

THE SHORT CHUTE



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... one amazing week in 1959

Harry Turner's Pursuit of Indianapolis

by Gregg Kishline

Forty-five years ago, I began tagging along with my Dad on visits to a remarkable place - Harry Turner's body shop. It was full of tools and cars and smells and profanity, but none of that made it unique or remarkable.

What made it special were the race cars that always sat in the back corner. Even as a child, I knew these machines had no useful purpose. They were wonderful to look at and stirred buckets of imagination. They were toys for grown men, playthings intended purely for adult enjoyment. On rare occasions, I would accompany my father to Milwaukee, and we would watch them on the Milc.

Harry owned midgets because he enjoyed the life: the adrenaline rush of driving these twitchy beasts, the satisfaction of competition, bragging rights, bonding with his fellow racers, the adventures that come with long-distance towing, and the prize money. He often intermingled these benefits, but there were risks as well.

After coming home on one occasion with a driving injury, he faced the wrath of his wife who pointed out that he was jeopardizing the family's security with this foolishness. There was undoubtedly more to that conversation that we'll never know. Thus did Harry cease driving. Years later, he ceased the marriage but kept the cars. Priorities.

I was raised believing that the Indianapolis 500 is the standard by which all

motor contests are measured, and Harry's shop was the bulk of that education. Harry was always ready to race or talk about it.

By day, my father designed passenger cars for a living. On his own time, he would play with all things automotive. I recall an evening visit at age 14, accompanying Dad to HT's shop in mid-May of 1959. It was the week that fell between the two Indianapolis qualifying weekends. A tarpaulin curtain had been hung around the race car corner, to ensure privacy. Dad and I violated the curtain, anyhow, to see a racecar in pieces. Something most unusual and serious was happening. The usual pleasantries didn't happen, and only a brief explanation was offered: Harry had bought a wrecked roadster at Indianapolis and was repairing it.

We watched intently, soaking up this improvisational racing theater until we realized it was better to leave them alone, and we left. Harry and his helpers were in another zone, too occupied for good-byes.

The story behind that frantic week remained a mystery to me for the next 40 years.

Harry's base of operations was "the ranch", an affectionate reference to his home and business in Kenosha, Wisconsin. About 1938 he bought three acres on the edge of town and built a single story home with a small body shop out back. Over the next 20 years, he enlarged the shop and landscaped the place into a handsome business operation.

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HARRY TURNER'S PURSUIT . . . (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Harry's son Lance still runs Turner Auto Body, and it's still called the ranch.

Harry got pretty good with his midgets, both building and driving them - he ended up with more than 100 feature wins. Following WWII, he started building his own cars and winning against the best Midwest drivers of the era. This included Tony Bettenhausen, who became good friends with Harry and often drove for him. Tony went on to champ cars in the fifties, but he often returned for a midget ride in one of Harry's cars. Each May, however, Tony was a fixture at Indianapolis, and even his critics conceded he could win it in the right car. Harry would join Tony at Indianapolis, in whatever capacity he could help.

Among the new cars at the Speedway in 1957 was a sleek, low-profile roadster, conceived by George Salih, who was the shop foreman for Meyer-Drake engines at the time. Salih had watched the roadster design evolve since Frank Kurtis first brought the idea to Indianapolis in 1952. Channel frames had given way to tubular space frames. Various suspension schemes were tried and discarded. Engines were leaned right or left.

Salih wasn't out to break new ground with chassis design at Indianapolis - he just wanted a good-looking race-car. "I used to doodle race cars on napkins, bits of paper, anything," he recalled. "Every time I'd doodle, the car would come out looking like this one. The more I studied the shape it was taking, the better it looked. Finally, it became an obsession with me. Actually, I had to lay the engine over to fit the shape of the car I wanted."

Working from his sketches in 1956, George Salih fabricated a rolling chassis and drive line, with a unique engine position dictated by his profile drawings. He scrounged enough "factory seconds" engine parts at Meyer-Drake to assemble a complete 4-cylinder 252-inch racing engine and offset it well to the left of the car's centerline.

Salih flopped the engine almost completely on its side, only 18 degrees above horizontal. This required engineering a new oil drain system and breathers, and he modified the fuel injection and exhaust systems, as well.

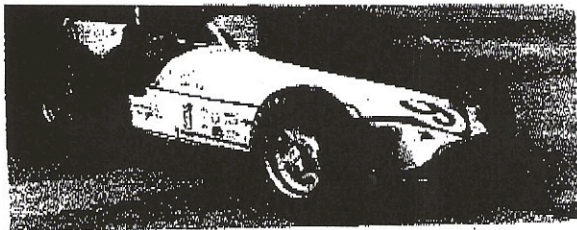


Photo by Bill Enoch

The whole project was a gamble by Salih, who'd gone into debt, mortgaging his home and his daughter's education to finance construction. He called on fellow-Californian Quin Epperly to build the aluminum body and tanks for the car.

Epperly was an extremely talented fabricator of champ cars and knew a better idea when he saw one. Salih was strapped for cash and a deal was struck. Epperly offered to reduce his price for finishing Salih's car in exchange for the right to build cars of this new design.

Skinned in Quin's expert bodywork, the car presented a dramatic low profile and a new term was coined by the racing community - "laydown". Racing scholars would later add that the laydown design also offered pre-loading of the left wheels, a lower center of gravity, and a lower frontal area which reduced drag. Salih just thought it was a better idea.

Salih had expected to sell the car prior to the 1957 race, but his unproven design attracted only tire-kickers. With no firm offers and no other alternative, he entered the car himself with sponsorship from muffler-king Sandy Belond. Sam Hanks agreed to drive. The rest is Indianapolis history. Hanks drove the Belond Exhaust Special to victory in its first race - the 1957 500-mile classic.

For the 1958 race, Epperly built two new Salih-derived laydowns. Assisted by Everett Duncan, a fellow graduate of the Frank Kurtis School of Race Car Construction, Epperly added his own refinements to the laydown design by further stiffening the frame, torsionally. Car #1 was built on an order from Louie Meyer, half of Meyer-Drake engines. Before the race, it was purchased by Messrs. Jones and Maley, co-owners of an Indianapolis auto dealership. Tony Bettenhausen agreed to drive the red #33 Jones & Maley Special. Car #2 was built for cider-merchant and whimsical tightwad Norm Demler, to be driven by George Arnick.

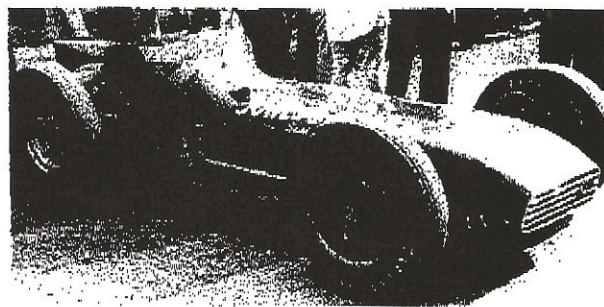


Photo by Bill Enoch

The Jones & Maley car was actually a cooperative effort between Louis Meyer Sr. and John Jones, according to Sonny Meyer. Louis Meyer Sr. had won the 500 as a driver and gone on to engine building as Meyer & Drake - in the footsteps of Fred Offenhauser. John Jones was the sole owner of an Indianapolis auto dealership and a perennial Indianapolis entrant, retaining the business name of his deceased partner, Mr. Maley.

Louis Meyer Sr. had approached Epperly, who agreed to build a laydown car using some components supplied

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HARRY TURNER'S PURSUIT . . . (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4)

by Meyer, including the engine and front axle. Sonny Meyer recalls that the engine had been sweetened with some unusual components. The crankshaft and the 220 connecting rods had been lightened, and magnesium pistons were installed. The lower reciprocating mass bumped the output of the normally aspirated 255-inch engine to 420 hp, by Sonny's recollection.

Bettenhausen's Epperly ride was fast and handled well, but he struggled in the 1958 race - by lap 135 he'd already made 4 pit stops. One routine stop was delayed by a troublesome rear wheel. Locating and tightening loose throttle linkage caused another lengthy episode. Despite the excessive time in the pits, he led the race and finished fourth. Although not properly sorted, the Jones & Maley car was a potential race-winner.

In the '58 '500, Salih's laydown won again, this time driven by Jimmy Bryan. George Amick drove the Demler car to second place. Bettenhausen's Epperly came home fourth. And Epperly's first solo effort, a 2-year-old upright roadster, placed fifth.

Consider for a moment that four of the top five finishers in 1958 were Epperly-built cars.

Harry Turner knew that lousy preparation was the only thing between Bettenhausen and the winner's circle in the '58 500. In 1959, the Jones-Maley car had been purchased by veteran owner Bill Ansted and entered at Indianapolis as the Ansted-Rotary Special. Although Bettenhausen had his choice of rides, he again opted for the same Epperly-built car and began practicing the car in early May. Harry also spent the month of May at the Speedway, mainly assisting Tony. Tony was having chassis problems with the Epperly laydown, but he remained very optimistic about his chances in the 1959 race.

For most of the entries, the entire month of May was consumed in preparing cars, making deals, and practice for the drivers - getting up to speed. At that time, mechanics were allowed a special permit to drive cars on the track, at reduced speed, for troubleshooting purposes.

In the week prior to the first day of qualifying, Smokey Yunick recalled swapping tips with Tony and Harry, who were working on Tony's handling problem. Smokey considered driving his own car, the Reverse Torque Special, in the race and was learning the track on a mechanic's driving permit which allowed "low-speed" practice. USAC's Frankie Bain was the licensing official.

Driving a roadster at Indianapolis was not as easy as it looked. In his book "The Best Damn Garage in Town", Smokey describes violating the low-speed restriction and his unwillingness to drive deep into turn three, and looking to Tony and Harry for advice:

"I'm shutting off fifty yards too quick... The car darts around bad when it's real windy, it sometimes jumps two car widths when

you go from track surrounded by grandstand to open area. I talk to Tony Bettenhausen, he says, "Smoke, they all do that. Don't do anything, she won't hit the outer wall, the air pressure between the car and the wall will stop it from hitting. ...Hell, Tony said, it's normal." Tony is driving a new laydown (Off), I believe Harry Turner built it. (Sorry, Smokey - it was Quin Epperly's creation, and a year old then.) Harry was a midget hot dog ten years ago. Tony's having big problems trying to go fast. Chassis problems. I ask Tony how to brainwash myself into driving into three. I've been over there and all the hot dogs are driving to a certain (bout ten foot tall) pine tree before lifting. I can't get closer than fifty yards before lifting. Tony says, "Just sneak up on it, a car length a lap. You get her in three once or twice the light will come on and it will be easy after that. Once you're in there, you can't lift or brake. You'll figure it out. ...you got to, Smoke. You just steer it a li'l, then nail it to number four entry." I ain't gained nothing twenty laps later.

Tony and Harry ain't gaining either.

They come to my location on pit road and Tony says, "Smoke I was running behind you from one to two. What's in that engine? You pulled me five or six car lengths down the back straight and you shut off early."

Harry's decided he needs to test his [Bettenhausen's] car also. Tony tells him he bets a thousand bucks Harry can't come within five miles per hour of Tony's speed. Harry starts for his wallet and I say, "Harry, you better re-think it, or you're gonna work this race for nothing." Well, Harry gives her a try. Frankie OKs him. Shit, 34 maybe 35 laps later Harry's still 'bout five miles per hour short of Tony."

In the remaining days of the second week in May, Tony and Harry continued to work on the handling problem with the laydown.

It was the first day of time-trials for the '59 race. On Saturday morning at the restaurant in the Sheffield Inn, Bettenhausen finished his breakfast with his wife, his family, and motorsports icon Chris Economaki, as Chris later recalled. Tony excused himself to go to the track. Less than 30 minutes later, about 11:30 am, Bettenhausen took the Ansted car out onto the track, for a few final practice laps with a pole run in mind. He slipped in turn two. Air pressure between the car and wall wasn't enough, and he hit the outside wall twice before sliding across the track, toward the infield. His corner speed would have been 130+ mph. Sailing across the grass, he went through a wooden fence nose-first, and flipped hard, embedding the roll bar in the mud. The impact and the cloud of debris were visible from the main grandstand, where cameras filmed Tony's error.

The car was badly damaged from the firewall forward, and except for a bloodied nose, Bettenhausen was uninjured. Tony credited the newly mandated roll bar behind his head with saving his life. It was just after noon, Saturday, May 16, 1959.

(Part Two in next issue of The Short Chute)