

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

RALPH DEPALMA

Italian-born Ralph DePalma came to the United States in 1893 at the age of ten. Like many of America's open wheel pioneers, DePalma began racing bicycles on the east coast in 1898. He was working for the Allen-Kingston Company as an automobile test driver when they called upon him to wheel their first race car in April, 1908. In 1908-09-10, he competed in American Automobile Association (AAA) competition in a Fiat Cyclone against the likes of Berna Eli "Barney" Oldfield in a Benz, Louis Chevrolet in a Buick and Ray Harroun in a Marmon. He began his board track career in 1910 at Playa del Ray, later notching wins at Des Moines, Chicago, Sheepshead Bay (N.Y.), and Beverly Hills. In 1911, DePalma, known for his genuine sense of sportsmanship, switched to a Simplex.

The handsome DePalma was the 1912 and 1914 AAA National Champion wheeling E.J. Schroeder's Mercedes. Despite gallantly trying to push his stalled Mercedes across the finish

line in 1912, only to have Joe Dawson flash by for the win, DePalma did win the 1915 Indianapolis 500. A year later, DePalma's request for appearance money and subsequent post-entry were summarily rejected by Indianapolis officials. During this time, DePalma feuded with barnstorming "outlaw" Oldfield and his Firestone-shod Mercer. In the late teens, DePalma continued his winning ways aboard the 12-cylinder Sunbeams, Packards and Ballots. During the twenties, he piloted the successful 8-cylinder "Miller Special" car. His riding mechanic was none other than his nephew Peter DePaolo, a future driving star himself.

In the mid-twenties, publicity man Bill Pickens (formerly Oldfield's press agent) hyped DePalma as the hero of Ascot, with his black-helmet rivals being such greats as Fred Horey, Frank Lockhart, Sig Haugdahl and Leon Duray. One of the most memorable wins for DePalma at Ascot was on January 20, 1924, when he won the first-ever three-lap Italian Helmet Dash over fellow fast qualifiers Horey,



Ralph DePalma
Bruce Craig Collection

Eddie Meyer and Fred Leickleider. The Vai brothers, local Italian vintners, presented DePalma with the silver-and gold-plated Victory Crown Helmet symbolizing speed and honor.

During his 27-year career, DePalma would reportedly win 2,557 races in 2,889 starts, making him perhaps winner of the most legitimate racing events in the history of the sport. His driving career ended with retirement in 1935. He then stayed involved in racing as an automotive and petroleum industries consultant. Ralph DePalma, one of 'big car' and sprint car racing's true pioneers, remained a wonderful ambassador for the sport.