

WILBUR SHAW

Wilbur Shaw was a friend of the Peverill family and was arguably the greatest racecar driver of the twentieth century. I will make the case.

Begin with the track record. Shaw won the Indianapolis 500 in 1937, 1939, and in 1940. He was runner-up in 1938 when, if he had won, he would have been the only driver to win three, let alone four times, in a row. He was the first and one of three drivers ever to win successive Indy 500 events and the only driver to have an opportunity to win three times in a row when in 1941 he led for 152 laps when a defective wheel put him in the Turn One wall. His racetrack career was one of only a few to span both a pre and post-war experience.

Let us digress briefly. Speculation abounds pertaining to Tiger Woods' prospects for exceeding Jack Nicklaus' eighteen major ("Grand Slam") golf wins. Seldom mentioned are Nicklaus' nineteen runner-up "Grand Slam" performances. To my view, these should be taken as a whole because together these demonstrate consistent achievement at the pinnacle of this profession.

Similarly, Shaw ranks only slightly behind Al Unser, Sr. for the most first and second place finishes in Indy races:

	1 st Or 2 nd	No. of Races
Al Unser, Sr.	7	27
Wilbur Shaw	6	13
A. J. Foyt	5	35
Rick Mears	5	15
Bobby Unser	4	19
Tom Sneva	4	18
Mauri Rose	4	15

Shaw not only won races but also ranks among the top five lap leaders in Indy history:

TOP FIVE LAP LEADERS

	LAPS	NO RACES	LAPS LED PER RACE
1. Al Unser	644	27	24
2. Ralph De Palma*	612	10	61
3. Mario Andretti	556	29	19
4. A. J. Foyt	555	35	16
5. Wilbur Shaw	508	13	39

* Won Indy 500 1915. Last race 1925.

It was “off the track,” however, where Shaw pulls away from the racing pack. Shaw designed and built racecars. Partnering early on with the Duesenberg brothers, he later created and built himself the sleek aerodynamic Gilmore Special and drove it to win the 1937 Indy. Nicknamed “The Pay Car,” it was one of the most successful cars ever to run the 500. It continued to finish in the top ten even after Shaw turned it over to other drivers. In 1939, he helped design and build the Maserati, which he drove to win the 1939 and 1940 races.

In 1991, Rich Taylor (see *Indy, Seventy-five Years of Racing's Greatest Spectacle*, St. Martins Press) dramatized Shaw:

“Fifty or sixty years ago, a lonely genius like Wilbur Shaw could literally build a car with his own two hands, gather a few friends together and go win the Indy 500. It was like something out of an old B-movie, with Wallace Beery and Mickey Rooney. ‘Come on, Fellas, I can build a car and win the Big Race! I just know I can!’ Not anymore, Kid.”

But Shaw’s crowning achievement was his leadership in the renovation and restoration of the Speedway in 1945. The track had seriously deteriorated during the war. Eddie Rickenbacker, its owner, was involved in politics and was president of Eastern Airlines; he had little time for the Speedway. Shaw convinced Rickenbacker to sell the Speedway to Anton Hulman whose family still owns it. Shaw retired as a driver and became president and general manager and oversaw the renovation of the track, the guardrails, and the grandstand area. It is probable that, were it not for Wilbur Shaw, there would be no Indianapolis Speedway.

On October 30, 1954, Shaw, age 52, was tragically, indeed ironically, killed in an airplane crash. *ALL THINGS CONSIDERED*, he was the greatest racecar driver of the twentieth century.

The Peverill family first connected with Shaw in California when he was winning races all over the state in the early 1930's. In 1935, he and his wife, Boots, lived with my grandparents, which he describes in his autobiography, *Gentlemen, Start Your Engines* (1955, Coward-McCann, Inc.)

"At that time our home was a small apartment in a house on top of a mountain which was part of a restricted area called Hollywoodland...."

"Originally, the apartment had been a laundry room in the home of Mr. and Mrs. J. E. Peverill and their daughter, Wilma. He was a retired Packard distributor from Waterloo, Iowa, who had been told he had only one year to live. He felt certain he could make a liar out of his doctor – and did – by getting a lot of sunshine, fresh air and moderate exercise. Being a thrifty mid-westerner, he also had converted the laundry room into one of the most attractive little apartments I had ever seen.

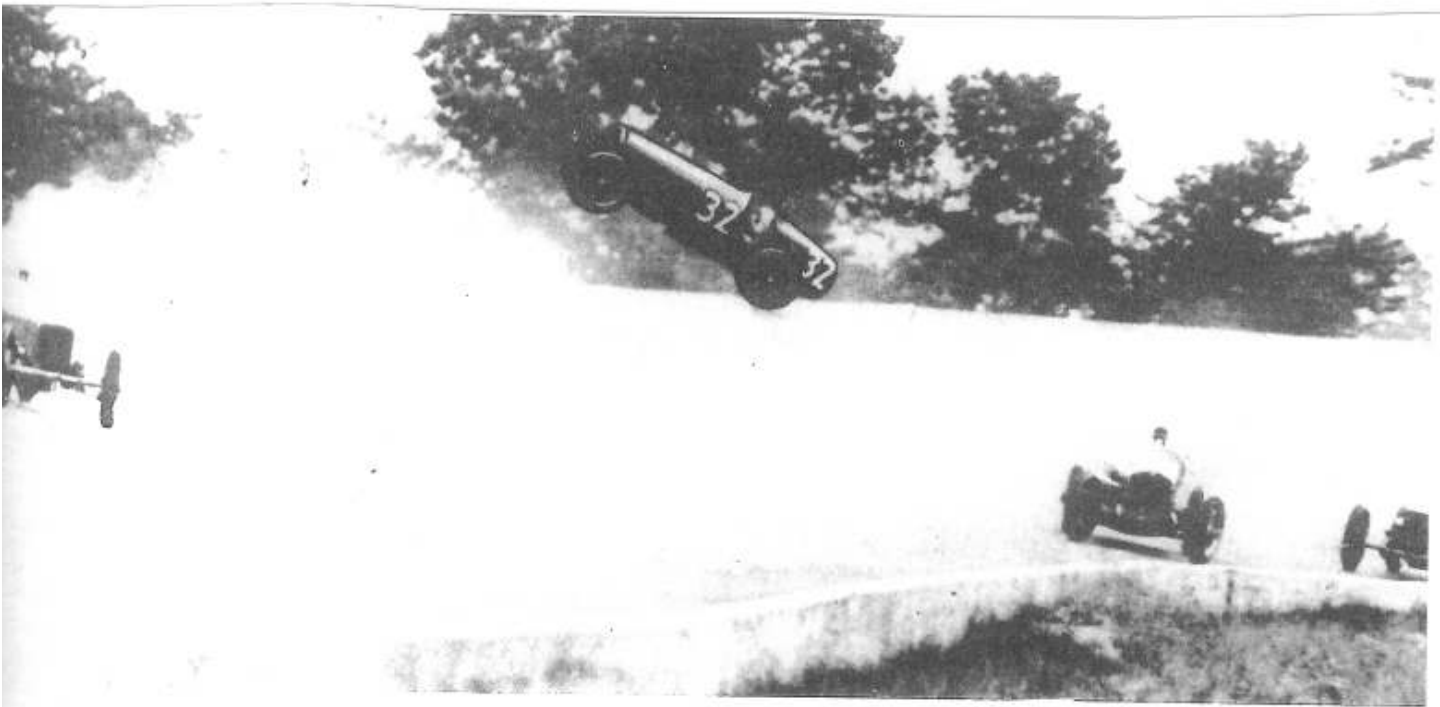
"He was almost twice my age. But, for exercise, he would fill a wheelbarrow full of dirt and dump it on the other side of the road. For more exercise the next day, he would shovel the dirt back into the wheelbarrow and return it to the spot from which he had taken it. To pass the time away, he even had dug a cave – as a quick refuge while sun bathing – in the jungle-like area of Griffith Park, which was just across the road. Boots often joined him for long walks in the evening, while waiting for me to return from the airport. One night I brought home an Irish Setter, wondering what his reaction might be to having a dog on the premises. When I awakened the next morning, Mr. Peverill already was at work on the project of constructing a suitable runway outside our patio in the only small, flat area available on the mountain side."

Actually, my grandfather was William J. Peverill whom Shaw has possibly confused with my uncle J. A. who spent a lot of time there too. William was associated with the early Hudson dealership in Waterloo but not with the Packard distributor that was later on in Des Moines. My brother Jack and I lived in that same apartment in 1938. It is located just a few blocks from the famous icon HOLLYWOOD (The name was shortened after the war), around whose 30-foot letters we played.

Shaw and my dad were the exact same age, and they too became friends. For promotional purposes, he drove Packards and Hudsons around the track at the Iowa State Fair. Rumor has it that he and my dad raced a couple “souped up” Hudsons on Fleur Drive at 3 A.M. in the morning. My mother corresponded with Boots both before and after Shaw’s death.

In August of 2002, I talked with Bill Shaw (Wilbur, Jr.) to see if there was to be a celebration of Shaw’s 100th birthday. I don’t think there was and, if not, the Speedway missed a great opportunity.

“Drivers were tough back then: young Wilbur Shaw drove relief for Phil Brown in the 1931 500, and sailed over the Northeast wall in Pardee’s Duesenberg. Unhurt, Shaw walked back to the pits and did a second relief stint in Jimmy Gleason’s Duesenberg, which finished sixth.”





GILMORE
SPECIAL

90

WINNER

WILBUR SHAW (driver) JIGGER JOHNSON (mech)
Indianapolis Motor Speedway
1927

© 1927
The Gilmore
Trust

Wilbur Shaw won the Indy 500 in 1939 and 1940 in this Maserati.
I have a miniature of this car in my office





MASERA

WILSON SUW

World Motor Speedway 1939.

© 1939
MOTOR SPEEDWAY
CORPORATION



WINNER
WILBUR SHAW
Indianapolis Motor Speedway
1940

100
10000
100000
1000000



Shaw celebrates his 1940 consecutive win (the first in Indy history) with his wife, "Boots".



Hulman, Rickenbacker and Shaw conclude the sale of the Speedway.

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William J. Peverill, CFP®

John A. Peverill, CFP®

April 21, 2003

Mr. Wilbur Shaw, Jr.
9765 Haggard Road
Morgantown, In 46160

Dear Bill:

I enjoyed our visit and was proud to learn that I made a small contribution to the cause of celebrating your dad's 100th birthday.

Enclosed is the piece I wrote. I will send more later.

Kind regards.

Sincerely,

William J. Peverill

Enc.

Hi Bill, this is Bill Shaw. I am more than delighted to hear your voice for the major reason that I have been tearing this place apart trying to figure out what I did with your address, phone number and all that kind of thing to catch you up with what we did for Dad's 100th birthday and to thank you for building a fire under me. It was a timely phone call and it has turned into something very nice and good.

You've got my phone number and my address is 9765 Haggard Road, Morgantown, Indiana 46160. Give me a call when you've got a minute. I'll give you my cell number in case that's easier –

Looking forward to talking to you – can't wait to read what you've written. It will be great to visit.

Take care – happy Easter.

vernon
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May 1, 2003

Bill Peverill
Peverill Capital Planning Inc.
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Dear Bill:

I really enjoyed reading your research about Wilbur Shaw. Marilyn and I have always been interested in the Indy 500 but much more so after attending a number of times this past decade...courtesy of Don Marsh.

Your case is well made, although, (as in most sports) the modernists would argue Uncer Sr. is the best ever. Those are probably the same people who believe that Tiger Woods is superior to Bobby Jones and Jack Nicklaus.

Thanks, again.

Best regards,



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May 28, 2003

Mr. William F. Vernon
The Vernon Company
One Promotion Place
Newton, Iowa 50208

Dear Bill:

Thanks for your note about Wilbur Shaw. On the track record alone, you would have to give Unser, Sr. the edge. (Unser's achievements, however, were a result of 27 races; Shaw 's took only 13.)

It was Shaw's overall race track performance that led me to describe him "the greatest."

Did you go this year?

Kind regards.

Sincerely,

William J. Peverill

P.S. Incidentally, my text reads "Three drivers were to win successive Indy 500 events." As you know, there are now five including Castroneves who almost made it three times in a row.