

# Pre-World War One History of the Indianapolis 500 (1911-1916)



Ian Chermansky

## 1911

**Background:** The inaugural Indianapolis 500, called the 1911 International 500-Mile Sweepstakes Race was held at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Tuesday, May 30, 1911. The starting grid was set by entry date, not based on qualifying speed. The drivers had to qualify by setting a 0.25-mile run with a minimum required speed of 75mph. This inaugural Indy 500 offered the largest purse in racing to date, \$27,550. There were 46 entries from around the United States and Europe, but only 40 qualified. The estimated spectator attendance was over 80,000. American Johnny Aitken was the first person to lead a lap of the Indy 500. Ray Harroun was the eventual winner of the inaugural Indianapolis 500, coming from the 28th starting position to win more than 6 hours after the start of the race.

### **Facts:**

**Starter:** Fred J. Wagner

**Pace Car:** Stoddard-Dayton

**Pace Car Driver:** Carl G. Fisher

**Pole Position:** Lewis Strang (USA)

**Pole Speed:** N/A (Grid set by random draw)

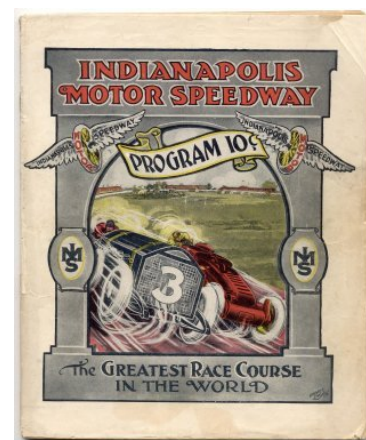
**Winner:** Ray Harroun (USA)

**Winning Entrant:** Nordyke & Marmon Company

**Average Speed:** 74.602mph

**Time to Complete:** 6:42:08

**Most Laps Led:** Ray Harroun (88)



### **Race:**

On lap 1, American Johnny Aitken took the lead from 4th place and led until lap 5 when Spencer Wishart took over in a Mercedes. Wishart was then overtaken by David L. Bruce-Brown's Fiat who dominated the first half of the race. Unfortunately, the first death in Indianapolis 500 history occurred on lap 12 when riding mechanic for Arthur Greiner, Sam Dickson, was killed when a wheel came off the American Simplex car Greiner was driving, which resulted in Greiner losing control and both men were ejected from the car. Greiner survived with just a broken arm, but Dickson reportedly flew into a fence 20 feet from the car and died instantly. Close to the halfway point in the race, Ray Harroun (who was an engineer for the Nordyke & Marmon Company and defending AAA national champion) passed Bruce-Brown for the lead. Harroun was relieved of driving duties by Cyrus Patschke on lap 70 when the car was in 5th place. Harroun re-entered the "Wasp" at lap 102, only a mile behind David Bruce-Brown. During the second half of the race, Harroun and Lozier driver Ralph Mulford fought back and forth for the lead, with both drivers taking the lead from each other through pit sequences. Harroun and Mulford both pit later on, and when Mulford came back onto the track, Harroun was scored with the lead and a 1-minute 48-second advantage, and eventually, victory. Harroun took home the \$10,000 first-place prize, as well as other monetary prizes on top of that. Harroun came out of retirement just for this race, and after he won the Inaugural Indianapolis 500, he promptly retired once again, this time permanently. There was a controversy that Mulford finished ahead of Harroun, as there was confusion about timing and scoring, but the result has remained unchanged since 1911 and will stay that way.

## 1912

**Background:** The 1912 Indianapolis 500 was held on Thursday, May 30, 1912. After Ray Harroun won the 1911 Indianapolis 500 with no riding mechanic, the rules were changed to require a riding mechanic in each car. The rules were also changed to limit the number of cars to start the race to 33 to make the race safer. The purse increased to \$50,000 in 1912. There were 29 entries for the 1912 Indy 500, but only 24 of those cars qualified. This year, the cars had to qualify by maintaining a speed of above 75 mph over an entire lap, increasing from the quarter-mile qualifying distance required from 1911. David Bruce-Brown had the quickest qualifying speed, with an average speed of 88.450mph over a single lap. The starting grid was still determined based on entry date however, so Bruce-Brown did not sit on the pole for the 1912 race. That honor was awarded to Norway's Gil Anderson, as he was the first to enter the race. The estimated attendance was 75,000 spectators. Joe Dawson was the winner on his 2nd attempt, after finishing fifth driving for the Nordyke & Marmon Company as Ray Harroun's teammate in the 1911 race.

### **Facts:**

**Starter:** Fred J. Wagner

**Pace Car:** Stutz

**Pace Car Driver:** Carl G. Fisher

**Pole Position:** Gil Andersen (NOR)

**Pole Speed:** N/A (Grid set by entry date)

**Winner:** Joe Dawson (USA)

**Winning Entrant:** National Motor Vehicle Company

**Average Speed:** 78.719mph

**Time to Complete:** 6:21:06

**Most Laps Led:** Ralph DePalma (196)



### **Race:**

At the start, Gil Anderson lost the lead to Teddy Tetzlaff who started in third, and Tetzlaff went on to lead the first two laps of the race. Then, Ralph DePalma took the lead from Tetzlaff in his gray #4 Mercedes, and went on to dominate almost the entirety of the race. DePalma surely was set to win, until his car began to misfire, and after limping to the line on lap 199, the car finally gave up. A connecting rod had been broken, which caused a hole to be torn in the crankcase. Indianapolis's own, Joe Dawson, was many laps behind DePalma, but on lap 199, Dawson and his riding mechanic Harry Martin took the lead from DePalma down the front straight. DePalma and his riding mechanic Rupert Jeffkins began to push the car to the line, not knowing what else to do at that point. Unfortunately for them, they wouldn't be able to finish the race. To the excitement of the 70,000 fans who were there to see the end, Joe Dawson led the last two laps in his Indianapolis-made, blue-painted National race car to win the second running of the Indianapolis 500. Joe Dawson feared there might be a scoring issue following the controversy of Ralph Mulford believing he won the race in 1911 over Ray Harroun, so Dawson drove two extra laps just to be sure. Dawson still finished over 10 minutes ahead of second place Teddy Tetzlaff in his Fiat. Dawson was also relieved of driving duties for a portion of the race by relief driver Don Herr. One of the most famous stories of the 1912 Indy 500 was that of Ralph Mulford. By numerous accounts, he stopped to change his shock absorbers and also stopped for fried chicken and ice cream during the race. Mulford did finish the

race though, with the grandstands essentially empty, and the sun setting over the main straightaway. Mulford finished the race 8 hours and 53 minutes after the start with an average speed of 56.285mph, which remains the record for the slowest finishing speed in Indy 500 history.



Joe Dawson winning the Indy 500 (1912)



Joe Dawson



## 1913

**Background:** The 1913 Indianapolis 500 was held on Friday, May 30, 1913. The Speedway made a few changes, tearing down the separate press and judges' stands near the starting line on the inside of the track and erecting a four-tier tower resembling a Japanese Pagoda as a control tower for officials. It is believed that this design was chosen based on Frank H. Wheeler's interest in Japanese architecture. A second tunnel was built underneath the track near the start of the main straightaway. The total purse was \$50,000, the same as the previous year. 27 cars qualified for the race, with Jack Tower setting a new qualifying speed record of 88.500mph. The starting order was determined by the drivers drawing names the night before the race, and American Caleb Bragg won the draw for the pole. Riding mechanics were still required at this time. The maximum engine size was decreased from 600 cubic inches to 450 cubic inches. Frenchman Jules Goux became the first foreign-born and the first European winner of the Indianapolis 500. Goux was also the second rookie to win the "500" with Ray Harroun being the first in 1911. The margin of victory over second place Spencer Wishart was 13 minutes and 8 seconds, which was approximately 7 laps at the time. As of 2022, this stands as the largest margin of victory in Indy 500 history.

### Facts:

**Starter:** Charles P. Root

**Pace Car:** Stoddard-Dayton

**Pace Car Driver:** Carl G. Fisher

**Pole Position:** Caleb Bragg (USA)

**Pole Speed:** N/A (Grid set by random draw)

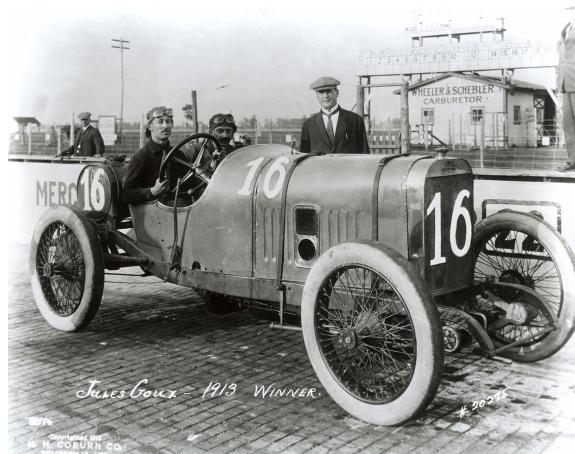
**Winner:** Jules Goux (FRA)

**Winning Entrant:** Peugeot

**Average Speed:** 75.933mph

**Time to Complete:** 6:35:05

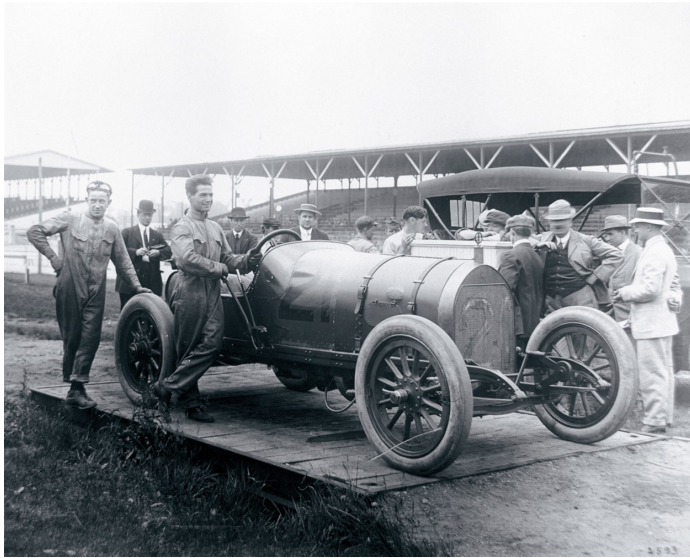
**Most Laps Led:** Jules Goux (138)



**Race:** This year's Indy 500 featured 7 cars from Europe, and the race was a true representation of Europe's progression in making racing cars over the Americans. Frenchman Jules Goux showed from lap four that his Peugeot was the car to beat. He took the lead on that fourth lap after starting seventh. Johnny Aitken (an American driver) volunteered to assist Goux in his first Indy 500. He told Goux on his first pit stop to keep his speed around 80mph so that he wouldn't have to pit as often. Goux agreed, but requested some chilled wine for his next pitstop as he complained about how hot it was on track. Goux had seven pints of champagne in an ice bucket waiting for him during the next pit stop. Goux and his riding mechanic, Emil Begin would both continue to drink champagne during pit stops throughout the race. In later years, AAA understandably banned the consumption of alcohol during competition. Goux essentially dominated the race, leading at the 200, 300, 400, and of course, the 500-mile mark. Goux finished over 13 minutes ahead of American Spencer Wishart, the largest margin of victory in Indy 500 history. At the time, the rules required the top ten drivers to finish the full 500 miles to receive prize money. This led to an extravagant sight for the spectators that remained after Jules Goux's finish. Charlie Merz, who was running in second place, would have his car catch fire towards the end of lap 199. Merz didn't want to surrender second place or the prize money, so he drove the final lap of the race with the car on fire while

his riding mechanic Harry Martin crawled out on top of the hood of the moving car to beat at the flames with his jacket. Merz finished third, in an amazing show of bravery.

**Note:** Harry Martin was tragically killed while helping test a Stutz race car at IMS less than two months later on June 26, 1913. A tire blew out and the car crashed into an outside wall and overturned, pinning Martin and his riding mechanic Frank Agan under the wreckage. Agan survived serious injuries while Martin was killed instantly.



Ralph DePalma's Mercer (1913)



Newly Constructed Pagoda (1913)

## 1914

**Background:** The 1914 Indianapolis 500 was held on Saturday, May 30, 1914. There were 46 entries for the race, but only the quickest 30 drivers during the qualifying elimination trials would qualify for the race. The starting positions were still determined by a drawing the night before the race. There were an estimated 100,000 fans in attendance. The purse was \$50,000 which was the same as the 1912 and 1913 races. René Thomas would go on to win the race in a Delage after leading 102 laps throughout the race, making it two straight years of French-winning drivers and racecars at Indianapolis.

### Facts:

**Starter:** Thomas J. Hay

**Pace Car:** Stoddard-Dayton

**Pace Car Driver:** Carl G. Fisher

**Pole Position:** Jean Chassagne (BEL)

**Pole Speed:** N/A (Grid set by random draw)

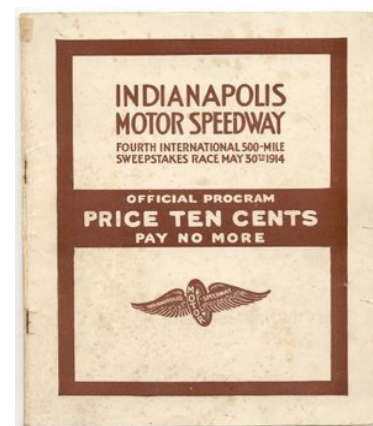
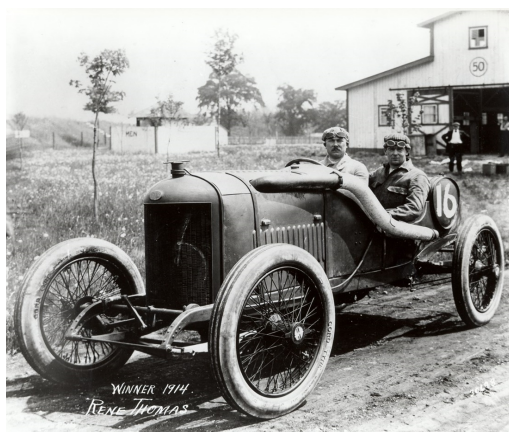
**Winner:** René Thomas (FRA)

**Winning Entrant:** Delage

**Average Speed:** 82.474mph

**Time to Complete:** 6:03:45

**Most Laps Led:** René Thomas (102)



**Race:** American Howdy Wilcox led the first lap of the race from his third-place starting position, but that was virtually all the action for American drivers at the front. René Thomas and Arthur Duray passed Wilcox and sped off, leaving behind most of the field. At the 100-mile mark, the two were only 22 seconds apart, but leading the field convincingly. Later in the race, an Isotta driven by Ray Gilhooley blew a tire and flipped upside down. As Gilhooley's riding mechanic Nino Zinani was crawling across the track in an attempt to escape the wreckage, the 1912 winner Joe Dawson swerved to avoid him and hit a pile of dirt heading toward the infield. Dawson's car flipped end over end, and both he and his mechanic had to be pulled from the wreckage. All four men survived, but with serious injuries. Unfortunately for Indianapolis's own Joe Dawson, he would never race again after this accident. There wasn't much drama after that wreck, as Thomas and Duray continued to lead. Thomas eventually started to build a bigger gap to Duray in second, and Thomas went on to win by 10 miles. The Europeans dominated once again, with 3 French drivers and 4 French cars sweeping the first 4 positions with a Delage in 1st and 3rd and a Peugeot in 2nd and 4th. Barney Oldfield was the highest-finishing American, taking home 5th place in his red and white number 3 Stutz race car. This day was deemed "a bad day for America" by a writer in *The Automobile* magazine at the time, as the Europeans showed they had faster and more reliable cars than the Americans.



Ray Gilhooley's wrecked Isotta (1914)



## 1915

**Background:** The 1915 Indianapolis 500 was held on Monday, May 31, 1915. The race was originally scheduled for Saturday, May 29, but heavy rain caused flooding which made it nearly impossible to get to the track. It was decided the race would be held on Monday so that the grounds of the Speedway would dry out and be suitable to host the expected 100,000 fans. A new AAA rule that a track could host one car for every 400 feet of track limited the starting field to 33 entries. Also, qualifying would now be for starting position for the first time in “500” history, with drivers required to meet a minimum speed of 80 mph over one qualifying lap. Car numbers were assigned based on qualifying speed. Out of the 41 entries, 10 were European, and only 24 cars qualified. Another rule change saw the maximum engine displacement drop from 450 cubic inches to 300. The last rule change was that no more than three cars of one make can start the race. The purse remained unchanged at \$50,000.

### Facts:

**Starter:** Thomas J. Hay

**Pace Car:** Packard “6”

**Pace Car Driver:** Carl G. Fisher

**Pole Position:** Howdy Wilcox (USA)

**Pole Speed:** 98.980mph

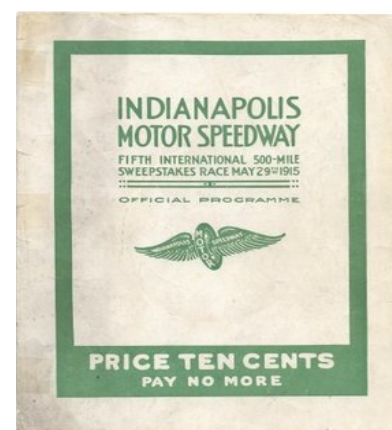
**Winner:** Ralph DePalma (ITA)

**Winning Entrant:** Mercedes

**Average Speed:** 89.840mph

**Time to Complete:** 5:33:55

**Most Laps Led:** Ralph DePalma (132)



**Race:** Americans Howdy Wilcox and Earl Cooper started 1st and 4th respectively, but didn't have enough once again for the European cars and drivers. The race quickly turned into a duel between Italy's Ralph DePalma in his number 2 Mercedes and the Italian-Briton rookie Dario Resta in his number 3 Peugeot. The two began to drive away from the rest of the field, and after about 80 miles, Resta took the lead from DePalma. DePalma didn't let Resta get far though, staying within 100 yards of each other at all times by some accounts. With 175 miles remaining, DePalma made his pit stop and came out a lap down to Resta. Resta waited too long to make a pit stop and blew a tire, which caused him to spin and forced him to pit for repairs. The Peugeot sustained damage to its steering which forced Resta to brake gingerly into the turns. DePalma continued to lead, and then on lap 197, he heard his engine start to sputter. The same issue that forced his DNF in 1912, mere minutes from victory, was a broken connecting rod. This time DePalma was able to hold on to win the 1915 Indianapolis 500, a feat that was long overdue for the Italian. This marked the third year in a row that a European driver and car won at Indianapolis.



Ralph DePalma in his race-winning Mercedes (1915)



## 1916

**Background:** The 1916 Indianapolis “500” was held on Tuesday, May 30, 1916. This edition of the ‘International Sweepstakes’ race was limited to only 300 miles instead of the usual 500 due to war in Europe. This was the only time the distance of the race was altered. The purse was only \$30,000 this year, compared to \$50,000 from 1912-1915. Only 21 cars qualified for the race, which is the smallest starting field in the race’s history. A crowd of approximately 80,000 were in attendance for the 300-mile race.

### Facts:

**Starter:** George M. Dickson

**Pace Car:** Premier “6”

**Pace Car Driver:** Carl G. Fisher

**Pole Position:** Johnny Aitken (USA)

**Pole Speed:** 96.690mph

**Winner:** Dario Resta (GBR/ITA)

**Winning Entrant:** Peugeot

**Average Speed:** 84.001mph

**Time to Complete:** 3:34:17

**Most Laps Led:** Dario Resta (103)



**Race:** American Johnny Aitken lost the lead to fan-favorite and fellow American Eddie Rickenbacker, who went on to lead the first 9 laps of the event. Unfortunately, his Maxwell race car suffered a broken steering knuckle which ended his race at the end of lap 9. Aitken retook the lead and held it for 7 laps, but Dario Resta quickly passed him for the lead and led the rest of the way. Resta drove the same Peugeot race car that he placed second in during the 1915 Indy 500, once again proving the durability of Europe’s race cars.

**Note:** Eddie Rickenbacker and his teammate Pete Henderson both wore steel helmets, which were the first use of crash helmets in American racing. Eddie Rickenbacker also played a vital role in World War 1, becoming famous internationally as a World War 1 flying ace. Rickenbacker would come back from Europe after the war and purchase the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1919.



Before the 1916 Indianapolis “300” Mile Race



Gil Anderson in his number 28 Premier racecar

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