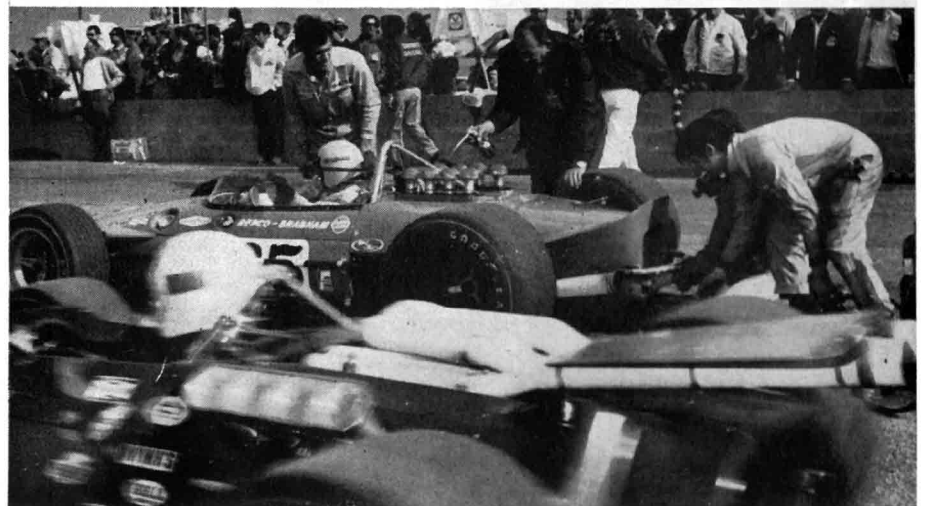


THE REX MAZE 300

USAC clearance. One day only, December 1, 1968. Two races for the price of one. Excitement! Fun! Games!

Entertainment provided by Mario's Musical Cars

by Eric Dahlquist



And as the sun slowly sinks into the western sky on Friday, we leave Mario with the pole (above). But that was before Gurney (top right) found his place in the sun. On race day Brabham (above right) had trouble firing up and then staying in the race for more than a few laps. Caught in a pushrod sandwich, Andretti (top left), between Gurney, Donohue.

The tent. It stood there above the short straight linking turns six and seven in all its magnificent splendor and from it the Michigan financial wizard, Ozzie Olson hosted the great, the near great and those who would like to be near great, as they watched his car, the Olsonite Eagle, and his driver, Dan Gurney, unconditionally obliterate the field in the Second Annual Rex Mays 300. With such dispatch, such consummate ease did Gurney hammer the opposition into Riverside's twisting 2.7-mile asphalt river that it was almost as if he had designed every kink and grade himself, lay the foundation, paved it and then stored the accumulated data away in his memory bank, a compartment automatically set in motion by the green flag — reading out all the shifts, brakings and lines through corners, at the appropriate instant. The Olson/Gurney arrangement is like the Wood Brothers/Gurney arrangement, it cannot lose for winning. Jim Chapman. Olson's public relations director, summed it up succinctly in The Tent as the December twilight burned itself out and the air whirled into a miasma of ageless bouyant talk of happy victors, bourbon being poured over ice, and the special smell of succulent ribs barbecuing: "We've been with Dan in four USAC races this last year. The first Rex Mays, Indy, Mosport, and today. We've won three and finished second in the other, Indy. That's not a bad record."

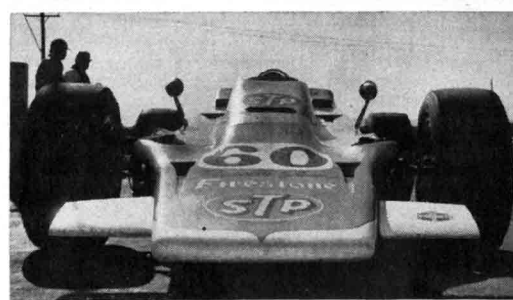
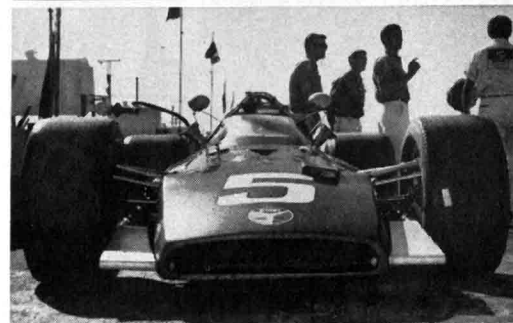
So much for what the people came to see; what the fans thought might have been a special rerun of last year's Homeric struggle just for them because they missed the original. Now they are two-time losers—like Mario. Remember? The National Championship had boiled down to one race — the final one — a new one — the First Annual Rex Mays 300. Either Foyt or Andretti would be Numero Uno for the next whole season — the American dream realized. Now, this time, save Mario and swap Bobby Unser for A.J. — or should that be the other way around? USAC's like that, predictable, a traveling road company where the cast is almost always the same, but the characters switch roles.

Coming into Rex Mays '68 Andretti led Unser in total points 4154 to 3846. On the basis of two points for every mile raced, all Mario had to do was place seventh or better and Unser was out, no matter if he won the event or not. Considering the miles more road course experience Mario had and the cool reality of only weeks before qualifying one of Chapman's Gold Leaf Lotuses on the pole at Watkins Glen, his first real Formula I outing, the sign painter was warming up in the pits. No. One was as good as on the Overseas National Airways car. But just in case

something should happen, Mario had an insurance policy—a second car that Jerry Titus would keep in contention so Mario could hop in if something... well, a person can't be too careful. And then, should Titus fail, Parnelli Jones had placed the STP turbines in backup which made four cars and after that just about every Firestone shod machine in the place was fair game. Of course, Unser, which is to say Good-year, had the same thing going and when you got right down to it, most of the competitors were there sort of like glorified car-hops merely to keep machines orbiting should they be needed by the big dogs.

The cars, they were interesting, too. First off there was the Eagle, Gurney's Eagle. The one he placed second with at the Brickyard, unchanged except that the tires and engine were bigger, the allowable rim width up from ten to fourteen inches and pushrod displacement 305 to 320. Even had the stock-block size not been boosted, the pushrod revolution Gurney began here a year ago, and reinforced on Memorial Day would have been well on its way. Comparing the starting fields a season apart showed just two stock-blocks on the 1967 grid and five in '68. Anticipating no regression in USAC production engine rules, another twelve months should see possibly half the field using them. It's simple economics, friends. The turbocharged Offy is not well suited to road courses because of its power range. It's the difference between buying two \$30,000 engines as opposed to a pair of \$10,000 ones. Forty grand saved is forty grand earned. So to be competitive you either have a stock-block or a cammer Ford. The stock-block is not only cheaper, at a time when the tire companies are stopping their gold shipments, but as items like Lucas injectors find their way on the Chevys along with impending factory improvements, Gurney's Ford and the Stovebolts will be the hot items.

Except for Mario's musical-cars routine on Sunday, Friday and Saturday's qualifying was probably the single most interesting action of the whole deal. Right away Mario goes charging off in his Brawler Hawk, breaks Gurney's year-old lap record by nearly one mile-an-hour and has the pole. He's serious about that championship. Now no one really believed that Mario would actually keep the coveted pole position (funny, they always call it that, "the coveted-pole-position") and after Dan shines the springs on his shock coils enough, so the suspension doesn't bottom on hard braking, he puts Andretti away by 1/5th of a second. The reason he needed more spring rate was that he qualified on a full load of fuel — bend your mind around that one, sand bag-



All right now, once more, from the top, these are the faces of the race. First, there was Dan Gurney and his Olsonite Eagle. He sat on the pole, won the race, and showed 'em it could be done in the first place. Then there was the Donohue/Penske Chevy Eagle—just to keep Dan honest. Next, Jud Phillips, fastens Dzus button on Rislone Eagle of Bobby Unser. He was second, won the National Championship. Brother Al, below Bobby, had four-wheel-drive Lola, crashed, finished 4th by switching cars. And last, the poor, luckless turbines. What can we say but good-bye.

REX MAZE 300

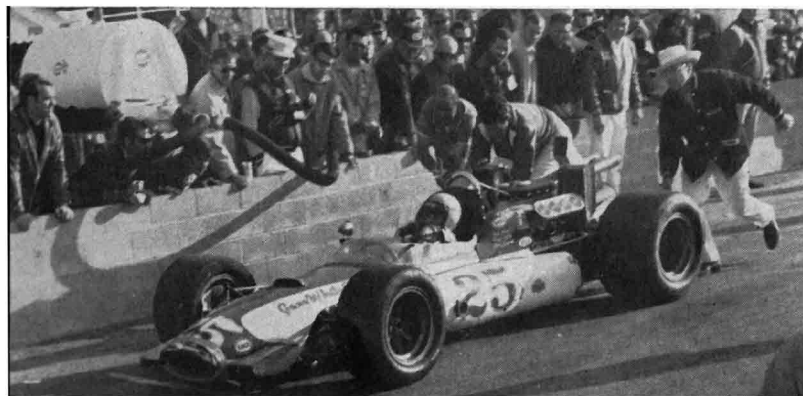
gers. Surprise two is that Joe Leonard had the STP turbine (in its farewell appearance) in third just ahead of Al Unser's four-wheel-drive Lola (which will be illegal after 1970 because USAC has seen through the four-wheel-drive conspiracy and is outlawing it. It's unfair, like the turbines). Mark Donohue (Penske strikes again) and Jack Brabham who found a 4.2-liter Repco-Brabham may be the answer yet.

Interspersed at regular intervals among the memorable qualifiers were some memorable engine explosions giving the track surface a nice even gloss of oil for race day which arrived with the full complement of movie biggies. One thing about a USAC race day, you can't say the Championship Trail contingent appears anxious about it—what with a good deal of their machine to be reassembled three hours before the start. Not Penske's bunch though, they could have hit the line at dawn. They're a study in contrast—right down to dress slacks and turtlenecks. This has about the same affect on the cornbelt bunch as finding out that all a kilted

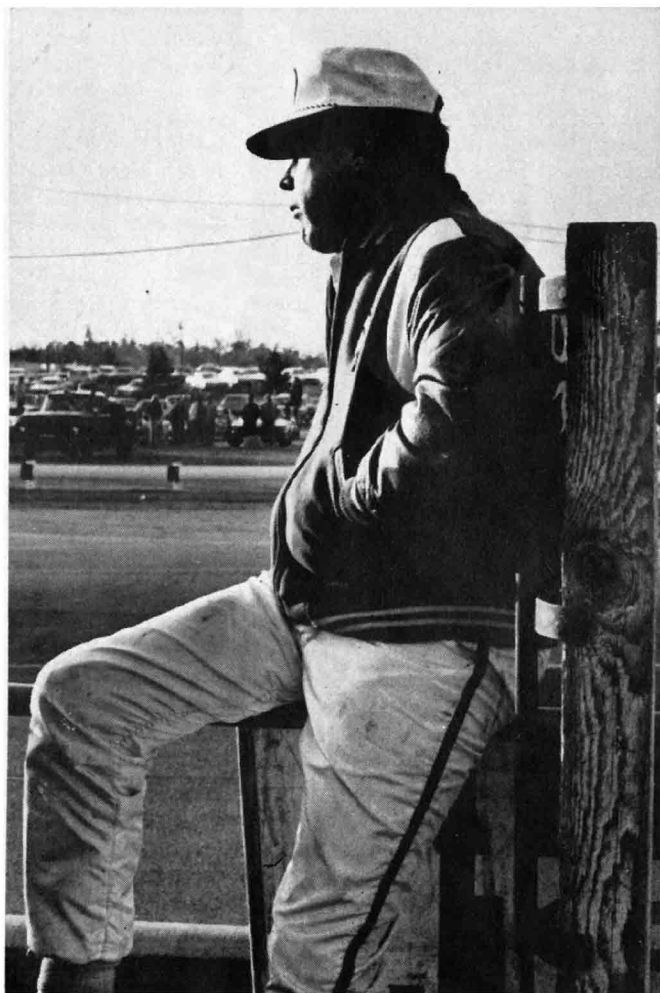
highlander wears under his kilts are his kilts.

The race starts eight minutes late and Gurney leads the first lap. At the end of which Lou Sell, driving the Smothers' Brothers Eagle loses a wheel and carooms off the back straight behind turn nine, his stop marked by a forty-foot column of flame. As Sell is helped from the wreck, Andretti sweeps by Gurney and holds the lead for four laps and then they swap back again. By this time Donohue had moved up to third and scoots by Mario, too. Now we have two stock-blocks setting the pace and some observers believe the Traco-prepared Chevy actually has Gurney covered in sheer power. One thing he does not have Dan on is getting through the tight turns without occasional hitting of one of the tire markers. In the life of any suspension upright, and an aluminum one at that, there are only so many tire markers you can swat and get away with. Donohue's number of kissed markers comes up on lap 35, the upright collapses and Gurney is all by himself with Mario back a ways. Some of Mario's insurance has been canceled, too, as his Number One back up car broke its rear suspension on lap 27.

Almost precisely at the halfway point, lap 57, Gurney slips into the pits for fuel and Mario inherits the lead. Away he flies, trying to stretch out a little margin of time for his own gas job later on. In full swing on the back straight, Andretti's engine lays down and dies and he coasts dead stick into the pits and the fun and games begin. After summarily kicking the tire of his fallen mount he heads for Parnelli Jones' pit as Gurney streaks by, regaining the lead. The order now is Gurney, Bobby Unser, Art Pollard (Turbine Twenty), Ronnie Bucknum, Lloyd Ruby and Joe Leonard (No. Sixty Turbine). Leonard gets the pit sign and while the car is refueled, he tries to tell Mario something about the condition of the car. Mario leaps in and is off to the races once more; the whole deal, refuel, driver swap, harness readjustment and all, is 42 seconds. Mind you, Mario has driven the turbines only a few brief laps at Indy, during practice, never on a road course, and turbines don't act exactly like regular machines. Yet, when he goes by, starting his second full lap, he seems to be really getting with the program. Hot-footing it into turn nine, he's right behind Art Pol-



Pay attention now, this how you play Mario's musical cars. A one and a two and . . . First, grab a ride back from the scene of demolishing both turbines in one swat on the back of Parnelli's bike (top). Then, shag Ruby out of his car and blaze out after Unser (above), leaving Lloyd perched on the rail watching (right).



lard, the second STP turbine. Then, in some kind of ultimate stroke of awful luck, Andretti and Pollard collide and slam into the wall. Nobody, least of all the Granatellis can believe it, both of their cars are out, finished, kaput. Previously sidelined drivers knew what was going to happen as soon as they saw both cars simultaneously enter the turn. All day, Pollard had been kind of going high and cutting down off the bank — Mario was trying to slide by underneath — zonk, they crash. A lot of other cars had been in precisely the same spot but they weren't running at eighty percent power with the brakes gone. Like we said, the turbines are something else.

While the statisticians ponder if this is some kind of new anti-record, going through your own car plus two backup cars in just four laps, Parnelli is making like J.N. Roberts, cycling out to the mess in which neither driver was hurt. Mario hops on the saddle behind P.J. and they make it for the pits. The word circulates that Andretti will take over Al Unser's car but that's no good because Al isn't even driving his original Lola but a backup and besides he's Bobby's brother and Bobby is currently in

second. Now comes the grand strategy huddle attended by all the principles, including of course, Jim McKay and Chris Economacki of ABC's Wide World of Sports, which are kind of motoring's super-press, as one European journalist commented.

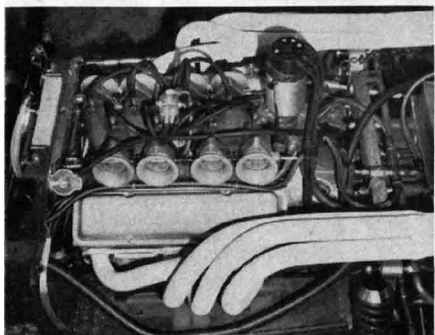
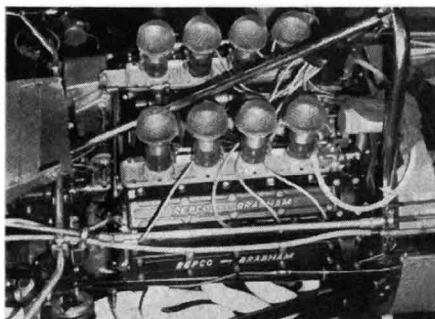
Okay, this is the play. Lloyd Ruby (currently in fourth) gets yanked. Well, sure, this will shoot Lloyd's chances for a third place in the national standings but what the heck, McCluskey was leading the race last year when A.J. stepped in. Of course, now that Mario isn't driving his own car anymore, he has to share whatever points he winds up with at the finish with the previous driver, Ruby. It says that in the clear and precise rules about playing musical cars. So, seventh overall just will not make it anymore, third night not even — in fact, rechecking our addition, it definitely won't.

Now the fans are really confused, Andretti has driven cars Two, Sixty and now, 25. The order, Gurney, Unser, Andretti, interestingly enough, is identical to last year's finish and Dan will surely run into some minor difficulty and play catch up and we get to see what we missed in '67 — the race of the

decade. Sorry, no dice, maybe next year.

Gurney wins, period. Bobby Unser is second, period. And Mario falls a miniscule 6.8 points short of the National Championship. Goodyear finishes one-two, and wins the championship for the second straight year, along with the race, though you would have never known it; Olsonite's victory celebration makes theirs look like a monastic retreat compared to one of those good old Roman goodies.

About his futile car-hopping capers, Mario reflected, "Even though I was ready to try anything with four wheels on it, it's still a bad rule. A driver should be allowed to score points only in the car he starts in." Others reflected in the longer view that this is where stock-blocks really came into their own — the '68 USAC season — and that Gurney's going to need the Wood Brothers at Indy because Penske/Donohue will be tough. Right now, for this period a Gurney/Eagle, Ford or Chevy powered is the combination. And, can you believe it? Next season Dan will give up Formula 1 to concentrate on USAC and the Can-Am. Maybe Ozzie will have a little flag with No. One on it, to fly over the tent. /MT



The Rex Mays affair was as rich in variety as you could ask. Take engines. Besides the cammer Fords, the Turbo-Offies and the Gurney Ford, a pair of other contenders appeared. Brabham's 4.2-liter Repco (3.78 x 2.83 bore and stroke), put out 550 horsepower on alky and 600 on 20 percent. Oil leak forced it out. Donohue/Penske Eagle (left below) had 319-inch Traco Chevy sans Lucas injection. Mario's Ford (left bottom) was attended by pro of pros, Chickie Hirashima of Autolite. For Bobby Unser (below) and Rislone, it's been a very good year.



REX MAYS 300 Results

POSITION	DRIVER	TYPE CAR	LAPS
1	Dan Gurney	REF	116
2	Bobby Unser	REF	115
3	Andretti/Ruby	REF	113
4	A. Unser/Scott	REF	112
5	Rick Muther	REF	107
6	Johnny Rutherford	REF	103
7	Billy Vukovich	REC	101
8	George Follmer	REF	97
9	John Cannon	REF	96
10	Peter Revson	REC	81
11	Gordon Johncock	REF	79
12	Roger McCluskey	RETO	74
13	Ronnie Bucknum	REF	72
14	Mike Mosley	REF	69
15	Arnie Knepper	REF	68

USAC National Championship (Final)

(1) Bobby Unser, 4326; (2) Mario Andretti, 4319; (3) Al Unser, 2892; (4) Lloyd Ruby, 2798; (5) Billy Vukovich, 1595; (6) A.J. Foyt, 1860; (7) Dan Gurney, 1800; (8) Gary Bettenhausen, 1595; (9) Mel Kenyon, 1355; (10) Jim Malloy, 1265; (11) Sam Sessions, 1260; (12) Gordon Johncock, 1257.