

INDY 500: FIVE OF THE BEST

The only sure thing in choosing the top-five Indianapolis 500-Mile Races is that nobody will agree with all of the choices. With 99 to pick from, what's left out is as hard a choice as what goes in. *RACER*'s Robin Miller isn't afraid to make the tough calls, so here are his five of the best.

No 1982 ultra-close finish? No 2006 cliff-hanger? No Foyt win? Nope. But Miller's sticking with his choices, and he's certainly chosen five classics - whether you agree or not...

WORDS Robin Miller



F. Peirce Williams/LAT



IMS archive

1960 A DUEL FOR THE AGES

For most of its first 43 runnings, a good Indy 500 consisted of having two drivers on the lead lap at the end. And if they were anything less than 30sec apart, that was considered a close finish. But Jim Rathmann and Rodger Ward changed all that in 1960.

Driving identical Watson roadsters, they pushed each other for the better part of three and a half hours, swapping the lead 14 times in the final 100 laps, entraining a crowd used to seeing dominant winners.

This race was a different animal from the start as the fans were treated to a five-car donnybrook, with Eddie Sachs, Troy Ruttman and Johnny Thomson all

taking turns trying to out-muscle the two protagonists at the front and.

A record 29 lead changes were recorded, but by the halfway point it was a private duel between the three-time Indy bridesmaid and '59 winner Ward.

In the last 50 miles they passed each other 10 times, then traded the top spot four times in the final 11 laps. Ward snatched the lead on Lap 194, but slowed after seeing how worn his right-front tire had become. On Lap 197, Rathmann swooped past by turning the fastest lap of the race (146.1 mph) and beating Ward to the checkered flag by 12sec.

44th Indianapolis 500

Pole/avg. speed:

Eddie Sachs, 146.592mph

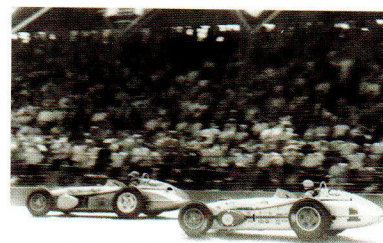
Winner/avg. speed:

Jim Rathmann, 138.767mph

Second: Rodger Ward

Winning margin: 12.67sec

Lead changes: 29 among 5 drivers



IMS archive

(TOP) Rathmann drinks the spoils of victory after his intense battle with Rodger Ward (ABOVE, Rathmann ahead of Ward).



LAT archive

it better and better as the race wore on," says Derrick Walker, Penske's team manager for three of those four wins. "He didn't run flat out all the time, but he always knew when to run hard and when to play it smart."

Mears smiles when he thinks about some of things he used to hear.

"A lot of people have no idea I drove for someone else besides Penske; they think I was born with a silver spoon, and some people thought I bought the ride. When I'd win Indy I'd hear, 'Mears backed into another one' a lot, but I guess the way I drove helped fuel that.

"I didn't have to lead - although my ego *wanted* to - because my goal was to always be there at the end, ready for a shootout. It only happened once [1991], but that's what I was always geared for."

And that record-equaling fourth Indy 500 win is the quintessential Mears.

Despite dancing on the ragged edge every May, he didn't hit the wall, or even spin, at Indianapolis until 1991, when his suspension failed going into Turn 1 during practice. The resulting impact broke his right foot (although only his crew knew), but not his spirit as he bounced back to win a record sixth pole the next day. And what he did in the race further enhanced his legacy. He learned that running flat out



Gregory M. Mears/LAT

"When I'd win Indy I'd hear, 'Mears backed into another one' a lot, but I guess the way I drove helped fuel that"

RICK MEARS

lessened the persistent pain in his throttle foot, and putting his left foot on top of his right to hold it down worked best. For most of the afternoon Mears seemed to be a pawn in Michael Andretti's dominant day, until their memorable duel for the lead on Laps 187 and 188.

"That's the fun part of racing; figuring out how to make your car better, not showing your hand until the end and finding your best set up," says Mears, 25 years after besting Andretti. "The most

satisfying wins are the ones you *earn*."

Earning a record six poles at Indy was another mindset he mastered.

"I learned to be smooth in those dirt buggies, so that became part of my natural driving style, and I also think fast corners suit my approach," he reasons. "Plus, the speed didn't bother me."

He didn't bother with a farewell tour either - telling his team at the 1992 Penske Christmas party he was quitting.

"At Indy that year, I walked into our garage one morning and asked my guys, 'OK, where are we at?' instead of knowing. I hadn't taken it home with me the night before like I always did, so that was an indicator. What got me here was a love of driving, but I felt my desire starting to slip, and it wasn't fair to the team. So it was time."

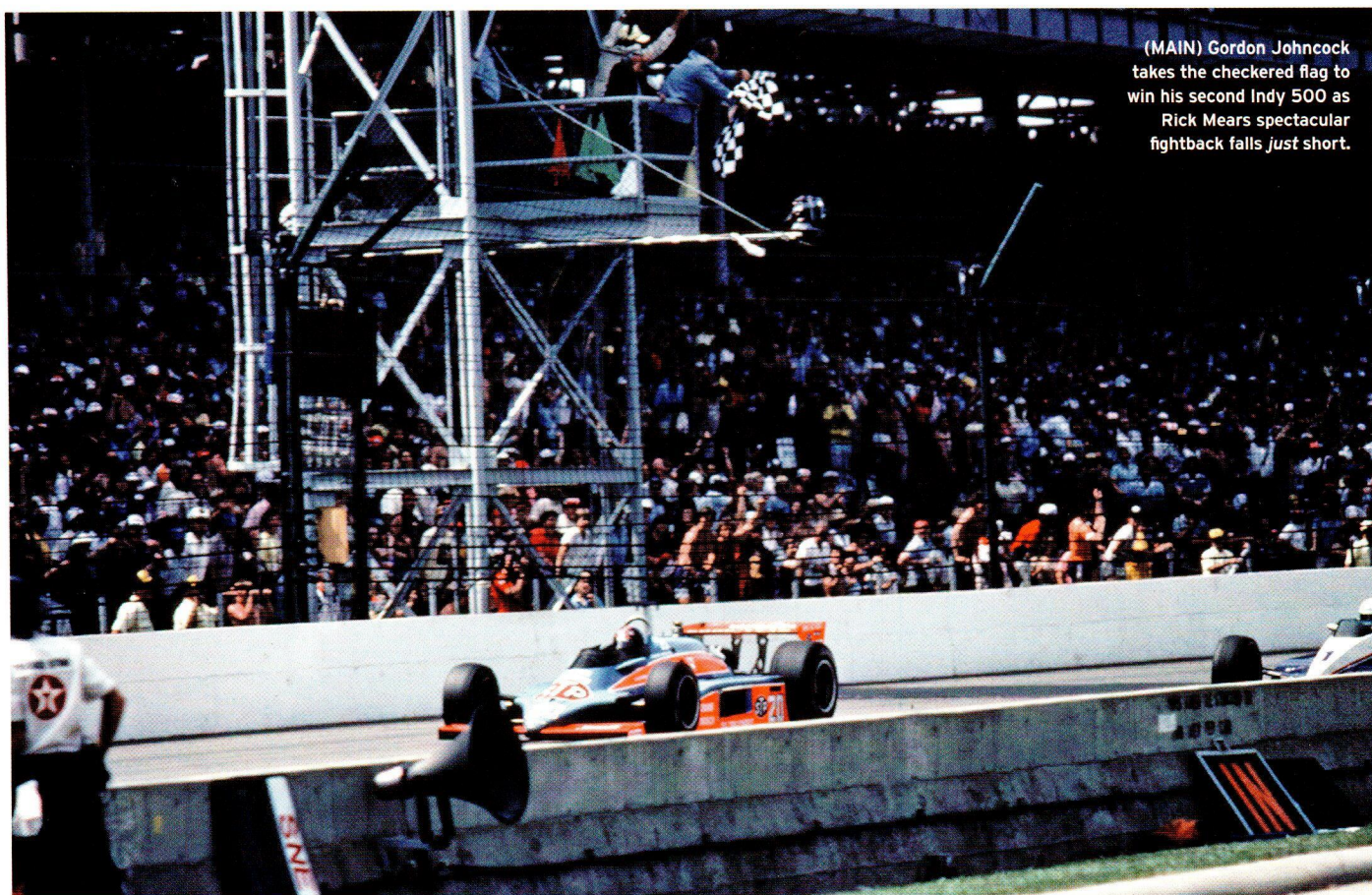
Mears walked away on his own terms and still on top - two rarities in racing.

"Rick is such a good person, so respected by everyone, and the most understated four-time winner in the business," says Penske. "I don't think he had any enemies either, and that's unheard of in this sport."

Much like his ascension.

Because the kid with dirt behind his ears in 1976 had no designs on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, yet became part of its fabric - forever. ■

(ABOVE) For 15 years, four-time winner and six-time pole-sitter Rick Mears was the benchmark at the Indianapolis 500. Following his retirement at the end of 1992, Mears (LEFT) with three-time Indy 500 winner Helio Castroneves) stayed with Team Penske as a driver mentor.



(MAIN) Gordon Johncock takes the checkered flag to win his second Indy 500 as Rick Mears' spectacular fightback falls just short.

1982 ONE WILD FINISH

During the long, heroic and sometimes heart-breaking history of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing" there had never been anything like this. The white flag is flying, the grandstands are shaking, the ABC announcers are screaming and the 66th Indy 500 has come down to the last lap.

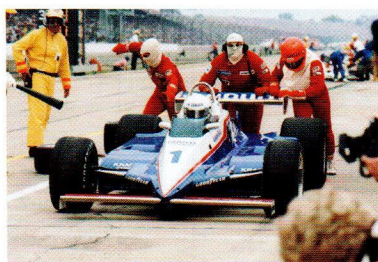
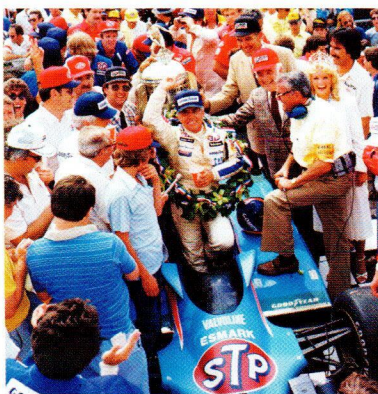
Gordon Johncock, the hard-driving veteran who lived on the limit, and Rick Mears, the cool, calculating assassin who always knew when to pounce, were side-by-side as they barreled into Turn 1 to decide the most pulsating finish ever.

And that had been a highly unlikely scenario with just 14 laps left...

Johncock owned an 11-second lead over Mears, thanks to their final pit stops in which the former got a quick splash of fuel after Mears got balked and lost valuable time.

Even though Mears had won the pole and led the most laps in Roger Penske's sleek PC-10, he found himself hopelessly behind the 1973 Indy winner. But then Johncock picked up a push and "The Rocket" picked up the pace. He was gaining a second a lap on the leader and, with four laps to go, Jim McKay and Sam Posey suddenly raised their voices.

"Mears is catching and closing fast, he's



(TOP) Nine years after his first win, Johncock celebrates again. (ABOVE) A lengthy last fuel stop left Mears 11sec back with 14 laps to go.

only two seconds behind," yelled McKay as you could hear the crowd's roar on TV.

As they crossed the yard of bricks to begin the final lap, Mears pulled alongside Johncock to complete his amazing comeback. But Gordy never lifted going into Turn 1 and Rick, low on the apron, lost the front end and skated toward the wall. He got his Penske under control and made a last gasp drafting attempt as they stormed to the line - but lost by a car length, or 0.16sec.

"I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but I wasn't backing off," said Johncock after the closest, wildest and most riveting Indianapolis 500 finish ever. >

66th Indianapolis 500

Pole/avg. speed:

Rick Mears, 207.004mph

Winner/avg. speed:

Gordon Johncock, 138.767mph

Second: Rick Mears

Winning margin: 0.16sec

Lead changes: 16 among 6 drivers

1991 MEARS GETS HIS SHOOTOUT

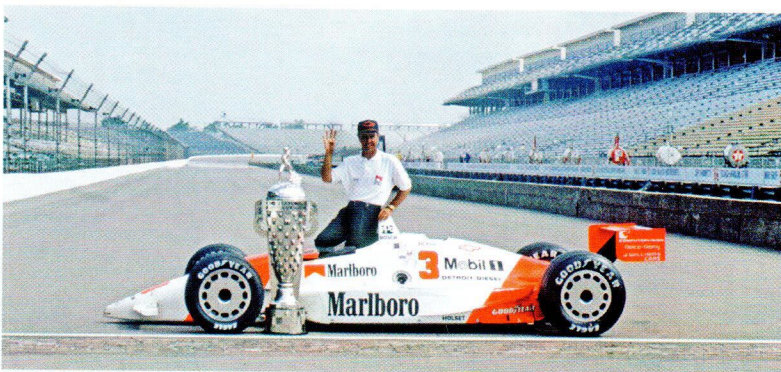
Rick Mears left his mark at Indianapolis in three different decades, but his signature victory came in 1991.

It was a month full of history for the Penske driver as he clouted the IMS walls for the first time ever and broke his foot when the suspension failed during practice, only 24 hours before qualifying began. Of course, he limped into his backup car and captured his record sixth Indy 500 pole position the next day.

Emerson Fittipaldi and Michael Andretti took turns controlling the pace during the first 170 laps before Emmo dropped out. Content to smartly stalk the leaders up to that point, Mears then inherited the top spot when Andretti pitted for fuel under caution on Lap 184.

On the Lap 187 restart, Andretti drafted Mears down the front stretch, dodged a couple of lapped cars, then made a bodacious outside pass going through Turn 1 to snatch the lead. It was the late-race shootout Mears always planned for.

But, while the crowd was still buzzing,



(ABOVE) Mears poses with the Borg-Warner Trophy for the fourth time - only the third driver to achieve such a feat in "500" history.

Mears returned the favor the next time around and re-claimed command by blowing past Michael in almost the same spot in Turn 1 - in identical high-side fashion.

From there, the 39-year-old IMS virtuoso held off Andretti to the finish and earned his fourth win to tie A.J. Foyt and Al Unser.

75th Indianapolis 500

Pole/avg. speed:

Rick Mears, 224.113mph

Winner/avg. speed:

Rick Mears, 176.457mph

Second: Michael Andretti

Winning margin: 3.149sec

Lead changes: 18 among 6 drivers





(MAIN) Coming out of Michael Andretti's draft, Rick Mears sets himself up for an outside pass through Turn 1 - the race-winning move in the 75th Indianapolis 500.

1993 THE STARS ALIGN

The star power, the circumstances as they played out, a crucial restart near the end, and the winner's refusal to drink milk made 1993 one of the most memorable.

It was the end of an era in many ways as four-time winner A.J. Foyt abruptly quit on Pole Day and then took a tearful farewell lap. It would be Mario Andretti's last blast of IMS glory and Al Unser's final appearance on the track he owned in the 1970s. Former Formula 1 World Champion Nelson Piquet returned following his devastating accident the year before, and reigning F1 king Nigel Mansell shocked the motorsports world by turning his back on grand prix racing to come to Indy cars.

After qualifying in the middle of Row 1, Andretti flexed his 53-year-old muscles and led 70 of the first 168 laps in his Newman/Haas Lola-Ford. But the handling went away and he faded as his teammate, Mansell, charged to the front.

The Brit, who'd seriously injured his back at Phoenix two months earlier, showed an affinity for ovals. He led from Laps 175-184 and was pulling away as he sought to emulate Graham Hill as a rookie winner.

But a caution bunched up the field and

1989 winner Emerson Fittipaldi and '90 victor Arie Luyendyk were in Mansell's mirrors on the Lap 185 restart. His lack of experience on restarts left ol' Nige a sitting duck as Emmo swept past him on the outside for the lead and Arie took the high line into second place.

Fittipaldi, the other ex-F1 champ in a star-studded lineup, held off Luyendyk by two seconds for his second Indy win, but then drank orange juice instead of milk in Victory Lane to infuriate the traditionalists.

Mansell brushed the wall late, but held on to third to become Rookie of the Year, while Andretti wound up sixth in his penultimate "500" and four-time winner Big Al finished 27th in his final run. >

77th Indianapolis 500

Pole/avg. speed:

Arie Luyendyk, 223.967mph

Winner/avg. speed:

Emerson Fittipaldi, 157.207mph

Second: Arie Luyendyk

Winning margin: 2.862sec

Lead changes: 23 among 12 drivers



(LEFT) Emerson Fittipaldi and Nigel Mansell were two of the Formula 1 World Champions in the star-studded 1993 Indianapolis 500 field, with Mario Andretti and Nelson Piquet making it four in total.

(ABOVE) Emmo took his second victory at The Brickyard, but riled the traditionalists by sipping Brazilian orange juice instead of Indiana milk.



The intense, last-laps duel between Ryan Hunter-Reay (No. 28) and Helio Castroneves (No. 3) sealed the 98th "500" as a classic.

Philip Abbott/LAT

2014 THE HUNTED AND THE HUNTER(-REAY)

In a month when 1995 Indy winner/1997 F1 champ Jacques Villeneuve returned to the Speedway and NASCAR champion Kurt Busch made his IndyCar Series debut, the race will be remembered for its frenetic finish and one ballsy pass.

Even though the lead changed 34 times among 11 drivers, it was the closing salvo that kept the paying customers on their feet.

Marco Andretti, teammate Ryan Hunter-Reay and three-time Indy winner Helio Castroneves staged one of the great slugfests. That trio was either nose to tail or side by side for the final 18 laps.

RHR was leading when Townsend Bell had a big crash in Turn 2 and IndyCar officials decided to throw the red flag on Lap 193 to try and finish the final seven laps under the green (eight of the previous 12 had finished under caution because of accidents or rain). It was unprecedented, but it was the right call.

With five to go, Castroneves went inside RHR and into the lead going into Turn 1. But on Lap 197, Hunter-Reay got a great run going down the backstretch and dove



Ernie Maschner/LAT

(ABOVE) Big day for the home team... Hunter-Reay kisses the yard of bricks after becoming the first U.S.-born Indy 500 winner since 2006.

almost into the grass to reclaim first. It was the kind of bold move a driver makes to cement his career or eat concrete at IMS.

On Lap 198, Castroneves came back on the outside of RHR in Turn 1 to retake the lead, but couldn't hold it to the start-finish line as Hunter-Reay used the slingshot to get back in front. On the last lap Helio gave it one final shot coming off Turn 4, but fell 0.0600sec shy at the checker.

It was the second-closest finish ever. RHR was the first American winner since '06, with Andretti a car length behind in third. ■

98th Indianapolis 500

Pole/avg. speed:

Ed Carpenter, 230.661mph

Winner/avg. speed:

Ryan Hunter-Reay, 186.563mph

Second: Helio Castroneves

Winning margin: 0.0600sec

Lead changes: 34 among 11 drivers

BE A PART OF HISTORY

The 100th Indy 500 takes place Sunday, May 29.

Practice begins Monday, May 16, with qualifying on the weekend of May 21-22, culminating in a shootout for pole 5pm Sunday. Miller Lite Carb Day is Friday, May 27.

Tickets are available at indianapolismotor Speedway.com

