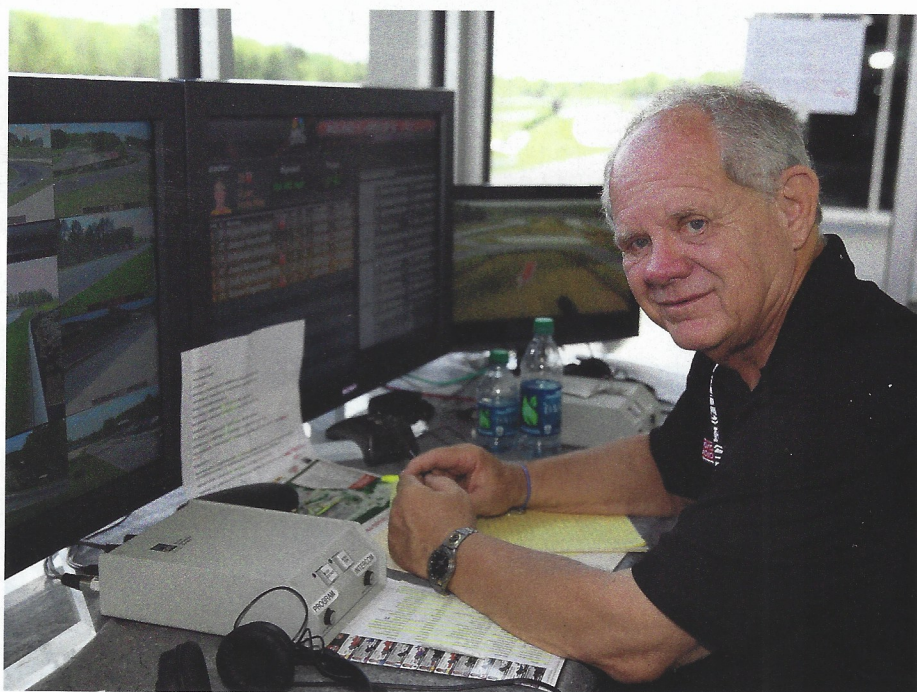
Indy 500 rookie Alexander Rossi won the 100th running of the race on fuel strategy. Paul Page’s son Brian was doing fuel management for Rossi’s car.



were trying to finish without a final fuel stop. "I didn't think that was possible, but I was trying to explain that strategy, and they weren't buying it. They thought a guy running 9th had no chance, and they had other battles going on."

As we know, Rossi did not make a last stop and won the race, and he ran out of fuel coming out of Turn 4 on the way to the checkered flag. "They had given him this incredible fuel number to make to have enough to get to 500 miles," Page explains. "I knew what was happening and knew my son was in the middle of it, and I was thinking, Brian, please don't screw this one up. He didn't, and they won that race. He was running very slowly to save fuel while everyone in front of him had to pit or decided they had to pit. I learned later that the team was not so worried about being able to make it to the finish but very worried about the closing rate of the 2nd-place car. He was reeling off seconds on that last lap, and there was a strong possibility that he could have passed Rossi at the finish. But that didn't happen. That race had everything going on that I love about racing."

Born in Evansville, IN, "Army brat"



IMS PHOTOS

Paul Page works the announcer's booth during the running of the Indianapolis 500.

Page grew up moving from base to base and attended 12 different schools before graduating from high school in Highland Park, IL. "I had a great uncle in Indianapolis who would bring me there for the summer, and that's where I got my first taste of the

Indy 500 and cars in general, beginning when I was about eight years old. In 1960, in my freshman year in high school, when we were stationed at Fort Sheridan, IL, north of Chicago, he paid for a train ticket to come down for the race. And they had not even started it when I fell in love with it...the





The Andretti Herta Autosport team poses with the Dallara DW12 Honda. Paul Page's son Brian is 6th from right with a beard. He called the winning fuel strategy, but he says, "We are team. Nobody does it alone."

"I enjoyed NASCAR when they were on bias-ply tires," he says, "because the old-school drivers of that time did not hesitate to say what they were thinking."

crowd, the ambiance—it was incredible." He then attended the University of Tulsa and served six years in the Army Reserve.

Page originally wanted to be a radio DJ but re-aimed his sights after that trip to the 500. "I started thinking maybe I could be a race driver in the Indy 500, so when I got old enough and left college, I bought a Lotus 51 Formula Ford. It was terrible, and I wasn't all that good. I later bought an Eldon Mk10C and raced that until 1977, but it wasn't long before I realized that I was never going to be a race driver. Instead, I decided to concentrate on trying to become an announcer for the Indianapolis 500."

He broke into radio hoping to DJ afternoon drive-time rock but was spinning classical music instead. He later moved to WIBC because Sid Collins (then the radio voice of the Indy 500) was there. "They hired me as a newsman, and I loved doing news," Page says.

"Sid and I became good friends, he mentored me, and the rest is history."

Despite being less than great by his own admission, Page has enjoyed competition driving "whenever someone was dumb enough to let me." What is his favorite among races he has driven? "The Baja 1000 in 2002, he says. "I had been doing the X-Games, so I guess that was part of it. They let me drive a great deal of it, and coming into La Paz in the dark, flying down this divided highway into the center of the city, we had to slow down because the crowds were lining the streets. Only minutes before, we were on a ridgeline picking our way over boulders and could see La Paz below. Now we were creeping through a crowd handing out stickers to kids. It was an incredible experience." The following year in 2003, he did Baja again with his son, which was also special.

SAM AND BOBBY

Doing Indycars on TV, he worked for many years with Sam Posey and Bobby Unser. "That was fun because they were diametric opposites," he says. Sam was a sophisticated, educated, skillful driver who had accomplished a great deal in his racing career, including at Indianapolis. He knew the sport and the cars and was very eloquent in

the way he expressed things. Bobby, out of that Sprint car/dirt-car era where they were tough and mean and losing five or six guys each year, was the total opposite. So, I had the yin and the yang sitting on either side of me, and I would play them. Critics complained about those guys fighting on the air, but that was the best thing that could happen because they were both singing things out."

Page loved and enjoyed calling a wide variety of sports through his years, including NASCAR, NHRA, IROC, Formula 1 and motorcycle racing and some "weird stuff" including a Rubik's Cube World Championship and 13 years of Nathan's hot-dog eating contests. "I enjoyed NASCAR when they were on bias-ply tires," he says, "because the old-school drivers of that time did not hesitate to say what they were thinking."

When we talked, he had just finished his autobiography, "Hello, I'm Paul Page," which will come out in May at the Speedway. "My life has been almost totally accidental," he enthused. "I did what I always said I should do, pursued my passion, and it worked for me. I have been so incredibly lucky in the life I've been able to live and all of the many things I've been able to do because of it. Not just racing things but across the board. I have been a very lucky man." 🍀