

Gordon Johncock:

25th anniversary of Indy 500 win

Rick off the Record

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It was 1982; twenty-five years ago that Gordon Johncock won the Indianapolis 500 auto race over Rick Mears by just a blink of an eye – sixteen/thousandths of a second or about a car length at over 200 mph.

That was Johncock's second win at "the greatest spectacle in racing." His other victory at Indy came in 1973, while driving for the same STP sponsored Patrick Racing Team.

Born and raised in the farming community of Hastings, Michigan, Johncock began racing as a teenager at some of the local tracks. He quit school after the 9th grade, which he now admits was "one of the biggest mistakes I ever made."

In addition to farming, Johncock soon found himself touring the Midwest and Canada racing seven nights a week mostly in the super-modified class on paved tracks. While teamed with his chief mechanic Duane Glasgow, "Gordy" won nearly 150 features. He set a world speed record racing a USAC sprint car, drove for Hall of Famer Junior Johnson in the NASCAR Winston Cup and went on to rank 3rd all-time in laps completed at the famed Indianapolis Speedway.

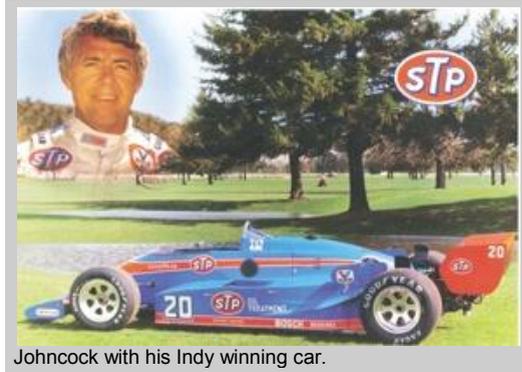
Johncock now lives about as far from the limelight as one can get. After "officially" retiring in 1992, Gordon and his wife Sue eventually moved to West Branch where he decided to get back into the timber business.

In 2003, he spotted a FOR SALE sign on a piece of property he'd wanted for years. By week's end it was his and a few years later Johncock had built a beautiful year-round home beside his half-owned 60-acre lake.

The location shall remain a secret but he's not THAT hard to track down. If you're looking on a map – go way north of North Branch, quite a bit east of West Branch and a little south of South Branch and you're there; basically the middle of nowhere.

Having sold his timber business two years ago, Johncock is spending time landscaping his property, feeding the birds and squirrels and playing with his dog (a schnauzer named – not hard to believe – Indy). He's 'relaxing' for the first time in his life.

For a hard-working man who's made a living owning labor-intensive businesses and driving race



Johncock with his Indy winning car.



Johncock at his home today.

cars, sitting idle makes him a bit edgy. When I called and asked what he was doing these days, he growled "not a damn thing!"

But he did invite me for a visit. After a lengthy explanation on how to get to 'nowhere' I found myself chatting with the still distinguished looking and courteous legendary two-time winner of the Indy 500.

No longer personally involved in racing, Johncock is somewhat at peace with his surroundings. I found him to be humble about his own accomplishments but very opinionated on racing in general. His wife thinks he still drives like he's in a race car (but very safely) and I got the impression he still thinks he can beat most of the guys out there racing today.

And why shouldn't he think that? After all Gordon Johncock is in the Michigan Motorsports Hall of Fame, the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America and the International Motorsports Hall of Fame. Mr. Johncock, start your engine...

ROR: You mentioned quitting school; at some point you must have thought, "I can make a living driving cars." When did that happen?

Gordy: Honestly, I never thought that. I've always worked or had another business while racing cars – farming, construction, the timber business. A driver couldn't do that today.

ROR: Why do you say that?

Gordy: First, a driver today shouldn't have outside distractions. Second, there just isn't enough time. A driver's week is totally taken up with making appearances, talking to corporate sponsors, recruiting and meeting new sponsors, testing equipment, qualifying and then maybe actually racing a few times. That's one of the major problems with racing today – not enough experience for drivers. They might have six or seven opportunities to race in a month. That was a good week for me.

ROR: Where did you race in those early years of super modifieds?

Gordy: Duane Glasgow and I would go seven days a week in the summertime. We'd start in Flat Rock on Monday; Tuesday in Fort Wayne, Indiana; Wednesday and Thursday we'd run somewhere in Canada; Friday was Rochester, New York; Saturday was Oswego, New York; and sometimes we'd run in Sandusky, Ohio on Sunday afternoon, then Toledo on Sunday night. I give a lot of credit for me winning so much to that great experience. I've raced more in one year than some of these drivers today have run in a career.

ROR: How did you move up to USAC (United States Auto Club) racing?

Gordy: Racing cars are a lot like other sports. You start in high school and if you're good, a college recruiter spots you and you get a scholarship to college. In college, if you do good maybe a pro scout makes you an offer. I ran super modifieds for about 10 years. I probably should have tried to move up sooner but I was doing well and was busy. We moved up to USAC sprint cars in 1963-64 then went to Indy in 1965.

ROR: Tell me about your first trip to Indy.

Gordy: It's funny to think back now especially when you see those big semi-trucks pulling into the tracks today. We loaded up our roadster on a two-wheel trailer in Hastings and pulled it with a Ford station wagon down to Indianapolis. That was a transition year to rear engine cars. I was

one of only two front engine cars to qualify for the race (14th) and finished in fifth place.

ROR: It must have been quite a thrill. That was really the top of the racing world.

Gordy: That was the highest you could go. I had never gone that fast before. We blew an engine and I drove the station wagon back to Hastings to get another one. I remember going down the road that night thinking, "This'll take me forever, I'm going so slow."

ROR: What separated you from the rest? Are great drivers born or made?

Gordy: First, I'd say the experience was a big factor, but you also have to have some natural ability. Really though, talent and experience can only take you so far. If you have to stop and think about what to do in a situation, you'd already be headed for the wall. Maybe you've heard the phrase 'driving with the seat of your pants', well, it's true. I remember Mario Andretti telling me once, "If you let your head override your ass, you'll be in the wall."

ROR: You've had great success at Indy, winning two times, 24 starts in a 28-year span from 1965 to 1992. It takes more than just having a fast car. What do you attribute that to?

Gordy: You have to be all together as a team. Some drivers will carry a car further than others but you need a car that can win. There are drivers that are great finishers and other drivers who are willing to 'hang it out there to win.' Mark Martin is a great finisher. Dale Earnhardt took chances to win.

ROR: So where did Gordon Johncock fit?

Gordy: I guess I hung it out there quite a few times. Look at how many times I wrecked (laughing). But my car owner felt that way too. Like me, he never wanted to finish second. If you were doing your job, trying to win and wrecked, it was all right with him.

ROR: Tell us about those last few laps in 1982 holding off Rick Mears. I read somewhere that he said if the race went 201 laps he'd have won. True?

Gordy: Rick Mears knows the Indy 500 is only 200 laps and I'm not so sure he'd have gotten by me on lap 201. Those last few laps my car was pushing so bad (wanting to climb the track) I was driving down next to the grass to keep it off the wall. We've talked about it, and if he had the experience in '82 that he had a few years later, he would have beaten me. Rick Mears became the master at Indy but in 1982 I was the master.

ROR: You've actually retired several times. Why, and what finally made it stick?

Gordy: I wasn't liking the way the team was headed, so I just up and retired in 1985. But I wasn't ready. I should have just quit and waited for the phone to ring from another good team. When I came back, the good teams already had drivers in place so I ended up driving in cars that weren't very competitive. By 1992, I was 57 years old and ready to retire.

ROR: You've only had one serious accident, but quite a few teammates and fellow drivers have been killed in racing. How did you handle that aspect of racing?

Gordy: I guess I never really got too close to the guys. I wasn't one to go hang out with the other racers. In the back of my mind, I'd say that probably was a big factor. Maybe if I had been close with some of those guys it would have affected my racing. I don't know.

ROR: You retired, went back to farming in Hastings and then got back into the timber business. Do you miss racing?

Gordy: Oh, every once in a while I'll be watching a race on TV and get an itch and think maybe... I'll tell you one job I'd never do in racing and that'd be one of those spotters for the driver. I'd be yelling and telling him how to drive all the time. They'd fire me before the race was half over (laughing).

ROR: Have you ever gotten a ticket driving the roads?

Gordy: I've got a few and gotten out of a few, too. One of the biggest mistakes I see out on the road is people using poor judgment. They don't judge distance very well. Why do people need a quarter mile space to make a left hand turn? I don't have much patience, and the police keep telling me I can't pass on the right-hand shoulder of the road. Twice they've told me that with a ticket. The last time was right there on M-61 in front of the golf course in Gladwin.

ROR: I'll talk to the owners about putting in a passing lane for you. Thanks, Gordy.