



Champions of a cause

Story and photos by Larry Edsall

In 1996, Arie Luyendyk set speed records at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway that have yet to—and may never—be broken. After turning a lap in practice at more than 239 miles per hour, Luyendyk produced a four-lap qualifying average of 236.986 with a fastest lap at an average of 237.498.

When asked to recall how fast those fastest laps felt, Luyendyk noted that on his qualifying run, his car didn't slow below 235, even in the turns, and hit a top speed of 242 on the straightaways. He then answered the question at hand, and his answer was astounding: "Every time I came out of Turn Four, my ears would pop, and they didn't do that at slower speeds."

Now retired from racing and living in the Phoenix area, Luyendyk was part of a panel of racers talking about their careers and their sport during the third annual Wheels of Wellness classic racecar show. Held each January on the grounds of

the historic downtown Phoenix home that serves as the headquarters for the local branch of The Wellness Community, the Wheels of Wellness show annually raises around \$50,000 for The Wellness Community Arizona's free support and educa-

tional services for those diagnosed with cancer and for their caregivers.

This year, the display included 30 historic racecars—from a 1933 Maserati Grand Prix racer to the 2009 Dallara-Honda that Dario Franchitti drove to the



Historic racing cars are parked on the lawn and driveways around the home of The Wellness Community in downtown Phoenix. They include (above from the top), the Blakely Oil Special, originally owned by Phoenix farmer John McDaniel and raced at Indianapolis by the likes of Arizonans Bobby Ball and Jimmy Bryan; the 2009 Dallara-Honda that Dario Franchitti drove to the Indy Racing League championship (that's Franchitti checking out the cockpit); a 1970 Plymouth Barracuda that was raced in the Trans-Am series by Dan Gurney's All American Racers team.

2009 Indy Racing League championship. Franchitti was on hand as the grand marshal for the day-long Wheels of Wellness show.

Midway through the day, the racers gathered on the front porch. In addition to Luyendyk and Franchitti, the panel included Bob Bondurant, Didier Theys and Darren Law, with yet another racer, Lyn St. James, serving as moderator. Among them, Luyendyk, Franchitti, Bondurant, Theys, Law and St. James had achieved a world sports car championship, four Indy 500 victories, four overall victories in the 24 Hours of Daytona and many other national and series championships.

Except for Franchitti, all reside at least part of the year in the Valley

PERSONALITIES

I knew Dario Franchitti was skilled at driving and dating, but I had no idea he had such a delightfully devilish sense of humor.

Franchitti is the 2007 Indianapolis 500 winner and two-time Indy car racing champion. He came to Phoenix to be the grand marshal for the third annual Wheels of Wellness classic race car show.

Unfortunately, his wife wasn't with him. She'd spent the previous day watching a University of Kentucky basketball game while Dario was in Indianapolis on business. After the game, she flew northeast to New York City while Dario was heading southwest across the country.

By the way, she, Mrs. Franchitti, is Ashley Judd, the actress.

The Wheels of Wellness kicks off Arizona's classic car auction week with a gathering of 30 or so historic racing cars. In addition to racing cars, Wheels of Wellness organizers assemble a group of racing drivers for a panel discussion. This year, the table included Franchitti, Bob Bondurant, Arie Luyendyk, Didier Theys and Darren Law, with another racer, Lyn St. James, serving as moderator.

Almost immediately, Franchitti teased Luyendyk about his hair, which is now nicely cropped but which used to be, well, as Franchitti put it, used to be a mullet.

As Indy 500 winners, Franchitti and Luyendyk both have their images engraved on the Borg Warner trophy. Franchitti chided Luyendyk that on the trophy, Luyendyk's hair is so long that it "looks like a mud flap."

St. James joined in, noting that when they both were racing at Indy, Luyendyk's hair always was longer than hers.

To be fair, Franchitti made himself the target of his own remarks. He said he'd spent Saturday visiting John Force's drag racing shop in Indianapolis, checking out Force's 300-mile-per-hour Funny Cars.

"I'd love to drive one," Franchitti said, but, he admitted, "I don't think I have the beans to pull the trigger."

Franchitti left Indy cars for a while to try stock car racing. Asked what the biggest difference was between the two disciplines, he said it had nothing to do with the racing, but hinted that the dimensions of the cars may have an impact on the drivers. For example, before moving into stock cars, Juan Pablo Montoya also raced Indy cars, which have very snug cockpits. Franchitti indicated that since making the switch, Montoya had put on some weight. In fact, he added, the biggest challenge for the team for which Franchitti and Montoya would be teammates in the upcoming 24 Hours of Daytona sports car race would be wedging Montoya into the driver's seat.

Asked about the differences he's experienced racing for the Andretti-Green and Target Ganassi Indy car teams, Franchitti responded: "I thought Michael [Andretti] likes to win, but Chip [Ganassi] takes it to another level."

As evidence, he said, after winning the Indy car championship this past season, Ganassi didn't have a team celebration but a two-day debriefing during which the team went back through the entire season to analyze a pit stop here or a corner there where it might have cut a fraction of a second off a lap time.

The drivers on the Wheels of Wellness each talked about how they got started in racing and how the sport had changed over the years.

Bondurant noted that his first race car, a British Morgan, had a chassis made in part from wood.

When it came Law's turn, he noted that he might have an advantage since "I didn't have a wooden car." — Larry Edsall

KEEP RIGHT >>



Race cars and racers (clockwise from the top) include a bright red 1957 Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa; one of the fabled Indy roadsters built by A.J. Watson (this one took the pole position for the 500 in 1958 with Dick Rathmann averaging 145.974 mph); a 1970 Ferrari 512M that raced in the 24 Hours of Le Mans; the driver's helmet, goggles and mascot displayed with a 1948 MG TC; part of the audience and the full racing drivers' panel (from left): Lyn St. James, Dario Franchitti, Bob Bondurant, Arie Luyendyk, Didier Theys and Darren Law.

of the Sun.

Whether they were driving a Maserati in 1933 or a Dallara in 2009, the drivers all have had to deal with challenges that were of the ear-popping—if not bone-breaking—variety.

The technological advances in race car development were evident to those walking around the Wellness headquarters' grounds. A couple of those technological advances became clear during the panel discussion when Law, the 2009 24 Hours of Daytona winner, and Bob Bondurant, who raced in the 1950s and '60s and drove the Ford Shelby Daytona Coupe to a world sports car championship, were asked about their pre-race preparations.

Bondurant talked about how team owner Carroll Shelby didn't want to take the then-young Bondurant to Italy to race in the Targa Florio event because Bondurant was so inexperienced he couldn't possibly know his way around a racing circuit that encompassed more than 40 miles of twists and turns on public roads through the Sicilian mountains.

But Bondurant went to Sicily early, at his own expense, and spent two weeks driving the course day after day to learn his way around.

In contrast, Law noted that to prepare for his first entry last year into the 24 Hours of Le Mans, his education started three months before the race but involved no travel. Instead, he said, he learned his way around the circuit by staying home and playing an Xbox video racing game that offered amazingly realistic detail of the race course. ■

After working as a sports editor for daily newspapers in Michigan, **LARRY EDSALL** was on staff for 12 years at *AutoWeek*, most of it as managing editor. He has driven more than half a million miles testing cars on four continents. He helped launch www.izoom.com and also helped found PAPA, the Phoenix Automotive Press Association. His books include *Masters of Car Design (Genius)*, *Miata 20 Years* and his eleventh, *Camaro: A Legend Reborn*, all available at amazon.com.

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