



FIRST INDIANAPOLIS victory came in 1925 for Pete DePaolo in Duesenberg Special (far left); he won AAA championship again in 1927 with this Miller front-drive (left).

Pete DePaolo followed one basic rule as he drove his way into racing's big-time: "Get out in front and stay there!"

BY JACK LEWIS

NOW TEACHING traffic safety to teen-agers, Pete DePaolo gave up racing after a near-fatal accident in Spain in 1934. He served in World War II as Lt. Col. in 8th AAF.

LITTLE GIANT OF THE GOLIATH ERA

EACH YEAR on Memorial Day, a stocky, broad-shouldered man with a quick winning smile and hair that is just beginning to turn gray at the temples, drops whatever he's doing and makes a quick trip to Indianapolis. There for several hours he sits unobtrusively in the grandstand watching the greats of racing compete in the eternal battle against time, space and each other.

If Peter DePaolo ever yearns to sit astride one of those throbbing juggernauts and feel the hot breath of oil-scented wind against his face, he gives no outward indication of it. When the race is over, he quietly leaves the track and goes back to his job at Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, teaching teen-agers about highway safety.

It wasn't always this way. Because of the past, DePaolo might be excused if his mind occasionally drifts back to days when the cheers of the crowd all but drowned out the full-throated roar of his Duesenberg Special as it careened around the broad sweeping curves and down the long straightaways, back during the golden era of auto racing.

Peter DePaolo moved into auto racing's blue-chip league in the early 1920s. This was accomplished by the not-so-simple expedient of barnstorming around the country and winning races at just about every place big

enough to rate a track. There weren't too many rules governing auto racing in those days. Survival seemed to be contingent on one basic rule: Get out in front and stay there!

Needless to say, this wasn't always the easiest thing in the world to do. DePaolo, having reached the big-time via his own bootstraps, was somewhat reluctant to relinquish his place in the winner's circle. Year after year he continued to work the circuit, while others, unable to keep up with the pace, dropped quietly out of the picture, or terminated their racing career by means of the most devastating of all finales.

DePaolo seemed to thrive on fierce competition. In 1925 while driving a Duesenberg Special he ground out an elapsed time of 4 hours, 36 min., 39.46 sec. to win the coveted Indianapolis Speedway classic. It was the first time anyone had averaged more than 100 mph over the grueling 500-mile course and the record of 101.13 mph was to stand up for seven years, until Fred Frame, driving a Miller-Hartz Special, nosed it out in 1932.

The same year DePaolo won the big one at Indianapolis, he also captured the AAA National Championship. In 1927 he again won America's top racing award.

Having attained almost every measure of success that was available in

America, DePaolo decided to go to Europe. There, over the man-killing European circuit, he began piling up new honors. For several years he earned over \$100,000 a year. Then the Roaring Twenties ended and the lean Thirties began, yet in spite of slimmer purses and increased competition, DePaolo continued to leadfoot his way through Germany, France, Italy and Spain.

His experiences during this era were varied. One time when racing in the German Grand Prix, at Avus, his car began acting up during the final league of the event. Rather than lose his hard-won position, DePaolo tried to hang on. He was gunning his car down the long straightaway in front of the grandstand, when the engine seemed to disintegrate in his face. Up in the grandstand, horrified spectators gave a collective gasp as one of DePaolo's connecting rods exploded out of the engine, careened into the stands like a trench-mortar shell and slammed into a wooden pillar six inches from the face of Adolf Hitler.

Having lived close to death all his life, it is probably a paradox that the man who made a career of taking chances should encounter his most serious accident in the course of everyday driving. It occurred on June 16, 1934, when DePaolo was in Barcelona, Spain. There, while driving an Italian

Maserati racer, he rounded a blind corner. Simultaneously, three children ran into the street directly in front of him. DePaolo cut the wheels, hard. The red racing car careened off a curb and overturned.

When DePaolo regained consciousness, his first realization was that he was stone blind. They told him he was in a hospital and had been unconscious for 12 days. Could he ever hope to regain his eyesight? They didn't know. They didn't even know if he'd live!

A week went by . . . two weeks. Long weeks they were, completely devoid of night and day. DePaolo had never thought much about night and day before, but lying in that bleak never-never land between life and death he had time to think about lots of things.

That was when DePaolo made the vow. He vowed that if by some miracle he lived, he'd quit racing and devote the rest of his life to helping people drive more safely.

A month went by, and with each day it became increasingly apparent that DePaolo was going to pull through. Then came the second miracle . . . Peter DePaolo regained his eyesight!

Twenty-nine years have now passed since the incident in Barcelona and during that time DePaolo has never driven another race. Moreover, he has been helping others just as he said he would.

Is the man whose name appears with Barney Oldfield, Ralph dePalma and a handful of other racing greats in Helm's Hall Automobile Racing Hall of Fame happy in what he's doing?

Concerning his present job at Firestone Tire and Rubber Company where he teaches traffic safety as part of a student training program, Peter DePaolo says: "I'm doing exactly what I want to do. Speed is O.K. when they drop the flag at Daytona or Indianapolis, but in today's traffic, nothing is quite as important as safety." ■

