

Phoenix Flyer

Jimmy Bryan dominated auto racing in the 1950s, but he might be even more memorable for his cowboy charm and witty showmanship.

THE BIGGEST sports star to roar out of Phoenix in the 1950s was auto racer Jimmy Bryan.

With his trademark El Producto victory cigar, rugged good looks and down-home wit, the tough racer with a soft heart had a knack not only for winning the decade's biggest races but for capturing the public's adoration.

Bryan was spotlighted in the era's high-profile media outlets, appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. His engaging wit was often on display. When questioned about his driving tactics for an upcoming race, Bryan replied, "Strategy? Just put your foot on the gas and go as fast as you can."

Nicknamed the "Arizona Cowboy," Bryan generated excitement on the speedways that mirrored the state's booming economy, making for a mutual love affair. Local leaders declared "Jimmy Bryan Day" on separate occasions in both Phoenix and the entire state. Bryan became the popular face of Arizona, heralded as even more admired than iconic U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater.

Not bad for someone whose first car was a bed frame. Born in Phoenix in 1926, Bryan was a mechanical wiz. At age 13, he built his first vehicle by attaching wheelbarrow tires to a steel bed frame that he powered with a one-cylinder water pump motor. The machine allegedly traveled 35 mph but lacked brakes. The skills Bryan learned driving his creation would prove invaluable years later when, despite failed brakes, he deftly maneuvered his racecar to victory in the 1956 Hoosier Hundred race at the Indiana Fairgrounds. Bryan also finished third in a race in Sacramento that year with nothing but the lower end of his racecar to slow him down. Observers dubbed Bryan the "brake-

less wonder" of dirt racing.

After graduating from Phoenix Union High School, Bryan joined the military during World War II to become a pilot. The war ended before he saw combat, and Bryan returned home and started racing. With no official driving experience to attract a sponsor, he competed in his own modified Ford roadster at the old Phoenix Speedway at Thomas Road and 62nd Street. Bryan would drive his racecar to the track, remove the windshield and headlights, then battle hot rods in evening races before reassembling the vehicle for the trip home to his parents' house in Phoenix's Sunnyslope area near Third Street and Hatcher Road.

Honing his driving ability, Bryan moved up to the midget racing class. He worked as a mechanic during the day and often raced at night – a grueling lifestyle made tougher by racing injuries. Bryan had his front teeth knocked out by a flying rock and survived a crash with a broken shoulder.

By 1951, Bryan's success on the midget-

car circuit advanced him to full-sized "Indy cars." But while racing alongside his Phoenix buddy Bobby Ball in 1954, Bryan also experienced the dark and dangerous side of auto racing: Ball was killed in an accident.

Undeterred, Bryan's racing career went into high gear. Showing an amazing fearlessness and physical stamina (he won two races in less than 24 hours in Indianapolis and Milwaukee), Bryan dominated the rough dirt ovals that were popular at the time. He won the national driving championship in 1954, 1956 and 1957. Over a three-year stretch, he won half of his 34 starts.

"Jimmy Bryan was the quintessential race car driver of the 1950s and put Arizona on the map because of his tremendous popularity with racing

fans," Phil Sampaio tells *PHOENIX* magazine. Sampaio is co-author of *My Hero, My Friend: Jimmy Bryan* (jimmybryanbook.com), winner of the 1992 American Auto Racing Writers and Broadcasting Association's "Best Book

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Popular Phoenix auto racer Jimmy Bryan (center) greets gushing fans and reporters after a race in the 1950s.

"Jimmy Bryan was the quintessential race car driver of the 1950s and put Arizona on the map because of his tremendous popularity."

— AUTHOR PHIL SAMPAIO

Phoenix Files History



Barry Goldwater meets Jimmy Bryan in 1955, left; Bryan at Indy, 1958



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of the Year" award. The book is being re-released to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Indianapolis 500 on May 29.

One of Bryan's most famous races was the 1957 Bobby Ball Memorial at the Arizona State Fairgrounds, which determined the national champion of Indy car racing. Near the end of the race, Bryan was lapping another driver when he was squeezed toward the outside fence. Incredibly, Bryan flew off the track through a hole in the fence created by an earlier accident, zoomed behind a wooden barrier in a flurry of dust, then seconds later burst through another damaged fence section in an explosion of wood and landed back on the track. Tossing out fence fragments from his open-air cockpit, Bryan caught up and found himself in second place. Cheered on by the hometown crowd, Bryan passed the leader on a curve to win his third national driving championship. Afterward, *The Arizona Republic* called Bryan's driving "a lumber truck gone berserk."

In 1957, Bryan journeyed to Italy for the Race of Two Worlds at the Monza Autodrome. The 500-mile contest was billed as a competition matching the best American and European drivers. Bryan won, becoming the first American victorious in a major European race since 1921. Italian fans ripped at his clothing for souvenirs.

The only elusive triumph missing from Bryan's résumé was the Indianapolis 500. He had come close to winning the race several times since first competing in 1952. In 1958, his trip to the Brickyard seemed promising since he was driving the "Belond Special,"

which won the previous year. Bryan managed to avoid a 15-car pile-up during the first lap and rocketed to victory, acknowledging the roaring crowd and throwing his hands in the air in his characteristic salute.

After his Indy win, Bryan took a break. In a 1958 interview with *Sports Illustrated* magazine, his father said, "Now I hope he'll retire.... I'm not a superstitious man, but I've noticed that Indianapolis winners ever since 1911 have had a record of running into trouble when they keep on racing."

Bryan raced sporadically, and after disappointing finishes in two Indy 500s, he returned to dirt events in 1960. In a borrowed car, he qualified second at the Langhorne track in Pennsylvania. During the first turn, his car flipped violently, killing the 34-year-old. Survived by a wife and two daughters, Bryan was buried at Phoenix's Greenwood Memory Lawn Cemetery at 23rd Avenue and Van Buren Street in what was called the biggest funeral ever held in Arizona.

— Douglas Towne