

THE DIESELS RUN AGAIN AT INDY

Cummins put a test drive in its 1931 Indianapolis racer up for grabs. The winner of the free-for-all reports:

BY ALLAN GIRDLER, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

FOR ONE BRIEF, FEARFUL moment, things looked very bad. All the arrangements had been made: Cummins Engine Co. had rolled out its restored 1931 diesel-powered Indianapolis car for a preview of its return to the Speedway; the Speedway management agreed to open the track; and one very eager Indy fan was ready for his first ride. The star of the show wouldn't go.

Air in the fuel injection pump. Bad news for a diesel. No fuel pressure and blobs of the stuff falling into the engine and making it run away with itself. The Cummins crew overcame. Bill Spoerle, who restored No. 8 after the car spent 30 years as a pigeon roost, kept pumping and priming.

Then it ran. All four massive cylinders caught hold, with a bellowing blend of La France fire truck and secondhand threshing machine. Roiling clouds of smoke. The engine was designed for attachment to a floor or a bulkhead, a stationary engine, in fact. It bolts solidly to the car's chassis, and

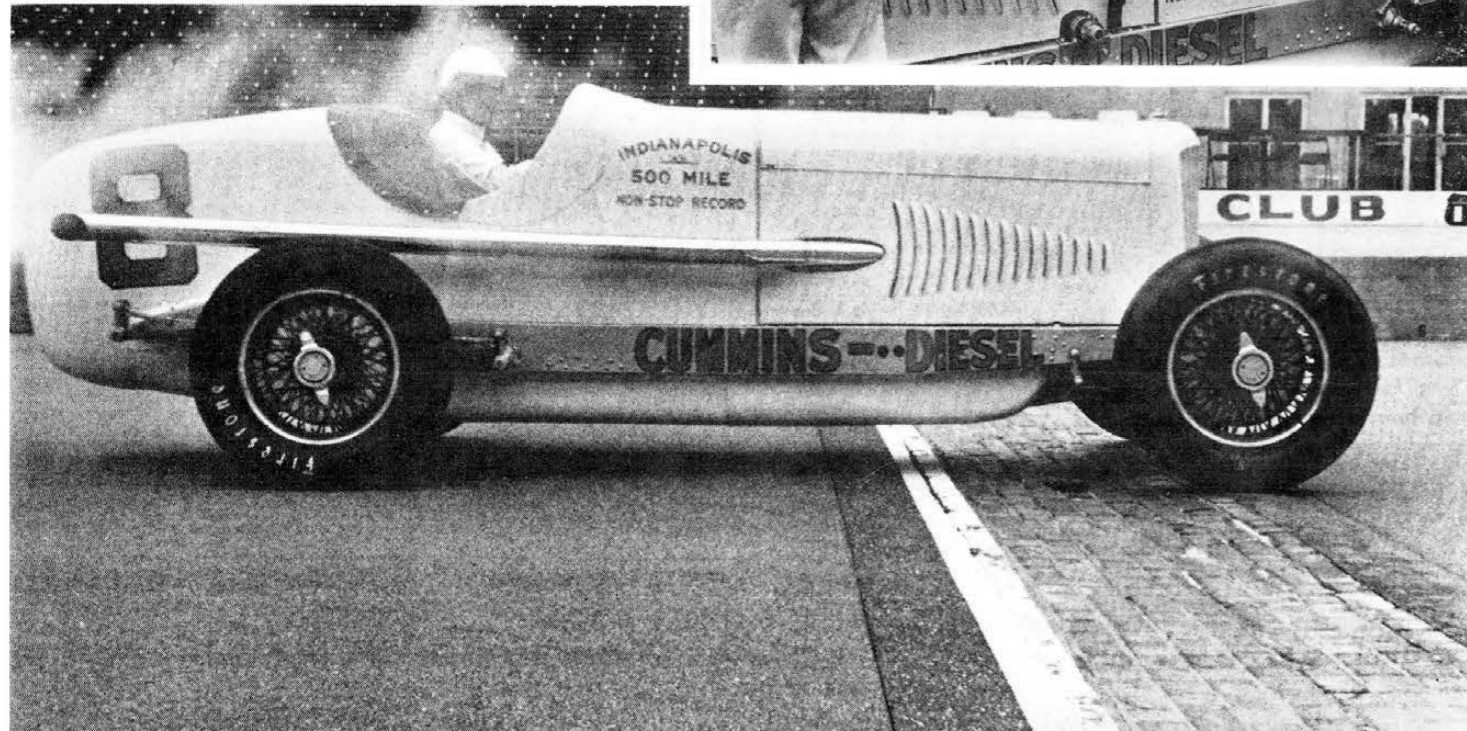
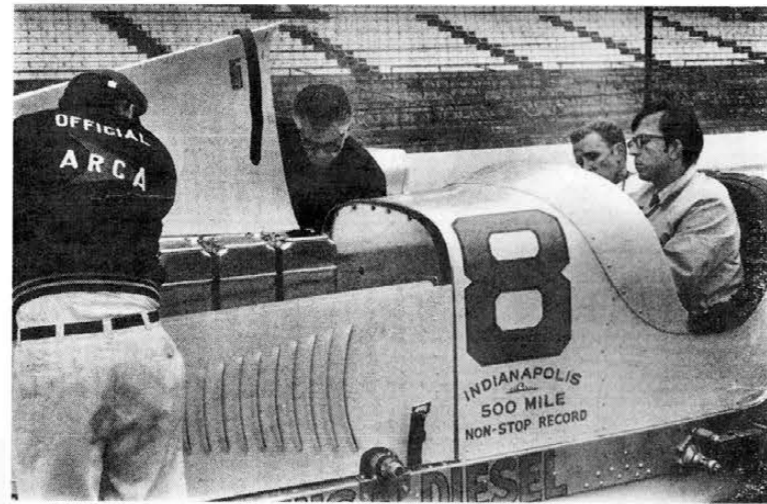
MANY HANDS make desperate work, right, as restorer Bill Spoerle, left, 1952 Cummins entry driver Fred Agabashian, Car Life Associate Editor Allan Girdler and Cummins' Bob Wilson pump, prime, switch and hope. Poised on the famous bricks, below, No. 8 leaves in a cloud of smoke. Coming down front straight, far right, made the trip and worry worth it.

even mighty Duesenberg frame rails can't dampen that much vibration.

The cockpit check-out was slow and careful. Pressure on the foot-feed at all times; the engine won't idle. If you want to shut the engine off, rock back on the pedal. If the engine doesn't want to shut off, or if it continues to pick up speed when you back off, haul on that handle. There are a few Cummins "U" type engines left in the world, in a lighthouse in Oregon and maybe a fishing boat in Louisiana, but only one has the three-valve head and you are in charge of it. The clutch

pedal is in the middle. The brake pedal is on the left, so the pushrod to the master cylinder can get there without going through the flywheel. Remember that the track maintenance men are working on the pavement. It has holes in it, with cones to mark where they are. Don't fall into any holes. Don't break anything.

Stand well back there, No. 8 is ready to roll. The clutch isn't at all stiff. The gearshift for the three-speed, straight-cut Duesenberg transmission is. Thunk, into first. Rappa-rappa-rappa, the revs pick up. Jud-jud-jud, the car rolls for-



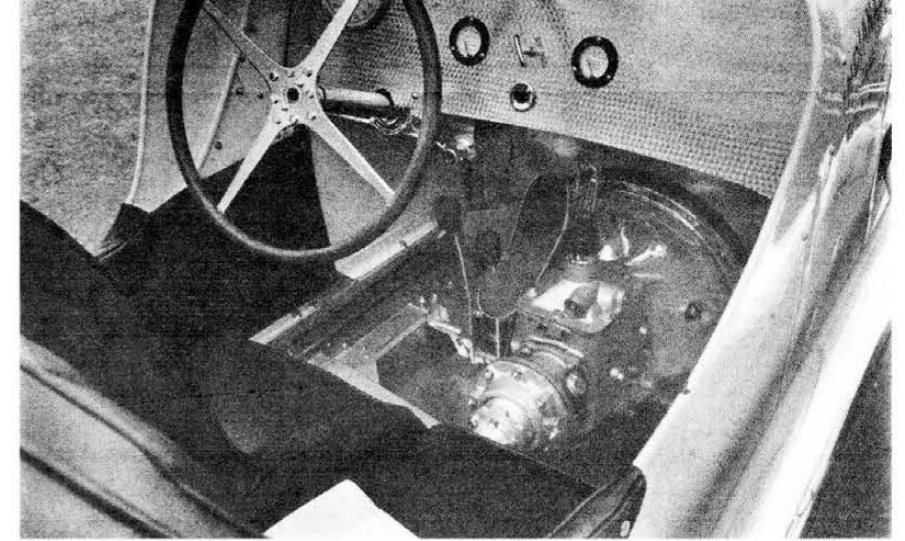
ward. The tachometer shows twice the true speed, something to remember. Up to a true 800, and haul the lever forward and out of first, push across the gate and shove for second. Deep graunching noises. Part of the pre-cockpit briefing at Bill's shop: The gears are straight-cut. There is no synchromesh. You will not be able to make a clean shift, nobody ever has; don't worry about it. Foot down again, more speed, and No. 8 is thumping down the backstretch.

Size is the first impression. At this speed, maybe 40 mph, the Speedway looks huge. The straight goes on forever, watched today by towering, echoing grandstands. Just a hint of the ghosts of the past, the hundreds of thousands of people who will fill this vacuum in a few weeks. An occasional grim reminder, a tangle of black lines leading up to the wall on the third turn.

The car feels huge. The wheels are 18 in. in diameter with 8-in. tires from a day when tires were as high as they were wide. No. 8 weighs 2900 lb. It may not be the heaviest car ever to run at Indy, but measured by volume it is the biggest. It looks it from the outside, and it feels it from the inside.

Cold is the next reaction. Bringing a fireproof driving suit, gloves, helmet, goggles and shoes seemed like a good idea back at the office. At trackside, that bagful of gear was something of an embarrassment. Does it matter if a club racer and lifelong Indy fan, driving at the Speedway to get a story and enjoy the only ride at Indy he'll ever get *looks* like a club racer and lifelong Indy fan enjoying the only ride at Indy he'll ever get?

Not today, it doesn't. It is cold on the track, and the only protection the driver has from the elements is the aforementioned suit, goggles, gloves and helmet, which quickly became a



COCKPIT is spartan, but not simple. The black button starts the engine, the handle above that stops it. Brake pedal is at left with clutch in the middle.

good idea again as soon as the car was underway.

Driving No. 8 is grownup's play. The steering is light, probably because those big skinny tires don't have much grip by today's standards. There's no play in the steering. Pull the huge, wood-rim wheel this way or that and the car points in the desired direction. Low on the bankings is enough to keep the car from having any feeling of cornering. The pull down seems to cancel the centrifugal force. No sensation of oversteer or understeer at low speed. The handling characteristics of the world's only 1931 Cummins racing car at high speed are not going to be explored today.

Everything is working beautifully. A little faster won't hurt, I hope. The thumping grows into a growl. The tach reads 2000. That's 1000 true rpm. The racing limit was 1800. Dave Evans qualified this car at 96 mph. He must have been doing well over 100 on the straights, so 1000 rpm is what, 50? 55? The track is getting smaller. It still

takes a long time to get around; but it's not so hard, now, imagining what the Speedway is like at 170. Walk around a race course and all the turns look wide. Drive the course at racing speed and there's barely room for the car.

The people who talk about the smooth pavement at Indy should try it in a 1931 racer. Beam axles, great thick leaf springs, two shock absorbers on each wheel. Stiffer-is-better was all they knew then. Over the traditional row of bricks at the start/finish, like driving over the curb in a modern car.

They were men in those days. The brickyard had bricks in it. Every seam in this pavement comes through to the driver. Going the full distance in this car, the way Dave Evans did, must have been like falling down 500 miles of stairs.

Ten laps isn't nearly enough, but it's getting dark, and everybody else has taken shelter in the tow truck. In with the clutch, shift into neutral, hard on the brake. Just in time, really. The lure of speed, even 1931 speed, is about to overcome the best of intentions.

