

# BOB COLLINS OF THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

ZAK KEEFER

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\rceil ven to the bitter end, while the curmudgeonly old columnist 

 ■ lay on his deathbed sipping beer topped with tomato juice

 ✓ (his way of masking the stench of alcohol), he was no good. at hiding that mammoth ego of his. "I was the best, wasn't I?" Bob Collins asked, over and over, seeking a reassurance he never needed. Friends would swing by the house for a drink and a memory, a good laugh, and a good-bye. They ended up staying for hours. Here was a man who had sat courtside for Bobby Plump's shot and Oscar Robertson's mastery; had scraped out secrets from racing royalty such as A. J. Foyt, Al and Bobby Unser, and Mario Andretti for decades in Gasoline Alley; and had chased deadlines from the greens of Augusta National to the Olympic torch in Rome to the tiniest high school basketball gym in the farthest corner of the Hoosier State. This man had stories.

Previous Page: Indianapolis sportswriter Bob Collins addresses the crowd after being named "Honorary Mayor of Milan" in 1954 for his coverage of Milan High School's unlikely state basketball championship. Above: Collins interviews Purdue University football coach Jack Mollenkopf.

How many sportswriters can say they expensed a bad night at the gambling tables in Las Vegas and got away with it? Dictated a column on the Indianapolis 500 after passing out drunk earlier in the day? Dictated another from a telephone booth in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention while policemen clubbed rioters in the head a few feet away and tear gas soaked the air?

How many zipped through the French countryside in a Fiat next to Bobby Unser? Toured the Vatican with Mario Andretti? Scooped Purdue University football coach Jack Mollenkopf on his own firing? Orchestrated a USA vs. USSR basketball game at Hinkle Fieldhouse? Took time off from work to run a mayoral campaign for his good friend, Bob Welch? Gave acclaimed author Dan Wakefield his first byline? Formed the city's professional basketball franchise? Had the audacity to publish Indiana University basketball coach Bob Knight's home phone number in the pages of the state's largest newspaper?

Only Robert Joseph Collins, the Cathedral High School graduate and Butler University student who showed up at the Indianapolis Star for a three-week internship in 1947 and stayed for forty-three years. He spent the final twenty-seven as sports editor, but never had much interest for the rudimentary tasks that came with the job—planning budgets, editing copy, or laying out the newspaper every night. He left that to his lieutenants. Collins's job was to write, and he did so better than anyone else at the paper. And he knew it. Over his four-decade jaunt at 307 North Pennsylvania Street, the Star's offices, he became a Hoosier institution, the writer Indianapolis woke up with each morning, and the literary conscious of a city and a state that worshiped its games, its teams, and its 500-mile race. "No one at the Star has ever had a bigger following, I can guarantee you that," said Plump, the kid from tiny Pierceville who hit the

most famous jump shot in the history of the state. Collins was there that night at Butler Fieldhouse, March 19, 1954, seated behind his trusty typewriter when Plump's shot lifted Milan past Muncie Central in the high school state title game before 15,000 fans. (The epic later inspired a movie called Hoosiers.) Collins was the only sportswriter in the state, Plump remembered, with the mettle to pick Milan to win it all before the tournament began. A day later, after riding with the team during its victory celebration, Collins was named the town's honorary mayor. Nothing for him was ever the same.

His lead in the *Star* the morning after The Shot: "Bobby Plump drove a jump shot home with three seconds remaining and—just like that—the Mighty Men of Milan became high school basketball champions of this state. Muncie Central was the vanquished. The score was 32–30. And the game—well, it was one of the greatest this state tournament has ever seen."

It was the upset that catapulted Collins's legendary career. After that his column inches grew, his readership

soared, and his popularity boomed. His short, snappy prose was sublime. He was fearless in his writing, comforting one minute, maddening the next. His words were met with laughs and tears, anger and astonishment. He became the authoritative voice of Hoosier Hysteria during its most gilded era and, later, did the same for the Indianapolis 500. No journalist's copy carried more weight. No insights were more respected. By the time of his death in 1995



A 1949 photo of reporters (clockwise from top left) Bob Williams, Jack Overmeyer, Corky Lamm, and Collins. Overmeyer, then editor of the Rochester (NY) Sentinel, had worked as a sportswriter at the Indianapolis Star until 1946.

he was an Indiana icon. "His official title at the *Star* is that of sports editor. That's like saying Ted Williams played baseball or Abraham Lincoln was in politics," gushed Knight, of all people, long after he and Collins had mended fences and become close friends.

Collins wrote well and lived hard. By the end he drank himself to death. Robin Miller began at the *Star* as an eighteenyear-old copy boy in the 1970s, tasked with cutting horse-racing wire copy in the newsroom every afternoon. One day royalty strolled through the door. It was legendary *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jim Murray, a longtime Collins friend, in for a visit. Miller grew giddy with excitement when Collins summoned him into his office. He was going to meet Murray, he thought. He was wrong. "Go across the street and get us some Scotch, kid," Collins barked.

It was a lens into Collins's greatest vice.



In the golden age of newspapers, drinking in the newsroom was as commonplace as a second edition. Deadlines were met each night, papers printed, and cocktails poured. Collins threw them back like a marathoner in the Sahara Desert. Lunchtimes sometimes stretched three hours; he stumbled back into the newsroom five Manhattans deep. And he would not be finished. "Six was his baseline," said Dale Ogden, a Collins friend. "Nine or ten weren't uncommon. I never saw him with an unopened bottle of Early Times."

An Irish Catholic to his core, Collins drank before deadline and after, in the

office and on press row, at home, and at the bar he owned, Buck Collins' Saloon. He would shovel down a few more Manhattans—the Collins special, comprised of a shot of Early Times whiskey and a dash of vermouth—after the games, rubbing shoulders with coaches and players, earning scoops that popped up in the paper the next morning. He would wake up and do it all over again, further solidifying himself as the state's best sportswriter while further burying himself in a habit he never recovered from. John Bansch, Collins's longtime deputy sports editor, once asked his boss how he stumbled upon so many scoops.



**Top:** Bill Summer, Indiana Amateur Athletic Union chairman, and Collins are dwarfed by Soviet Union basketball players Jaak Lipso (left) and Alexsandr Petrov. **Above:** (Left to right) Actor Earl Holliman, Collins, and Tom Binford enjoy the action at the Wilbur Shaw Soap Box Derby Hill in Indianapolis in 1963.

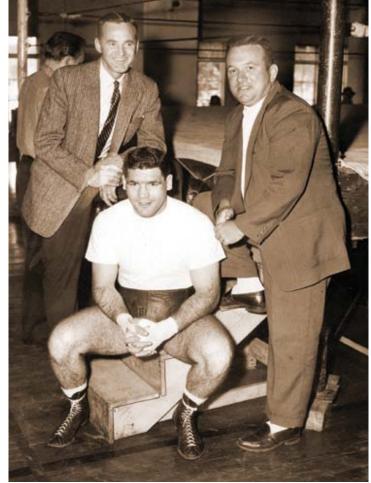
"Go hang out in the bars, talk to people, and in his grandather's trust your gut," Collins told him. His drink- honor—Buck ing spiraled out of control as the years wore on and his paycheck grew. In a 1995 article Collins penned for *Indianapolis Monthly* shortly before his death, he described his drives home after several cocktails as such: "I bounced off enough steel and concrete to build the Empire State Building."

Most friends, including Murray, Miller, and Ogden, admitted they were shocked Collins lived to see the 1990s. By then Collins knew his fate—a doctor had told him as far back as 1988 he would not see another year. He lasted seven, finally succumbing to cirrhosis of the liver in May 1995. "He should've donated that liver to the Museum of Science and Industry," Miller joked. But even in those final few months, fascinating, the playthe old raconteur could still tell a story. So friends would swing by his house, bringing beer to mix with tomato juice, and stir some life out of him. They roared in laughter, reliving Collins's epic tales until they stumbled ample theater to on the one topic that cooled his mood and froze the laughter. All of a sudden, Collins's words would slow and his voice would crack, the emotions too heavy for a man nearing his inevitable end.

He was an Indianapolis boy all his life, raised mostly by his grandmother in the Haughville neighborhood on the city's near west side after his mother was hit by a car and killed. Collins's parents divorced

Collins' Saloon. To cure his youthful rambunctiousness, Collins's teachers at Cathedral punished him by sending him to the library. It was there his love for literature blossomed. He was an ardent reader until the day he died, mainly of ancient history. He stumbled into sportswriting by accident, but found it ers and the coaches and the games and the spectacle of it all. It provided him share his dry wit and poignant prose.

Long after his own playing days had stopped, Collins told friends he was the best pound-for-pound halfback in Cathedral history. In reality he was a third-stringer. He arrived at Butler in the fall of 1944 figuring he might one day become a history teach-



Indianapolis Star assistant city editor Lawrence "Bo" Connor (standing, left) and Collins visit with heavyweight boxer Willie Besmanoff, May 23, 1960. During his career, Besmanoff fought such well-known boxers as Archie Moore, Sonny Liston, George Chuvalo, and Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali).

continue learning how to become what he was already being paid to do.

His job was to write about high school basketball in a state that cherished it like no other. Collins was the benefactor of fortuitous timing. Of the Star's five-man sports desk back then, a young Collins landed the role of lead writer on the high school hoops beat. With no professional teams in Indiana, and with the college programs taking a significant backseat in popularity, high school basketball reigned supreme. Every Friday night Collins darted to some corner of the state, chronicling it all in his beloved "Shootin' The Stars" column for the next day's paper. It became borderline gospel in the basketball-crazed heartland. Collins became a star. "If Bob Collins took time to write about you, you were a big deal," Miller remembered.

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when he was eighteen months old, but he remained close with his father and became a third-generation saloon keeper when he purchased a downtown bar and named it

er. But after he obtained a three-week internship the summer after his junior year at the Star, he never made it back, later admitting it would be foolish to



The tables are turned on Collins as he is interviewed at the Indianapolis 500 by Jim Gerard of Indianapolis television station WFBM. Gerard served as the host of his own talk show on WFBM and WTTV through 1987.

Collins raised eight children amid three marriages, turning down more prestigious jobs in bigger cities to keep Indianapolis home. Once pursued by the Chicago Tribune, Collins drove up for an interview, grew tired of the traffic, and turned around before ever making it to the newspaper's offices. He reluctantly became the Star's sports editor in 1964 only after the paper's editor-in-chief threatened to hire someone from outside the building. To his many readers' relief, Collins continued with his columns, sometimes as many a six days a week. Eventually they stretched beyond the cloistered walls of the sports world and centered on any topic that tickled his curiosity. "Linda Collins here," he began so many of those "Lighter Side" columns, writing from the perspective of his youngest daughter. They became so popular that Linda regularly received fan mail.

Collins traveled the globe, covering Super Bowls and heavyweight fights, golf tournaments and auto races, and the Olympics. He seldom chose to quote athletes or coaches in his stories, instead leaning on his detail-laced descriptions and punchy prose to capture the scene. "My philosophy on covering sports is simple," he once said. "If you can't observe enough while watching the game to write a decent story, you should switch to book reviews." He was more direct with his colleagues, telling Bansch, "People pay to read me, not read the same damn quotes every coach and every player say after every game." After his coverage of the Milan miracle, Collins became the Star's biggest star, so much so that the paper's top brass plucked Collins off the sports beat at times and tossed him into politics. It was managing

editor Bo Connor who told Collins to drive up to Chicago and cover the 1968 Democratic Convention. It was an event that promised to be divisive, perhaps polarizing; every reporter in the newsroom had ambitions of covering it. They could smell the potential Pulitzers. So when Connor tapped Collins, they were furious. Connor never budged. He wanted his best writer-Collins, who dictated this lead from a phone booth during the infamous Chicago police riot on August 28, 1968: "In a matter of seconds the bitter acrid smell of tear gas permeated the area, making vision impossible and breathing a labor. Some of the policemen were what you called compassionate: They swung for the arms, ribs and backsides. Others went for the homerun. They swung for the head. And there were a lot of broken heads. Michigan Avenue looked like Stalingrad."

Collins was charming and combative and charismatic—a quintessential newspaper columnist amidst a booming era

for the industry. He once burned through his travel money halfway through a trip to Los Angeles, where he was covering the Super Bowl. "Old money gone. Send new money," he wired Connor at the Star's offices. When he returned, Connor pressed him for an explanation. Collins came

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clean: He had had a rough night at the gambling tables on a one-night trip to Las Vegas. Astonishingly, Connor approved the expense. "Research for a future story," was how Collins clarified it.

In the hours after the rain-delayed 1975 Indianapolis 500, Collins was nowhere to be found. By 7:00 p.m., an hour before the paper's first deadline, editors sent a copyboy into his office. He opened the door and popped Collins on the head.



Above: A familiar sight—Collins enjoying a drink. Opposite: (Left to right) Lieutenant Governor Richard Ristine, Collins, and Governor Matthew Welsh share a plate of food during a Groundhog Day party at the Indianapolis Press Club, 1963.



He was passed out drunk, lying face-first on the floor. His coworkers woke him up, forced some coffee down his throat, and

ship as coach, the Star ran two front-page photographs of Knight grabbing one of his players by the jersey during a narrow vic-

He and Knight got off on the wrong foot, which is not all that surprising. The two were cut from the same stubborn cloth, and early on their egos collided like two skyscrapers crashing into one another.

marveled while Collins dictated a column out loud, his secretary pecking away on his typewriter. He made the deadline.

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to the public and chided The Star on his weekly television program," Collins wrote through a thick vein of sarcasm. "I think coach would appreciate how many Hoosiers are out there behind him. All it will take is a phone call. His office number is: 812-337-2238. His home: 812-336-0508." Knight grew incensed. "Went absolutely nuts," Miller recalled.

But Collins had stood his ground something Knight deeply valued. Knowing full well it would not be wise to make enemy of the state's most influential sportswriter, the two later became close confidants, so much so that it was Knight who penned the introduction of Collins' 1984 book, Thought You'd Never Ask, a collection of his





to right) Max Stultz, Collins, Jep Cadou Jr., and Bill Eggert; Collins with racecar driver and friend Mario Andretti in 1970; and Collins and three of his daughters attend practice for the 1959 Indiana-Kentucky All-Star game.

greatest columns. (Another Indiana icon Collins routinely sparred with was Foyt, the cocky Texan who dominated the Indy 500 in the 1960s.) Years later, as Collins neared the end of his life, Knight drove several hours, fighting through a nasty snowstorm, to attend a roast in Collins's honor. "He was the only human being in history that ever told Bob Knight and A. J. Foyt exactly what he thought of them to their face," Ogden said. "Collins told Knight he was a [expletive] asshole. He did the same thing to Foyt. These guys were at the height of their profession. He told A. J. that when he was the most famous racecar driver in the world. He told Knight that when he was the most famous basketball coach in the country. And wouldn't you know it? He became good friends with both."

Two decades after his death, Collins's fingerprints remain all over the Indianapolis sports scene. He helped found the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, promoted the Indianapolis 500 amid its ascension into a global event and, in 1967, gathered six investors together at a country club in Lafayette and convinced them to pony up \$9,000 each. "He came back in the office that night and said, 'It's done. We're going to have a pro ball team here," remembered Bansch, shaking his head in astonishment. That team? You know them as the Indiana Pacers.

He saw it all, wrote it all, and drank it all. Friends asked, over and over in those last few years, what he cherished most. What was the greatest highlight in a career littered with them? Collins answered the same way every time. He covered Super Bowls and prizefights, Masters tournaments and Indianapolis 500s and the Olympic games. But no. None of that. It was something else. "The day he died, there was nothing he was more proud of than what he wrote about Attucks," said Ogden. "It made him feel like he did at least one thing right. In his eyes, Attucks made his life important."

The idea behind the formation of Cris-



Three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Johnny Rutherford (left) and Collins prepare for a celebrity bike race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on May 12, 1974. Rutherford's wife, Betty (center), served as crew chief for the race.

pus Attucks High School in Indianapolis in 1927 was simple: Rid the city's public schools of black students. "We'll build you a good high school, you go there, we'll go here. You don't bother us and we won't bother you," is how Ogden, a curator of history at the Indiana State Museum, put it. How bad was it? The day Attucks

opened its doors, the Ku Klux Klan held a rally that marched past the school. The procession lasted an hour.

The Indiana High School Athletic Association refused Attucks entrance into the state basketball tournament for the first two decades of the school's existence. By the time the Tigers were allowed in, in







Left to Right: Collins enjoys practice at the Indianapolis 500 in 1972 with three of his grandchildren; eight-year-old Bill Gearlds inspects Santa Claus's beard (Collins under the whiskers) in 1961; and Collins throws the ceremonial first pitch at an Indianapolis Indians game at Bush Stadium in 1989.

1947, the Attucks players faced a staggering torrent of racism. The Tigers packed box dinners for road trips, knowing full well restaurants would refuse them service. They found black cats hanging in their lockers. In huddles before tipoff the players would hold hands and shout, "The first 10 points for the refs, the rest for us!" They knew a harsh reality—the only way to assure a victory was to make sure the game was not close at the end.

Attucks players were routinely victims of death threats. Hallie Bryant, the state's 1953 Mr. Basketball, received one before that year's Indiana-Kentucky All-Star game. He played, and dominated Kentucky, but only after entering Butler Fieldhouse that night with a police escort. The Attucks coaches once received an anonymous letter about two of their players. "Do not play Winfred O'Neal and William Mason if you value their lives," it read. That threat spurred an inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. On another occasion, Attucks's best player, a savvy young guard named Oscar Robertson,

received a call before a much-anticipated showdown with Indianapolis Tech. "If you play," Robertson was told, "you'll get shot."

This was Indianapolis, and these were the 1950s. The city's deeply conservative population was not ready for an all-black team to reign over its pastime. In Attucks they saw a threat to tradition, to basketball purity. They saw their horizontal game, the one perfected by Plump's Milan team and

with its state title in 1954—that teams built on a foundation of fundamentals and a patient, deliberate offense ultimately triumphed. Milan was the blueprint. Attucks said forget the blueprint. Attucks ran the floor. Its players dunked. They scored in the triple digits. They shattered previous perceptions. So the frictions played out in high school gymnasiums on Friday evenings across the state.

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so many others before them, shifting vertical—a group of bigger, faster, and stronger athletes uprooting convention and burying so many of their white teams along the way. With each win Ray Crowe's team debunked the myth that Milan had furthered

Collins found himself central to the conflict. He was a white reporter defending a black team in a city barely a generation removed from the height of the KKK. He wrote what he saw, critics be damned. It was not always easy. In the 1953 semistate



Clockwise from Top, Left: Indianapolis Colts owner Bob Irsay watches as Collins pulls out the first number for Colts season tickets from an air lottery machine in 1984; Walter Krick (left), president of the Milan Town Board, presents Collins with a certificate proclaiming him Honorary Mayor of Milan following his series of articles on both the basketball team and the town in 1954; Collins autographs a copy of the book he wrote with Andretti, What's It Like Out There?, for Andretti; and Collins launches a shot at halftime during an Indiana Pacers game at Market Square Arena in 1977.







final, Bryant drove the lane and lofted a shot before being knocked to the floor by two Shelbyville players. The whistle blew. Bryant was called for charging. The basket was wiped out, Shelbyville was awarded free throws, and soon enough Attucks's season was over. "The worst call I've seen in a lifetime of watching sports," Crowe later said.

After Bryant was called for charging and Attucks lost to Shelbyville in that 1953 semistate game, Collins, courtside as always with his trusty typewriter, took to the pages of the *Star* to defend the all-black team. He chastised the biased officiating, the racial taunts from fans, and dispelled the commonly held perception that the Attucks players won by simple virtue of their athleticism. No, Collins would not back down. No, Collins would not turn a blind

eye. No, Collins would not write what the white readers of Indianapolis wanted him to write.

There were plenty of subscribers to the Star that loathed him for it. "A communist," some called him in letters to the editor. Another wrote: "The only thing you ever see or read about in The Star is some outstanding Crispus Attucks player or something about their coach or what a tremendous crowd was at the game." Others shouted "N----- lover!" while they drove past Collins's home late at night, honking their horns. Some called his house and told him over the phone exactly what they hoped one of those black basketball players would do to his young daughters. Even Collins's boss at the time, Star sports editor Jep Cadou Jr., took issue with the Attucks phenomenon early on,

once citing the sport's inventor, James Naismith Jr., in a column. "Naismith never intended players with 'jumping jack legs' would be able to rewrite basketball's traditional patterns," Cadou wrote. He later chastised Attucks for having six players who could dunk the ball.

Collins, steeled by that Irish audacity of his, kept writing what he saw, and by 1955 that was a team without peer, one led by the best coach in the state and the best basketball player his eyes had ever seen. "He beats you to death with a pillow," Collins wrote about a young Robertson. "He finesses you off the floor." No shady officiating would keep the Tigers from a state championship. Slowly, their players grew to trust Collins. Eventually, to love him. Both Robertson and Bryant stayed close with him until his death, forty years



after Attucks' historic first state title. "People really resented him for writing about us," Robertson, a Basketball Hall of Famer, said. "A lot of white sportswriters wouldn't do it. But Bob Collins did. I can't even tell vou in a few words how much he meant to our team at that time." Bryant added: "He called it like he saw it. He was a man who was simply doing the right thing at a time when it wasn't easy to do the right thing. He was fair and he was courageous."

The letters continued to pour in, the phones at the Star newsroom kept ringing, and Collins never blinked. "You know right where to find me," he barked at them, Ogden recalled. Collins was not the only area journalist to champion Attucks (Jimmy Angelopoulos of the Indianapolis Times did so, as did the city's black publication, the *Indianapolis Recorder*), but he was certainly the loudest. He was the authority on high school hoops and the voice of the state's largest publication.

changed how black athletes were viewed in the city and the state.

A new age of racial integration was dawning in Indianapolis. Thanks to Collins, the Attucks team became the city's most popular symbol of black culture. "Pull out your adjectives, garble the syntax,

What he wrote mattered. What he wrote

his good friend, who would type away, chronicling a dying man's memories, from Augusta National to the Olympic torch in Rome to, yes, Crispus Attucks. "I don't fear death, I'm just not in any hurry," Collins said. "But I have reached the point Sinatra calls the final curtain, and I want to leave them laughing."

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throw it in one big stream and you'll have a word defining the show Attucks gave 15,000 high school addicts last night," he wrote in the March 21, 1955, Star the morning after the Tigers became the first all-black high school team in America to win a state championship. He was chron-

> icling a polarizing chapter of sports history, and he had the foresight to tell readers precisely that. What Collins wrote next was as true then as it is today, no matter if the Star's readers were ready for it not: "Their names will be remembered as long as there is high school basketball played in Indiana."

After he retired from the Star in 1990, Collins wrote once a week for the Indianapolis Business Journal. By 1995, when the *Indianapolis Monthly* called and asked him to share his story, Collins was too sick to type. He would lie in the bed and mumble to Ogden,

Miller was another friend who would stop by to visit. One afternoon, in May 1995, one of Collins's daughters called and told him they were about to give her father his last rites. Miller, by then a Star sports columnist, brought with him a milk shake from Steak and Shake and a rough draft of Collins's obituary, both at Collins's request. The old sportswriter read over the obit, sipping his milk shake, and quickly grew incensed. An editor at the Star whom Collins was never fond of had cut it from forty inches to twenty-four inches. "Put this sentence back in!" Collins barked at Miller. "And this one!" Miller was impressed. "That was just a classic," he recalled. "How many guys can say they've edited their own obit?"

A native Hoosier, Zak Keefer has written for the Indianapolis Star since 2011. He currently covers the Indianapolis Colts. His work has been honored by The Best American Sports Writing, Associated Press Sports Editors, and the U.S. Basketball Writers Association. This is his first article for Traces. Readers can get in touch with Keefer at zak.keefer@indystar.com •

### COURTESY COLLINS FAMILY



**Opposite:** Rutherford receives a congratulatory hug from Collins after winning the 1974 Indianapolis 500. Above: Collins's book with Andretti focused on the racecar driver's only win at the Indianapolis 500, in 1969. Andretti is one of only two drivers (Dan Gurney is the other) to win races in Formula One, IndyCar, World Sportscar Championship, and the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing.

### FOR FURTHER READING

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