

Unfair Advantages: The Life and Times of Mark Donohue

by Ruth Baron '06

A fire at the Sunoco refinery near the airport dominated the front pages of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, but the sports section belonged to Mark Donohue, a racecar driver who had blown a tire during a practice run before the Austrian Grand Prix and died from complications related to the accident two days later, August 19, 1975. Donohue was a hometown hero who'd grown up in South Jersey and raced out of prominent Philadelphia suburbs. The coverage of his death bore startling similarities to the news of the six firefighters who had lost their lives at the refinery. Like Donohue, most of those men had attended work that day, as they did most days, risking everything but fearing little; they too were young, with wives and children waiting for men who never came home. As the city of Philadelphia demanded Sunoco accept responsibility, they gazed at photographs of Donohue emerging from the blue and gold Sunoco sponsored McLaren, a grin marking his 1972 Indianapolis 500 win.

The funerals must have been eerily similar as well. Firefighters and police mourning their fallen brothers, knowing it might have been them, thinking maybe it should have, praying it would never be. The great names of racing all came to pay last respects to Donohue. Mario Andretti, Gary Bettenhausen, Bobby Allison, Tom Sneva. His friend and racing partner, Roger Penske, whose cars Donohue had driven exclusively for almost a decade, led the pallbearers carrying Donohue's casket from the church.

"Is there something wrong with us?" Peter Gregg, a fellow racecar driver and friend asked a week later in *The New York Times*. This is where, of course, the similarities to the firefighters end. For while they had died saving lives, Gregg's question was legitimate; Donohue, at thirty-eight years old, was not inexperienced. He had been racing for more than fifteen years. In addition to winning Indy in 1972 (where he was the first driver ever to drive more than 160 miles per hour), he'd also been named the race's Rookie of the Year in 1969. He won the International Race of Champions in Daytona Beach, Florida the year before his death and set the world's closed course speed record-221.16 mph. His racing career had begun almost immediately after his graduation from Brown University in 1959, and he would go on to win a total of fifty major races, setting numerous track records along the way. His degree in mechanical engineering would ensure that he knew how his car was working from the inside out. When he helped build and design cars, the *Inquirer* reported in an obituary, he searched "for ways to assure a driver that his car was not a torpedo designed for destruction solely for the enjoyment of blood-thirsty spectators." He was an extraordinarily talented driver who understood the risks of racing; a driver who left behind a wife, Eden, and two children, Michael and David.

But Gregg, himself a Harvard grad, understood just how insignificant all of this could be. "Did the tire that burst on Mark Donohue's car last week in Austria know how good he was?" he asked in the same article. "And did the blood clot that killed him know how good he was?" Donohue must have known the obvious answers to these questions. He'd already suffered a major injury a month after winning Indy; he'd crashed during a test run and mangled his leg so badly doctors warned he would never race again. Even more tellingly, he'd retired of his own volition less than a year before his death. Why would such a man choose to race? And why, after having already proven himself as a champion many times over, would he return to a sport he knew could kill him at any moment?

In nearly every surviving photo of him, Donohue's face bears a boyish smile. Brown's 1958 year book, *Liber Brunensis*, shows a soft-faced, sandy-haired young man, a poster child for the brotherhood of Theta Delta Chi. A Pembroke woman stands to his side, and the caption reads, "At left is 'Cherub' Donohue with beer can, tennis shoe, and charming companion: triad of Ivyism." This was, coincidentally, the first year he would race, caught up in the same boyish obsession with speedy driving as his Ivy League friends, none of whom would ever approach his status as a driver.

It was a year earlier, in the spring of his sophomore year at Brown, that Mark Donohue had developed sports car envy. The love affair with cars had begun even before that when, at the age of fifteen, he'd bought his first, a '37 Ford hot rod. With no license, his experience was limited to driveways and empty fields. He'd been through others since, but something about that spring among fraternity brothers with Jaguar and Mercedes roadsters drove him to flashy two-seaters with powerful engines built for speed. His father, who believed two-seater sports cars "were the peak of frivolous transportation" encouraged him to at least buy American. Using his mechanical engineering studies to evaluate gear ratios and carburetors he selected a bright red '57 Chevrolet Corvette. It may have been slightly more modest than his friends' imports, but girls still tried to climb in whenever he stopped at traffic lights.

About a year later he accompanied a Brown friend, Dave Lawton, to Laconia, New Hampshire, a town nearly three hours away from Providence, where Lawton belonged to a racing club. Despite the fact that Donohue himself was not a member, he was allowed to run in his Corvette as Lawton's guest. His Corvette was a street-stock car which was showy on the street, but certainly not designed for race tracks or hill climbs, and he found himself matched up against experienced racers with high-performance equipment Donohue could neither imagine nor afford, yet he somehow secured the best time of the day. In his autobiography, Donohue ascribes his win, somewhat ironically, to an "Unfair Advantage," a phrase which becomes the book's title. He suggests that though the Corvette was a street car, it was better prepared for the hill climb necessary to win the race. At the same time he takes obvious pride in his victory; he'd

gone into the race against more experienced, better prepared drivers, and still out driven them.

Donohue narrates *The Unfair Advantage*, but the book is coauthored by Paul Van Valkenburgh and retains an as-told-to style. In the autobiography, he constantly walks this line between pride and humility, skill and chance. He paints himself as a naturally talented driver whose wins come from sheer luck. He races so well because he's fortunate enough to drive exceptional cars, exceptional cars he can easily identify and help to construct using his mechanical skills. This is, of course, the central tension of racing. Only a well designed car with perfectly tuned parts can reach speeds over 150 miles per hour, only a skilled, well trained driver can handle such an automobile. Yet at that speed even the best car and the best racer can't prevent a tire from blowing on the worst day. Every single race is a full-scale battle between the best laid plans and the unseen forces of the universe. The sport is essentially a game of defying physics, of exceeding gravity's speed limit. Flying may have thrilled him, but it was the science that kept him going. "It's the mechanical end of it," he once told a reporter, "the challenge of working with all this intricate machinery of trying to squeeze a few more hundredths of a second out of it. Now that's a thrill."

As often as this can go wrong, as often as the machine mutinies against man's control, as often as nature asserts limits of speed or movement, it didn't on May 27th of 1972 when Mark Donohue won the Indianapolis 500 with an average speed of 163.465 miles per hour. It was a sunny day with temperatures in the seventies, but they would reach well over a hundred inside of Donohue's blue Sunoco-McLaren-Offenhauser, a streamlined capsule with truck-sized wheels jutting out either side. In his shiny helmet, Donohue looks like the pilot of a rocket ship, tailed by the car's thin spoiler and the billowing smoke of other drivers' failures.

In early May of the year before he'd run 178 mph in his first test out on the track, a speed that surpassed the 172 mph other drivers believed to be the car's limit. Later, as the team gathered in their garage to tend to that car and process the day, Al Unser, who would go on to win Indy that year, entered and told Donohue, "Look, we've been competitors for a long time, and you have your way of doing things and I have mine, but when you come here and run six miles per hour faster than anyone else-I gotta shake your hand." He didn't get the win that year, but Donohue, along with Roger Penske and his racing team, was doing things with cars that other drivers couldn't even wrap their minds around.

When Donohue came back to Indianapolis in 1972 he was hungry for a championship, but nothing went according to plan. In the preceding month of qualification and preparation, he went through seven different engine failures-each for a separate problem. The day before the qualifying race, he broke the team's last motor, and the only alternate available was working at 100 horsepower shy of its capacity. If his boss, Penske, hadn't shelled out 35,000 dollars for a new motor Donohue wouldn't have even been in the race. After a month of frustrating failures he must have entered the race prepared for the worst, but drivers understand better than anyone how quickly their luck might change.

It took three hours, three minutes, and 31.55 seconds to win Indy. On "the happiest day" of his life, Donohue understood just how much luck had to do with it. First Peter Revson broke his gear box, then Bobby Unser broke his motor. His teammate, Gary Bettenhausen, a second generation racer, dropped out after his engine stopped responding properly. Donohue wasn't the last man standing, but Jerry Grant's bad pit-stop cleared the way for Donohue to take the race. The *Inquirer* wrote, "There was no victory celebration here. No popping of champagne corks. The mood was as somber as that of a Sunday morning church service. Racing is a close-knit world. But when one man's bad luck leads to another man's victory, even when they work for the same organization the pain is no less."

Donohue may not have openly or publicly gloated, but pain certainly wasn't the view from the victory lap in the Oldsmobile convertible pace car. He drank the traditional victory bottle of milk while they handed him the gigantic Borg-Warner trophy. His face, as all the Indy champions before and after him, would later be carved onto its side beneath the startlingly nude male brandishing a racing flag. Fruit of his victory in hand, he found his mother next to him on the podium, smiling for the cameras. A young spectator, a woman, instructed a crew member to give Donohue a very clear congratulatory message: "Tell Mark that if he wants to, he can have my body tonight." As the mechanic relayed the message he handed the racer a slip of paper with her address and phone number written on it. "There was a gal who was truly down-to-earth!" Donohue exclaimed in *The Unfair Advantage*.

Later, as he waited at a bar to meet his team for TV interviews, the bartender recognized him and offered a drink on the house. As the other patrons realized who was drinking in their midst, they one by one bought drinks, far faster than they could be consumed. When he left to go to the network, he left behind beverages lined up like dominoes, all the way down the bar and around the corner. The driver spoke so "grossly" that the interview had to be heavily edited before it was broadcast; apparently Donohue's language couldn't handle its liquor. The sportswriters reported none of this; most likely they didn't see it, but even if they had, Donohue had already proven himself to be an exceptionally sensitive and composed athlete.

Perhaps he was such a gracious winner because he'd had such a rough month. His sense of luck didn't detract from his pride, but he understood just how easily he might have been the race's loser. In *The Unfair Advantage* he describes, rather poetically, the feeling of the final laps at Indy.

When I'm ahead, and everything is working properly, it's like living in another world. Late in the race the windshield collects a lot of oil from other cars, and it becomes almost completely black. I don't really see the car as such . . . I'm going very fast, there's a lot of noise from the engine, and I can feel the cornering and accelerating forces as if I were the car . . .

I just seem to be part of a well-oiled machine. That's the sensation that's so thrilling to me-knowing that everything in the system is working exactly as it's supposed to. And the longer I'm away from that, the harder it is to understand or describe it. Most people who have never been in that position will *never* understand it.

That's when I lose sight of the fact that racing drivers do something. There is no conscious skill involved at that point, and I feel what I'm doing is the obvious, natural thing to do. The driver is simply doing what the car wants to be done.

The description is strange to those of us who have never driven a race car; who have never tested the boundaries of speed; who have never challenged natural forces with mechanics. Donohue knew this feeling of auto-pilot only came from years of experience and the help of an extremely skilled team of designers of mechanics. He'd defended the sport to a reporter, saying, "I know it might not look like much, looking down into a cockpit and seeing you turn a wheel here, shift a lever there. But there are so many precise movements under high load conditions, and even just holding your head up against a cornering force, you have to be so strong." He may have learned to feel like driving was only an obvious, natural thing to do, but he also knew intimately the moments where drivers were intended to ignore and defy the obvious and the natural.

Donohue never discusses his major accident in *The Unfair Advantage*. He mentions the minor scrapes, and describes in detail the damage to the cars. The deaths and funerals of his peers receive similarly brief treatment; he never addresses feelings of loss or questions of mortality. Though his 1972 crash in Atlanta only stole a short moment of his career, it can't have been an insignificant event in his mind. An *Inquirer* reporter recalled the brutality of the accident, describing how the car had "disintegrated at 200 miles an hour, crushing his legs and searing his body." But Donohue was back to racing only a few short months later, and back to winning just as quickly.

By 1974, Donohue's retirement couldn't have surprised his friends and teammates or the sportswriters who had grown to love him. Racing is a dangerous sport, and he had a family. He'd already won around a million dollars in prize money, and his mechanical skills ensured he could remain around cars for as long as he wished. And it was probably no great surprise, then either, when he left retirement only seven months later. A friend and former teammate, Peter Revson, had died in a crash, and Donohue and Penske decided he was the most suitable replacement. He made no great show of ending his retirement, and expressed humility at his reentry, reminding anyone who asked that no driver had ever successfully returned from retirement. "And I don't think I'm going to be the exception to that rule. Drivers can't go on forever." But he must have wanted to challenge that law as well, test the limits of his own body, his own skill. "No guy in this business is ever really, completely satisfied," he'd once said. In such a competitive business, it seems plausible that that's the reason they never stop trying.

If he was looking for satisfaction at the Austrian Grand Prix, he would not have found it. In a practice lap, his right front tire blew causing him to crash into the catch fencing, igniting flames most drivers are used to seeing. The car was damaged beyond repair, but it looked like Mark Donohue would be fine. The *Inquirer* reported no news of the accident the following day, noting the winner as well as damage to another driver's car during the race. He seems to have been conscious at the hospital, complaining of a worsening headache. The pain turned out to be a blood clot in his brain, and he required immediate surgery. The operation appeared successful, but the doctors warned it would be nearly a week before they'd know for sure. While the newspapers reported the racer in stable condition, he slipped in and out of a coma until he died at around midnight on August 19th with his wife Eden by his side.

The sports pages insisted fans not mourn the loss too sadly, for Donohue had understood the risks of racing, accepted them, and continued to drive despite them. Photographs from the funeral show Penske, stony faced but composed, joined by similarly unmoved drivers at Donohue's casket. No matter how good a driver he had been, friends and colleagues remembered him most for his sportsmanship, intelligence, and kindness. In the obituaries, his wife and children are mere footnotes to his career. Most of them don't even mention the parents who survived their only son.

Donohue barely mentions his family in his autobiography either, but they must have been a presence in his racing career. Perhaps the reason he and his first wife, Sue, the mother of his children, divorced was her fears of his mortality. His friends held a reunion in 2005, thirty years after his death, celebrating Donohue's career. A photograph shows Sue standing next to a Sunoco blue and gold Camaro. She smiles at the camera, but she looks slightly uncomfortable, almost nervous. Her son, David is pictured at the same event, behind the wheels of various cars Donohue had driven; they had been restored and loaned by their current owners for the occasion. David Donohue is a racecar driver, too, on a team sponsored by Jay Leno. He recently set a street car closed-course speed record of 196.301 miles per hour at Talladega, the same track where his father set a race car closed-course speed record of 221.16 miles per hour ten days before his death.

"Is there something wrong with us?" Gregg wondered, and by the end of the article he seemed unsure. "I believe the purpose of my life is to enjoy it," he wrote. But he also said he would no longer race in Formula One or Indianapolis cars, that they were simply too dangerous. (One of the reasons Donohue cited for leaving retirement was a desire to try Formula One racing, "It's the one thing I haven't done in my career," he said, "it's the ultimate challenge.") To this day, Formula One is less popular in the United States than it is abroad in countries like Austria where Donohue was killed, but NASCAR isn't exactly *safer*. Some claim it's easier because the races take place on oval tracks instead of using twisting, winding turns popular in Formula One, but as a result speed dwarfs skill every time, and crashes garner more attention than wins. This direction of popularity the sport has taken, with its emphasis on unrefined speed and senseless destruction, seems a far cry from Donohue's love of fine tuned mechanics and the fair and unfair advantages they enable.

Donohue probably believed there was nothing wrong with him until his car was on fire. Even then, it was something he'd seen countless other drivers experience; sometimes they survived, sometimes they didn't. "Fear is just something I won't allow myself to think about," he once said. "If you stopped to think you'd probably stop racing."

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