

Chapter 1

“... into the unknown.”

Spring, 1960. In his home at 14259 Grayville Drive in La Mirada, California, Troy Ruttman rubbed the sleep from his eyes and groggily blinked awake. He sensed something was wrong. He reached to his wife’s side of the bed and felt nothing but cold, rumpled sheets. Beverly was not there.

She was probably up and out already, he reasoned, his mind attempting to function through a sleepy haze. Taking the kids to school, he thought as he fumbled for his wristwatch on the bedside table. As his eyes slowly focused on the time, he was puzzled. It was too early for that. Too early for them to be already dressed, fed and out the door.

He swung his legs off the side of the bed and shuffled down the hall, peering into rooms, but there were no signs of anyone. Only the squeaking of the floor beneath his feet and the distant, muffled ticking of a clock disturbed the eerie quiet. He was alone.

He made his way to the kitchen, slid out a chair, and dropped down heavily at the table. He hoped, prayed, that the thoughts tumbling through his mind weren’t true. But the longer he sat there, mulling over past events, the more obvious it became. His worst fears had been realized. Beverly had taken their three children, Toddy, Troy Jr., and Roxanne, and left. It was the worst day of his life. The worst up to that point, anyway.

After a long day of soul-searching, he came to the realization that what had happened was his fault. His bouts with alcohol, the loud arguments, the banging of the Los Angeles police on their door in the middle of the night, had finally pushed Beverly to do what she had often threatened to do.

The knowledge that it was of his own doing only served to intensify the emptiness that engulfed him, the pain that settled in his gut like a hot iron. He wasn’t hurting because he would be without com-

panionship; rather, the hurt came because he would be without the woman, the family he loved.

Thirty-year-old Troy Ruttman was seldom without a companion, without women in his life. That was a part of the celebrity package. Part of being a hero race car driver. Especially a young, handsome, successful one.

Attractive women are as much a part of the racing landscape as fast cars and hot engines. They are a dangerous temptation to men who spend much of their time away from home and are hunting for an off-track substitute for the intoxicating, adrenaline-fueled high generated on track.

Beverly, however, was the only woman Troy truly loved. Really cared about. As difficult as it is for a race car driver to settle into a life resembling any kind of normalcy, she was the one with whom Troy wanted to do just that.

They had met and married when they were both only 18. “Young and dumb,” laughs Beverly today. Yet they grew together, built a family together, and laughed together, until Troy’s personal problems finally caused the laughter to die in sorrow.

From the time Beverly left, Troy never stopped trying to win her back. In fact it was 1962 before their divorce was finalized. They both eventually remarried, Troy twice more. But when, in 1996, he found out he had cancer, it was Beverly Troy wanted to see. It was Beverly who could comfort, and Beverly who brought a smile to his face as they reminisced through photos of those “young and dumb” days.

Troy was, by nature, a considerate, caring man. Gregarious. Charismatic. Fun to be around. His infectious humor made him the life of the party. But he was also a binge drinker. And when he was on a binge, he was no longer fun.

Contributing to the difficulties was the fact that when he was drinking, he wasn’t around. That’s an obstacle, no matter the number of warm qualities a person might possess, that even the most patient, understanding woman cannot overcome.

It was enough of a challenge for Beverly to raise three children while her husband was constantly absent, chasing race cars across the country, without having anything else compete with the precious little time he did have away from the race track.

“Troy was not the type drinker,” explains Beverly, “that could

just drink socially. He couldn't sit down in the evening and drink a beer, and be done. Once he started drinking he wouldn't stop for days. For weeks. It was miserable. I never understood why he wouldn't stop altogether.”

The answer, to Beverly's frustration, is that it's not that easy. Troy's binge, or periodic, drinking is considered by medical experts to be a form of alcoholism. And alcoholism is a disease that grabs and won't let go. Its hold is powerful, unrelenting. Once hooked, you cannot simply stop.

What was incredible about Troy Ruttman, however, is that despite the demons that chased him relentlessly, despite alcohol's often debilitating hold on him, he still soared. Achieved. Excelled.

That he remained able to follow his dreams, become an incredibly successful race car driver, and rise to the heights of international renown speaks volumes about Troy's unrelenting resolve, fierce desire, and unprecedented talent.

Oh, that marvelous, enviable, God-given talent.

“I grew up with Troy on the midget tracks of California,” stated two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Rodger Ward during an ESPN television interview, “and Troy Ruttman was probably the most talented race driver we have ever known. He was as great a natural driver as I have ever raced against. I never knew anyone who had more natural ability than Troy. He could do things in a race car that were ... well, they were miraculous.”

Ward's assessment of Troy is made from a position of considerable authority. During his own illustrious career, Ward competed against, and beat, some of the best drivers in the world, among them Jim Clark, Dan Gurney, A.J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones, and Mario Andretti. He knows of what he speaks.

Nor is Ward the only driver of renown who has been impressed and inspired by Troy Ruttman.

Nineteen sixty-three Indianapolis 500 winner Parnelli Jones was another. When Parnelli was growing up in California and first becoming interested in cars and racing, he was a huge fan of Troy's. It was Troy's exploits on the track that helped influence Parnelli toward his own racing career.

Another Indianapolis 500 winner, Jim Rathmann, who won in 1960, was also a staunch admirer of Troy. They raced against each other early in their careers, and then later at the Indianapolis Motor

Speedway. Although they were contemporaries, Rathmann once described Troy as one of his heroes. He admired his ability immensely.

“Troy was always a real hard driver,” recounted Rathmann. “But he was a real race driver. I can’t say enough about the guy. I’ve known a lot of good drivers, but Troy was one guy who could drive anything.”

Three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Bobby Unser agrees with Rathmann’s opinion.

“There are only so many people that come down the road of life that have REAL ... talent. Born with it,” animatedly states Unser. “They get out of bed one morning and can drive a race car very fast. And, it doesn’t matter the type of race car.

“I’ve seen hundreds, probably thousands of race car drivers,” he adds. “But I’ve known only a few that had that natural talent. There was Parnelli Jones, there’s my nephew little Al, and then there was Troy Ruttman.

“Troy was one of the best on earth. He could drive anything ... ANYTHING ... and make it look so easy. That son of a gun could drive a race car better than anybody.”

American racing icon Dan Gurney, who competed internationally on the Grand Prix circuits of Europe, was equally awed by Ruttman’s raw ability.

Gurney says of him, “It was obvious that Troy Ruttman had enormous talent, skill, and a competitive spirit that would take him to the front no matter what.”

Gurney’s complimentary statements are far more than a respectful eulogy of a comrade now gone. His praise comes from the heart. Gurney, like Parnelli, had seen Troy race on the California short tracks, became a huge fan, and finally met him in 1958, when Troy was in Italy running the Race of Two Worlds at Monza.

After Monza, Gurney spent a month with Troy and Beverly traveling across Europe, while Troy competed in some Formula One races. During that European summer they became close friends, shared amazing adventures, and created lifetime memories.

The accolades, the unwavering respect, from Troy’s peers and competitors are well placed. He was a winner in every type of race car he chose to strap himself into. Few drivers have ever demonstrated so much success across such a diverse field of endeavor.

He was the archetypical American, oval-track racer, but he relished in trying his hand at other racing disciplines. He raced sports cars, stock cars on road courses, and became the first Indianapolis 500 winner to compete in a Formula One race.

His remarkable achievements have earned him passage into prestigious institutions that honor only the world's best drivers. He has been inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America, the National Midget Racing Hall of Fame, the West Coast Stock Car Hall of Fame, and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway's Auto Racing Hall of Fame.

Troy launched his racing career in those heady days just after World War II, when auto racing exceeded the popularity of not only most other sports, but most other forms of entertainment as well. Competing against such extraordinarily talented drivers as Bill Vukovich, Jack McGrath, Rodger Ward, Jimmy Bryan, Johnnie Parsons, and Walt Faulkner, Troy became one of auto racing's biggest stars.

He developed a popularity that rivaled other mainstream celebrities of that day. When he performed, his notoriety was such that the stars came out to see him. In 1949, however, he left his passionate fan following, and the comfortable familiarity of the West Coast tracks, to head “back east” to run against some of America's best drivers on the highly competitive American Automobile Association (AAA) circuits, which included the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

As Troy scraped and fought his way up one rung of the racing ladder after the other, his winning ways never abated. He would eventually capture five AAA Championship car races, 16 AAA midget races, and excelled in the AAA sprint cars on the trio of famed, frightening, high-banked, half-mile speedways of the Midwest: Winchester, Salem and Dayton.

Known as the “Hills” or the “Walls” because of their harrowing steep banking, these tracks were body breakers. Widow makers. One summer Sunday at Winchester, two men died in consecutive qualifying attempts. Both were Troy's friends.

Yet, the first time Troy ever set foot in one of those infamous speedways, he was racing on it. And he won. Seemingly fearless, he stormed to win after win on those evil tracks, setting speed records and tallying dozens of victories along the way.

Success on the high-banked tracks in those days not only won championships, but attracted the attention of the Indianapolis car owners as well. They reasoned that drivers who were brave enough to run the “Hills” would do well on the long, ultrafast confines of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

In 1949, Troy made his first Indianapolis appearance. Three “500s” later, in 1952, he added his name to that unique group of men in the world of sports who go down in history as an Indianapolis 500 winner.

With that win, Troy’s racing career had already achieved legendary status. His racing accomplishments were stunning. Not only did he wear the ring of an Indianapolis champion, he had won dozens of races in all types of racing disciplines, captured multiple championships, and held records that would stand for decades.

And he was all of 22 years old.

His potential was not fully tapped. His promise not fulfilled. His talent not fully developed. Even as he continued to mature as a driver, his legacy was on course to be one for the ages. His future bordered on the unbelievable.

Yet, it was not to be.

Within months of winning Indianapolis, he suffered a freak racing accident that nearly terminated his career and, as he struggled to make a comeback, escalated the problems he was already having with alcohol abuse.

Troy once described his 18-month rehabilitation regime following the accident as consisting of, “... drinking, gambling and chasing women.”

That, of course, did little for his already troubled personal life, and in the next decade he tumbled into a downward spiral of damaged relationships, fortunes lost, and marriages broken.

“He went through four women, and a million dollars,” remarked Troy’s father, Ralph, with a somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but sadly accurate, description of his son’s staggering personal issues.

If Troy wasn’t already mired deep enough in the complications of life, in 1969 he was brought to his knees with a bitter blow. The unthinkable occurred. His only son, 18-year-old Troy Jr., died in a racing accident.

Yet, as he always managed to do, Troy persevered. Time after time he would find himself trapped in a pit of despair, often of his

own making. And, just as many times, he would resolutely claw his way out.

Troy eventually contained his alcoholism, mended broken relationships, and made peace with a sport that had provided so much, yet had taken so much away. And it is for these battles won, even more, perhaps, than his phenomenal achievements on the race track, that Troy should be celebrated and memorialized.

“When you think of my grandpa’s life,” reflects Troy’s grandson Joshua Lewis, “you realize how amazing it was that he could face all these problems and keep coming back. He got to the top of racing, and had everything. My grandma tells the story of when a limo would come pick her up, and she would do her Christmas shopping on Rodeo Drive. He was a rock star!

“I mean he had this incredibly beautiful, classy wife, with kids, but goes through a procession of absolutely crazy women, and drank himself out of racing. After that, he finally gets his life back together, remarries, creates a successful Yamaha dealership, and then loses everything again. And, he came back from that. What an amazing legacy.”

Dan Gurney said of his friend, “There’s a lot of risk in racing, a lot of unknowns. Besides his obvious talent, one thing that made Troy so good was his willingness to step, unafraid, into the unknown.”

Pressing forward at full throttle, Troy Lynn Ruttman’s life was one lived, and sometimes barely survived, on the edge of the unknown.

This is his story.