



Herman Schurch

Herman Schurch was born on April 7, 1903, in Sumisvald, Switzerland, to Jacob Hermann and Elisabeth (Elise) Schurch. Siblings included a sister, Freda, and brothers, Adolph (Jack) and Werner (Benjamin).

His family emigrated from Switzerland to the United States when he was a boy, arriving in New York on July 7, 1910, on the liner *USS President Grant*. From New York, the family moved west to Los Angeles.

Herman began his racing career in the mid-twenties, and began learning his trade on the tough southern California dirt tracks. By 1927, a new "German" driver, Herman Schurch, was added to the list of "Pacific Coast Stars" driving the number 14 "Lind Special." In August of 1927, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Herman "gained almost as much renown on the speedways of Germany as Baron Richtofen did in the air." Obviously, the press was taking liberties inasmuch as Herman left Europe when he was seven years old.

With the jump to the American Automobile Association (AAA) Pacific Coast title chase came greater competition; Mel Kenealy, Ernie Triplett, Walt May, and Francis Quinn to name a few. It didn't take long for the young driver to get even more press. The August 8, 1927, *Los Angeles Times* reported, "Herman Schurch, German ace, forced Speed Hinckley to break the world's record here today in the championship sweepstakes in one of the fastest and greatest auto races ever staged at Banning."

After the 1927 season, Herman moved to Long Island, New York, with his "Hollywood Special" in tow, where he hoped to find success on the dirt tracks of the East. He did, as Herman was competitive right away. For many years, the annual big car program was the anchor event of the Allentown Fair's grandstand entertainment. In 1928, the fans turned out in droves to see Ray Keech, famous for his land speed record set on the beach at Daytona of 207.55 mph. On this day, Keech tied the one-lap record set by Ira Vail four years earlier, won the dash and the third heat. Herman, however, would steal Keech's thunder by winning the 20-lap feature. Other notable winners of this annual event include Ira Vail, Billy Winn, Fred Frame, Floyd Davis, Bob Sall, Dennis "Duke" Nalon, Joie Chitwood, Tony Willman and Ted Horn.

The 1928 season would also mark Herman's first trip to the Brickyard. Schurch tried four times to qualify for the Indianapolis 500. He did not qualify in 1928. He qualified and finished 20th in 1929. He drove relief for his friend "Shorty" Cantlon in 1930, driving the car for laps 147-200, with the car finishing in second place (by the rules at Indianapolis, the starting driver, Cantlon, received the credit for the second place finish). In 1931, Herman qualified and finished 39th, completing only five laps, but later relieved George Howie for laps 113-200, taking the car to eleventh place (again, the finishing order credited to Howie).

By 1930, Herman had won races at Allentown, Atlanta, Flemington, Deer Park (Long Island), Riverhead (New York), and Woodbridge (New Jersey). In addition to his success at the Allentown Fair, his exploits at Woodbridge greatly enhanced his reputation in the East. Woodbridge was the last of the board tracks. The half-mile speedway saw crowds of over 10,000 fans, was banked 38-degrees in the corners, and produced frightening 19 second laps. On May 18, 1930, 13,000 fans saw the season opener at Woodbridge. On this day, Fred Frame and Herman would put on a show that people would talk about for years to come. On the first lap of the feature, Herman spun into the infield. He was able to keep the car under power and made his way back onto the speedway a half-lap behind the leaders. Not only was time lost in the spin,

but something was broken on the left front. The crowd groaned as the left front wobbled, but the groans soon turned to cheers. The crowd marveled as Herman ran down third place, Deacon Litz, made the pass, and closed on Frame to finish second. Herman was the people's winner that day. On June 1, Frame hoped to show the Woodbridge fans that his opening day win was no fluke. Herman had other ideas. Schurch led all 50 laps. Not one to nurse his lead, Herman thrilled the fans with a number of frightening skids. At one point, Herman slid against the top rail sending sparks and splinters flying.

On October 18, 1930, Herman was at Langhorne. Before the start of the race, Herman and Miss Dorothy Lila Turner, of Staten Island, N.Y., were married in front of the grandstand, with Bucks County Justice of the Peace Joseph C. Keating performing the ceremony. The fans in attendance applauded and sang a rendition of "I Love You Truly," as Herman kissed his new bride. Just before the ceremony, Herman had set quick time, breaking the one-mile dirt track record. With the start of the main event, it looked as though it would be a very special day indeed. By the 25th lap of the 100-lap event, Herman was leading by a quarter-mile. Unfortunately, there would be no happy ending. On lap 38, engine problems would put Schurch out of the race.

Herman went home to Los Angeles over the winter. He would chase the Pacific Southwest title. After a winter of engine trouble, his most notable performance had been a wild end-over-end ride through the north turn fence at

Legion Ascot. Even with all his problems, he managed ninth in the final Pacific Southwest standings. When spring returned, Herman headed back East.

In 1931, Woodbridge ran one final year. On October 18, Mauri Rose, Bryan Saulpaugh, and Herman would take part in the last race to be held on a board track of a half-mile or larger. Schurch would win the second heat, but experience mechanical problems in the

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feature. It was the end of the board track era and, in just three short weeks, Herman would be gone as well.

Schurch returned to California with high hopes. On November 7, Herman was behind the wheel of the number 3 Tarbet at Legion Ascot. The car was purchased by Harlan Fengler, then president of Cragar Corporation, who gave it to Clarence Tarbet to run in Pacific Coast events with a Cragar engine. W.H. "Stubby" Stubblefield, Mel Kenealy, Elbert "Babe" Stapp, and Bill Cummings had driven the car earlier in the year.

In order to get used to the car, Herman decided to take advantage of a Saturday afternoon practice session the day before the November 8 100-miler. After a few warm-up laps, he hit the throttle and the wheels locked. The car catapulted through the fence and flew into the air. Schurch was thrown from the car. He was taken to a local hospital, and was reported to be near death. He died the following day. He was 28 years old. Herman Schurch was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, but for some unknown reason the family moved him to Hollywood Hills Cemetery in 1964. Sadly, a few years after Herman's death, the far-reaching Hearst papers published photos of the fatal accidents of Herman, Ernie Triplett and Bob Carey as part of Hearst's effort to have racing banned.

*By Larry Ball, Jr.
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