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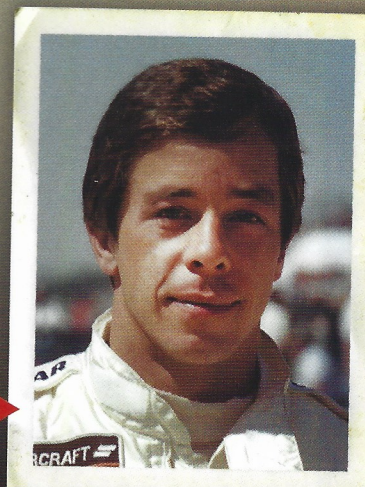


*Gurney's  
Last Ride*

**AAR Eagle  
Santa Ana**

**Mario Andretti:  
The Great - What If?**

**Legendary Sprint Car  
Builder Paul Leffler**



*My Favorite Race*

**HOWDY HOLMES**

1979 Indianapolis 500

## REVS UP AT

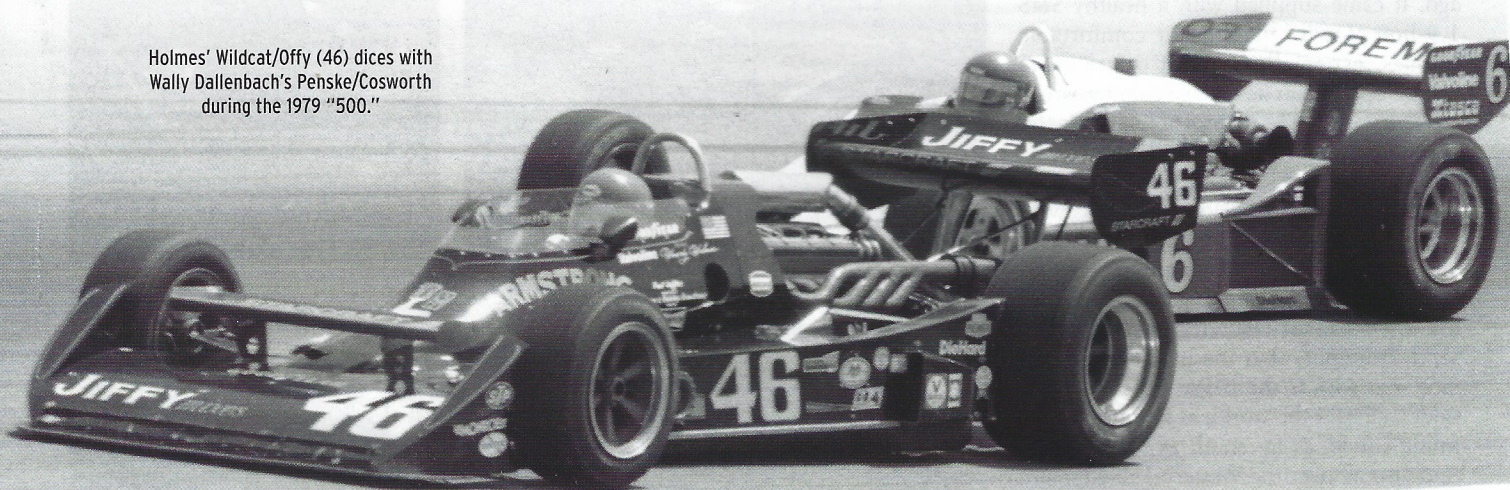
- Amelia Island Concours
- HMSA Laguna Seca
- NHRA March Meet
- The Race of Gentlemen
- VHRR Phillip Island Classic

**UK Saloon Wars: Chevy II vs. Jaguar Mk II**





Holmes' Wildcat/Offy (46) dices with Wally Dallenbach's Penske/Cosworth during the 1979 "500."



## HOWDY HOLMES

### 1979 INDIANAPOLIS 500

BY GARY WITZENBURG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN MAHONEY

Howard S. "Howdy" Holmes didn't hesitate when we asked him to name his favorite race from an impressive 16 years of competition in open-wheel Formula Fords, Formula Super Vees, Formula Atlantics and Indy cars. "The 1979 Indianapolis 500," he responded with a grin. Coming off the 1978 Formula Atlantic Championship, that was his first Indy 500, his first oval-track experience, his first drive ever in a 780 hp Indy car. What made that race so special?

Holmes was in college studying business when he attended the Michigan International School of High-Performance Driving at the just-opened Michigan International Speedway in 1968. After training on the (long-defunct) 3.0-mile infield road course that used the start-finish straight of the high-speed oval, he was thoroughly hooked. "One thing our family did together was go to the Indy 500," he relates. "I saw my first race in 1957, I had a boyhood dream of being a race car driver, and that school experience refreshed that dream."

He worked as a gopher in a race shop for more than a year, then decided to go racing. "I left school in my senior year and,

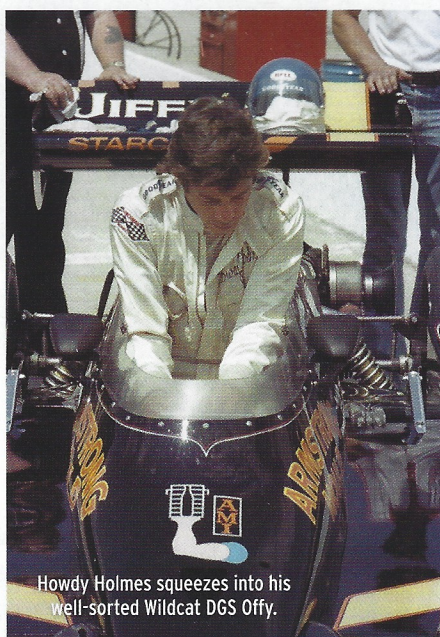
with a friend, built a homemade trailer, ordered a \$69.95 set of tools from a catalog and bought an engine manual from the college bookstore. The guys at Chelsea Milling Company (his family's Chelsea, MI business) built me a 12 x 20' plywood garage in the back of one of the

warehouses, and that's how I started."

Holmes won SCCA Central Division Formula Super Vee Championships in 1972 and '73, setting five track records. Moving up to pro series, he finished second in the 1974 Inverhouse international (U.S., Canada and Mexico) Super Vee series and was Rookie of the Year in the Canadian Player's Formula Atlantic series. The next few seasons brought more wins and podium finishes leading up to his 1978 Formula Atlantic championship.

"Atlantic was quite a going concern with a lot of names that you would recognize," he says. "Keke Rosberg, Bobby Rahal and a lot of others competed in that series. And when I won the championship, I was hoping to find something in Formula 1. But that never happened."

So he returned to Formula Atlantic in '79, and in March got a strange phone call: "He said, 'Are you Howdy Holmes?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'How would you like to drive the Indy 500?' I thought it was a crank call. My response was, 'No thanks. I think I'm playing paddleball that weekend.' That stunned the caller, who turned out to be a PR guy for Texaco.



Howdy Holmes squeezes into his well-sorted Wildcat DGS Offy.

"But this guy was serious. Sherman Armstrong, founder/owner of Armstrong Moulding in Indiana, was extremely successful in Sprint Car racing, primarily because he had an historic chief mechanic named Paul Leffler (see pg. 42). They won everything there and were looking for something new so decided to go to Indy with a rookie team and driver. I guess they tapped me because of my Atlantic experience."

It's a huge jump from road racing Formula Atlantic to a very fast oval in a very powerful car you've never driven before. At those speeds and with the wall right there, the consequences of making a mistake can be huge. "Absolutely," he says. "And if I had known about it six months before, I would have had plenty of time to get worried. But I didn't."

### Like a Rock on the End of a Rope

"As a driver, you don't really give that much thought. As a road racer, my belief was that road racing was more difficult than oval racing...until I got into oval racing and found oval racing more difficult. In road racing, you're turning left, right, braking, shifting, and you have depth perception. On an oval, you're like a rock on the end of a rope. Once you get going, the difference between your straightaway speed and your cornering speed is not that much, so that band of concentration is really, really narrow. And there are no visual aids to keep your focus sharp. And you can't drop a wheel off into the dirt, because there isn't any."

Indy 500 practice started on the first day of May, but Holmes was in Mexico that weekend for a Formula Atlantic race, which he won. He got to Indianapolis on Sunday night and out to the Speedway Monday morning. "I didn't really know what was going on," he concedes, "except for the fact that all of a sudden I had this opportunity to race there."

So there he was, a rookie driver with a new team and mechanics with no Indy experience. "What saved us," he says, "was having an old, reliable car, a three- or four-year-old Wildcat, and an Offenhauser engine. Enough people had worked on Wildcats that they knew how to set them up. Same with the engine, which was at the end of its competitive run. The rage in those days was Cosworth. And those turbocharged engines were good for 770-780 horsepower, maybe 235 mph at the end of the straight and 170 through the corners, given that era's aerodynamics and tire technology."

Holmes didn't get much track time that



Starting 13th, Holmes was the only rookie who qualified for the '79 "500." He finished 7th.



Car owner Sherm Armstrong gave Holmes his Indy 500 opportunity.



Holmes had proved himself on road courses, and here qualified on the 2.5-mile oval at 185.864mph.

first week other than rookie orientation, which was circulating at a specific speed for a number of laps, then moving up in 10-mph increments, while officials and veteran drivers watched. Yet he qualified a very respectable 13th, the only one of 14 rookies entered who made the race. "In those days," he says, "there were maybe 100 driver and car assignments, so it really was two races: Qualifying, to get into the field, then the race itself."

Any scary moments? "I do recall that the first time I left the pits, got onto the back straight and put my foot in it, it really set me back in the seat. But, like anything else, the first time you do something, it may seem a little overwhelming, the second

time less so, the third time less so. I also recall leaving from a pitstop, and the pit lane had cracks in it so you had to be careful not to light the turbocharger on the way out. I did that once and was fearful that maybe it would break a half-shaft or something. Fortunately, it didn't."

"The scariest part is the start, "because you don't practice with 32 other cars on the track. They talked to us about that in the drivers' meetings, especially the rookies. That was a little interesting. Driving an Indy car on the straightaway is no big deal. You have to pay attention when there are other cars around. But in the corners, those cars would slide, so smoothness was very important."

## Going Two Laps Down

Then he had to pit on just the second lap with no boost pressure. Someone had forgotten to tighten a clamp on the hose from the turbocharger to the plenum chamber. "Fortunately, the guys found it and tightened it, and I came back out last, two laps down."

Four hundred and ninety miles of hard racing later, Holmes took the checkered flag in 7th place, "and the Goodyear guys told me that I consistently had the fourth fastest cornering times." Not surprisingly, he was named Rookie of the Year. Does he recall any good races with anybody? "I remember passing some people on the outside going into turns but didn't pay much attention to who they were. They were just other cars." Okay.

"I was very pleased with the team, and they were pleased with my driving, and that was the start of a direction change in my career. As a road racer hoping to get into Formula 1, I took a sidetrack to Indy, and I'm glad that I did. I ended up driving Indy six times and had a sixth, a seventh, two 10ths, a 12th and a 13th, and for a while, I had the best average finishing record of anybody who had done four or more Indy 500s."

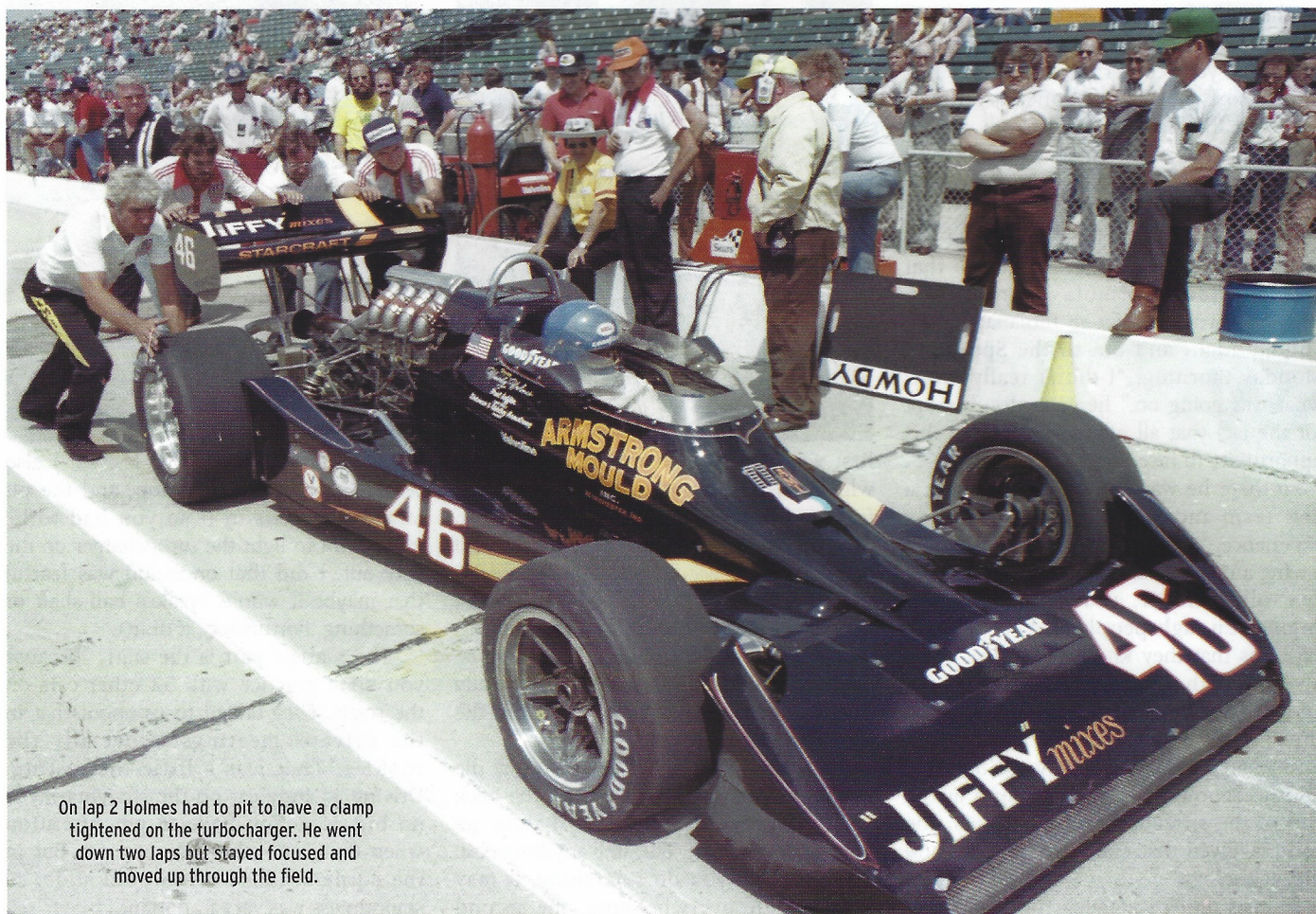


Racing on an oval was a completely new experience for Holmes, who drove a smooth and consistent race.

Holmes has also authored multiple articles and the award-winning book, "Formula Car Technology," has done ESPN color commentary and has run his own advertising and marketing businesses. He is now CEO of his family business, Jiffy Mixes maker Chelsea Milling. And that first Indy 500—notable as the first year of the contentious USAC/CART split—remains his favorite of many, many races, including plenty of wins in other classes.

"You have a boyhood dream to be a race

car driver, then you get that chance to race the Indy 500 with all these guys who were your boyhood heroes. It was very important to me that my family was there, so it went full circle from sitting in the stands with them to having them there watching me race. But I think my favorite part, aside from the fact that it was my first Indy 500, was that the car worked, and everyone did a great job. And to come out last two laps into the race and still finish that well, was very, very special."



On lap 2 Holmes had to pit to have a clamp tightened on the turbocharger. He went down two laps but stayed focused and moved up through the field.