



49.1975.2 Indianapolis Motor Speedway  
Marion County  
Marker Text Review Report  
8/12/2014

## Marker Text

### Indianapolis Motor Speedway

Constructed in 1909, the Speedway has contributed significantly to the advancement of automotive technology and development of safety devices. It is unchallenged as the world's oldest continuously operated race course and the site of the largest one-day sports event anywhere. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and dedicated on the 59<sup>th</sup> running of the "500," May 25, 1975.

## Report

This State Historical Marker highlighting the importance of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway touches on the historical significance of the prestigious racecourse. Although the majority of the text is correct, the marker does not elaborate on the specifics of the track's history. Nearly 40 years after the dedication of this marker, some details are no longer entirely accurate. Below is a list of factually correct statements from the historical marker with some clarification of the Speedway's unique history:

- The Indianapolis Motor Speedway was constructed in 1909. The text does not mention that the facility was originally built for a multitude of different types of racing including hot air balloons, motorcycles, automobiles, and airplanes. The first Indianapolis 500 was not held until May, 1911, but the marker does not note the date of the event. Without these important facts, the text may mislead the reader to believe the track was built specifically for the Indianapolis 500, and that the automobile race began as early as 1909.<sup>1</sup>
- The Speedway has "contributed significantly to the advancement of automotive technology and development of safety devices." The marker lacks examples including technological advancements in the racing surface, the installation of safety lights, mandatory use of helmets, safer engineered designs of the automobile, the creation of the rear-engine car, the constant competition to create faster cars, use of non-combustible and alternative fuels, and the SAFER barriers used to minimize impact against the racing wall. Some of these technological and safety innovations came to fruition after the marker's installation and are mentioned here to highlight the race's continued contribution to automotive technology and safety.<sup>2</sup>
- The Indianapolis Motor Speedway, at the time of this review, still purports to be "the site of the largest one-day sports event," but IHB now avoids the use of subjective and superlative terms such as "first," "best," and "most." Such claims are often not verifiable and/or require extensive qualification to be truly accurate, especially as time passes and additional information is made available.
- The famed track is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was listed on March 7, 1975.<sup>3</sup>

Again, IHB avoids the use of subjective and superlative terms in marker texts. The marker text's assertion that "It is unchallenged as the world's oldest continuously operated race course" is an excellent example of why the agency adopted this policy.



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The Milwaukee Mile racecourse in Milwaukee, Wisconsin noted in 2008 on its website that “Motorized racing events date back to 1903, a full eight years before the first Indianapolis 500, making The Mile the oldest, continually operating motor speedway in the world.” The Milwaukee Mile racecourse challenges the claim, and even singles out the Indianapolis Motor Speedway specifically.<sup>4</sup>

Verifying the Milwaukee racecourse’s statement would require searching microfilmed Milwaukee newspapers that are not available locally, an endeavor outside the scope of this review. The Milwaukee Mile does offer a list of winners in open-wheel and stock car races held at the racecourse, starting in 1912. Stock car racing did not begin at that site until 1948. Though the documentation offered by The Mile is incomplete, it remains plausible that “motorized” racing may have occurred prior to 1909 at the site, including races that were not sanctioned by National Automobile Associations, or races featuring other motorized vehicles.

It could also be argued that the Indianapolis Motor Speedway has not been “continuously operated” as a racetrack since its construction in 1909. Two world wars caused the speedway to halt races from 1917-1918 and 1942-1945.<sup>5</sup> According to historian Sigur E. Whitaker, Tony Hulman purchased the track in November, 1945 and spent millions of dollars to repair the dilapidated and unused grounds for the 1946 race.<sup>6</sup> Primary sources were not located to corroborate this claim, but it is plausible. There has been an Indianapolis 500 every year since 1946, a Brickyard 400 since 1994, a United States Grand Prix (Formula One) race from 2000-2007, and a Moto[r]cycle Grand Prix starting in September, 2008.<sup>7</sup>

### Learn More

Learn more about the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with a visit to the [official website](#) or pay a visit to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway [Hall of Fame Museum](#).

### Recommended Reading:

Arute, Jack, Jenna Fryer, A. J. Foyt, and Jack Arute. 2012. *Tales from the Indianapolis 500: a collection of the greatest Indy 500 stories ever told*. New York: Sports Pub.

Kramer, Ralph. 2009. *Indianapolis Motor Speedway 100 years of racing*. Iola, Wis: Krause.

Whitaker, Sigur E. 2011. *James Allison a Biography of the Engine Manufacturer and Indianapolis 500 Cofounder*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co.

Whitaker, Sigur E. 2014. *Tony Hulman: the man who saved the Indianapolis Motor Speedway*.

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<sup>1</sup> “Motorcycle Race Certain,” *Indianapolis Star*, February 21, 1909. This article noted a motorcycle race would be held at the new Indianapolis track, and that construction was scheduled to begin in March; “Woman and Girl to go Along in Balloon Race,” *Indianapolis News*, March 12, 1909; “Contract Let for Motor Speedway,” *Indianapolis Star*,



March 16, 1909; “Conditions Ideal for Balloon Races,” *Indianapolis News*, June 5, 1909; “Only Two Balloons are Still in Air,” *Indianapolis News*, June 7, 1909; “Balloon Indiana Makes a Landing,” *Indianapolis News*, June 8, 1909; “Motorcycle Army Takes Possession,” *Indianapolis News*, August 12, 1909; “They’re off at Motor Speedway,” *Indianapolis News*, August 14, 1909; “Records Smashed in Auto Races,” *Indianapolis News*, August 19, 1909; “Track Pronounced in Good Condition,” August 20, 1909; “Five World’s Records Melt,” *Indianapolis News*, August 21, 1909; “Indianapolis Motor Speedway to be Scene of Principal Racing Event Scheduled for 1910,” *Indianapolis News*, April 16, 1910; “Great Crowd at Speedway Races,” *Indianapolis News*, May 27, 1910; “Official Revise List of Winners,” *Indianapolis News*, June 1, 1911; D. Bruce Scott, *Indy: Racing Before the 500* (Redington Shores, Florida, 2005), 22, 24, 34, 40, 86.

<sup>2</sup> View a timeline of track safety improvements at <http://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/history/51999/>. See also Liz Clarke, “IndyCar Makes Switch to Ethanol,” Washington Post [Online], March 21, 2007, accessed 8/21/2014; Indianapolis Motor Speedway, *Indianapolis 500: The Legacy Series* (5 DVD Set, IMS Productions).

<sup>3</sup> National Register of Historic Places Focus Database, accessed August 22, 2014, <http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Milwaukee Mile no longer has an official web presence at milwaukeeemile.com (as of August 2014), but [Save The Mile](#) and the [Wisconsin State Fair](#) (current owner/operator) make these assertions in their promotional materials. Read an updated history of the track [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> “Sports News Briefs,” Freeport [IL] Journal Standard, March 15, 1917, 8; “Speedway Race Off,” Tipton [IN] Daily Tribune, March 23, 1917; “500 Mile Races May 30 As Usual,” Brownsville [TX] Herald, January 16, 1941, 8; “\$50,000 Auto Event On Again Next Year,” Washington Post, December 8, 1918, 22; “Speedway Now Just a Grassy Track,” Tipton [IN] Tribune, May 27, 1944, 2; “Kokomo Guards Given Detail at Speedway,” Kokomo [IN] Tribune, March 30, 1946, 2.

<sup>6</sup> See also Sigur E. Whitaker, Tony Hulman: The Man Who Saved the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See especially the Indianapolis Motor Speedway’s timeline of past races at <http://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/history/51998/>.