

TO SAM RACING IS A BUSINESS

by Hannibal Coons

FOLLOWING this year's victory of Mr. Sam Hanks at Indianapolis, there has been an unusual hubbub. After winning the biggest event of any automobile racer's career, Sam had hardly wiped Miss Charisse's congratulatory lipstick off his cheek before he announced that he was hanging up the helmet. Thank you very much, but he was done. To those who didn't know Hanks, it has been as paradoxical as a man winning the heavyweight championship of the world, and then, with riches finally in his grasp, announcing his retirement before even stepping into the shower. What could have brought about such a remarkable situation?

What brought it about is the career itself of possibly the most unusual man ever to set out to make a living behind the wheel of a race car. After 25 years, in which he has won practically everything else a man can win in racing, Hanks' twelfth-try win at Indianapolis, at the age of 42, was simply the only cookie he still needed to fill the cookie jar.

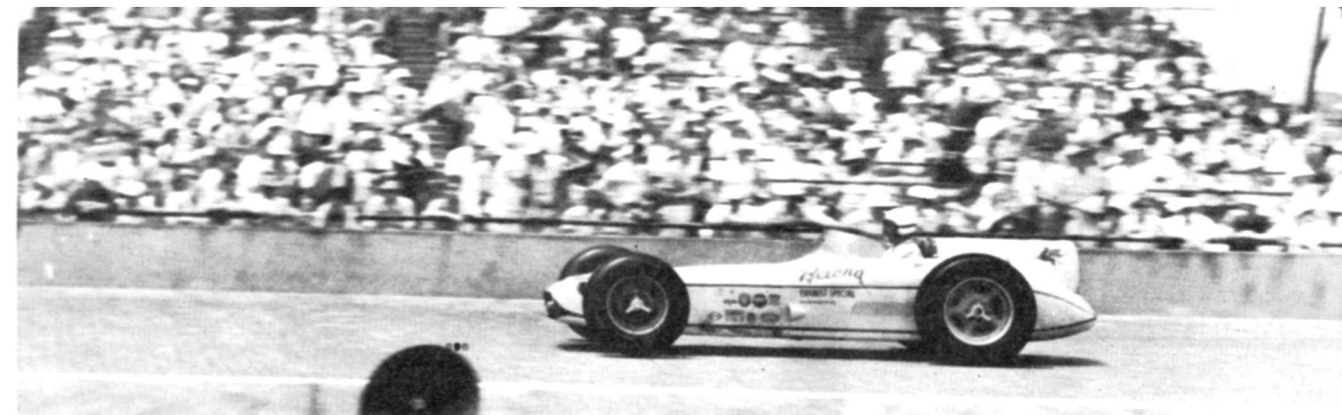
From the very start, Hanks has known exactly where he wanted to go and how he was going to get there. And now, with the long-delayed win at Indy, he's there. With the job done, what else to do but to step lightly out from behind the wheel and bow gratefully to one and all?

The interesting thing is not what Hanks won over the years, but rather how he won it. How has this pleasant and friendly man with the sharp features and the bristly crewcut been able to drive everything on wheels for a quarter of a century in seeming magical safety, win everything in sight, save his money, and end up actually holding the pot of gold? That's the thing that's worth learning.

The basic facts of his career are easily set down. He started racing twenty-five years ago in self-contrived roadsters at Muroc Dry Lake, while he was still in Alhambra High School near Los Angeles. When he'd tune up his early-era hotrods, the neighbor ladies would hasten to get the children and dogs off the front lawns; they knew that that Hanks boy would shortly come rooty-tooting by. In 1936 Sam entered the pro ranks, driving midgets; the very next year, 1937, he won the Pacific Coast Midget Championship. By 1941 he was National Midget Champion, as well as Chicago Board Track, Michigan and Ohio State, Flint City and Pennsylvania Bank-Track Champion. He started his apprenticeship in big cars in 1939, first trying Indianapolis in 1940. By '52 and '53 he'd worked up to third in the 500, and last year he was an agonizingly-close second—only twenty seconds back of Pat Flaherty. And this year he won it. In 1953 he was AAA National Big Car Champion, and in 1954 he set the American closed-course record of 182.554 mph at the Chrysler Proving Grounds.



In any commercial venture, the measure of success is how much you make and how long you stay out of trouble. Sam Hanks is a wealthy, healthy man and the reason is simple—to Sam



For over three years Sam has been strengthening his arms and shoulders, toughening up for the three-hour left-hand turn called Indy. Although over 42, he finished the race fresher than most of the young drivers.

Photos: Wide World

But the most important fact in Hanks' Alger-like rise to fame and fortune is that clear back in 1938, only two years after he'd started racing, Sam had already saved enough money to buy his own midget, and his own trailer to cart it around on. From then on he was strictly in business for himself. He picked his own races, drove where the money was, and when he won a purse he split it with no one. And his purses have included a record five main-event wins in a row at Gilmore Field in Los Angeles, and a record seven in a row at Sportsman's Park at Bedford, Ohio. He also took the biggest single purse in midget-racing history when he won over \$5,000 in the 250-lap Gold Cup in the huge Los Angeles Coliseum. Sam has always been at his best when the purses have been the largest.

There are, of course, reasons for his success other than his monetary concentration. Since racing is a chancy business and a little hard on the nerves, some of the boys have been known to achieve their most outstanding speed records in getting to the nearest bar after the race. Not Sam. There has never been anything at a post-race bar that he's needed. While the other boys were hastening to the bubbly house, Sam would rapidly load his midget onto his trailer and head

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Sam, who prefers milk to martinis, receives his victory kiss from Miss Charisse. Having finally won this one, he has hung up his helmet and says he's through with racing.

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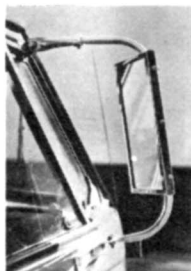
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"Choice of Champions"



Sam Hanks

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for home. The next morning he hastened to the bank as soon as it was open to deposit the night's loot.

The resultant excellent condition of Hanks' bank account is the best indication that he will keep his promise of retiring from active racing. Most professional athletes who continue after announcing retirement are driven by need of money, and in most instances the results are dismal. Sam can quit on top, on top of both automobile racing and a sizeable bank balance. His investments have been carefully made and only after sound advice. There is no reason why Sam should not stay retired, and still be solvent.

But there are those who cry, "why should Hanks retire at a mere 42, when, in this remarkable year of the oldsters, Piero Taruffi, Italy's famous Silver Fox, himself finally won the punishing Mille Miglia at a grizzled 50?"

The difference is that Taruffi is an Italian, and Hanks is not. Attempting to compare Sam Hanks with any Italian ever born is like trying to compare an ice cube to a blowtorch. It is true that Hanks, after a like number of tries, was as fiercely determined to win at Indianapolis this year as Taruffi was finally to win the Mille Miglia. Many who know him best say that Hanks would have won at Indy this year if he had had to go nine thousand miles an hour, get out and push Mr. Salih's radically different Belond Special, or just plain run with the car on his back. Whatever was necessary he would have done; but having won, that's it. The Italians love danger for its own sake; they find something strangely therapeutic in the chill breeze of the Grim Reaper—even an Italian bus driver will scare the pants off you. Hanks, on the other hand, has never courted danger just to embrace danger itself—put up a sufficient purse, and he will kick a lion in the eye, but never just to liven up a dull Sunday.

Actually, showing his usual foresight, Hanks started retiring some three years ago. The first thing he retired from was dirt-track racing, a form of human activity that has always been the dirty end of the racing business, from the standpoint of the unavoidable hazards involved, mostly in the form of flying rocks. The only remotely serious injury that Sam has ever had during a race was a busted beizer from a flying rock on a dirt track.

In this connection, I'll never forget my own first view of Sam in a dirt-track race, some years ago. A neophyte at the time as a dirt-track spectator, I came into the filled stands and noted that there were several rows of fine vacant seats right down front by the rail. Well lucky me, I thought, and hastened down there and got comfortable. Then the cars came by the first time, and suddenly I was trying to fight my way out of flying gravel like a man caught in a hurricane in a bean factory.

Another secret of Hanks' success—and a lesson that should be firmly learned by anyone who would attempt to drive racing cars in competition—has always been his excellent physical condition.

Gifted by nature with the eyesight of an eagle, quick and sure reflexes, and ice-cold nerves, Hanks has never been profligate with his physical resources. Early taking to heart of the admonition that health lies in moderation in all things, Sam has been moderate in all physical things all his life. He considers cigarettes an abomination — his wife Alice even stopped smoking because he hates them so — but like many of the sort of men who make good race drivers and good airplane pilots, he smokes cigars, in moderation. Knowing that his body was his greatest asset, he has never abused his own physical machine.

The last few years at Indianapolis, observers who watched Hanks pondered how a man past 40 could finish the grind so much fresher than many of the younger drivers. When Sam stepped out of his car at the end of the 500, he was not only remarkably fresh, but he said that he felt capable of setting out on a second 500. This year, at 42, after he and Alice finally got away from the festivities at the Speedway, they went back to the Graylynn Hotel, where many of the other drivers and various of their Southern California well-wishers were staying, helped toast their victory in champagne in a round-robin of various of their friends' rooms—the champagne didn't affect Sam or Alice at all, they were still so numb from the victory—and about ten o'clock they went out to dinner. After dinner, they went back to their room and opened congratulatory telegrams half the night. I've often wondered what an Indianapolis winner did the night of his victory; this is what Sam and Alice did.

But the victory involved a lot of careful preparation before the event. Over three years ago, after he had become fully acquainted with the rigors and demands of Indianapolis, Hanks started regular three-times-a-week workouts at Bruce Conner's Gym in West Los Angeles. Conner, a small but well-muscled man, is a graduate physical therapist with a degree from the University of California. He and Hanks talked over what would be necessary to come in not third at Indianapolis, but first.

The paramount need at Indianapolis is for great strength and endurance of the hands, forearms and shoulders. Different from the endless clutch and brake operation of road races and sports car competition, Indianapolis is simply an unending trial of the arms and shoulders as you hold steady on that grinding four-hour left turn.

So Hanks went to work with barbells, weights and pulleys, and with spring hand-grips to use at home. At the gym he did endless "wrist curls" — holding a weighted dumbbell in both hands, letting it roll slowly down toward his fingertips, then rolling it back up with the fingers. He gradually increased the weight of the long-shafted dumbbell to 63 pounds. He did other work with a "wrist roller" — a device by which he moved weights up

and down by rolling his hands and wrists on a pulley. He did overhead presses with dumbbells and barbells, and endless prone presses — lying on his back on a bench, and extending a weighted barbell to arm's length, sometimes with light weights and at other times with weights up to 120 pounds. He did these workouts three times a week, for three years, in hour-and-a-half sessions. While resting between each workout, he drank a pint of cold carrot juice to further buttress his excellent eyesight.

That, plus being by now so utterly confident of his training and ability that he can relax during a race, is why Mr. Hanks wasn't exhausted at the end of his finally successful 500.

Sam's whole career has been a uniquely straight path to success. Samuel Dwight Hanks was born at Columbus, Ohio, on July 13, 1914. His father, a contractor and builder, moved the family to Southern California in 1920. The rest of the family, including Sam's older brother, have never had the slightest interest in racing, but Sam was somehow born with a love and knowledge of engines. As early as 14, hardly into high school, he was already personally rebuilding and selling airplane engines. He was also building up roadsters and selling them. As soon as he was old enough, he raced them himself at Muroc Dry Lake and other speed strips. After graduating from high school in 1933, he worked for a time as a startlingly young tool and die designer and layout man for an oil-tool firm. But auto racing was irrevocably in his blood. In 1936 he crowded in behind the wheel of his first midget, and was to go almost without stopping for twenty-five years.

Since the age of six Hanks has lived in and around the Los Angeles area, much of it in Alhambra, then Burbank, where he began his investments in real estate. About a year ago he built a modest but sparkling ranch-modern house overlooking the ocean on the Mediterranean-like hillsides at Pacific Palisades. It's a California-type house, with little more than the garage facing on the street, but with the far wall of the living-room practically all glass and looking out on the backyard "living area." Through the wide glass doors you look off down to the left at the blue sweep of the curving coastline, or straight across a little valley to the soft rolling green of the mountains. It's a nice spot.

It was here that I finally caught up with Hanks after Indianapolis. There was no doubt that it was Sam's house. Out in front was the gold-colored Mercury convertible with "OFFICIAL PACE CAR — INDIANAPOLIS 500-MILE RACE" emblazoned on its sides. *Good Lord, I thought, he won that, too.*

Incidentally, when I was there it was already causing an odd difficulty. They'd gone out to dinner in it the night before, and on the way home two Thunderbird and one Corvette driver had become so intoxicated at the sight of it that they'd wanted to race Sam! "I don't know what we're going to do," said his wife Alice; "we certainly don't want to cause anybody to have an accident!" What they'll most probably do is repaint it. But it must be

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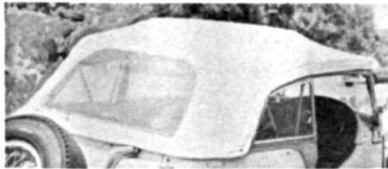
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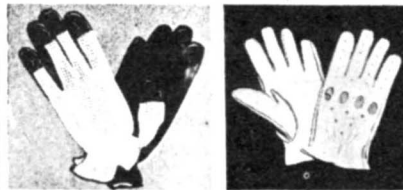
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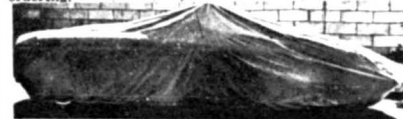


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Sam Hanks

(Continued from page 49)

a thrill for the man who's won it just to drive that car around town.

Since they'd just arrived home the day before, the inside of the house was in a state of controlled confusion. The place is beautifully and newly furnished, but the dining-room table was a mass of letters and telegrams. They were just beginning to answer some of them on a typewriter, and an overflowing pasteboard carton of more letters to be answered lay on the floor. Another thing that a win at Indianapolis produces besides money is an awful lot of letters.

Alice answered the door. "Come in," she said, "Sam's on the phone." Alice, as those who have seen her on television with Sam know, is small, blonde, and beautiful; but she is also a small-town Iowa girl — utterly without pretense or phoniness. She and Sam have been married ten years, having met during the war at Wright Field. Alice was a civilian secretary and Sam was an Air Force Lieutenant in Production Engineering and Flight Test.

During the time I was at their home, the phone kept ringing like it was in a stockbroker's office. Twice it was George Salih (pronounced Sally), who built the Belond Special. Sam, in a sport shirt and smoking a cigar, would pop around into the den and answer the phone; then pop back in and talk some more. He is an extremely pleasant and affable man, but he has that inner supercharged tenseness about him that is found in most champion athletes. He is sharp-featured, with a bristly crewcut and piercing blue eyes. He talks rapidly because he is intensely interested in what he's saying. Talking to him, even in his own living-room, you feel the terrific concentration that has made him a great race driver. His eagle-sharp nose is bashed maybe the merest bit out of line from the rock that hit it in 1953 in Milwaukee, and he has an almost imperceptible scar on his forehead just above his eyes from another dirt-track rock in 1954 at Sacramento, but he bears no actual signs of conflict.

I asked him his remarkable secret of staying out of trouble on a race track.

"I always try to drive well out ahead," he said, talking in that rapid-fire fashion and piercing you with those sharp eyes. "I hardly even look at the cars close around me. Oh, I see them, but I'm looking well ahead down the track. That way you can see trouble developing, and you see it far enough ahead to be under control by the time you get to it."

That, and concentration. "When I'm driving a race," he went on, "I have one thousand percent concentration. I don't know where Alice is in the stands and don't want to know. I don't want to know one thing about anything except what I'm doing — I have one thousand percent concentration on driving that car."

But now he's retired. Is he? What is he actually going to do? As of the heartwarming "WELCOME HOME SAM HANKS" Independence Day picnic and fireworks at the Pacific Palisades playground, Sam was delighted as a kid with the new Honorary Fire Chief license plate for his Merc, and Alice looked beautiful as a Rose Queen. Anyway, as of the Fourth of July, his plans are as follows:

He is through driving at Indianapolis. He is through on all fronts of active racing except to complete his Mercury commitments. Following Indianapolis he won the 300-mile stock car grind at Trenton, New Jersey — on a day hot enough to kill a goat — and he has four more stock car races at Milwaukee to fill out his Mercury contract. The final one is in September. After that, the helmet goes up on the wall in the den along with the rows of trophies.

He has a two-fold reason for completing the Mercury contract. One is to keep his word on a commitment; the other is that with even a fourth spot in each of the four races at Milwaukee he'll win the National Stock Car Championship this year, and will then be the only man in history to hold the triple crown of automobile racing — National Midget Champion (1941 and 1949), National Big Car Champion (1953) and National Stock Car Champion.

After that — he hasn't decided. He's still considering the flood of offers that have poured in on him, and, being Hanks, he is going to consider them all carefully before making up his mind. By now he has extensive reserve funds of his own, and various people including movie bigwig Clarence Brown want to back him in a big sports car agency in the Los Angeles area. Sam knows automobile sales — with his customary respect for apprenticeship he worked two years for his friend Bill Murphy, the wealthy sports car racer, at his Buick agency in nearby Culver City, and for the last six months or so before Indianapolis he was sales manager of a small sports car firm in Santa Monica. "If I had a sports car agency I'd want it to be a big one," said Sam, "so that we could have a decent advertising budget. And I'd want a terrific service department — I'm a bear on service."

But other vistas are in a way even more tempting. As soon as he announced his retirement, the Indianapolis sports writers and others started an immediate campaign to get Sam to take the late Wilbur Shaw's place managing the Speedway. Other facets of the industry want him to take various public relations posts with the automobile industry itself.

What I think Hanks would most like to do would be a combination of these latter two. If he could manage the Indianapolis Speedway and keep his home in Southern California, being directly on the Indianapolis scene for April and May of each year, the other ten months he would be happy to busy himself as goodwill public relations man for the general automotive industry. I think Hanks would be the happiest in this capacity, and of the greatest continuing value to all of us.

Whatever Sam does, you can bet on one thing — he'll concentrate on it.

Hannibal Coons