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## The 1945 Purchase of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway: How World War II Changed Racing History and Culture

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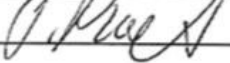
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**The 1945 Purchase of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway: How World War II  
Changed Racing History and Culture**

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**Spring 2023**

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **Introduction**

The histories of certain events can sometimes reveal a turning point, or watershed, that changes the trajectory of every event that follows. This paper is a microhistory of one such pivotal moment in 1945 that defined the history of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway as it is today and, by extension, has also impacted the history of the famed Indianapolis 500 Mile Race. This moment helped make the Indianapolis Motor Speedway “the Racing Capital of the World” and the home of the largest single day sporting event in the world, and it allowed two men to create a new racing culture.

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway is a crown jewel for not only the Indianapolis community but for the United States as well, bringing in hundreds of thousands of fans almost every year.<sup>1</sup> “The Month of May”, the month in which the spectacle and its celebrations commence, can be seen and felt in Indianapolis; street signs with drivers’ names are put up, checkered flags decorate front yards, and the city hosts a parade the day before (the largest parade of the year). During May in Indianapolis, it is unmistakably clear that the Indianapolis 500 is just around the corner. It is the largest single-day sporting event in the world and the racetrack, and the surrounding town of Speedway is themed heavily on “the Racing Capital of the World.” Many people in Indianapolis are

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<sup>1</sup> The Indianapolis 500 Mile Race has seen two breaks in its total 106 runs; one during World War I (1917-1918) and one during World War II (1942-1945). Even during the COVID-19 Pandemic the event ran, not in May, but in September 2020, without spectators.

proud of the event that draws so much attention and so many people to their city. People put out porch displays with all things checkered; some residents of Speedway set up paid parking in their yards and have cardboard cutouts of their favorite drivers. The legacy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indianapolis 500 means a great deal to locals of Indianapolis and Hoosiers alike. They both bring notoriety and attention to the city and the state annually. Eyes of not just the rest of the country, but also of the world, rest on this Midwestern area one day every year. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway is a huge part of Indianapolis' identity; if one were to look at Indiana or Indianapolis themed mugs and merchandise, it is not surprising to find a checkered flag, or a race car placed to represent the state or city.

Many race fans, however, may not be aware that the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was once in jeopardy, leaving the future of the Indianapolis 500 stalled as well. The Second World War brought a prolonged halt to the annual running of the Indianapolis 500. Some were unaware if the track would even reopen at all. Others feared that if it did reopen, it would not be opened to match its former glory. The track had already survived much trepidation when it found its footing, leaving some to wonder: could it survive this calamity as well?

Indianapolis has made many names popular, such as Mario Andretti and A.J. Foyt and Scott Dixon. The 500 is a crown jewel in the racing world and many people watch and attend the race even if they do not normally follow racing or follow a different series of racing. The IndyCar series was created specifically because of the Indianapolis 500. IndyCars are the type of vehicle that race this event and the event counts towards the

IndyCar Championship. Drivers are often willing to sacrifice it all towards the end of their Indy 500 run, rather than attempt to finish in a comfortable, assured spot for points, because they are so intent on the chance of being an Indianapolis 500 winner. As an Indy 500 winner, they would have their face on the Borg-Warner Trophy, drink the famous milk, wear the celebratory wreath, and kiss the bricks— they would be a part of history. The prospect of winning has an effect of altering a driver's judgment and putting a driver's full attention on winning.

### **Early History and Context**

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway was founded in 1909 by four Indianapolis businessmen: James A. Allison, Carl G. Fisher, Arthur Newby, and Frank H. Wheeler. Through much trial and error, these men-- but Fisher in particular -- tested out different forms of racing, including cars, motorcycles, and even hot air balloons.<sup>2</sup> Since the early years of the Indianapolis 500 Mile Race, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway has seen hundreds of thousands of spectators and fans enter its gates, but this has not always been the case, especially not in the beginning. The Indianapolis 500 was the brainchild of Carl Fisher, who was widely known for his dangerous and far-fetched business ventures. After many failed events that did not bring in the expected number of crowds, the 500 was a risky move and the founders gambled heavily in their efforts to make the race track a success.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Leerhsen, *Blood and Smoke: A True Tale of Mystery, Mayhem, and the Birth of the Indy 500* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 22-25.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Leerhsen, *Blood and Smoke: A True Tale of Mystery, Mayhem, and the Birth of the Indy 500*, 22-99.

The Second World War, although very tragic in many ways, provided the opportunity for a change in leadership that would forever alter the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Following World War II, the revitalization of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway by Wilbur Shaw and Tony Hulman created a new culture surrounding the Speedway. Motorsports garnered much interest across the United States in the very early 1900s when they became popularized. Interest became more organized in fashion directly after the Second World War when NASCAR was founded in 1948 and Formula 1, known commonly as F1, in 1950. New motorsport racing leagues were created because there was a high demand for and interest in them. The Indianapolis 500 was held for the first time after World War II before NASCAR or F1 were even established as racing leagues. With the Indianapolis 500 restarting with much popularity, it was proved that there was still a great interest in motorsports that could be monopolized on— people wanted to watch and attend racing events. Tony Hulman and Wilbur Shaw recognized how important auto racing was to the American culture, and took the risk to prove its popularity withstood years of absence and limitation due to war.

The Speedway brings growth and development to Indianapolis, as well as revenue and customers to businesses in the area. If the purchase by Tony Hulman in 1945 had not occurred, the Speedway would not be what it is today, if it were to even still exist at all. Had the Speedway not been purchased, Indiana would perhaps not be known for racing, the largest single day sporting event would be something else, and IndyCar would likely not exist. Attending the Indy 500 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway is a tradition that can be passed down from generation to generation, a yearly “pilgrimage” made not only

by Americans, but by many around the world. The Speedway is not only important to those who live in Indianapolis, or even just IndyCar fans, it has impacted the world of auto racing as a whole.

### **Methodology**

This paper employs a microhistorical approach to study Hulman and Shaw's partnership in the 1945 purchase of the Indianapolis 500 and how a new racing culture was formed. Microhistory studies look at a specific occurrence, person or group of people, or event during a certain time period in extreme depth that are further connected to larger patterns and overarching themes. By looking at something or someone in depth, other wide arching demonstrations can be discovered and made. It is a very humanizing way to look at history, as world and transnational histories often fall into the trap of losing their human touch. In the book *The Houses of History*, authors Anna Green and Kathleen Troup explain that, "Indeed, many historians influenced by the anthropological approach have favoured microhistory, placing small communities, single events or even one individual under minute scrutiny."<sup>4</sup> Microhistory is not just simply a biography; microhistory studies work by connecting the case study to a larger trend that was occurring at the time.

While microhistory has been a useful form of study, it does have its downfalls.

One of the biggest criticisms has been that it is unable to represent every person, place, or

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*, Red Shelf (Manchester University Press, 2016), <https://platform.virdocs.com/r/s/0/doc/725150/sp/212514353/mi/642826829?cfi=%2F4%2F4%2F2%2C%2F1%3A0%2C%2F1%3A0> , 200.



event to which it attempts to draw a larger connection. For example, if a researcher were to do a study of a person who lives in Indiana's experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic, that researcher could not claim that this single person's experience is equivalent for all people in Indianapolis. Historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon makes the case in favor of microhistory: "But if we stick to small units, as microhistorians have generally done, we are likely to gain a better grasp of our subjects, and gain insight into a lost world which would otherwise have remained closed to us."<sup>5</sup> Microhistories help us better understand and explain the past by analyzing stories and experiences of people actually there— it makes history personal.

In using this methodology, there are deep and prevalent topics about the Indianapolis Motor Speedway that will not be discussed. Topics such as gender, class, and race, or the "big three" in historical studies. It is no secret that in the past, even now, women have not had a huge place in motorsports. Many times, they have been excluded and it was not until 1977 that a woman even raced in the Indianapolis 500. To this day, there has only been one Black man who has raced in the Indianapolis 500. Racing is an extremely expensive sport, therefore, it is not an easily accessible sport, that is without the proper resources. Motorsports have been clouded with many disparities and limited access points, yet, in recent years there has been hope with pushes to make the sport (especially IndyCar, the series that runs in the Indianapolis 500) more accessible. While

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<sup>5</sup> Sigurður G. Magnússon and Istvan M. Szijarto, *What Is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice*, ProQuest Ebook Central (London: Taylor & Francis Group, May 29, 2013), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/butler/reader.action?docID=1207529> , 158.



Motor Speedway. Hulman's funding and support were needed to purchase, run, and make improvements to the Speedway, and it took Shaw's passion and determination to make this purchase happen in 1945.

When the purchase of the track is mentioned, oftentimes historians and authors will refer to it being "saved;" Donald Davidson goes so far to say it was "rescued."<sup>7</sup> While this is a proper description of what happened, it only goes so far. Yes, the Speedway was saved, but it was also changed and improved for better. It was not purchased to remain static or to stay the same. No, it was bought with ambition in mind. Furthermore, by using the word "save," Davidson is implying that the track needed saving, that it was in danger. For something (or someone for that matter) to be saved, one would typically think that thing was in distress to start with, that is the entire concept around being saved.

It is not common to find history books specifically designed for auto racing, especially focusing on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and IndyCar. Because auto racing is a fairly young sport that a limited number of people can participate in (because of the price tag), not much academic scholarship has been published that focuses on it. F1 is a worldwide phenomenon and NASCAR is extremely grassroots in its fan base in the United States. IndyCar is fairly split, the makeup of the drivers still sees Americans as the

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Davidson, "Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945," Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolis motorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolis motorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

largest group, but over half of the drivers are foreigner born. That is a truly interesting aspect of the Indianapolis 500 as well, as it is a very “American” event; it is held the day before Memorial Day, “The Star Spangled Banner” is sung, aircrafts fly overhead, some spectators sport American flag attire. Yet, commentary is done in a multitude of languages and the race is broadcasted worldwide and watched by millions. Not many sports can be so culturally centered, while also being of such an interest to so many different cultures.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **Historical Background of 1945**

In order to put into perspective the massive improvements and culture that Shaw and Hulman created around racing culture in Indy, it is imperative to look at the status of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway prior to this purchase. Understanding the mentality that ran the track prior will help explain how pivotal the shift in leadership was. It will also help depict how drastically racing culture grew following a shift in leadership.

#### **THE DOWNFALL OF THE RICKENBACKER ERA**

The Indy 500 and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway remained popular prior to World War II. Yet, without the race occurring due to war efforts for World War II,

Speedway owner, Eddie Rickenbacker, let the track deteriorate. The racetrack began to crumble, the infield became overgrown, and stands began to fall apart (Figure 1).

Historian Donald Davidson remarks that many residents of the time believed that the track would be torn down and turned into a subdivision.<sup>8</sup> But this all changed when Wilbur Shaw stepped into the picture. Shaw, a three-time winner of the Indy 500, saw the ruins that the track had become and determined that he was going to save it. By meeting with Indiana businessman, Tony Hulman, Shaw was able to persuade someone who had the means to support and rebuild the Speedway after purchasing it.



Figure 1:

Dilapidated Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 1940s

Credit: The Indianapolis Motor Speedway

After Eddie Rickenbacker purchased the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1927, he seemed to immediately realize that the purchase may have not been in his best interest

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945.”

or the best interest for the Speedway. He notes in his autobiography, “After acquiring the property, I suddenly realized that I had neither the time to run it properly nor the money or credit that would be required for proper expansion over the next few years.”<sup>9</sup> Eddie Rickenbacker was not a rich and wealthy businessman who had large sums of money to spend. In fact, he had to borrow much money from the bank in order to purchase the track.<sup>10</sup> Rickenbacker may have been interested in and cared about the track and auto racing, but he did not appear to hold the skills nor funding to properly take care of it for a number of years.

Rickenbacker also did not buy the track outright; he held a stake in it and then gradually began to buy up other stocks.<sup>11</sup> This shows that his purchase of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was not simply impulsive, rather he had time to think about what he was doing and became involved in a gradual fashion. He may have known that his purchase of the track was not a smart move, yet he did have time to back out or to not be sole owner at all. This depicts a certain determination in the way Rickenbacker’s mind worked; he appeared determined to own the track, no matter how many loans he had to take out. So Rickenbacker clearly had a desire for the Speedway, at least at first.

The track was closed during World War II for multiple reasons. Rickenbacker originally wanted the track to be used for aircraft testing for the Second World War, which makes a great deal of sense with Rickenbacker being recognized as a famous

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<sup>9</sup> Edward V. Rickenbacker, “Indianapolis Speedway,” in *Rickenbacker* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 150-160, 160.

<sup>10</sup> Edward V. Rickenbacker, “Indianapolis Speedway,” in *Rickenbacker*, pp. 150-160, 160.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 150-153.

World War I fighter pilot, but this plan did not end up working out, as the infield was not spacious enough.<sup>12</sup> Yet the actual race course was abandoned during the war and did not see usage or maintenance, making the return to racing more difficult from years of neglect. It was not only in Indianapolis that the absence of motorsports was felt. Across the country and world, motorsports were shut down and did not occur on a large-scale for around three years. After Rickenbacker was informed the track could not be used for military flight testing, Rickenbacker closed the track “on July 31, 1942, due to the government’s vastly increased demand for fuel, rubber and other supplies, ALL forms of motorsport were brought to an end by federal mandate.”<sup>13</sup> It was a requirement for the track to shut down, motorsports could not happen at all in the United States; it was illegal. The very thought of sports such as soccer or basketball being completely shut down for four or more years seems inconceivable to a modern audience. Yet that was the expectation of sacrifice for the citizens of a country at war.

The Speedway was obviously suffering greatly at this point. Racing couldn’t occur, so there was no money coming in. The owner was already strapped for cash and seemed all but enthusiastic about his ownership position, and the track was left unused and began to become dilapidated. Not at all a pretty picture, not at all a hopeful future;

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945,” Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

<sup>13</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945.”

the only thing the track had going for it was that there was still a passion and desire for it. That may not seem like a lot, but with enough determination and the right connections, it can make a huge difference. And two men were about to prove this theory true.

### WILBUR SHAW:

#### DETERMINATION AND PASSION ARE EVERYTHING

Wilbur Shaw was not new to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway when he visited the track in 1945. He had won the Indianapolis 500 three times and had participated in it numerous times. One of the reasons he was so appalled by the condition of the track was because he had such a strong connection to the track; so many fond memories had been made there. He had felt both its highs and its lows. The place was important, and Shaw recognized it. He knew something had to be done to ensure that the place was returned to its former glory. It meant something to so many people and to lose it would be a travesty.

Wilbur Shaw was born Warren Wilbur Shaw on October 31, 1902, near the town of Shelbyville, Indiana. He came to Indianapolis when he was sixteen years old, and found jobs working in the automotive industry, which helped foster his love for cars and racing.<sup>14</sup> Following his passion for cars, he began to work on his own car that he would use to compete in dirt track races for several years, bringing home some good results as

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<sup>14</sup> “Warren Wilbur Shaw,” [indyencyclopedia.org](https://indyencyclopedia.org/warren-wilbur-shaw/), June 13, 2022, <https://indyencyclopedia.org/warren-wilbur-shaw/>.



well. Shaw competed in his first Indianapolis 500 in 1927, boasting a fourth-placed finish.<sup>15</sup>

When Wilbur Shaw entered the gates of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the first time in years in 1945, he was working for Firestone, a company that makes tires (and is the sole brand of tire used in the Indianapolis 500 as far as 2023 is concerned). Firestone wanted Shaw to test out their new tires for durability and safety.<sup>16</sup> Shaw must have been incredibly excited to return to the place that had brought him fame and victory. However, if he hoped to return to the track he once knew, he was terribly mistaken. Shaw recounted that day he went to test at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in his autobiography:

What impressed me most about the test on the Speedway, however, was the physical condition of the famous plant. There were big crevices in the track's surface on the turns, which had to be patched before we could start the test, and grass was growing between the bricks on the main straightaway. The old wooden grandstands looked as though they were about to fall apart. Absolutely no maintenance work of any kind had been done on the track for almost four years. It reminded me of a dilapidated back house on an abandoned farm. A lot of money would be necessary to make another International 500-mile Speed Classic a reality. The depressing scene actually haunted my dreams for several nights.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Warren Wilbur Shaw," [indyencyclopedia.org](http://indyencyclopedia.org).

<sup>16</sup> Wilbur Shaw, *Gentlemen, Start Your Engines* (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, 1955), 274.

<sup>17</sup> Wilbur Shaw, *Gentlemen, Start Your Engines*, 274.

Shaw provides a vivid description of the track as well as the emotions that overwhelmed him that day, motivating him to make an effort to save the track. The account also gives some sort of insight into how Wilbur Shaw must have felt. He clearly took the time to look at the track and remember how poor the conditions were. Here Wilbur Shaw was, a man who saw much glory and fortune at this place— and now he had to see it in such a devastating state. How could it get this bad within a handful of years? How could people let it get this bad? Did anyone care? Shaw may have not gotten these answers, but he knew he cared about making it better.

TONY HULMAN:

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE WHAT WEALTH, EDUCATION, AND INTEREST CAN GET YOU (IT NEVER HURTS TO ASK)

Tony Hulman was already a part of elite Indiana society when he met with Wilbur Shaw in 1945. Hulman was the owner of a production company that had stores and made goods, most notably Clabber Girl Baking Powder. He was a wealthy businessman, which was a key attraction factor for Wilbur Shaw to seek Hulman out with the prospect of buying the Indianapolis Motor Speedway from Eddie Rickenbacker. Hulman was also a native Hoosier, which helped tie him to one of Indiana's crown jewels; the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indianapolis 500 in particular attracted people to Indiana.

Tony Hulman was born Anton Human Jr. on February 11, 1901, in Terre Haute, Indiana. He was a descendant of immigrants from Germany and was born into a wealthy

family who owned a grocery store.<sup>18</sup> Hulman, with his wealthy upbringing and high education was destined for success and greatness. Not only was Hulman sharp and intelligent, but he was also gifted athletically. He attended the prestigious and well-known Yale University and was a notable athlete not only in football but in track and field as well.<sup>19</sup>

Tony Hulman was a clear example of a successful businessman. His mind for business and family connections allowed him to become President of Hulman & Company in 1931. Thanks to his guidance, “the company came to encompass real estate, power and utility businesses, newspapers, radio and television stations, a brewery, and eventually several Coca-Cola bottling plants, among other interests.”<sup>20</sup> Hulman had the understanding and skill to make something into a success. He had an ability to increase the worth of the projects he worked with, such as the Clabber Girl Baking Powder brand previously mentioned. This is clear with several aspects of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. In 1962, Hulman revived the Auto Racing Hall of Fame and brought it to Indianapolis from Detroit, Michigan. And he was further able to heavily increase the Indianapolis 500 prize money, typically more than \$60,000 and he increased to \$115,450 in 1946 and by 1977, it was almost \$2 million.<sup>21</sup> Hulman was a clear business man and he knew how to draw top drivers to the Indianapolis 500, making the excitement around the race skyrocket even more.

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<sup>18</sup> “Anton Hulman, Jr.,” IMS Museum, September 23, 2022, [https://imsmuseum.org/fame\\_inductee/anton-hulman-jr/](https://imsmuseum.org/fame_inductee/anton-hulman-jr/).

<sup>19</sup> “Anton Hulman, Jr.,” IMS Museum.

<sup>20</sup> “Anton (Tony) Hulman Jr.,” indyencyclopedia.org, February 24, 2022, <https://indyencyclopedia.org/anton-tony-hulman-jr/>.

<sup>21</sup> “Anton Hulman, Jr.,” IMS Museum, September 23, 2022, [https://imsmuseum.org/fame\\_inductee/anton-hulman-jr/](https://imsmuseum.org/fame_inductee/anton-hulman-jr/).

To give an insight to the privacy and quietness that was Tony Hulman, Donald Davidson writes that, “Hulman, in the meantime, could generally move around town without being approached because even for quite some time after the purchase, many people in Indianapolis did not even know who he was.”<sup>22</sup> Hulman was not a fan of the spotlight and did not seek any sort of notoriety or fame for buying and reviving the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. It would have been easy for him to place himself in the spotlight and make himself the star of the story, but that is not what interested Hulman. This makes his purchase of the track seem even more honorable and selfless as he did not seek to get much from the track, he just wanted to see it succeed, not only for its own sake, but for the sake of his home state of Indiana as well. He wanted to make sure Indiana received notoriety and prestige and he wanted the rest of the world to acknowledge it as well.

Hulman was a highly proud Hoosier. He loved his home state of Indiana and wanted to bring positive attention to it. He promised a revitalization of the track and that it would provide thrilling racing for spectators to come and watch. “Our first aim will be to look at spectator comfort and convenience and provide a track and competition that should be an invitation challenge to the greatest race drivers in the world. We think the

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945,” Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

fans in Indiana will be glad to know that the Speedway is home-owned now.”<sup>23</sup> Hulman places specific emphasis on the track being “home-owned,” a seeming belief that this would impress fans in Indiana. Tony Hulman wanted to create excitement and hope for fans; they had gone five years in succession without their beloved Indy 500. Hulman wanted these fans to be aware that not only would the track and the race be back, but it would be better too. There would be thrill and excitement now that someone with an area-oriented connection to the track had control of it. Shaw was not only interested in the racing, but in the fact that this track was something important to the people of Indiana.

Following Hulman’s purchase, even Eddie Rickenbacker expressed approval of the Hulman purchase. At the time of the purchase Rickenbacker stated, “It is fitting that Hoosier management and Hoosier capital should continue the most famous venture in mechanical competition.”<sup>24</sup> The idea and emphasis on Hulman being a Hoosier is once again brought up and highlighted. The Indianapolis 500, while famous worldwide, is still, first and foremost, a race in the state of Indiana. It also further demonstrates Rickenbacker’s happiness in being able to sell the track. While Rickenbacker did not hold the same passion for racing and owning the track as he previously had, he still believed it was important for the track to go to people who would care for it. Rickenbacker’s

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<sup>23</sup> Dawn Mitchell, “Retro Indy: When Hulman Bought IMS, His Mom Told Him to 'Tear It down and Start All over',” *The Indianapolis Star* (IndyStar, November 14, 2019), <https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/motor/indy-500/2019/11/14/tony-hulman-buys-dilapidated-indianapolis-motor-speedway-retroindy/4189514002/>.

<sup>24</sup> Dawn Mitchell, “Retro Indy: When Hulman Bought IMS, His Mom Told Him to 'Tear It down and Start All over',”.

departure from the track was amicable; Rickenbacker was now freed up to pursue other passions (when would have appeared more promising than a run-down race track), while the Speedway was now in tender hands that would build it back up to greatness and sustainability.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **Purchase and Upgrade**

To provide some context to how a new racing culture was formed, it is important to understand how the Speedway was built back up and the initiatives that were taken to ensure the continuation of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indianapolis 500. After these improvements, the path was paved for a new racing culture to be laid out.

#### **NEGOTIATIONS:**

#### **HERE'S THE DEAL**

After years of the track sitting and crumbling, some people feared that the track would never reopen and would be turned into suburban housing additions.<sup>25</sup> After the

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<sup>25</sup> Donald Davidson, "Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945," Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolis motorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolis motorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

Second World War there was a huge boom in housing, especially in terms of suburbia. It is not likely that the track would have not been reopened at all, however. Donald Davidson states that Eddie Rickenbacker was planning to reopen the track for racing events.<sup>26</sup> However, it is likely the track would have suffered. Donald Davidson gives the impression that Rickenbacker was not exactly excited to own the track and that his passion for it was not high. Davidson describes: “Shaw quickly determined that while Rickenbacker had been quoted as saying that the track would be opened for business as soon as the hostilities were over, he would not, in fact, be averse to entertaining proposals of sale.”<sup>27</sup> Rickenbacker had been involved in a variety of different prospects during World War II and the Speedway was simply not top priority anymore.

Furthermore, in Eddie Rickenbacker’s autobiography, *Rickenbacker*, he has one chapter dedicated to his time owning the Indianapolis Motor Speedway; the chapter holds only ten pages of text in a book that is 443 pages long.<sup>28</sup> It is evident that Rickenbacker did not have a whole lot to comment on regarding his time owning the track.

While Rickenbacker did dedicate a chapter to the Speedway and he did care enough to invest in it in the first place, there were other facets of his life that he viewed as *more*

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<sup>26</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945.”

<sup>27</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945,” Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

<sup>28</sup> Edward V. Rickenbacker, “Indianapolis Speedway,” in *Rickenbacker* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 150-160.

important. Therefore, if Rickenbacker were to have reopened the track, it is likely that there would have been much effort from him in doing so. Hulman spent much money making improvements and updates to the track, yet Rickenbacker does not give the impression that he would have done the same. Rickenbacker had already spent money on the track prior to the start of the Second World War, such as adding a golf course within the track. It is not likely that he would have been keen to spend much more money. Rickenbacker was an aviation man and World War II reignited that passion in him. He wanted to spend his time, energy, and money on flying, not auto racing.

On Wednesday, November 14, 1945, Tony Hulman became the sole owner of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway after purchasing the track from Eddie Rickenbacker. It is not fully known the exact amount that Hulman paid for the track, but many, including David Donaldson, widely consider the amount at the time to be around \$750,000.<sup>29 30</sup> This was certainly a large sum of money for the time, and Hulman would have to

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<sup>29</sup> “Indianapolis Auto Track Sold By Rickenbacker for \$750,000: Profit for Rickenbacker Predicts Successful Operation” (ProQuest Ebook Central . The New York Times, November 15, 1945), <https://ezproxy.butler.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/indianapolis-auto-track-sold-rickenbacker-750-000/docview/107351906/se-2>

<sup>30</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945,” Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).



continue to pour money in for renovations. Even Tony Hulman's mother thought her son was making a not well thought out decision.<sup>31</sup>

## RENOVATION AND LOGISTICS TIME:

### NOW THE REAL WORK BEGINS

The race was on to get as much work done on the track as possible before the race and events in May 1946. There would be no possibility that the crews would be able to complete everything that put the track back in the condition it had previously been in.<sup>32</sup> Tony Hulman, the proud Hoosier, believed that Indiana needed its own "Kentucky Derby", an event that would bring prestige and tourism to Indiana.<sup>33</sup> When purchasing the track, Hulman did not wish to make a huge profit from it, he simply wanted to break

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<sup>31</sup> Dawn Mitchell, "Retro Indy: When Hulman Bought IMS, His Mom Told Him to 'Tear It down and Start All over'," *The Indianapolis Star* (IndyStar, November 14, 2019), <https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/motor/indy-500/2019/11/14/tony-hulman-buys-dilapidated-indianapolis-motor-speedway-retroindy/4189514002/>.

<sup>32</sup> "Indianapolis Auto Track Sold By Rickenbacker for \$750,000: Profit for Rickenbacker Predicts Successful Operation" (ProQuest Ebook Central . *The New York Times*, November 15, 1945), <https://ezproxy.butler.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/indianapolis-auto-track-sold-rickenbacker-750-000/docview/107351906/se-2>

<sup>33</sup> Donald Davidson, "Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945," *Indianapolis Motor Speedway*, 2020, [https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

even. Profit, in his view, could be used to make improvements on the track.<sup>34</sup> And indeed it was; repavement of the track, rebuilding of grandstands, other facility improvements and buildings. The Speedway was back in business and the Indianapolis 500 would once again commence in 1946. Tired from years of economic depression and war, Americans, now with money to spend, clamored to spend some money and go to the track.

Ralph Kramer describes in *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing*, that Hulman and Shaw needed to put money and energy into repairing the garages (which had been destroyed in a fire in 1941), Pagoda, and stands. There was a shortage of high-grade steel materials needed to build new stands, so Hulman decided to redesign the stands to use the steel materials that were available.<sup>35</sup> In order to make the repairs necessary to have the track ready for May, crews had to work in freezing winter temperatures and late into the night.<sup>36</sup> Even the most drastic measures would not lead the track to have everything done that it needed done. Hulman and Shaw were fully aware of this fact, but they remained determined to complete what they could get to.

After the 1945 purchase, it began to finally sink in for race fans that the Indianapolis 500 was coming back. Buzz and chatter passed around amongst media and fans alike. Prior to the 1946 race, *The Indianapolis Star* published an article preparing fans for the race, while also letting fans know about the updates to the track, “Perennial

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<sup>34</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945.”

<sup>35</sup> Ralph Kramer, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2011), 132.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Kramer, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing*, 133.

race-goers possibly will have difficulty in recognizing the track this year,” noted a *Star* reporter. “Paint, lumber, nails, and hammer are giving it a thorough face-lifting. Two new grandstands– the main pagoda and one in the south turn– plus about 12,000 parquet seats along the infield home stretch give the entire layout a “younger” look.”<sup>37</sup> The track is described as looking “younger”, and it gives a sort of excitement for fans to see what’s new.

Even though the 1946 Indianapolis 500 was able to occur, it was not met with complete and total success. There were still many issues that needed to be ironed out and solved to ensure that the 500 would run more smoothly in the future. Wilbur Shaw described in his autobiography, “As the result of our experience in the hectic six-and-a-half months leading up to the 1946 race, it was evident The Speedway management faced three major problems.”<sup>38</sup> Shaw goes on to describe those three problems as traffic jams, the stands’ quality, and the small amount of the prize money. This required three solutions in Shaw’s mind: a way to bring comfort to patrons and to alleviate traffic jams, more expensive improvements (mainly including the grandstands), and to offer more prize money to entice drivers to enter. All of that seemed simple enough, but would require much money.

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<sup>37</sup> Ralph G. Hesler, “Speedway Chatter,” Newspapers.com (*The Indianapolis Star*, April 27, 1946), <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/5823233/1946-indianapolis-500/>.

<sup>38</sup> Wilbur Shaw, *Gentlemen, Start Your Engines* (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, 1955), 288.

**The Hulman-Shaw Dream Team Relationship:**

The Hulman- Shaw business relationship worked well from the start. Tony Hulman was a quiet individual who did not like the spotlight, while Wilbur Shaw had charisma and energy that allowed him to successfully engage with others in social situations. Tony Hulman was content to be in the background, while Wilbur Shaw, with his three Indianapolis 500 wins, worked well with the public. Shaw needed Hulman to purchase the track and Hulman needed Shaw to be out front and to win the public over (Figure 2). Yet, Hulman recognized how integral Shaw was to the purchase of the Speedway, after all, it was Shaw who approached Hulman about purchasing the track. Hulman owned the track, yes, but it was Shaw who initially had the idea and the interest in bringing the track back to its former glory. It was Shaw who first visited the track and became determined that something had to be done. Shaw who had come to notoriety through winning an event held at this track. Donald Davidson described the relationship this way, “[Hulman] seemed perfectly happy to remain in the wings and have the internationally known and positively dynamic Shaw ‘front’ the management team and begin the seemingly impossible task of getting the track into shape for the reopening...”<sup>39</sup> Hulman had a self awareness that he was introverted and not extroverted, and therefore it would not serve him well to be the frontman and face of the track. Yet Hulman

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<sup>39</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945,” Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 2020, [https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event\\_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7](https://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/news-multimedia/all/2020/03/20/03-20-2020-hulman-shaw-teamed-up-to-rescue-ims-from-ruin-in-1945?event_class=%7Bc4d9ff0b-f711-48fd-a53b-bd75d277c0a4%7D&startrow=7).

recognized that Shaw did have these qualities and that the public admired and respected Shaw. The relationship was ideal, but short-lived, as Wilbur Shaw passed away on October 30, 1954, a day away from his fifty-second birthday.



Figure 2  
Tony Hulman (left) and Wilbur Shaw (right).  
Credit: Indianapolis Motor Speedway

Following the death of Wilbur Shaw in 1954, Tony Hulman took over as President of the Speedway. This may have been surprising to some, as Hulman was shy and already had another company to run. However, it can be inferred that Hulman likely felt comfortable in running the Speedway after having been involved with it for almost ten years. He knew how to run it at this point, and with his background in business, Hulman had ideas for the track that he wanted to implement directly. To continue, seeing that the track was performing so well, Hulman was boosted with a new sense of confidence and security that allowed him to see himself in a more public role regarding the Speedway.

T.E “Pop” Meyers had been a staple at the Speedway for years and it was no surprise that Hulman and Shaw wanted him on the team. He also had advised Tony Hulman that his purchase of the Speedway would be a sound investment, showing that Hulman trusted Meyers.<sup>40</sup> Yet he did not have the role at the track that some people assumed he would. “(Pop) Meyers was expected to be named president when Hulman bought the track in ‘45. Shaw got the job instead.”<sup>41</sup> Pop Meyers had years of experience working at the track at that point and knew its ends and outs, so many naturally assumed that he would get the President position. This did not happen, Shaw got the position (although Meyers was named General Manager). In many ways this demonstrates how tightly the business relationship of Tony Hulman and Wilbur Shaw ran. Tony Hulman bought the track, he owned it. He did not necessarily need to continue to work with Shaw.

POST- 1946 500:  
IT’S RENO TIME AGAIN

The 1946 running of the Indianapolis 500 had its highs and lows. Henry Ford II had driven the pace car and George Robinson, the British, yet naturalized American (who would later die that very year in a different race), had taken the checkered flag first. Fans were happy to finally have racing back again, however, not everything went smoothly.

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<sup>40</sup> Donald Davidson, “Saviors' Story: Hulman, Shaw Teamed Up to Rescue IMS from Ruin in 1945.”

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Kramer, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications , 2011), 146.

Notably, not all fans with tickets were able to attend the race.<sup>42</sup> Traffic was so bad that by the time some fans finally reached the track, the race was already completed. And not all the structural and cosmetic issues had been addressed because there had simply not been time to do so.

Grounds superintendent from the late 1940s to the 1970s, Clarence Cagle, describes how updates to the Speedway were not rare, but commonplace. “‘A lot of times,’ Clarence said ‘Mr. Hulman would just come by and ask what we thought about maybe building this or changing that. And we knew that was a signal to do it.’”<sup>43</sup> People who worked on the grounds knew that there were high expectations as to what level the track needed to be at, that Tony Hulman was constantly looking for updates to make the track better.

While the Hulman-Shaw team had worked hard to get the big issues in order, as previously stated, there was certainly not enough time for crews to get to everything before the May deadline. It was the 500’s first time back in four years and there were certainly bound to be issues that arose. Not only was the traffic outside a huge issue, but as was the traffic inside. “A plan to virtually double the number of traffic lanes through the tunnels was quickly drawn up, and Harry Tousley’s guys were called in again.”<sup>44</sup> Besides race cars, there are also the cars of owners, teams, drivers, employees, and

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<sup>42</sup> Lloyd H. Wilkins, “33 Drivers Poised for Starting Bomb; Throngs Jam City,” (ProQuest: Ebook Central, *The Indianapolis Star*, 30 May 1946), <https://www.proquest.com/hnpindianapolisstarshell/docview/1890766817/3D92348F35A04F13PQ/10>.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph Kramer, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2011), 138.

<sup>44</sup> Ralph Kramer, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing*, 139.

spectators that are parked and moving around inside of the track. Then there are also people walking in and out of the track as well as to different locations within the track. All of that leads to a lot of backup that makes it difficult to move within the track.

Beyond traffic and the flow of movement during race day, more additions to the make-up of the track was needed. Hospitality and press attention were two categories that needed more work. Author Ralph Kramer describes how “Over the next few years, a press box sprouted along the top of the paddock grandstand, the parquet seating area behind pit lane, Tower Terrace, was elevated and a row of rooms for accessory companies was constructed underneath.”<sup>45</sup> Speedway officials were looking forward to really showing off the track. They welcomed the press and wanted the press to write about the track and different events to advocate and advertise for the track. Seating was added and updated to make facilities look better and to be more comfortable for spectators as Hulman had promised when he purchased the track. They wanted to create a culture around the Indianapolis 500 and wanted companies to come and be a part of the tradition as well.

Safety was another big concern for Speedway officials, as was ease. “A new field hospital was built along with eighteen more garages and three sections of the big grandstand outside Turn One.”<sup>46</sup> Drivers can obviously be hurt during events, as vehicles are driven at high speeds with drivers racing side by side with each other. Mechanical malfunctions can also lead to crashes, injury, and even death. But not only drivers are

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 139.



under the threat of being injured or needing to be treated during events. Spectators are also at risk too. Events may sometimes take place on extremely hot days. Heat stroke, dehydration, and sun burns are big concerns for spectators, as well as drivers and employees. Facilities that were up-to-date and accessible were essential for large events.

As previously mentioned, traffic was a considerable problem during the first Indy 500 after the Second World War. This was somewhat ironed out by the 1956 Indianapolis 500, as traffic control steps that were planned by the police were published in a *The Indianapolis Star* article from May 27, 1956. A diagram of an Emergency Route is shown and three main routes are shown as routes that will be enforced. The planning and set up behind this traffic, shows the training, time, and specialization that had been placed in Speedway.<sup>47</sup> Following the traffic debacle at the 1946 race, this source shows that protocol had become more sophisticated, it also demonstrates the increasing importance of the automobile on people's daily lives.

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<sup>47</sup> "Police Prepare As If In Wartime For Speedway 'Invasion'," (ProQuest: Ebook Central, *The Indianapolis Star*, 27 May 1956), <https://www.proquest.com/hnpindianapolisstarshell/docview/1891234549/4805F6A4C0B84636PQ/13?accountid=9807>.

## CHAPTER 4:

### Impacts of the Track

The focus of this chapter is to take a look at how the 1945 purchase impacted racing culture in the community surrounding the Speedway. Also explored is the impact Indy had on racing worldwide. Indy was already respected highly in the racing world, but this purchase took it a notch further. Many traditions that fans know and love today were born during this era.

#### SPEEDWAY, INDIANA: A TOWN BUILT AROUND SPEED

The implications of the 1945 purchase of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway by Tony Hulman at the request of Wilbur Shaw reached far beyond the confines of auto racing. The town of Speedway, Indiana is a community located right outside of the track's gates. This community was built heavily around the track, and so when a change in the track began, so too did a change in the community occur. A community that was fairly small, but grew exponentially after the purchase.

The town of Speedway, Indiana was established in 1912 and incorporated in 1926. The town was created around the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.<sup>48</sup> To this day Speedway has remained separate from Indianapolis, even though it is within Indianapolis city limits. This is defined as an enclave. Speedway is located on the west side of

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<sup>48</sup> "Old Speedway," Historic Urban Neighborhoods of Indianapolis (HUNI), accessed February 3, 2023, <https://huniindy.org/index.php/old-speedway/>.

Indianapolis. In 2005, the Speedway Historic District was placed on the National Historic Registry, which helped with the redevelopment of Main Street in Speedway.<sup>49</sup>

While Speedway officially became a town in 1926, it was not until after World War II that the town truly began to grow. According to the Meeting Minutes of the Board of School Commissioners from June 1978, when the town of Speedway was incorporated in 1926, it had a population of 507 people. Then in 1970, that population number had grown to 15,056 after adding departments throughout the years.<sup>50</sup> It shows how much the town of Speedway had grown and the 1945 purchase and World War II were big contributing factors of this population growth.

Speedway furthermore became more populated following the Second World War. In 1969, Speedway became a part of the Metropolitan Police Department, the Speedway police department was previously run under a town marshal system until 1968.<sup>51</sup> This shows more of an officiality that was occurring in Speedway. A town marshal is more of a small town feature that shows a town has less people and crime to worry about, but when an area becomes a Metropolitan Police Department, it demonstrates that that area is populated and developed. The Speedway Public Library opened in 1968. This may be over twenty years after the 1945 purchase, but it shows that the town was gradually growing and got to the point where it was large enough to have a public library. A public

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<sup>49</sup> “Old Speedway,” Historic Urban Neighborhoods of Indianapolis (HUNI).

<sup>50</sup> “Meeting Minutes of the Board of School Commissioners, June 1978: 201801\_IPS0335214\_Page 5488,” (Indianapolis Public Library Digital Collections, June 1978), <https://www.digitalindy.org/digital/collection/ips/id/284491/rec/1>.

<sup>51</sup> “Study Neighborhoods: Speedway,” The Polis Center, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://polis.iupui.edu/about/community-culture/project-on-religion-culture/study-neighborhoods/speedway/>.

institution, such as a library, demonstrates a sense of community in a town or location. It is a place where locals can gather together and meet publicly. The schooling system began to grow following the purchase of the track. The high school moved locations in 1963 to accommodate a larger number of students.<sup>52</sup> “New elementary schools were built in the late 1950s and early 1960s, bringing the total number to four—each one named after a founder of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.”<sup>53</sup> The naming of these schools after the four founders of the Speedway marks the importance of the Speedway on the culture of the surrounding area. Schools are important parts of a community because they help raise the next generation of potential residents of a community. When schools grow because of an increase in population, that means there are more children that grow up and can potentially remain in the community, along with their parents.

The rebirth of the Indianapolis 500 gave the town of Speedway something to be proud of, something that would bring enormous amounts of people through Speedway. An article from *The Indianapolis Star* from May 30, 1946 discusses the anticipation felt for the Indianapolis 500 Mile Race. For this race, 175,000 people were expected to come to the race after a five year hiatus.<sup>54</sup> This would bring many people to the town of Speedway, as well as economic opportunities for stores and businesses there. The race

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<sup>52</sup> “Study Neighborhoods: Speedway,” The Polis Center.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Lloyd H. Wilkins, “33 Drivers Poised for Starting Bomb; Throngs Jam City,” (ProQuest: Ebook Central, *The Indianapolis Star*, 30 May 1946), <https://www.proquest.com/hnpindianapolisstarshell/docview/1890766817/3D92348F35A04F13PQ/10>.

would bring many people to the track to visit and spend their money, bringing traffic jams to the city. A clear sign of the growth of racing culture.

Of course not all of the growth seen in Speedway in the years following the purchase of the track were due to the track being purchased. James Allison, one of the founders of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway had his own engineering company that flourished after his death. During World War II, the Allison V-1710 Engine was in high demand.<sup>55</sup> So some people moved to Speedway for employment purposes. Furthermore, as mentioned above, there was a housing boom following the conclusion of the Second World War. New suburbs were bound to pop up in many different communities. Yet, because the track was purchased, people had hope in the area again and the improvements to the track made the area much more attractive for homebuyers and for homes to be built.<sup>56</sup>

## RACING BEYOND THE 500:

### OTHER LEAGUES

The re-rise of the Indianapolis 500 after World War II was not the only example of the rise of motorsports during the time period. Many different types of auto racing were formally introduced to the general public, with some of the most famous racing series in the world being established. A couple of years after the Indianapolis 500 saw its

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<sup>55</sup>Casey Pfeiffer, "Town of Speedway," (The Indiana History Blog, August 10, 2022), <https://blog.history.in.gov/tag/town-of-speedway/>.

<sup>56</sup>"Speedway," The Polis Center, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://polis.iupui.edu/about/community-culture/project-on-religion-culture/study-neighborhoods/speedway/>.

recommencement, both F1 and NASCAR were created as racing series, F1 in 1948 and NASCAR in 1950 respectively. The reopening of the Indianapolis 500 and the running of the Indianapolis 500 truly helped inspire and build the fire for the “resurrection” of motorsports, particularly of formalized series in motor racing.

To look at broader implications, Scott Beekman’s *NASCAR Nation: a History of Stock Car Racing in the United States*, mentions of NASCAR officials deciding to start the Daytona 500, “Along with the creation of a AAA circuit, the efforts to create a 500-mile race to rival open-wheel’s showcase event in Indianapolis marked 1950 as a pivotal year in the history of stock car racing.”<sup>57</sup> This demonstrates the interconnectedness of different racing leagues. It also shows a sort of competitiveness between different forms of racing, with each attempting to outdo each other in the size and “wow” departments. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway truly set the bar with the Indianapolis 500, it was an event that many other racetracks and racing series envied and saw as the event to beat. While NASCAR to this day has a larger following than the likes of IndyCar, NASCAR has yet to produce an event as internationally loved and steeped in tradition as Indianapolis.

The Indianapolis 500 counted as a F1 race when the series was first starting off. In *Formula One: the Pinnacle: The Pivotal Events That Made F1 the Greatest Motorsport Series*, Tony Dodgins explains that, “Indeed, in 1952 and 1953 the championship ran to

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<sup>57</sup> Scott Beekman, *NASCAR Nation: A History of Stock Car Racing in the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=801139>, 46.

Formula 2 regulations, because there wasn't enough competitive F1 machinery available, and the Indy 500 continued to be included on the schedule until 1960.”<sup>58</sup> The Indy 500 counted as a F1 race for ten years, as F1 was still trying to build up rules, regulations, and machinery. The Indy 500 then was integrated with a series outside of itself, a series that was still getting its footing and that used the Indy 500 as an event due to the 500's famous and popular stature. Many European drivers did not choose to participate in this race because it was so different from the other European races on the schedule. The Indy 500's influence is shown here because it was not chosen for the drivers' sakes or for the benefits of the track itself, but rather it was chosen to give notoriety to the new F1 racing series. The Indianapolis 500, while still considered as a for points race, did not provide most F1 drivers with anything, and yet it continued to stay on the schedule, demonstrating in a fashion that connections truly do matter when starting off in the racing world, whether it directly leads to success or not.

Motorsports showed resilience in that they did not disappear or diminish after their time of being shut down during World War II. The Second World War simply put a pause on the popularity of motorsports, it did not stop the charge of speed nor the thrill spectators got from watching it. This goes beyond the Indianapolis 500 and the United States, but reaches all types of motorsports all over the world. Formula 1 is the most popular and well-known racing series across the globe. Its races are not held only in one country or continent, but in many different areas of the world. Drivers that participate in

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<sup>58</sup> Tony Dodgins and Simon Arron, *Formula One: The Pinnacle: The Pivotal Events That Made F1 the Greatest Motorsport Series* (Brighton: Ivy Press, 2022), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/butler/detail.action?docID=6966404#> , 21.

the series are from different countries and make up a variety of cultures. Fans are not confined to one area, nor are broadcasts done in one language. It is a very universal series. One could argue that motorsports became even more popular following the conclusion of the Second World War, at least in terms of becoming more officialized and recognized worldwide.

### A HULMAN LEGACY

The Hulman legacy is particularly felt today. The Speedway remained under the ownership of the Hulman family and then later the Hulman-George family for nearly seventy-five years. The Hulmans have been staples of the track, especially Tony Hulman's daughter Mari Hulman-George, who was a beloved figure at the track until her death in 2018. The 1986 winner of the Indianapolis 500, Bobby Rahal, said that Mari Hulman George was "every driver's mother."<sup>59</sup> Under the family's leadership, the Indy Racing League, today known as INDYCAR, was founded in 1994 (to the annoyance of some CART fans, but that is a whole different rabbit hole to go down). INDYCAR is the sanctioning body of the IndyCar Series that competes in the Indy 500. IndyCar is its own racing series that competes on various race courses, typically in the United States. The Hulmans, or more specifically the Hulman-Georges, were able to expand the reach of their brand and there was a market for it. IndyCar is a growing series with three feeder

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<sup>59</sup> Dana Hunsinger Benbow, "Mari Hulman George, Matriarch of Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Dies at 83," *The Indianapolis Star* (IndyStar, November 3, 2018), <https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/motor/indy-500/2018/11/03/mari-hulman-george-longtime-head-indianapolis-motor-speedway-dies-83-indianapolis-500/1871900002/>.



series as well: USAF, Indy-Pro 200, and INDY NXT (formally Indy Lights). The descendants of Tony Hulman truly grew the reach of the Indianapolis 500 by expanding it to its own series. Many racing series cannot claim that they were formed because of the strong culture and support that stood around a single event. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway (Figure 3) is the World's largest sporting facility, and the Hulman-Georges helped the track fill in the shoes that the track had created.



Figure 3

Aerial view of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, circa 2000s.

Credit: <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1173031>

There are also many traditions that came from this family. Carb Day (or Carburetion Day to use its formal title) is a clear example of how the Hulmans were able to make the Month of May an event in and of itself. Practice and Qualifications have also been extended to truly make the Indy 500 a month long affair. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum, which houses the history of the track and the Indianapolis 500, was

the brainchild of none other than Tony Hulman. “An idea Tony Hulman had in 1946 to induct racing greats into an exclusive Hall of Fame is implemented without Speedway involvement in 1952. It operates independently until 1961, when it becomes property of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Foundation.”<sup>60</sup> Located within the track itself, the museum is open year-round to race fans to visit exhibits and see historic cars and artifacts up close and personally. This also allows people to visit the track outside of race seasons and events, keeping the passion for racing relevant year-round. The museum was initially located at the north end of the track and later moved to the south end, closer to the main entrance on West 16th Street. Tony Hulman’s idea also added another layer of prestige to the track, as it had a place to commemorate its history.

## CHAPTER 5:

### Conclusion and Discussion

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway has existed in some form for more than 110 years. It has seen changes in leadership and physical makeup, but millions continue to enter through its gates to watch races of many different types. NASCAR fans have been wowed by the Brickyard 400, F1 fans have witnessed legends make history, aviation fans

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<sup>60</sup> Ralph Kramer, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway: 100 Years of Racing* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications , 2011), 144.

have seen planes perform twists and loops. Above all else, the Indianapolis 500 has welcomed fans back time and time again across multiple generations. It is not at all rare to see multiple generations of race fans at the track together to watch a race.

It is especially important to study this important shift in the history of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway as the track is in the middle of another major shift. In early 2020, the Hulman-George family sold the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and IndyCar Racing Series to Roger Penske, who owns the Penske Corporation. Penske is an avid race fan, owning his own teams in IndyCar, NASCAR, IMSA, and other racing series. Penske's start to owning the famed track did not go well, as the COVID-19 Pandemic broke out heavily that year and the Indianapolis 500 was held in August (not in the typical May) with no fans in attendance. The year 2021 saw limited capacity and by 2022, it was back in full swing. Despite hardships, the track has been upheld and fans continue to come back.

The Indy 500 gave people a reason to celebrate and have fun again after years of economic depression and war; something that not only Hoosiers needed, but Americans as well (and even the world as a whole). The event may not be a special event and occurrence for every person, but using this track's legacy as a premier event as an example can certainly allow an exploration into the feelings of the American public (in general) during this time period. It created a boom and excitement, which gave many the hope for a more enjoyable future. It also shows how nostalgia was a key factor in the revitalization of the track. Life had been stricken with many hardships for quite some time and people wanted to celebrate something, to feel as though better and more joyful

times were ahead just around the corner; racing culture and enthusiasm had returned. All these factors created a prime launching pad for a revitalization in racing culture.

Through their belief about what was and their belief of what could be, Shaw and Hulman saw something that not all others could. While Rickenbacker had not given up on the track, he had certainly lost his zeal for it. Yet Shaw and Hulman knew what the track meant to the Indianapolis community and the tradition that the 500 had become. They saw something special and knew that people were hungry for it. By building up excitement and anticipation, Shaw and Hulman were able to get people to show up and buy into a new racing culture that continues to grow to this day.

This microhistory has not only been insightful to the history of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, but to the histories of American emotions following the Second World War and to the rise of motorsports following the Second World War through a creation of a new racing culture that would defy all expectations. Wilbur Shaw and Tony Hulman were far from perfect individuals, but they did do much for Indianapolis history and for motorsports. Studying their passion for reopening a race track gives us an insight into why people found motorsports important during that era. They allowed hundreds of thousands of fans to gather every year to celebrate and witness The Greatest Spectacle in Racing (Figure 4). The hope is that this work can be a stepping stone for historians of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to find interest and to continue to add and to further research.



Figure 4  
Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Indianapolis 500 Race Day (late 2010s)  
Credit: *INDYCAR*, Photo by Karl Zemlin

There is something special about the Indianapolis Motor Speedway that continually brings fans back time and time again. The touch of the Hulman-George family helped drivers, teams, and fans of a variety of different series feel welcome within the track's fences. Though the Hulman-George era of leadership has ended, its legacy lives on. Their reign helped revitalize the track and make it special, they also brought it into the twenty-first century. One hopes that the new era of Penske ownership will continue to build up the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and progress it to a bountiful future and a continuation in the passion for racing culture.

In the case of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, it was two men who had faith that a racetrack could continue a tradition and be loved by fans for years to come. Neither man had experience owning or running a sports facility before, but both had the confidence that they could save the track and preserve it for generations to come. There

was no proof that fans would come back or that people were still interested in the tradition of the Indy 500, but both Tony Hulman and Wilbur Shaw knew that the venue held something special within it, something that mattered and could not be forgotten. And millions of fans today, whether they know it or not, are grateful for the faith that two men held and the culture that they were able to build.

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