



Cavino "Kelly" Petillo

by Larry Ball, Jr.

Cavino Michelli Petillo was born on December 5, 1903 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His Italian emigrant parents, Luigi

and Rosi Petillo, moved the family to California where they established a grocery store on South Compton Avenue in Los Angeles.

Young Cavino went by his middle name, and when a schoolteacher mistook Michelli for "Me Kelly," he was given a nickname that he eventually adopted professionally. Kelly honed his driving skills while working in the family business. Kelly would drive the family's fruit truck back and forth over the San Gabriel Mountains from Fresno.

Kelly might have been described as a rough kid. He was of short temper and quick to fight. "Kelly" wasn't young Cavino's only nickname, he was also known as Kelly "the Shiv" Petillo. Many probably saw nothing but trouble in Kelly's future. Luckily for Kelly, he started racing. Kelly won a Bakersfield-to-L.A. endurance race and began driving at Legion Ascot in 1929 always carrying baby shoes on board for luck.

In 1929, there was hardly a better place to be if you were a race car driver than southern California. Kelly had the advantage of being close to one of the greatest dirt tracks in the world, Legion Ascot. The best of the best were racing at Ascot, and Kelly would eventually become one of them. By 1931, Kelly had cracked the top ten in points for the coveted Pacific Southwest title by finishing tenth to Ernie Triplett.

1932 was a big year for Kelly. It was this year that he first qualified for the Indy 500 (finishing 12th), and the year he started winning at Ascot. His big break came when he got the call to drive the Sparks and Weirick Miller-powered car known as "Poison Lil." On August 17, 1932, Kelly drove "Poison Lil" to victory in the 30-lap feature at Legion Ascot. With that, he had become one of the top drivers in the country.

Driving for Joe Marks in September and October of 1932, Kelly would win three more at Legion Ascot. He finished eighth in the Pacific Southwest title behind Ernie Triplett, Lester Spangler, Wilbur Shaw, Chester Gardner, Bill Cummings, Bob Carey, and Elbert "Babe" Stapp.

By 1933, Kelly was becoming more consistent; he was finishing races. Early in his career, Kelly was known to be hard on equipment. While his reputation had greatly improved by 1933, it was still an issue. Paul Weirick often expressed his frustration when Kelly would unnecessarily find himself in an incident causing damage to "Poison Lil." Driving for Lloyd Vieaux, Kelly would win at Legion Ascot on September 13, 1933. More importantly, he finished fourth in points for the 1933 Pacific Coast title. Finishing ahead of Kelly were three Hall of Famers: Al Gordon, Rex Mays, and Ernie Triplett. Fifth through tenth included three more Hall of Famers: Chester Gordon (fifth), Wilbur Shaw (ninth), and Babe Stapp (tenth).

Kelly was looking forward to 1934. The year started off with a win at Legion Ascot on March 14, driving the Harvey Ward Cragar-powered car. By early summer, Kelly was in the mid-west driving once again for Joe Marks. On April 22, 1934, Kelly Petillo made his debut at Jungle Park. After it was all settled, he finished second to Terre Haute's Ira Hall. In June, Petillo returned to Jungle Park. Just three weeks earlier, he had surprised everyone by establishing a new track record and sitting on the pole for the Indianapolis 500 (finishing 11th). Three weeks later, nobody was surprised that he was fast qualifier at Jungle Park. Following time-trials, Kelly outran Rex Mays in the 4-lap "Italian Helmet Dash." Mays evened the score by taking the ten lap heat. In the 30-lap feature, Kelly's Joe Marks owned #4, which a year earlier had taken the life of 1932 National Champion Bob Carey, blazed to victory over a field that included Hall of Famers George "Doc" MacKenzie, Rex Mays, and Lloyd Axel. On July 4th in Dayton, Ohio, Kelly again found victory lane. Back in southern California, on November 25, "Poison Lil" would take Kelly to another Ascot win. Then on December 23, 1934, Kelly and his mechanic, Takio Hirashima, a Glendale High School student, crossed the finish line first in a scheduled 300-mile race at Mines Field Speedway. Enveloped in fog, the race ended after slightly less than

200 miles. Wilbur Shaw finished second. Kelly ended the year on a high note. He managed to finish seventh in the Mid-West points behind Al Theisen, Rex Mays, Mauri Rose, Doc MacKenzie, Chet Gardner, and Charles Engle. Emil Andres, Clay Weatherly, and Maynard "Hungry" Clark rounded out the top ten. For the second year in a row, Kelly finished fourth in points in the Pacific Coast title. Coming in ahead of Kelly were Rex Mays, Floyd Roberts, and Al Gordon.

1935 would prove to be Kelly's best year as a driver, and probably the beginning of his destruction as a person. January 13 and 27 saw Kelly driving the Sparks-Weirick Miller to victory at Legion Ascot. On April 14, it would be the Earl Haskell owned Miller taking Kelly to another feature win at Legion Ascot. By May of 1935, Kelly was struggling to put something together for the Speedway. He had taken his life savings and borrowed money from his family to build his own Indianapolis car. His father mortgaged the family store and other relatives kicked in what they could. A family friend, Arrigio Balboni, ran an aircraft salvage yard. Mr. Balboni allowed Kelly to take instruments and other parts from the wrecked airplanes. Louis "Curly" Wetteroth built the body, and Kelly made the rest of the car in his own shop. The front axle came from a wrecked Plymouth, and the transmission from a Studebaker. He needed an engine. Kelly couldn't afford the \$3500 price for a new Offenhauser, so Fred provided him one on credit with the understanding he pay if he made any money at the Speedway. Offenhauser saw this as an opportunity to show that he could make equipment that was competitive at the Speedway.

Kelly qualified for the pole at the Speedway only to be disqualified for violating a fueling rule. On his second attempt, the engine blew. After getting the engine repaired at a local shop, he finally made the race. Starting 22nd, Kelly would go on to win the 1935 Indianapolis 500. It was the first win at Indianapolis for an Offenhauser engine. On July 4, 1935, Kelly won the St. Paul 100 on the 1-mile dirt oval at the Minnesota State Fair Speedway. Bill Cummings was second, followed by Al Miller, Wilbur Shaw, Deacon Litz, and Louis Meyer. On October 13, Kelly won the 100-miler at Langhorne, Pennsylvania. By the end of 1935, Cavino Michelli Petillo was the AAA National Driving Champion.

1935 also was the year that the drivers tried to organize into the National Championship Drivers of America. The idea was that drivers would promote races in order to get a bigger share of the gate receipts. Rex Mays, Floyd Roberts, Louis Meyer, Wilbur Shaw, Fred Frame, and Bill Cummings all signed up. Not Kelly Petillo. Kelly would not forego appearance money. As the most recent 500 winner, he was in demand. It was his opportunity to enjoy the perks of being an Indianapolis 500 winner! After promoting two races, the NCDCA was dissolved.

Kelly Petillo was by most accounts an arrogant and obnoxious character. This was true when he was terrorizing the streets as a youngster in the family's fruit truck. It was true when he was winning at Legion Ascot. Some say after he won the 500 in 1935, he became even worse! His miserable disposition was legend. A car owner was once heard to say, "I would love to have Petillo drive for me if you could bring him to the track in a cage and only open it to put him in a car." Racing, it seemed, had kept Kelly out of trouble. Unfortunately, trouble would catch up with him later in life. Kelly didn't handle his newly found fame and wealth very well. There were assaults, drunkenness, and disorderly conduct charges. During the war, Kelly was implicated in the shooting of a Marine in a barroom he was supposedly running in L.A. In 1946, the Speedway rejected his entry. In 1948, Kelly was charged with Assault and Battery with Intent to Kill. The victim was Petillo's former secretary, a young woman he slashed from her ear to her mouth. On January 17, 1949, Kelly Petillo was sentenced to one to ten years in the Indiana State Penitentiary. Inmate number 24838 was paroled on August 25, 1955, but returned to prison on May 23, 1957, for parole violation when he came to Indiana from California for the 500. Petillo finally left prison on April 23, 1959. A few weeks later, the Speedway again rejected his entry. A sad ending for a once great race car driver.

Cavino "Kelly" Petillo died from emphysema on June 30, 1970. He is buried in the Grindstone Cemetery in Glenn County, California.

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