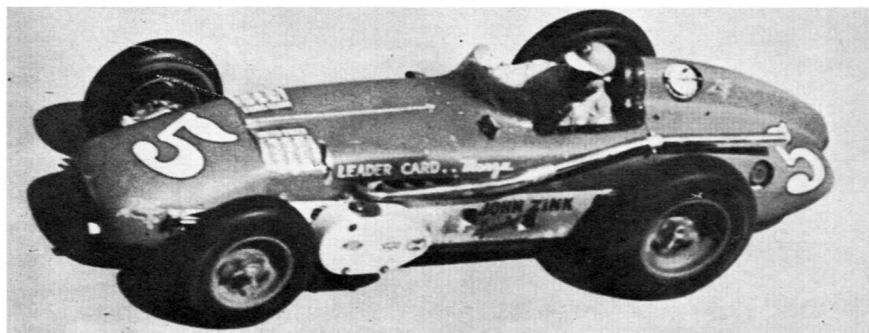


JIM RATHMANN: U.S. DRIVER

by Steve McNamara



The antithesis of the classic U. S. leadfoot, Rathmann is number two man on the totem pole — and he's only made half the circuit



Winning this year's Monza 500 conclusively proved that Rathmann, second to none in oval-ability, has plenty of competitive spirit and a fine sense of balance. Balance not only to sense his way around corners, but to know when to charge and when not to. He recognizes the difference between road racing and track racing but feels that though each requires dissimilar cars and driving techniques, a driver who proves himself good in one arena should be able to succeed in the other — given time and practice. Musso did, can Rathmann?

JIM RATHMANN is causing some mental anguish among those who believe they have American drivers pegged. Well-known on both sides of the Atlantic now for his convincing win at Monza, Rathmann's medium-size frame can't be squeezed into the standard stereotype of U.S. oval track drivers.

Who's to blame, Rathmann or the stereotype? Both. The greasy, barely literate lead-foot who stands for U.S. DRIVER in the minds of many, bears approximately the same resemblance to the best American drivers as the obnoxious kid in the MG does to Stirling Moss. The best U.S. drivers keep their nails clean, speak the language like natives, write legibly and depend far more on judgment than guts. But given this revised version of the U.S. Championship car driver, Jim Rathmann still doesn't fit too well.

Quiet and unassuming to the point of secrecy, Rathmann is probably the dead last man you'd suspect of liking nothing better than driving 200 miles an hour. He spends considerable time in such bland pursuits as watching TV Westerns, fishing, and puttering around he yard of his ample new home in Miami Springs, Florida. He isn't much of a party-giver nor goer and he shudders at the popular image of a race driver as a flamboyant daredevil who laughs at death.

"Bravery doesn't win races," he believes firmly. "It's good judgment and common sense. If a guy gets carried away and gets a little too much Dick Tracy in him, he'll wipe himself out."

Jim has great respect for his fellow drivers, both American and European. And he certainly doesn't belong to the school which insists the best oval track and road racing drivers have nothing in common. Rathmann subscribes to a view held by a couple of pretty fair country drivers, Juan Manuel Fangio and Stirling Moss, that the critical faculty in racing is a highly developed sense of balance. Only if a driver can feel the car in the seat of his pants is he able to drive it skillfully. And the more sensitive his derriere, the closer he can drive to the limit. Oval racing, a bore at best to road racing enthusiasts, does require the same sense of balance, the same ability to drive up to the limit.

Jim's attitude toward the automobile would seem a bit out of place at a regional rally: he sees it simply as a machine for driving as fast as possible, beating other drivers while doing it. This is of course the same motivation behind Grand Prix drivers. But in order to conduct this drive under the constant supervision of spectators, and consequently make money, American racing was promoted on small, oval tracks. It's the geography of the course rather than a lack of driving skill that has sapped U.S. racing of its interest for the sports car fan.

Rathmann fails to sympathize with the sports car enthusiast's disinterest in blinding speed as a method of earning a living, but he has a great deal of respect for the best Grand Prix drivers. During the feisty battle of words this spring concerning Fangio's ability to tame The Brickyard, Rathmann made his position very clear.

He said Fangio would be new to the Speedway, which is quite unlike anything else in the world, and would of course be at a disadvantage. "There are a lot of tricks to learn," Rathmann said, "but if he (Fangio) gets used to them he ought to do very well."

"And in one way Fangio will have an advantage. There's a lot of mental work in that race. You more or less have to keep talking to yourself or you'll go nuts. After driving in all those road races I don't expect Fangio would be the man he is if he didn't know how. He's been world champion five years. That means he's a great driver, period."

One of the drivers Rathmann liked and admired most was an Italian, Luigi Musso, and like all Americans who have been to Monza, he has great respect for the Jaguar drivers of Ecurie Ecosse.

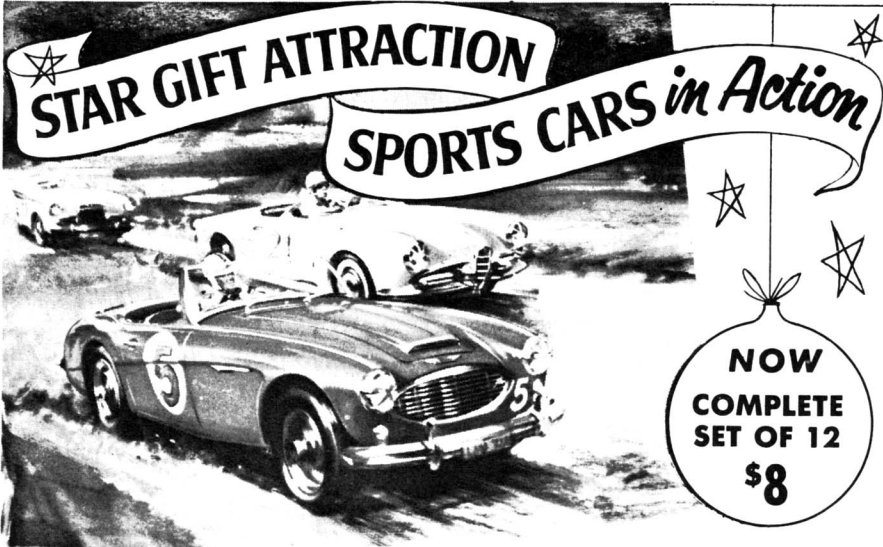
While the terrific speeds at Monza this year unnerved a few GP drivers (notably Harry Schell who had an ancient Ferrari), Rathmann thrived on it. Asked what he thought of driving between 200 and 210 on the "cobblestone" straights, Jim's principal observation was, "It's just fine, if you don't look at the trees."

Rathmann found in Musso a man with the same approach to racing. "He really put his foot in it going into those turns," Rathmann says. "He gave me a ride around the track in a Ferrari sports car and I was terrified. He is — I mean was — a heck of a nice guy. And then Jim adds the ultimate accolade: "He was a real charger."

Underneath a polite, cheerful manner, Rathmann is recognized by his fellow drivers as perhaps the most fiercely com-

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Rathmann

(Continued from page 25)

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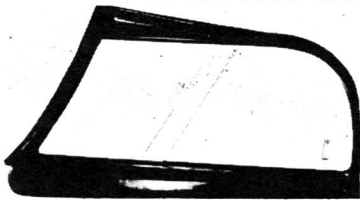
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petitive driver in America. This was evident during the last heat at Monza. Jim had won the first two heats and could afford to stroke the last, as Jimmy Bryan had done last year, finishing second or third, and still win the race. But any plan involving less than first had little appeal. Rathmann drove the last heat full bore, squelching Bryan's bid to win at least one heat.

There is an additional reason why Rathmann wanted to whip Bryan as soundly as possible. Although he is rated No. 2 to Bryan's No. 1 in the United States, Rathmann can well afford to believe he is the best driver in America. While Bryan drove nearly all of the championship races last year, Rathmann drove about half, yet going into the last race, at Phoenix, Rathmann held an ample point lead. But his car picked that point to poop out and Jim finished far back in the pack. Bryan won and picked up the No. 1 ranking.

The No. 2 on his racing helmet may bug Rathmann a bit, but the big spook in his life is the Indianapolis 500. Casual race fans know the 500 is a big race, but it's impossible to overestimate the almost mystic hold The Brickyard has on American drivers. In no other sport is there really a counterpart; no single contest that dwarfs all others. Even the U.S. driving championship is badly overshadowed.

Rathmann has driven in nine of the last 10 Indianapolis races and would be delighted to trade all those miles, and probably throw in a mortgage on his house, for a solid grip on the checkered flag.

He's been close.
"In 1952," he says, "I had turned about 50 laps (of 200) when my brakes went out. Later I stopped for gas by grinding the car along the pit wall. An official saw what was going on and tried to shut off the car. My pit crew pushed him away and pushed me off. The best I could do was second." (With no brakes, yet.)

1953 was a close one of a different sort. Jim was boring down the front straight at about 170 when the crankshaft broke. "The car made three loops and went about 1,500 feet backwards. I ended up right in front of my own pit area. I said, 'Boys, I tried to get it as close as possible.' That was a hairy one."

His 1955 trip to Indiana was also memorable. "The car had an experimental two-way radio for talking to the pits. The day before the race I was running down the back straight at about 160 when I heard this voice tell me to go to some address and fix a stopped-up sink. They'd given me the same frequency as an Indianapolis plumber."

In 1957 "We figured we had it all wrapped up. But we put in too much gas toward the end and the car wouldn't handle. We were second by 20 seconds."

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Last Memorial Day Rathmann's car was clearly less powerful than most of the others, but he finished a respectable fifth by driving the corners much cleaner and faster than the other drivers.

So Jim Rathmann's a nice guy who doesn't knock the Europeans and is marvelously adept at driving in circles. What should make him of more than casual interest to the road racing follower? The possibility that he may prove or disprove a belief dear to the heart of the ovalphobe.

There is no more violent controversy than the transfer of skills between oval and road racing. The road racing fans insist Fangio in a good car would gobble up Indianapolis and Rathmann would be hopelessly outclassed at Monaco. The Championship car boosters take the opposite tack, with equal vehemence.

At Monza the road racers tried an oval track and some did quite well considering their machinery. But with a few exceptions, such as Musso, they didn't like it at all.

The opposite side of the coin, Championship car drivers in Formula I machines, shows promise of reflecting more light on the controversy. Troy Ruttman has signed to drive a Maserati (and did rather poorly in his first outing).

But Jim Rathmann is perhaps the most "delicate" of the Championship car drivers — he uses his head more and his brakes less than most anybody else at Indianapolis. A fifth in the 1953 Mexican Road Race (behind four of 17 team Lincolns) indicates he isn't befuddled by long straights and abrupt turns.

Rathmann has the sense of balance (and balding pate) that seem prerequisite for road racing success. He can undoubtedly master the process of taking his foot off the floor long enough to shift gears. His performances at Sebring and Nassau were nothing to write home about — he drove hard but tended to treat the turns as if they were banked. However, Corvettes are hardly the machinery in which to establish a great road racing reputation.

Representatives of Ferrari and BRM thought enough of his talents at Monza to begin negotiations. (He was to drive a BRM at Rheims but the deal fell through at the last minute.) If the price is right Rathmann will probably join the Grand Prix circuit toward the end of this year or the beginning of next.

The attractions are obvious: Rathmann likes to drive fast cars and make money doing it. The U.S. sports car fan is aware of the generous purses and starting money offered in Europe and South America, but until fairly recently a surprisingly large number of American drivers believed the Grand Prix circuit was something akin to SCCA races with unpronounceable names.

Between turns around Monza's concrete soup bowl, the Americans discovered the Old World offers fast cars and money for driving them. Rathmann, who hasn't driven the complete American circuit in years, is very interested in the lucrative challenge.

It will be elucidating to see if the king of the Autodromo di Monza can make any headway with the princes of road racing.

—Steve McNamara



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