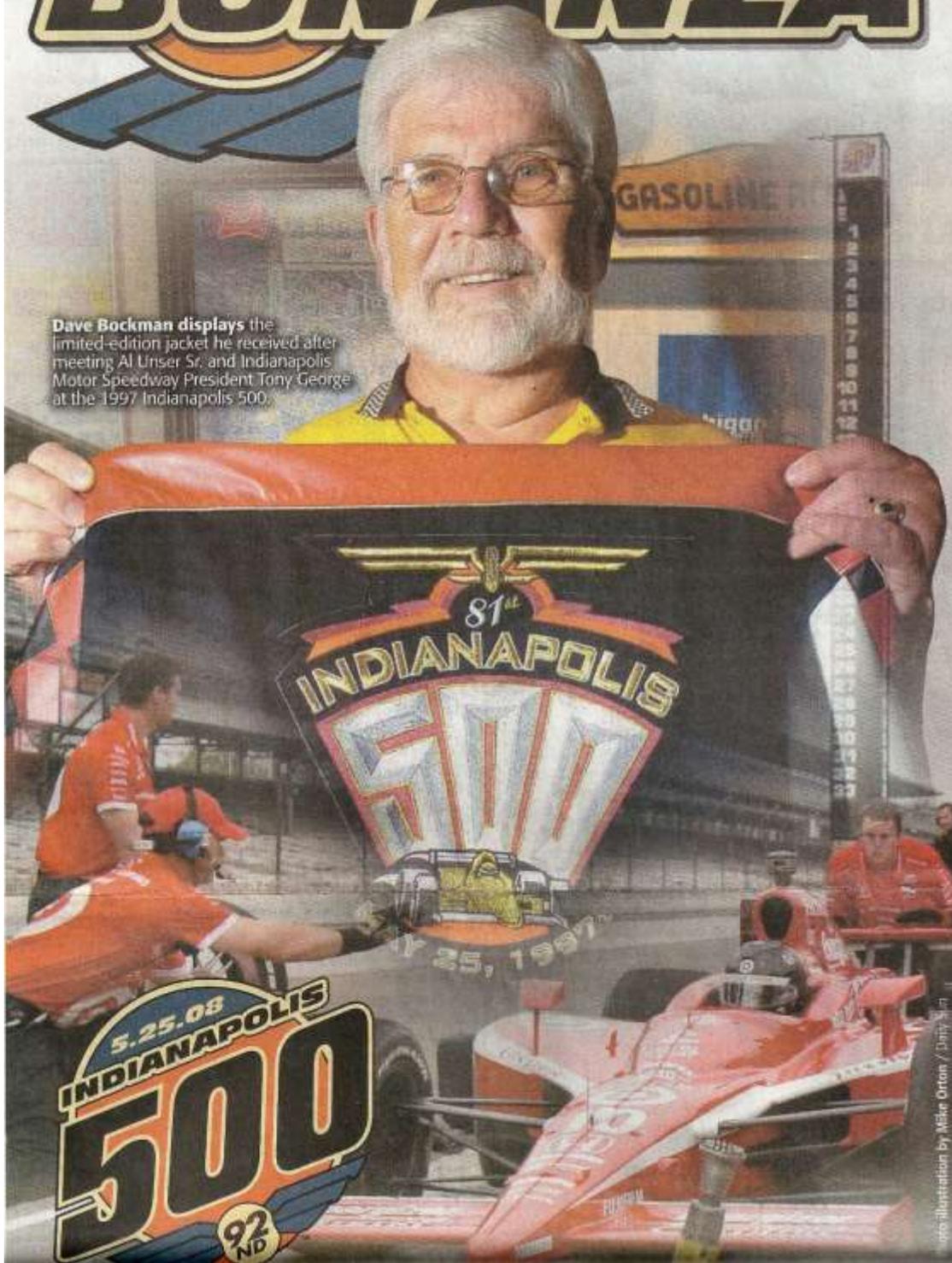


# BRICKYARD BONANZA

Dave Bockman displays the limited-edition jacket he received after meeting Al Unser Sr. and Indianapolis Motor Speedway President Tony George at the 1997 Indianapolis 500.



## Bockman has attended 47 of the last 49 Indy 500s

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By Keith Chartrand

The drive from Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Ill., to Indianapolis almost completed, 21-year-old Dave Bockman emerged from behind the wheel of his 1958 Ford at a filling station just outside Indianapolis.

Bockman popped the trunk as three of his Air Force buddies got out of the car. Empty beer and soda bottles covered every possible inch of the trunk space, some bouncing off the bumper and onto the pavement.

"You can imagine what that car smelled like," Bockman recalled some 48 years later.

With each bottle worth between 3 cents and 5 cents, this was their ticket to a weekend of fun.

"The owner of the filling station was gracious enough to take every (bottle)," Bockman said. "When we got back to the car, we counted it up to be \$28 dollars.

That would be enough money to fill the car's gas tank for the return trip to Chanute, buy a case of beer and scalp four tickets.

It was Memorial Day weekend in Indianapolis. There was only one show in town – The Indianapolis 500. The international racing capital of the world would become Bockman's home away from home.

### **Small town country living**

If you're from Indiana, you understand what Indianapolis Motor Speedway is, what it stands for. You know how big the annual running of the Indianapolis 500 is and have felt the goose bumps when "Back Home in Indiana" is sung just prior to the start of the race.

Huntertown, Ind., native Dave Bockman knows, just as he knows it's exactly 132 miles from the driveway of his one-time Huntertown home to the Speedway. He's been there more than a couple of times, much more than just that weekend leave trip back in 1961.

The small country town of Huntertown is 15 minutes due north of Fort Wayne and there wasn't much to it.

"A filling station, a church and a grocery store was about the only thing that was there," Bockman said. "We weren't too far away from the filling station."

As a fifth-grader who had just come back from his first-ever trip to a stock car race at Fort Wayne Raceway, Bockman was now addicted.

"I loved the way (the cars) sounded," recalled Bockman of his first race.

That filling station in town, Warner's Service Station, was getting closer and closer to Bockman. He was naturally drawn to it as a teenager looking to satisfy his addiction. Gay Warner, the mechanic at the filling station, was the one who led Bockman to become really hooked on racing.

"It wasn't many years after that that (Warner) ended up being involved in modified stock cars," Bockman said. "When I became a junior in high school I started being involved and helping out."

Warner was the mechanic for Guy "Skeeter" Grocock and Duke Krockner, local drivers who toiled in a six-city racing circuit. The circuit included tracks in Fort Wayne, South Anthony, Sandusky, Jackson, Eldora and New Breaman. Bockman worked in the pit crew for both drivers wherever they needed him.

"If it was no more than changing a tire, I did it," Bockman said.

## **Cars, racing all the time**

With his unbridled passion for cars and racing, it should come as no surprise that Bockman spent his life working for a company that helped put race cars on the track, and during his free time he was in the stands at the track.

After his four-year stint in the Air Force, Bockman worked for the Dana Corporation in Fort Wayne. Once a Fortune 500 company, Dana was and still is a supplier of axles and driveshafts as well as structural, sealing and thermal-management products. Customers of Dana include every major vehicle and engine manufacturer in the global automotive market.

"I understood cars and I thought this would be the ideal opportunity and job that I've always wanted to have," Bockman said.

His first job at Dana was in the automotive and manufacturing portion of the company; literally the nuts and bolts of the company. Later, he went into the personnel side of things as an employment specialist. He put more than 30 years into the company.

But that wasn't even close to the number of years Bockman put in at the Indianapolis 500. For 47 of the last 49 Indianapolis 500 races Bockman has been in the stands.

"It's just like any habit you have or any sport that you're involved in," Bockman said. "It would be just like a child going to Disney World for the first time."

One of the two years that Bockman wasn't in attendance, he was overseas in his final year of duty in the Air Force. In 1994, the other year he missed the race, he was recuperating from open-heart surgery. The infamous beer-and-soda bottle journey isn't included in the calculation either. So, in fact, he's been to a total of 48 Indy 500 races.

## **47 different memories**

Unbeknownst to Bockman and his Air Force buddies, if they had worn their uniforms to the race in 1961, they would have been admitted for free. Not knowing of this perk, they weren't about to shell out a bunch of cash for tickets.

"This one buddy of mine, he walks up to the scalper and the scalper gives him four tickets," Bockman recalled. "(My buddy) took a \$5 bill and folded it double, he takes a \$1 bill and folds it double. So he (actually) had \$6. "He gave it to him and he gave us four tickets to get into the race." At the time the tickets were going for \$3 apiece.

"So we got four tickets for \$6 was what it amounted to," laughed Bockman.

"When you fold the bills double it looked like \$12.

Several years later Bockman was on the losing end of a ticket deal, kind of a payback per se.

"There were four of us going to the race," recalled Bockman. "I had four tickets, my buddy had four tickets. I held all eight of them, and when I sold four of them, I sold the wrong four, the better set of four tickets."

While Bockman's buddies will never let him forget that one, they were jealous of him when Bockman returned home from the 1997 race with a new article of clothing given to him by a pair of gentlemen.

Through his connection with the Dana Corporation, Bockman had a seat in the Mechanics Laundry Company hospitality suite. In walked the spokesman for Mechanics Laundry, four-time Indy 500 champ Al Unser Sr. The former champ lit up the room with his personality and his stunning 1997 Indy 500 leather jacket, one of only 100 made.

After Unser made his way around the room, Bockman got Unser's ear. Unser asked about Bockman's connection to Mechanics Laundry and seemed very interested when Bockman mentioned

that he worked for Dana Corporation. As their conversation continued, Bockman kept looking at Unser's jacket.

"Boy, I'd sure look good sporting that jacket," Bockman said.

"Tell you what, Dave," Unser said. "Why don't you come with me?"

Bockman followed Unser to the elevator and the next thing Bockman knew he was in front of Tony George, president and CEO of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Corporation.

"Tony, I want you to meet Dave Bockman," Unser said. "This guy's been here 35 years and he thinks this jacket of mine is pretty neat."

"Is there any way I could buy one of those jackets?" Bockman pleaded.

"No," retorted George quickly.

A frustrated Bockman, with his credit card burning a hole in his pocket, said, "Oh, OK."

George smiled and added, "You can't buy one, but I'm gonna give you one."

Bockman all but melted. The jacket was No. 62 of 100 jackets made for the 1997 Indianapolis 500, which was won by Holland's Arie Luyendyk.

### **Not this year**

Bockman's Santo Domingo home has one room set aside for two things: his Indy 500 memorabilia collection and his Jeff Gordon collection. On one end of the room is a large flat-screen television made for the ultimate television experience. On the other end of the room is a leather chair with ottoman.

According to Bockman, he has taken many catnaps in that chair. But not today. Bockman's got a racing doubleheader to take in from the race room. The Indy race coverage kicks off at noon followed by the NASCAR Coca-Cola 600 at 5 p.m.

That's right – Bockman will not be at the race. His attendance record will now stand at 47 of the last 50 races.

"The kids are taking the tickets this year," Bockman said. "We are very involved with the church. My wife plays the bells and this is their Sunday. I can give up a race for her joy."

Even through the TV set, Bockman's eyes will light up when he sees the 350,000 to 400,000 fans and hears the traditional pre-race command: "Gentlemen, start your engines."