



# Racing's Haunted Driver

Auto racer Eddie Sachs lives with an obsession: He wants to win the Memorial Day 500 at Indianapolis and quit racing before death denies him this triumph. • By LARRY MERCHANT

One out of every three winners of the Indianapolis 500-mile auto race does not live to tell his grandchildren about it. Of the drivers who will be on the starting line Memorial Day, one in eight probably will be killed in action before next year's race. Death can come at any track to these men whose job it is to break speed limits. Many race drivers insulate their nerves against the peril by ignoring it, but not Edward Julius Sachs Jr., the most controversial figure on four wheels. "In the long run," Sachs acknowledges, "death is the odds-on favorite."

Eddie Sachs, who will be thirty-five this Sunday, hopes to defy the grim arithmetic of his trade by staying in competition until he wins the Indianapolis 500—and then retiring.

"When I win the 500," he says with a positive sense of destiny, "I'm going to rush to the exits where the people are pouring out and yell, 'I won, I won. Me, little Eddie Sachs from Allentown, Pennsylvania. Me, me, me. I won the 500.'"

## Eight Seconds From Victory

Last year, after failing even to finish the race in seven previous attempts, Sachs came within a few breaths of realizing his ambition. He had a commanding lead in the forty-fifth Indianapolis classic with only ten miles left. But a tire was disintegrating under him. Respecting the percentages, Sachs stopped and got a new tire. The change took twenty-one seconds. He lost by eight seconds to A. J. Foyt. "I would rather be a live coward," said Sachs, unoriginally but aptly, "than a dead hero." The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company certified his wisdom by testing the damaged tire under simulated conditions of the 500. The tire rolled a half mile—and burst.

Although the casual sports fan thinks of the race as a one-day affair, the Indianapolis 500 is really a month-high pyramid of tension and danger. It begins in late April, when about sixty sets of drivers, cars and crews converge on the famous "Brickyard" (now brickless). In

three weeks the field is reduced to thirty-three. Nobody is more eloquent in describing the mounting pressure of those first three weeks than Eddie Sachs, a balding, nonathletic figure who looks like the type who would never cross the solid white line in the middle of the road.

## Shakedown for Top Speed

"You must build up slowly to competitive speeds," he explains. "If you climbed into a car and went 140 miles an hour without working up to it gradually, you'd get sick."

"On the first day I run twelve laps—four at eighty miles an hour, four at 115 and four at 120. During these shakedown cruises I concentrate on every aspect of the car's behavior. Was the gas pedal smooth? Was the car stable? What about the brakes? Was the steering weak or strong? Was the steering wheel too near me or too far away? How was the engine temperature? Fuel pressure?"

"I'll discuss everything with my mechanic, Clint Brawner, one of the best, and plan the second day. On May second we'll get up to 125 and 135 miles an hour. Then we'll go through the same routine, checking everything in minute detail. The next day we can hit 138."

"All this comes under the heading of indoctrination. Even the veterans need it, because there's no track to compare with Indy. Other tracks are a mile or less; Indy is two and a half miles."

"On May fifth the track is open for high speeds. You concentrate so hard that you get tired quickly. You're constantly alert for possible changes in the track or car. And you check the opposition."

The collective madness accelerates in the second week. "Many drivers and cars are having difficulties making the speed," says Sachs. "Temper flare. There are arguments between drivers and mechanics, mechanics and owners."

"You are at a new plateau of concentration. How can I gain a few feet? Maybe I can go to that black spot on the wall before turning. You don't try ridiculous

things, but you must be aggressive. The winner of the 500 must drive as fast as his car will let him—not unsafely, but a little past the point of safety."

"For those of us who will be going all out to win—drivers like Jim Rathmann, Rodger Ward, Jim Hurtubise, A. J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones, myself—the tension is greatest. We are getting ourselves prepared mentally, physically and emotionally for a tremendous race—an ordeal."

"You may get tired after only a few laps, and there are 200 of them. I've figured out that I make thirty-six separate moves on every lap—thirty-six moves in sixty-one or sixty-two seconds. I'll be hitting 170 on the straights and 135 on the corners. If you lose control, you'll skid 600 feet before you can react."

## Full Throttle at the Curve

"We're all running as fast as we can by May twelfth and thirteenth. You know just how strong you are by then. The ones doing the good jobs get along. Those who aren't don't. Drivers change cars and cars change drivers. Nerves are straining."

Qualifying trials begin on the second weekend. Cars are timed for average speed over four laps (ten miles). Each gets three chances to record a top speed.

About twenty cars will qualify on these two days, and their drivers can relax during the third week while the mechanics strip down the cars and rebuild them, piece by piece. Those still on the outside face another week of intense strain as they prepare to compete for the remaining openings in the thirty-three-car field in further qualifying rounds the next weekend.

The fourth week is one of final conditioning for men and machines. Drivers familiarize themselves with one another's cars and styles. Pit crews are coordinated. Engines are broken in again. Fuel consumption and tire wear are checked; those who finish the 500 will have used as many as a dozen sets of tires at \$250 per set during their month at the Speedway.

At last it is the eve of the race. "By six o'clock on the twenty-ninth," Sachs says,

"after a drivers' meeting to go over the rules, the tension hits me right in the solar plexus. I have a tough time trying to eat. But I go right to sleep."

## Mass Before the Race

"The morning of the race everything else is out of my mind. After my wife and I go to early Mass, even she keeps a respectful silence when she sees that far-away look in my eyes. If you told me my house burned down, I'd say, 'So what?'"

Nancy Sachs, a pert brunette, undoubtedly would find something else to say. The Sachs—Eddie, Nancy and young Eddie III, born last February sixth—take considerable pleasure in their reconvered 200-year-old stone farmhouse on fourteen acres in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania, near Allentown.

Nancy has watched all of her husband's races since they were married in Indianapolis after the 500 in 1959. (Several years previously Eddie had a brief marriage which was annulled.) Nancy becomes deeply involved when Eddie is racing, but doesn't fidget. In contrast, the tension in Sachs spills over at Indianapolis when the cars line up for the takeoff. "This is the greatest moment of my life," he says. "I'm all choked up. Everything I've ever wanted is here, right now. The Purdue University band plays *Back Home Again in Indiana*, and Tony Hulman, the Speedway owner, says over the loudspeaker, 'Gentlemen, start your engines.' My eyes are so wet the first time around the track that I can't put my goggles on."

In a sense, Eddie Sachs has been headed in the direction of Indianapolis from the time he was a tyke. His parents were divorced when he was five. At the age of ten he sat on his father's lap and steered the family car. At twelve he was permitted to drive alone on country roads. Two years later he was tooling along main highways at breakneck speeds. He was a motor-age Huck Finn.

"The summer I was fourteen dad was doing contracting work for the Government," Sachs recalls. "He had to go from





*Sachs, face coated with grime, reflects on the grueling 500: "Everything I've ever wanted is right there."*



## HAUNTED DRIVER

city to city, day after day. He worked days while I slept in a hotel, and I drove nights while he slept in the back of the car. He forbid me to go less than eighty miles an hour. First thing he'd do if he woke up was look at the speedometer. If it was under eighty, he'd snap, "What's the matter, what's the matter?" I'd go up to eighty again, and he'd doze off."

Sachs was twenty when he saw his first auto race in Greensboro, North Carolina, late in 1947. "I thought it was ridiculous," he says, "but I also thought I could outride anyone there."

At that time Sachs was not long out of military service. Medically discharged from the Navy after a truck broke one of his legs, he had enrolled as a freshman at the Edwards Military Institute in Salem, North Carolina, a junior college and boarding school that he had attended off and on since boyhood.

### From Bellhop to Driver

Now, with a race-driving career in mind, he impulsively quit school and headed for Miami Beach. There he began a four-winter career as a bellhop to finance his racing apprenticeship.

Sachs raced, hitchhiked and odd-jobbed his way to the shrine in Indianapolis in 1952. He hoped to get a chance in that year's race, but guards flung him off the grounds bodily because he lacked proper credentials. "I'll be back," he shrieked. "Remember the name, Eddie Sachs!"

He returned in 1953 and 1954, but did nothing to indicate that he belonged. To be eligible for the qualifying rounds, a rookie has to pass a driver's test. This involved making four twenty-five-mile runs in two days at speeds ranging from 110 to 125 miles an hour (120 to 135 today).

Eddie flunked the test both times, which ordinarily is a sign that a man had better forget about race driving. Instead, Sachs went on to be acclaimed "Midwest Driver of the Year" in 1954—an award which nearly proved his undoing.

At a banquet in his honor in Dayton, Sachs read a prepared speech calling for various reforms in the American Automobile Association, racing's governing body since its infancy. "I was just carrying the ball for a lot of guys who should have carried it a long time ago," Sachs says. "I attacked antiquated rules—rules that hadn't changed to meet changing times. Two veteran drivers helped me draft the speech but, when they saw the reaction of A.A.A. officials, they acted like they never heard it."

Sachs was made to wish that he had never heard of it. The A.A.A. suspended him—for life. To get reinstated he had to write a five-page apology demolishing his own thesis. "I'm ashamed of that. I wasn't a man," Sachs says now. "But they were the absolute law, and I had to get back into racing."

He did, although he was barred from the 1955 Indianapolis race. The following year the A.A.A. withdrew from auto racing. It was replaced in the big-car field by the United States Auto Club. Sachs has had some minor differences with this organization too, but he gives it his full approval.

In 1956 Sachs got back to Indianapolis, and this time he passed his driver's test. But he subsequently was eliminated at the qualifying stage.

The next four years—1957 through 1960—he qualified but couldn't finish the race. His performance kept improving, though, and in 1960, and again in 1961,



*Strapped into the cramped cockpit of the supercharged racing car he will drive at Indianapolis on Memorial Day, Sachs prepares for a trial run. He tapes his racing goggles to shut out distracting glare.*



# HAUNTED DRIVER

Sachs won the coveted pole position with the fastest first-day qualifying time. This projected him into the featured role in hour-long television shows. A combination of the two films has been narrated in French and in Russian.

Nationally and internationally, Sachs is recognized today as a skilled auto jockey. He also has a reputation as a madcap character: He once brought a Dixieland band with him to the Langhorne (Pennsylvania) Speedway to serenade the crowd. And he is the pinup boy of the press and promoters because he won't dodge a question. After the same Langhorne race to which he took the band, he called fellow-driver Jim Hurtubise "bush" for trying to disguise the fact that he had driven only ninety-nine of the prescribed 100 miles.

Of such stuff are legends, friends and enemies made. "A lot of people think I'm silly," says Sachs. "I don't mind. I'm having the fun, and they're not. Others say I'm publicity happy. That's not true. I'm publicity conscious. I'm selling a product, Eddie Sachs"—he is incorporated—"and I sell racing while I'm at it."

## Death on the Turn

But he sometimes pays a price for his outspokenness, as happened when he candidly analyzed the death of Jimmy Bryan at Langhorne in 1960.

Sachs relates, "Jimmy won the 500 in 1958 and went into retirement. This was his first race in two years. On the very first turn he was killed. When reporters came to me, I told them that after such a period of inactivity he couldn't be sharp—no one could. I also lauded him to the high heavens for the fantastic race driver he was.

"Papers all over the country picked up the story, but many of them used only the part about the accident, which sounded like criticism. A lot of drivers wouldn't talk to me for a year after that."

The story did not say that other drivers refused to discuss the tragedy at all, while Sachs openly wept.

Bryan's death led Sachs to his present resolve not to push his luck any further if and when he wins the Indianapolis 500. "I remembered what happened to other 500 winners, and I decided it would not happen to me. Lee Wallard won in 1951. He was burned so bad a few days later that he was broke by the time he got out of the hospital. Troy Ruttman won in '52 and slipped into obscurity. Bill Vukovich won in '53 and '54 and was killed in '55. Bob Sweikert won in '55 and was killed. Pat Flaherty won in '56 and was sidelined for several years with an injury.

"Then in 1957 Sam Hanks won and retired permanently. He is the director of competition at the Speedway today, and he is respected by everyone."

Sachs thinks the big reason many race drivers stay at it too long is that they don't manage their money properly. Sachs talks from bittersweet experience. For years he spent money as fast as he earned it, and sometimes faster. He bought a car; it was repossessed. He bought a little saloon near Allentown and expanded it to an establishment employing eighteen persons, and then it collapsed around him during a steel strike.

Today Sachs has one of the most lucrative deals in auto racing. For driving Dean Van Lines' 1650-pound, 407-horsepower bullet, he receives a \$6900 retainer plus a standard 40 percent cut of prize money (50 percent if he wins the Indianapolis 500).

That's half of the deal. Sachs also has a full-time executive job with Dean Van Lines. A fat part of his income—\$55,000 in 1961, including more than \$25,000 in prize commissions—comes from this. Last year he was Northeast field supervisor, with responsibility in a fourteen-state area to improve sales in lagging franchises, open up virgin territories and handle complaints. Recently he was made supervisor of national sales in the New York area, a position with greater financial potential.

"I am the only active race driver in America with a position in management," Sachs declares. "Other drivers get publicity jobs that last as long as they're on top. I've prepared for when I'm not on top."

Meanwhile the Indianapolis 500 remains the center of his existence. "I think of it every day of the year, every hour of the day, and when I sleep too," Sachs says, grinning.

The Indianapolis Speedway was originally built as a dirt track in 1909 by a group headed by Carl Fisher. There were so many accidents that it had to be paved with bricks. The first 500 was held in 1911. Ray Harroun won it at an average speed of 74.6 miles per hour (last year A. J. Foyt edged out Sachs in the record time of 139.13 miles per hour).

Eddie Rickenbacker and associates took control of Indy in 1928. Speeds and fatalities soared. New safety measures were adopted in the mid-thirties—driver's test, auto inspection, the banning of riding mechanics. But driver deaths have increased in direct proportion to increasing speeds, with eleven having been killed in the last fourteen years. All told, some forty-eight deaths have been attributed to the Speedway—twenty-nine drivers, twelve mechanics and seven spectators.

Since World War II the 500 has boomed along with the automotive industry. Anton Hulman Jr., a business tycoon from Terre Haute, Indiana, bought out the Rickenbacker regime in 1945. Prize money in 1946 was \$115,450. Last year \$400,000 was in the pot. Winner A. J. Foyt collected \$117,975 of this and runner-up Eddie Sachs \$53,400.

## 13 Trips to the Hospital

The 500 is now probably the richest sports binge in the world. Sachs says that total receipts for the month of the 500 have been estimated to run as high as \$8,000,000. None of this would be possible if it were not for daredevils like Eddie Sachs, who can be stopped by nothing short of death. In his fourteen years as a race driver, Sachs has been hospitalized thirteen times—twice for six months. The left side of his face has been done over with plastic surgery. He has had three broken arms, a broken leg, too many broken ribs to count and five concussions.

In his first serious crack-up Sachs's midget racer tore up thirty feet of fence in Richmond, Virginia, in 1949. "Someone said, 'Looks like he's a goner, doc,'" Sachs remembers, "and I got up and holled, 'I'm OK, I'm OK!'"

In those younger, wilder days, Sachs raced as often as 200 times a season. This year—if he is frustrated at Indianapolis again—he will appear in only five major events and a handful of stock-car races.

By driving only the best cars on the safest tracks in a select few events, Eddie Sachs has reduced the odds against him. But every race is a risk. The question is—since his retirement plans hinge upon his winning at Indianapolis—will Eddie be able to stop in time to beat those deadly percentages?

THE END