SPORT REPORT

Stock engines are in the news—on the bricks, dirt tracks, road circuits and Daytona's white sand

THE LATE WILBUR SHAW'S career behind the wheel and later at the helm of the Indianapolis 500 covered more than two decades auto racing. The story of these years, as he saw them, will soon be told.

Shortly before the fatal airplane crash last October, Shaw completed his autobiography. Final editing was in the hands of Mrs. Shaw and Al Bloemaker, public relations man for the speedway. The book reportedly will be published shortly, in time for the 1955 Memorial Day classic.

As for this year's 500-mile race, there is the customary flurry of reports on passenger car engines being developed for the event. One source even insists that a Dodge is in the process of preparation. How many of these will even reach the qualifying stage, much less the starting lineup, is highly speculative.

Deadline for entering is April 15 and don't be surprised if you see a foreign-engined car on the list. An overseas publication also says that Mercedes has its eye on the 500, although not for this year, with the engine from the new eight-cylinder 300 SLR as the basis for the effort.

Stock engines, however, have made some headway with the AAA Contest Board, which has announced a new maximum limit of 336 cubic inches for both sprint and championship classes. The new rules does not apply to Indianapolis, where maximum limit remains at 274 cubic inches.

All this gives the stock engines certain advantages, since racing engines still are restricted to displacement of 274 and 220 cubic inches in championship and sprint cars, respectively. Stock blocks and heads must be used.

LAST CALL FOR BIG ONES?

SPORTS CAR RACING probably will have a new ruling from the FIA which promises to upset the current pattern. A special committee is studying a proposal that engines in major events be limited to 3,000 cc (183 cubic inches). It would be a hard blow to the users of hefty Detroit products, since the SCCA and various independent sports car clubs in the U.S. would undoubtedly fall in line, as well as the AAA.

It's especially interesting to speculate upon the effect this would have in the Mexican road race. All-American entries, such Ak Miller, would be faced with new problems.

One of the most promising solutions is the new Myer-Drake unit which apparently has been designed with this turn of events in mind. Three such engines, in experimental form, have been installed in domestic sports cars. And Briggs Cunningham is expected to give another version a whirl in the forthcoming LeMans race (June 11-12).

Cunningham again has the only U.S. car in the lists for LeMans, will also be running a D-type Jaguar. However, the latest release on entries shows him with only one car up for the 24-hour famous event.

Most fans of U.S. stock car racing on dirt tracks under AAA and NASCAR sanctions are having trouble forecasting the effect 1955 models will have on results. In the past, the Hudson Hornet has had things pretty much its own way, and 1954 versions —still eligible—will continue to figure prominently. The new Hornet will have a hard battle with such threats as the Buick Century, Chrysler's 300, and the torsion-bar Packard during the current stock-car season.

The Chrysler 300 already has a pretty good start. It took first and second in the 160-mile Grand National, of NASCAR's Speed Week, after the first car to cross the finish line (a Buick Century) was disqualified in the follow-up inspection for having polished valves. Oddly, driver of the winning Chrysler 300 was Tim Flock, who finished first last year in an Olds and then was disqualified for modifications in the engine.

Top times in the one-mile speed runs earlier during Speed Week included a two-way average of 127 mph by a Chrysler 300, a run of 124 mph by a Thunderbird (which also did 84 mph in the mile from a standing start on the sand.)

Speediest machine in the meet was a grand prix-type Ferrari which rolled over the white sand at a blistering 174 mph, then turned in a two-way average of 170 mph. It was the fastest time ever recorded during the six-year history of Speed Week.

Next major sporting event in the U.S. is the SCCA's colorful annual event at Pebble Beach, Calif., on April 16-17. As in the past, the road race will be preceded by a concours d' elegance on the swank grounds at Del Monte lodge. •

ENGINEERING'S GOLDEN AGE

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It's not hard to argue that refinement carried to this lavish extreme is actually sheer extravagance, and that the manufacturers might better have spent the man-hours producing more cars for more people. But if they had there would have been no classics. Classics, by their nature, made few compromises with costs.

You could have bought a low-priced car for what it cost to produce a set of timing gears for a Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce. But the gears were almost perfectly silent and practically indestructible and this, for Rolls, was what counted. Similarly, the American Crane-Simplex engineers decided that head gaskets were a makeshift and inadequate device, and spent dozens of man-hours on each engine lapping the cylinder heads against the blocks with a fine abrasive compound until a perfect metal-to-metal fit was achieved. Many classic manufacturers, in their eagerness to maintain their reputation for quality, preferred to make in their own plants components that were generally farmed out to outside shops. Hispano-Suiza even designed and manufactured its own spark plugs and tires.

Classic bodies were, of course, no less perfectly engineered than the mechanical innards. The next time you see a luxury car of the Twenties or even the Thirties parked alongside one of today's dream-wagons, tap the metal of each. The difference is appalling. Aluminum, used extensively in classic engines to save weight, was used in the bodies for the same reason. The fenders, being the most vulnerable part of the car, were almost always made of heavy-gauge steel sheet. Windshield frames were usually brass or bronze castings, polished and plated. Interiors were the last word in rich but not garish opulence. The classics were built to make every aspect of driving—from settling into the upholstery to dismantling the engine—pleasant luxury.

In basic design approach, most of the classics stressed not high speed but a superabundance of low-speed torque. The Packard Twelve, for example, had so much pulling power that clean, smooth starts could be made in high gear. The rest of the gears were there for "emergency" use, because getting out of high was rarely necessary. Like most other classics, the Packard was a miracle of smooth running. The famous Rolls-Royce trick of balancing a coin on the idling engine could be performed just as easily on a Packard or a Lincoln Twelve or a Marmon or a Cadillac Sixteen.

Even though today's cars—largely because of improvements in the areas of detail rather than invention—can outperform the noblest classics in many ways, none can deliver the immense power of the classics with the kind of silken smoothness and near-perfect si-