

FLASHBACK



ABOVE & RIGHT: Two months later, Bentley was back at Indy, tender hands and all. (Young Bentley by Dick Berggren, Racing Photo by John J. Dowd Jr.)

BENTLEY DOES THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

By **Lew Boyd**

Who would have known that USAC opened its 1971 Champ Car season on February 28 with a 300-miler down in the southern reaches of Argentina? But ask any friends of Bentley Warren whether he ran it, and they'd say, "Probably!"

A spur-of-the-moment decision by USAC, the race consisted of two 150-milers on an oval called Autodromo Ciudad de Rafaela in the land of Fangio. And when 27 Indy cars were unloaded from their planes, everyone was taken aback. There were machine-gun-toting guards everywhere, wildly enthusiastic fans, and a track that was beyond enormous. It had been presented as a replica of Indy. In actuality, it was 2.9 miles—quite likely the longest oval ever raced upon. Not surprisingly, Lloyd Ruby sat on the pole with a blistering 178.184,

three mph faster than the '70 pole at Indy.

The previous year, shipping magnate and Champ Car team owner Tassi Vatis had taken a chance with a young strap of rawhide as his driver, the uniquely wired Supermodified challenger Bentley Warren. Though they'd only run five or six events, never actually competing on anything over half the size of Autodromo, Bentley seemed to require no learning curve. Even today he lights right up when he describes Argentina. "That place was so fast. I just loved it."

Forty thousand showed up on race day. The racing was said to be intense and captivating, with groups of cars dicing throughout. In the initial 53-lapper, Al Unser dueled thrillingly with Lloyd Ruby before galloping off to the win. Mike Mosely and Swede Savage followed.

Bentley had a tough go in that first one. His Classix Wax-sponsored car, built by Bill Finley, whom Bentley called a "super

wrench," rode on liquid suspension.

"With no gauges it was difficult to record and adjust. We had missed it at first, but it was night and day in the second leg. Bill had guessed right, and the car was fantastic right from the green."

He settled in smoothly like a veteran, running with the leaders, on his way to the front. Soon he tucked behind Ruby in second. "I was running just as fast as Unser and did that ever feel good." Every crew member and fan in the place was now watching.

Then it happened—that instantaneous violence so unique to racing. Rick Muther's turbine blew, painting the outside groove with oil, Swede Savage and Bentley right behind him. Swede made it through; Bentley didn't. He told Robin Miller, "Hitting that oil was like hitting ice at 200 mph."

The car backed into the fence, splitting the fuel tank, and blew up. It rolled,

broken, down the banking while Bentley, much like a stuntman, unhooked his harness, forced his hands down, and leapt out. An instant later, as the invisible fire reached paint and flammables, a huge yellow inferno erupted. At this point thousands—whether in the stands or pitside—turned to one another asking, “Who is this guy?!?”

The race was resumed after Bentley was whisked off to the hospital, and Al Unser led 48 laps for another dominant win, lapping all but Ruby. And, though USAC would not return to the Autodromo, most concluded the show had run off generally well.

The Bentley show, however, had a couple more scenes. He had ended up with serious burns on his hands and forearms, requiring heavy bandaging. He was told to drink lots of fluids and, characteristically, charmed the nurses into bringing him “mucho cerveza.”

So, though admitting it was a challenge to hold the bottle, when he was released the next day, he had a bit of a head start. He decided to go partying. Meanwhile, the bus to the plane back to Indianapolis was waiting in the heat, loaded up with USAC officials and competitors, none too pleased about the delay.

Fortunately, Bentley did have someone with whom he could share a bit of the blame. His buddy Bill Simpson had also been AWOL. He’d been trying to convince a rose-lipped Argentine maiden in a barroom to come to California and marry him.

After some surgeries at Massachusetts General Hospital, Bentley was able to continue his notable Champ Car start at Indy a couple of months later. But all that momentum was broken by a devastating sprint car crash at Toledo later that summer, requiring a long and complicated recovery. He subsequently concentrated on Supermodifieds and Silver Crown with brilliance, on his way to becoming one of racing’s most beloved characters.

He reigns today over his kingdom, the infamous and expansive center for racers and bikers, Bentley’s Saloon on the coast of Maine—about as far as you can get from Rafaela, Argentina.

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