

TODAY, HE'S GONNA DRIVE LIKE IT'S 1972

In 2005, Ron Martin's wife bought him A.J. Foyt's Indy 500 ride. Fully restored, the car returns to Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

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Ron Martin eased the bright yellow race car from the garage of his house a few weeks ago, mindful of every tug, every fingerprint, the 12 hours spent buffing the magnesium wheels to mirror magnificence.

Once raced in the Indy 500 by A.J. Foyt, this 36-year-old compilation of aluminum, rubber and leather is the fulfillment of a dream begun as a kid in Indiana, listening to his grandfather spin stories of building cars for the 500 in the 1930s.

Today, memories of those stories undoubtedly filling his head like the sound of the 40 or so other vintage race cars around him, Martin, 61, will drive that car through the canyon of grandstands and over the yard of bricks at 160 mph. He'll feel his gut tighten when his mind tells him just how flat and sharp Turn 1 really is.

The annual procession of retired speedsters is a staple of the Indy 500 prerace ceremonies. Each car is verified and invited by Speedway museum officials. Martin wonders if he'll be able to keep it from becoming a race.

"That's going to be tempting," said the retired electrical contractor and Florida resident of almost a half-century. "This is getting pretty exciting."

The T.T. Thompson Special, was built by A.J. Foyt Enterprises for the 1972 Indy car season. "Coyote" red, according to its U.S. Auto Club technical committee data sheet, the turbocharged, rear-engine eight-cylinder qualified 17th for the Indianapolis 500 with Foyt, one of the greatest racers ever, at the wheel.

That was about its apex.

It finished 25th on race day when the turbo failed and broke down the next four times Foyt used it before selling it off.

Lee Brayton (father of late driver Scott) brought it home 10th in a 1973 race (its career best) but failed to qualify for the 1973 Indy 500. Dick Simon ran it once in late 1973, and Rick Muther's 1974 Indy 500 ended on Lap 11 with a 27th-place finish because of a burned piston.

Reminiscent of a soap box derby car compared with its descendants, it was in disrepair three years ago when Vonnie Sue Martin noticed it in collector Tom Acker's Largo shop.

Vonnie Sue, a retired victims advocate and automated records specialist with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, had been a bit of a speed demon back in Indiana herself, arguably more so than her husband.

While his racing experience comprises some sessions in the Richard Petty Driving Experience and its sprint car equivalents, she had done some "powder puff" drag racing at what was once known as Indianapolis Raceway Park. So she saw the ne'er-do-well Thompson Special, which became the best wedding anniversary present ever.

Acker had found the car, then blue and white, sitting in a Chevrolet dealership in Carmel, a northern Indianapolis suburb, in 1984.

"Wife of the year, right there," said Acker, nodding toward Vonnie Sue as they helped ease the car into the morning sun of the Martin driveway, where its mustardy sheen became blinding.

While Acker wouldn't say how much the Martins paid for the car, he said the sale is helping him "eat really good right now." Martin estimates the car's value at \$200,000 after a complete renovation at a shop near Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

"We've got every decal on it that ran in '74, every stripe, even the writing," Martin said, "exactly as closely as we could get it to how it ran in 1974. It takes time and effort to even locate that stuff."

Martin said the car was restored to the motif used by the decidedly less-famous Muther because Foyt had little success in it. Besides, he said, it looked better in yellow.

Martin hoped to show the car to Foyt on Thursday at the tents near Indianapolis Motor Speedway, where the vintage machines were being displayed. Perhaps the four-time Indy 500-winner would pose for a photo.

But what was Martin mostly thinking about Thursday afternoon?

"We drove around the shop a little bit just to see how the clutch was working and all," he said.

"I'm really looking forward to this."

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