

ART AND FINISH



905 Packard on tour: De Palma at the start-finish line of the 1919 Santa Monica road race. Standing next to the car is Douglas Fairbanks, top film star of the day, honorary starter and enthusiastic race fan. Ralph set a lap record with the car in an exhibition run. Note dress of crowd, nearly everyone is in suit and tie.

Packard's Race Car Driver — Ralph DePalma — 1914-23

STORY BY GARY DOYLE

PHOTOS FROM GARY DOYLE ARCHIVES

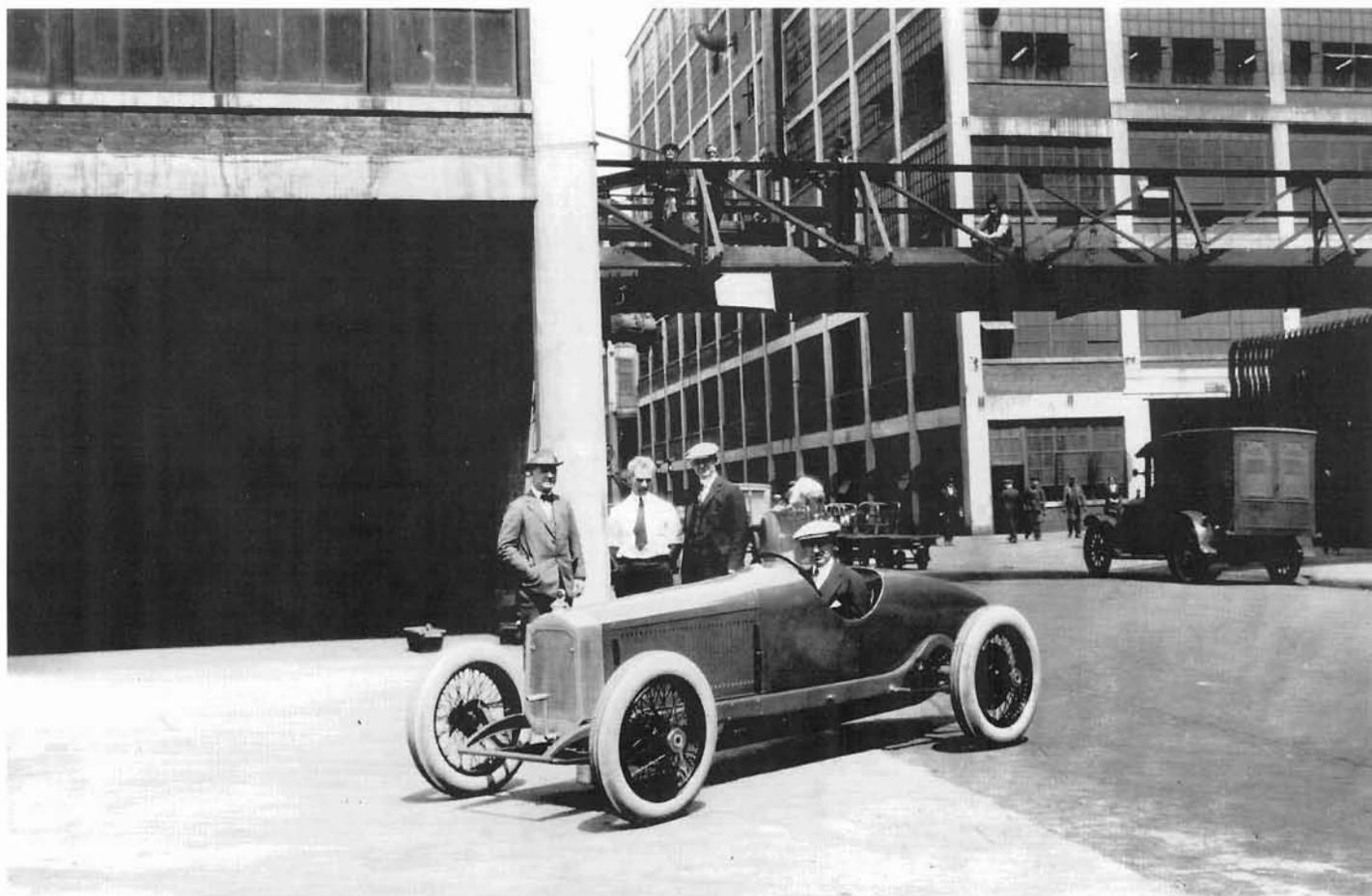
Ralph De Palma, perhaps America's greatest race car driver, had a long and productive relationship with the Packard Automobile Company. It began in 1914 and continued to the mid-1930s.

It started when De Palma raced in the 1914 French Grand Prix on the eve of

World War I in a British car, a Vauxhall. He was originally scheduled to drive for the Mercedes team. Through a series of decisions made by the German company, Ralph De Palma and his backer, E. C. Patterson, Ralph bought the Mercedes car that finished second. Mercedes won the race. They had six cars at Lyons, France

where the race was held, and the British and French confiscated three of them after the outbreak of war. Three made it back to Stuttgart and De Palma brought one to the United States. (See photo page 13.)

Jesse Vincent, Packard's chief engi-



122 Packard: The 1923 Packard "122" taken in May, 1923. Joe Boyer is in the cockpit with (l to r) Alvan Macauley, PMCC President, Ralph DePalma himself, and Col. Jesse Vincent, Director of PMCC Engineering behind the car.

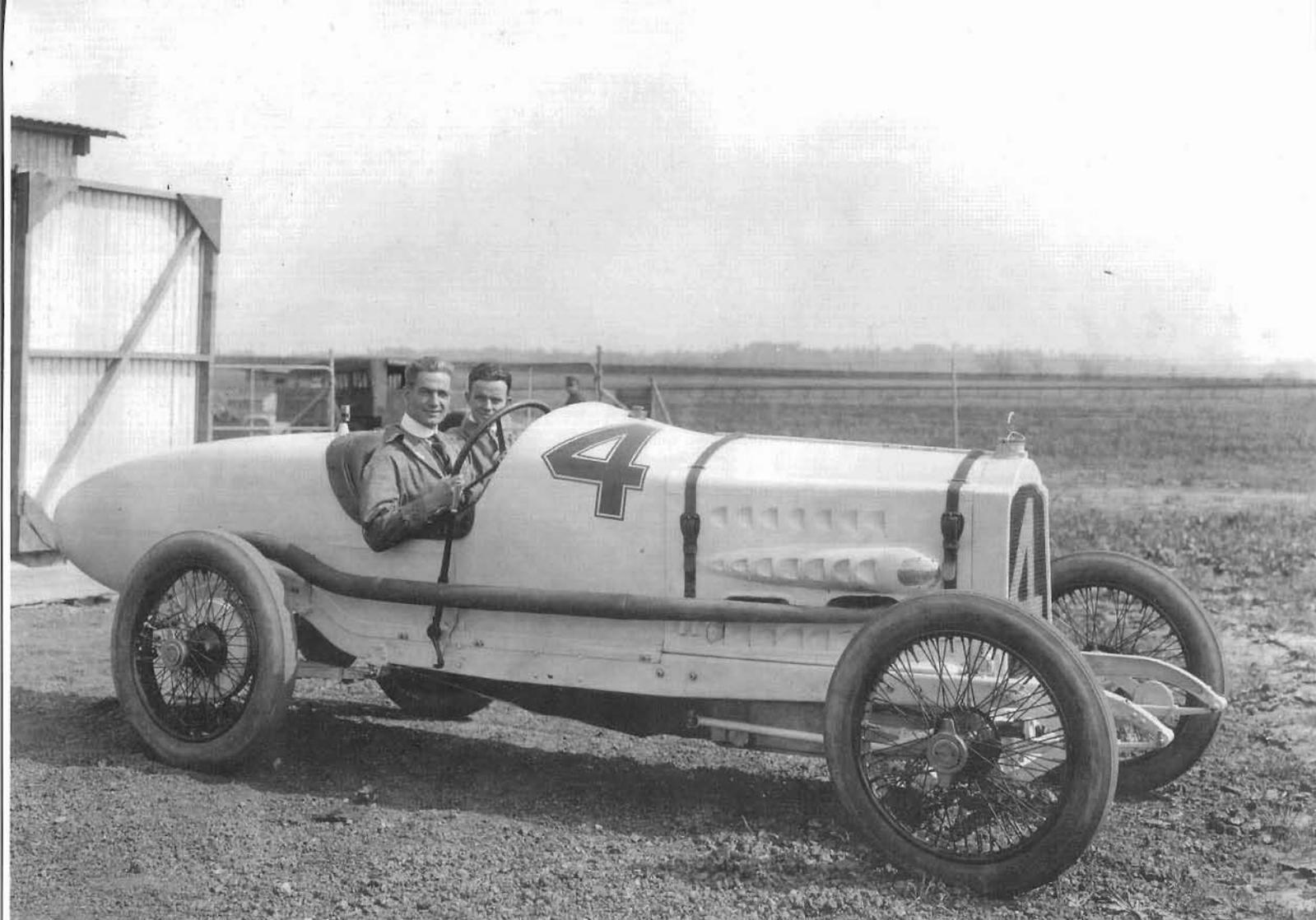
neer, was very interested in looking at the Mercedes engine. The German company had put versions of aero motors in their Grand Prix cars in 1913 and 1914. Ralph secured examples of both and during the 1913-1916 time period lent them to Packard for study. Vincent had been given the direction by Packard to develop an aero engine for the projected needs of the United States in the coming war. Many of the design features of the 1914 Mercedes Grand Prix machine wound up in the various Packard aero engines that preceded the famous World War I "Liberty." Working on these projects De Palma and Vincent developed a close personal and professional friendship and worked together building, testing and racing the 1914 Mercedes then various Packard race cars.

The first was the very successful "299" Packard that Ralph raced on the American board tracks from 1917 to 1919, and the 1919 Indianapolis 500. Vincent designed an aero engine to fit the 300 cubic inch formula for automobile racing in existence at the time. He wanted to test the engine in a race car instead of an airplane because it was cheaper, safer and more controllable. The motor was extensively tested during 1915 and 1916 and raced by De Palma from 1917 through 1919. It may have been De Palma's most successful racing machine over a long and storied career. It was fast and ideally suited to the board tracks. He

owned the car because Packard, while interested in testing the engine, was not interested in the direct expense of supporting a race team. (See photo page 12.)

After the successful testing of the "299" Vincent and Packard's engineers developed what is known as the "905." This engine was more suited to propelling an actual aircraft and was a direct precursor to the Liberty. Three were built and tested prior to Packard and other companies manufacturing some 20,000 Liberty engines for war planes. While most never made it to the combat zone in Europe they would show up in postwar aircraft, watercraft and other military and civilian applications.

During the war De Palma and Vincent both served at McCook Airfield in Dayton, Ohio. Vincent was base commander for most of 1918 and Ralph was flight director for about half the year. At McCook they put in place a plan for Ralph to take a "905" with a special chassis designed to attempt new land speed records at Ormond/Daytona Beach. After both men left the military they immediately went to work at the Packard factory in Detroit to fabricate this car, Vincent returning to the position of Vice-President of Engineering and De Palma employed by the racing department. From late January to middle February of 1919, De Palma set every American speed



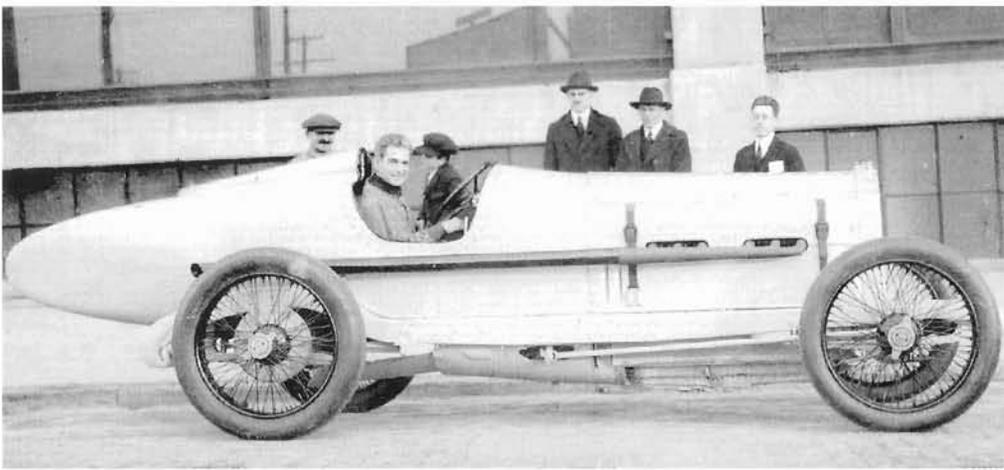
299 Packard: Photo taken in front of the Packard garage at Sheepshead Bay board track in 1917. Ralph De Palma sits in the cockpit of the cream colored 12-cylinder Packard race car he purchased from the company. A high tech machine for the age. It had an engine displacement of 299 cubic inches and an aluminum body.

record from one to twenty miles. The beach car achieved a speed of just less than 150 miles per hour through the measured mile (149.8 mph) and 134.7 mph for twenty miles. In an era when people and news sources hung on every new speed record, De Palma and Packard were at the height of awareness and recognition. (See photo page 13.)

Presumably, Packard spent the huge capital and corporate effort to manufacture the "905" to position Packard's domestic car products after the war. Subsequent to the record setting in Florida the "905" made a nationwide tour of race venues, automobile shows and public displays for seven months after the success on the beach. Remember, that this is 1919 and De Palma was the fastest human on earth. The straight line airplane speed record was 127 mph set in 1913. War pursuit planes were about as fast as the "905" but going that fast on land was a unique experience and not without huge amounts of risk. The car, with De Palma in the cockpit, made appearances in Los Angeles, Denver, Indianapolis, New York and Toronto, Canada among other places. It always attracted press attention and the Packard publicity department worked hard at all the appearance

locations to relate the attributes and performance of the record car to its passenger automobile product. While not suggesting its consumer products were as fast as the beach car it was all about Packard engineering, product development and attention to detail that allowed De Palma to set all the new records. (See photo of 905 with Fairbanks on page 10.)

This seemed to be the only "race car" Packard was interested in at the time. There was no effort to update the "299" or develop another competitive vehicle for De Palma to campaign with for the rest of 1919 and beyond. Ralph left the employ of the company and pursued Ballot then Duesenberg for his racing program. Packard's interest in racing was strategically focused on their study of Mercedes technology, engine development for warplanes and promotion of their passenger cars after the war. They never developed a racing team beyond the thorough testing of the "299" and "905" while supporting the activities of Ralph De Palma. That changed in 1922 when Jesse Vincent contracted with Ralph to develop a Packard race car based on the 122 cubic inch displacement formula for the 1923 racing season.



905 Packard: Ralph and the land speed record car in front of the Packard factory on East Grand Blvd, Detroit, in 1919. It was a new car with the 12-cylinder 905 cubic inch aero engine with which De Palma set all American speed records from one to twenty miles at Daytona Beach in February of 1919.

De Palma was interested in this project because of his desire to engineer automobiles. In 1916 he had started his own company to produce racing cars and engines. While this venture did not survive the war, Ralph was still interested in race car development and found the opportunity with the Packard 122 project. By contract three cars were to be built and raced in California prior to their introduction at the 1923 Indianapolis 500. De Palma set up shop in the facilities of Earle C. Anthony in Los Angeles. Anthony was the largest Packard dealer west of Chicago. It took longer than anticipated to build the cars and Vincent finally ordered everything moved to Detroit. The cars were never tested under fire until the 500 and as a result were not sorted properly and all three, while qualified for the race, with one on the front row, were out before mid-race. Vincent in his daily diary talks a lot about the tribulations of building and testing these cars and notes that on the eve of the race it was apparent the machines were not going to make the entire 500 miles. He checked with Alvan Macauley, the President of the Company, asking him whether they should be withdrawn. They raced but were fragile. (See photo on page 11.)

The cars were beautiful and had state of the art six cylinder engines. They were well covered by the press in the lead up to the race and given a chance to win. Two of the three drivers, De Palma and Dario Resta had won the 500 before and Joe Boyer would win the next year, 1924. Immediately after the race the cars were sent back to Detroit and two of the three were cut up for scrap and the third at least in part has survived to the present day. Either because of the dismal failure at Indianapolis or a different direction by the marketing or accounting departments of the company, the "122" Packard project was scrapped and all aspects of its existence were suppressed. No photographs of the car under development nor any of the patterns or blueprints have survived. It is as if the car never existed. The original intent was to race the machines against the Millers and Duesenbergs on the board tracks

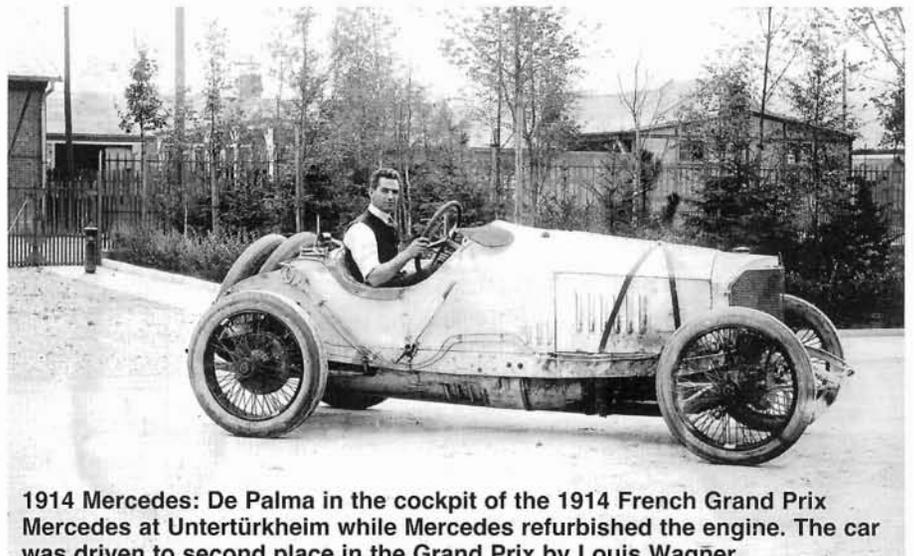
and develop their potential. Jesse

Vincent repeatedly discussed this in his diary and the press. De Palma had spent the better part of a year designing and building the cars. He was left without a ride for the season beyond Indianapolis.

The demise of the "122" project effectively ended De Palma's association with Packard in regards to racing. He did work for a Packard dealership in Indiana as a salesman during his retirement in the mid-1930s. What had started with Packard's interest in wartime aero engine development and produced a productive relationship with arguably the best driver in America ended with the corporation parking the beautiful little blue race cars in Detroit.

These events are discussed in great detail in my new book *Ralph De Palma, Gentleman Champion* which is available for \$80.00 by calling toll free at 866-600-6973 or visiting my website at www.king-of-the-boards.com. The book is a racing biography of De Palma with much historical information and photographic resources regarding his contemporaries and the automobile racing scene during what has been called the Golden Age of American Racing. The book is beautifully produced and limited to 1,500 individually numbered and signed copies.

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1914 Mercedes: De Palma in the cockpit of the 1914 French Grand Prix Mercedes at Untertürkheim while Mercedes refurbished the engine. The car was driven to second place in the Grand Prix by Louis Wagner.