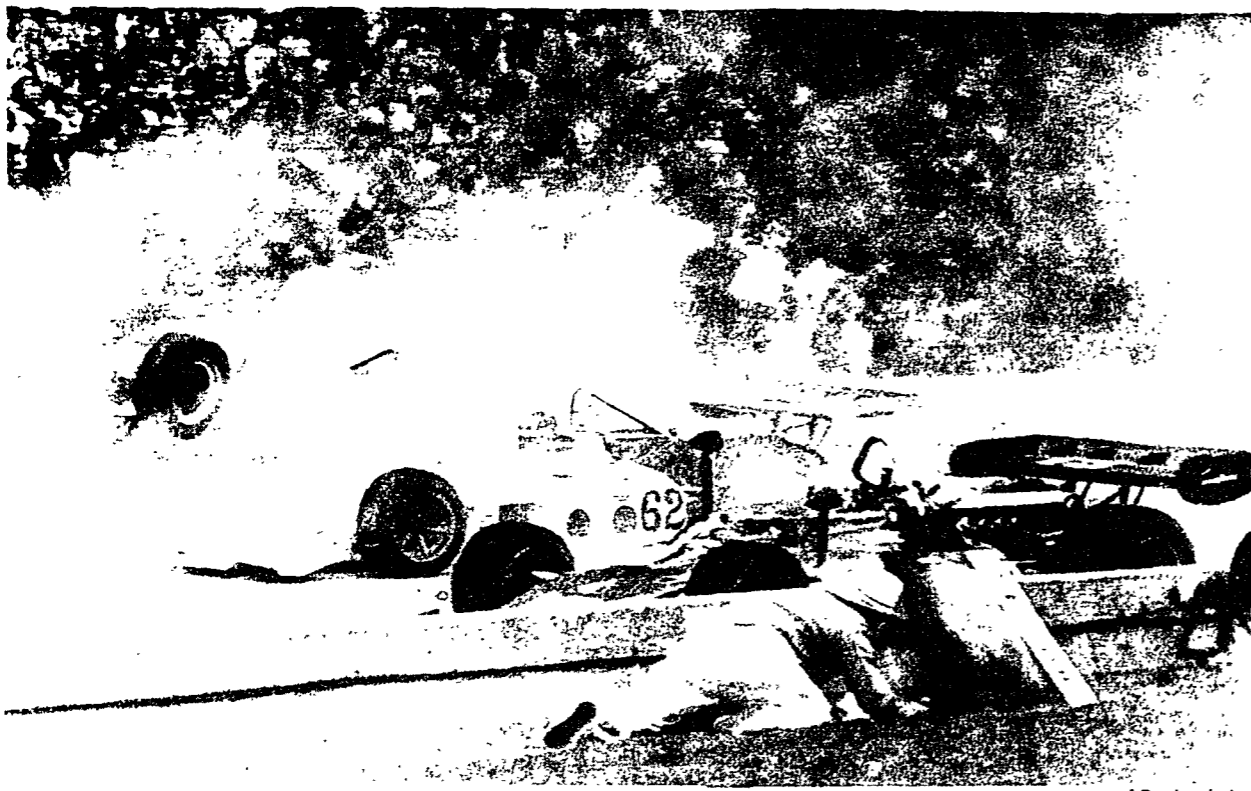


Rain postpones Indy before fiery crash



AP wirephoto

Walther critically injured in 9-car pileup

INDIANAPOLIS (AP)—A jarring, grinding collision only seconds after the racing flag was dropped brought an abrupt end to the 57th running of the Indianapolis 500-mile race yesterday.

The race, already delayed by showers for more than four hours, was put off until 10 a.m., EDT, today.

Last night's forecast called for a 30 per cent chance of scattered showers this morning and decreasing in the afternoon. "There will be a lot of shower-free time," a National Weather Service spokesman said.

One driver, David "Salt" Walther of Dayton, Ohio, was in critical condition in Indianapolis' Methodist Hospital with multiple burns on 40 per cent of his body and a broken left wrist.

Two other drivers and 18 spectators, apparently struck by flying debris, also were injured.

About 20 minutes after the

accident, rain drenched the track and the record crowd of more than 300,000 for a fifth time. Speedway officials quickly shut down the 2½-mile oval for the day.

The crash, reminiscent of a bigger, more serious one in 1966, involved nine cars. At

one of the 33 starters—Bob Harkey in 30th position couldn't get his motor cranked up—had made the two pace laps.

Then Walther, who had started in the middle of the sixth row, apparently lost control and veered across the

and hot metal. Of those treated at the infield hospital, most suffered burns—some to the corneas of their eyes. At least one was hit by flying debris.

David Hobbs, a tall, angular Britisher, drove through the pileup and escaped with slight damage to his car.

"We are supposedly the best drivers in the world, and we can't even drive down the bloody straight," he fumed.

In addition to Hobbs and Walther, other drivers involved in the wild melee of spinning machines were Jim McElreath, John Martin, Lloyd Ruby, Mike Hiss, Lee Kunzman, Wally Dallenbach, Dick Simon and Mike Mosely.

Walther, at 25 the youngest driver in the race, was making only his second start at the ancient Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

From a video tape replay of the accident, it appeared that another driver nudged the rear of Walther's car and knocked it into the wall. Then it was hit by other cars before it flipped and caught fire.

"We are supposedly the best drivers in the world and we can't even drive down the bloody straight."

—English driver David Hobbs

least three of them appeared to be so badly damaged they will not be able to make the restart.

It occurred about 100 yards down the track from where starter Pat Vidan had dropped the green racing flag, 4 hours 5 minutes after the scheduled start. All but

broad front straightaway and flipped into the high fence guarding the main grandstand.

The car burst into flames, then spun several times before coming to rest upside down in the grass near the first turn.

Spectators sitting in expensive box seats only 20 feet from the racing surface were sprayed with searing flames

'Salt' Walther saw both fire and rain

By WILL GRIMSLEY
AP Special Correspondent

INDIANAPOLIS (AP)—"Salt" Walther paced up and down in front of his garage on Gasoline Alley as periodic bursts of rain delayed the start of the 57th Indianapolis 500 yesterday.

"This is terrible," the 25-year-old Dayton, Ohio, native said. "I haven't eaten for two days. I have just built myself up emotionally for the start of this race. Now it is postponed."

"A guy really gets psyched up for a race like this and I guess I am as psyched up as anybody."

A couple of hours later, Walther's No. 77 McLaren-Offenhauser exploded in flames after crashing against the wall in the main stretch, the central casualty of a nine-car accident that sent gasps through the crowd of 350,000.

Two poles holding cables were snapped about six feet from the base and parts of shattered steel were hurled into the crowd. An undetermined number of spectators were treated for injuries. Two women were slipped through a hole in the fence and carried away in ambulances.

Walther was in critical condition in Indianapolis' Methodist Hospital with multiple burns on 40 per cent of his body and a broken left wrist. For the second year in a row, young Walther failed to complete the first lap of the grueling race.

Last year, the former hydro-plane racer now turned to the championship auto circuit, failed to complete it when his car suffered mechanical problems and coasted to a stop at the No. 2 turn.

"These long delays and on-again, off-again situations are tough on everybody but particularly on rookies," said Bobby Unser, 1968 winner and one of the favorites in this year's race. "I have a different description of rookies. I consider Salt

Walther, for instance, a rookie because of his lack of experience in this type of racing. Everybody gets butterflies in their stomachs, but it's these young guys like Walther who are hurt most by indecision and delay."

The accident exploded like a bomb on a gray, drippy day that saw flashes of sunshine and periodic invasion of clouds and rain.

Everyone seemed gay, like people attending a Sunday picnic or Fourth of July celebration, when Jim Nabors sang the traditional "Back Home in Indiana" and the cars were pushed onto the 2½-mile asphalt track for the start of the race after a four-hour delay.

Spectators strained against the ropes to watch the 33 cars being led on the customary pace lap preceding the 200-lap race. When the green flag went down, signaling the drivers to give the throttle their heaviest foot, the cars surged down the straightaway in front of the main grandstand so fast there was little but a blur.

Suddenly, there was a flash of fire and parts of finely tuned racing cars began flying through the air. Others started spinning and twisting over the track in full view of a majority of sport's biggest crowd turnout.

The suddenness of the accident sent a cold chill through the crowd. They stood like people frozen, straining for a sight and searching for word of the extent of the tragedy.

Women began crying and wringing their hands as crews dashed from the pit area to the track and back again and as ambulances whined, carrying the injured from the track to the hospital.

First reports were that Walther, who apparently was the most seriously hurt, suffered multiple burns on his face and body and had a back injury. He was picked up by helicopter

and flown to nearby Methodist Hospital in a maneuver as dramatic as the movies.

The uncertainty of the start of the race, resulting in the sixth delay or postponement in the event's 62-year history, brought varying reactions from the drivers who suffered through the long wait.

Bobby Allison, one of the three rookies in the starting field, appeared one of the most calm as he and Mark Donohue, the defending champion, chatted in the pit area while waiting for the announcement to get onto the track. "Yes, it's distracting," he said. "We would like to race but if there is a delay it's the same for everybody. It doesn't bother me."

Swede Savage of Santa Ana, Calif., agreed with Bobby Unser and Walther that delays such as that yesterday were tough on all the drivers.

"It's a big letdown — we all get psyched up and want to race," he said. "It becomes a question of just how many times you can psych yourself up for a big race. This is not like any ordinary race. This is the biggest one of all."

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