

# The San Diego Exposition Road Race

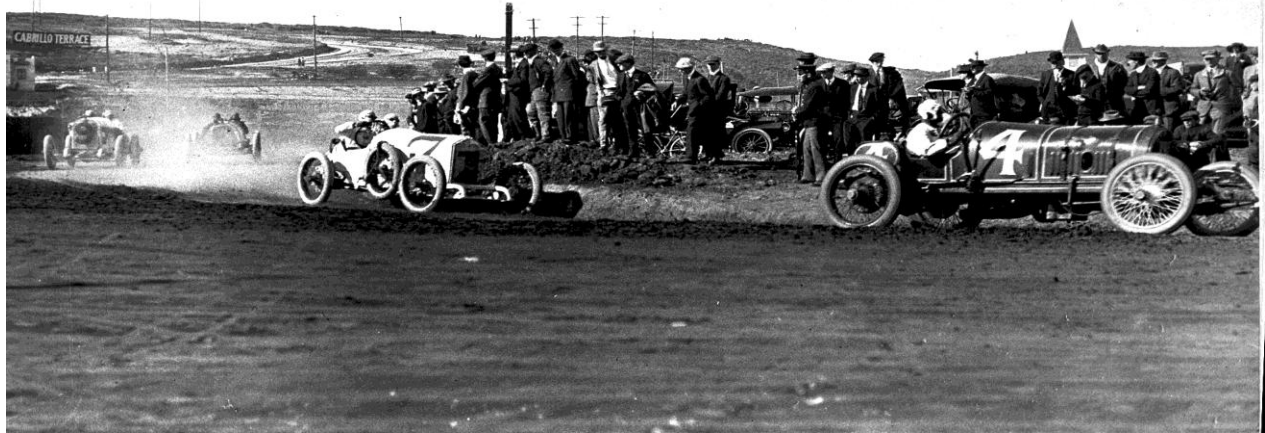
*San Diego is now the automobile racing capital of America. For the brief space of one week the Southern California exposition city is to revel in all the glory of the speed game. Next Saturday America's foremost drivers are to risk their lives . . . in one of the most unique motor races ever staged on the Pacific Coast.*

--Los Angeles Times, Jan. 3, 1915

In January 1915 the fastest race car drivers in the world met in San Diego to compete in a road race that would draw the attention of sports fans across America. Famous champions like Barney Oldfield, Eddie Rickenbacker, Earl Cooper, and San Diego's own "Bad Bill" Carlson would fight it out on a six-mile elliptical circuit laid on the dirt roads of Point Loma.

The race was planned as a promotion for the Panama California Exposition. Shriners from the Al Bahr Temple sponsored the event. The race course itself had premiered two years earlier in a 200 mile race won by Carlson. This time the drivers would race for 305 miles on January 9 for a winning purse of \$5,000.

It was a dangerous race course, featuring abrupt turns on "contourneated boulevards" paved only with a loose cover of decomposed granite. Beginning in front of grandstands on Rosecrans Blvd., the drivers raced north before making a sharp left turn at Lytton St., then south on Chatsworth to Catalina. A hard left on Talbot St. was followed by another left on Canon St. as the drivers worked their way downhill. The sharpest corner on the course came next as the drivers turned hard at the "Roseville Turn" and then sped on to Rosecrans. A two-mile straightaway followed where the newspapers predicted speeds would approach 100 miles per hour.



*Automobile Club of Southern California*

Thousands of spectators lined the course when practice runs began on January 2. There were mishaps and close calls daily as the drivers tested the track. Art Klein overshot the first turn on Lytton and plowed through fences and flower beds before regaining the course. Eddie Rickenbacker nearly ran over a team of horses that wandered on the course. Crowds in the grandstand gasped when Billy Carlson lost a wheel going top speed on the straightaway. His car plowed earth for a hundred yards before coming to safe stop.

The most entertaining calamity occurred when Bob Burman's Peugeot burst into flames coming out of the Roseville Turn. Burman frantically threw sand on the flames while his mechanic jumped out of the car and ran to a nearby house to grab a bucket of soap suds from a woman doing her laundry. The suds put out the fire and soon Burman was underway again after repairing burned out wiring.

On the morning of the great race an estimated 50,000 people spread out along the course to watch the spectacle. "It was the greatest throng ever seen at one event in San Diego," proclaimed the *Union*, "excepting, perhaps, the opening of the exposition."

There was some congestion at the main gates, which were half a mile from the grandstand. But the Shriners and a detachment of Marines kept the crowd orderly and moving. Free wagons ferried people to the stands along Rosecrans, where vendors hawked sandwiches, scorecards, and pennants.

General admission was one dollar, which included a bleacher seat. The 6,000 seats faced the long straightaway where the speeds would be the greatest. But most spectators chose to stake out positions along the dangerous turns.

A dozen local physicians staffed five field hospitals around the course and parked three ambulances to prepare for the injuries thought to be inevitable. "It is a race in which bad accidents are practically certain," the *Sun* noted.

The race began at 11:00 a.m. Eighteen cars made the start, each carrying a driver and a mechanic. The teams were started in pairs, two cars every 30 seconds.

Tom Alley in a Duesenberg took the early lead and held it for eighteen laps. Pre-race favorite Eddie Rickenbacker in his Peugeot thrilled the crowd by passing Alley on the straightaway on lap nineteen. But the crowd favorite was clearly Barney Oldfield who drew cheers from the grandstand each time he sped by with this trademark black cigar champed in his teeth.

Ruth Varney Held, author of *Beach Town* (1975) watched the race as an eight-year old, near her hillside home above Canon St. Held remembered Oldfield and Rickenbacker "roaring down the curving track, their cars kicking up dust and rocks and smelling like castor oil."

Another eight-year old, Joe Azevedo, recalled the day in an interview for the San Diego Historical Society. "This was a big race for us, especially the kids." Azevedo and his friends watched the racers from above the Roseville Turn. "Of course, most of us had never seen an automobile race in our lives. Most of us had never seen a racing automobile—never mind the race."

Azevedo watched as Oldfield's Maxwell caught fire after 37 laps. "Everyone came running out there with buckets of water, put out the fire, and got him going again. We had quite a time . . . All of us kids were going to become race drivers after that."

Out of eighteen starters only five drivers would finish the grueling race. Oldfield dropped out after his fire. Rickenbacker was done after 23 laps and broken rod. Earl Cooper, driving a Stutz, took the lead at lap 24 and never gave it up. He finished the 51 laps in 4 hours, 40 minutes—an average speed of 65.3 miles per hour. San Diego's Billy Carlson took second place and established a world endurance record by driving the entire 305-mile race without a pit stop.

The Exposition Road Race would be the last hurrah for the Point Loma course. Within a few years housing developments transformed the area. The original race course can still be traced by modern cars but the drama of hairpin turns on a dirt track is a distant memory.

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