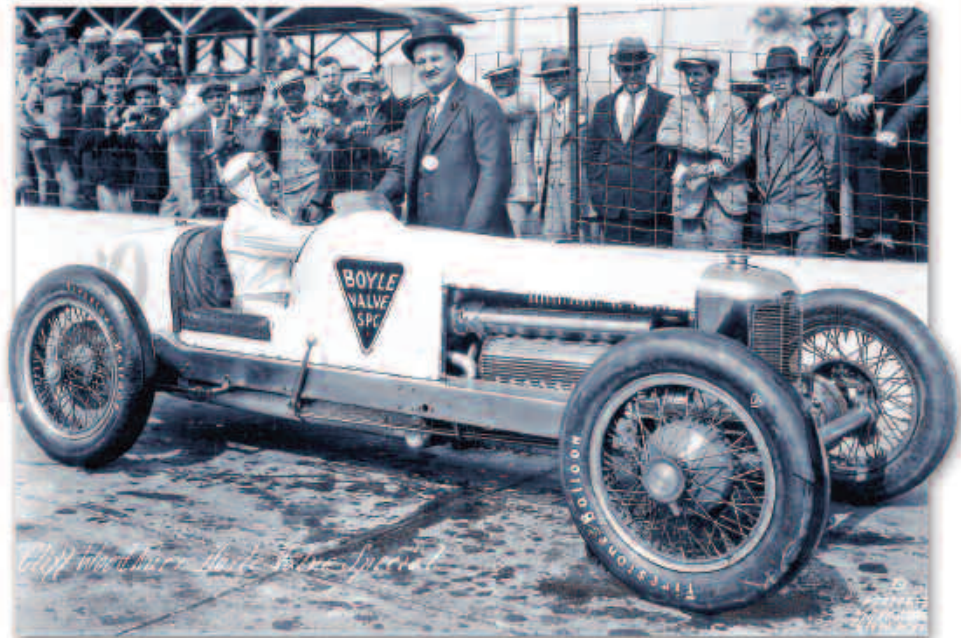


# The **IBEW's Racing** Legacy

*Before Alli Owens, There was the Legendary Mike Boyle*

It was Memorial Day 1940. More than 140,000 auto racing fans were gathered on the fairgrounds at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for one of the biggest racing events in the world. There were 32 drivers competing in the annual Indianapolis 500, but most eyes were focused on the Boyle Special, a little maroon Maserati with a clay pipe and a shamrock painted on its side. Behind the wheel was two-time cup winner Wilbur Shaw, who was hoping to win his third 500 and become the first driver in the race's history to win it two consecutive years.



**Mike Boyle, in bowler hat, stands behind one of his cars, the Boyle Valve Special.**

Shaw, then the most famous driver in the country, didn't disappoint. He dominated from the moment the green flag was dropped and would have likely set new speed records if it wasn't for a last minute rain shower, which forced the drivers to slow down. Sitting quietly in the stands, but watching with great satisfaction was Shaw's sponsor, Michael J. Boyle.

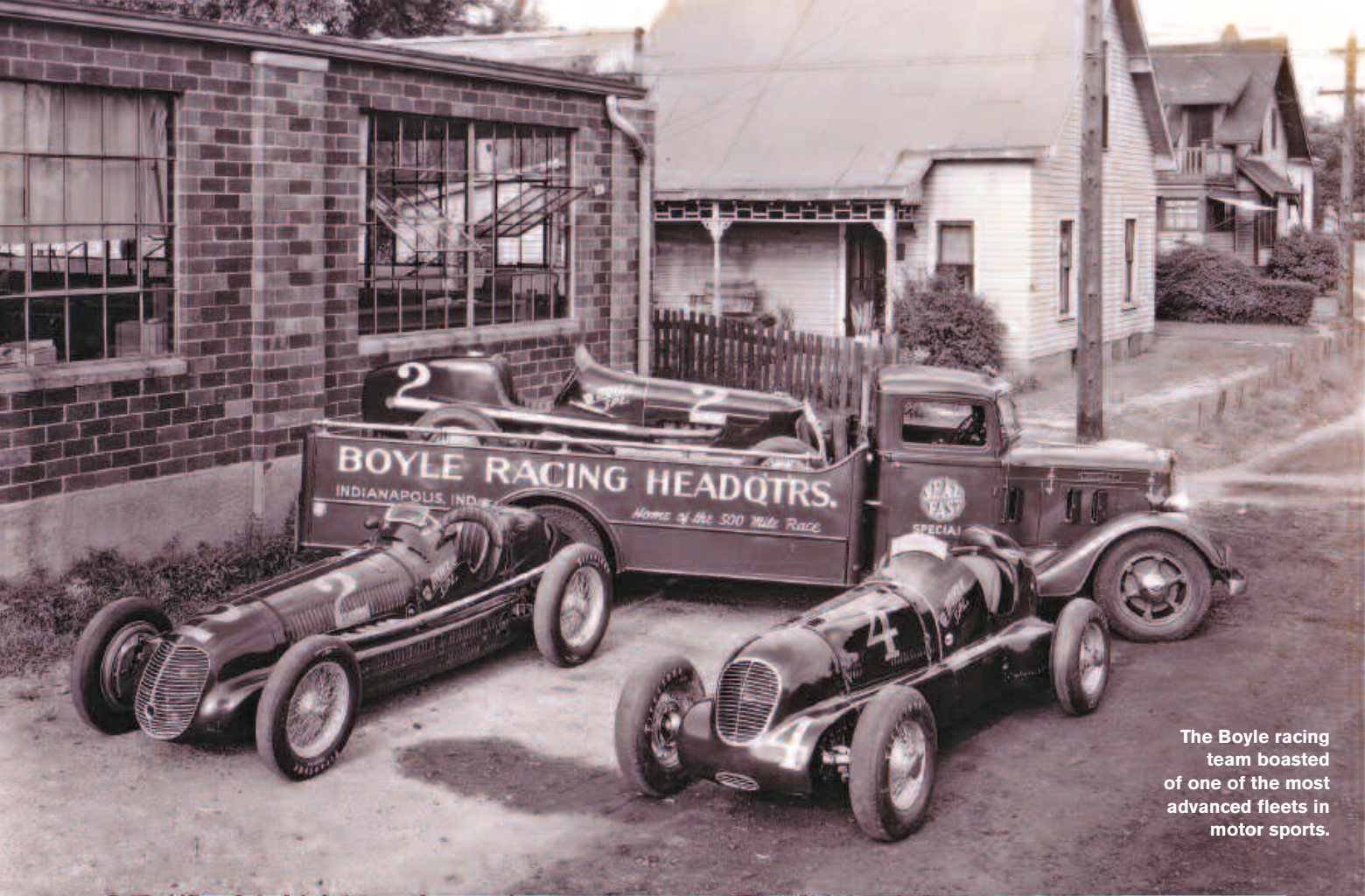
Boyle at the time was Chicago Local

134 business manager and Sixth District Vice President. Long before the IBEW and the National Electrical Contractors Association were sponsoring NASCAR driver Alli Owens, Boyle was one of sport's major backers, having sponsored two Indy 500 winners already.

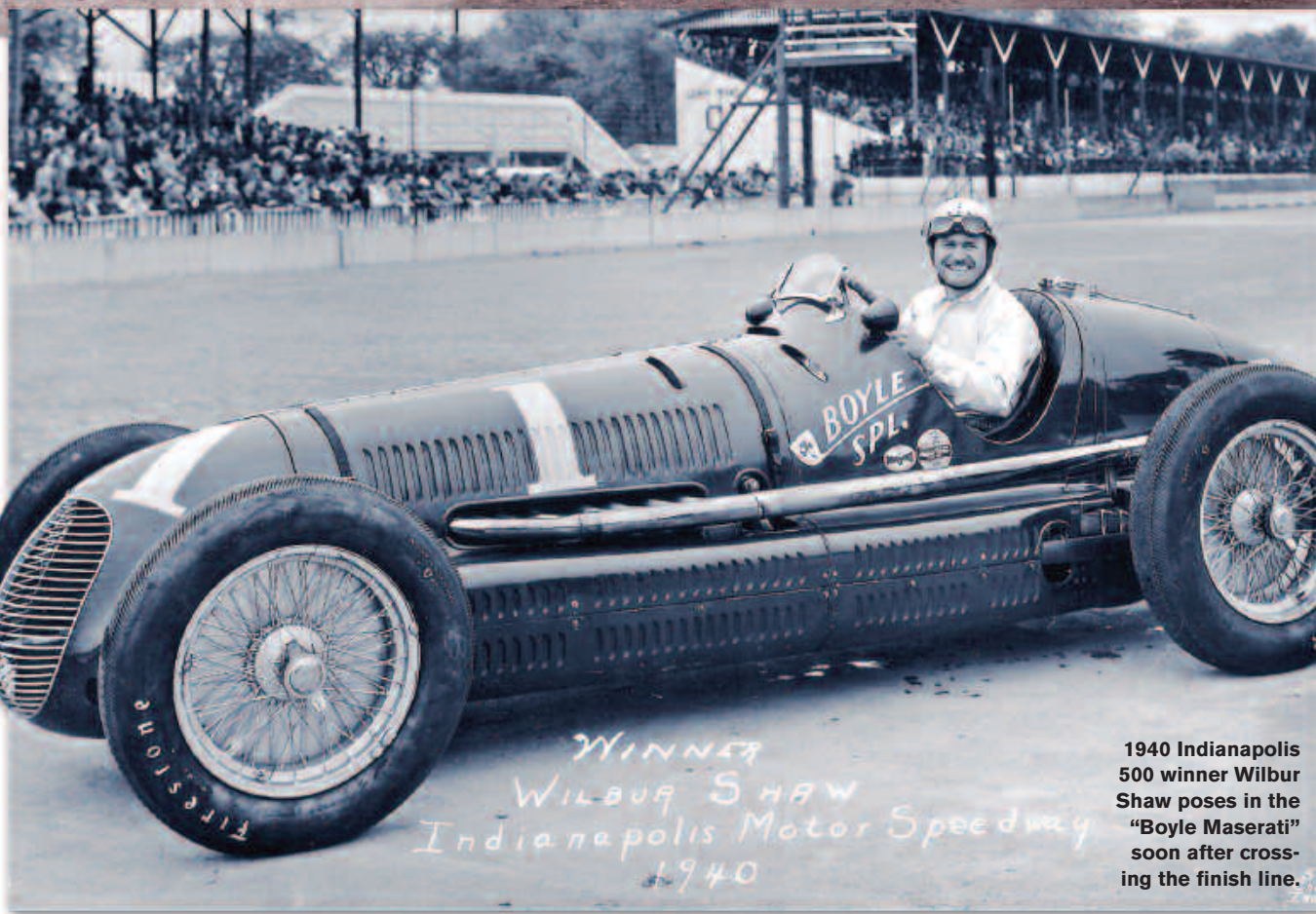
In the days before big corporate backers, only the very wealthy could afford to start up a racing team; the aver-

*(Continued on page 33)*





The Boyle racing team boasted of one of the most advanced fleets in motor sports.



WINNER  
WILBUR SHAW  
Indianapolis Motor Speedway  
1940

1940 Indianapolis 500 winner Wilbur Shaw poses in the "Boyle Maserati" soon after crossing the finish line.

## IBEW/NECA-SPONSORED ALLI OWENS RACES AT DAYTONA

For Alli Owens, a day of bad luck will never rub out the thrill of her first race at Daytona. Owens competed in the ARCA 200, prior to February's Daytona 500, in a Chevrolet, sponsored by IBEW and the National Electrical Contractors Association.

Growing up in Daytona Beach, says Owens, "it was my dream to race at the [world-famous] track." She was thrilled when her rookie team became one of the 32 cars that made the race out of 65.

Owens, 19, also served as the co-grand marshal of the Motorsports Parade, which marked the start of Daytona Speedweeks activities, before continuing her season in the ARCA RE/MAX Series. In her stock car displaying the Web site, **www.ElectrifyingCareers.com**, she clocked between 178 and 180 mph in testing before the race.

But her good fortune ran out near the start of the contest. On lap six, she and her teammate from DGM Racing were drafting (riding close to reduce each other's wind resistance)



when the teammate's vehicle was knocked sideways by another car. Owens entered the pit with four flattened tires and got back in the race but, on lap 23, she blew a clutch and was out of the competition. Despite the rough trip, "It was everything I wanted and more," she says. "Even Rusty Wallace had guys who went home. That's racing."

"Alli is breaking barriers for women in the racing world and she is carrying us along with her, promoting the IBEW and good-paying union jobs," says Jerry Westerholm, director, IBEW Construction and Maintenance Department.

"Even more important," says Westerholm, "Alli is building a reputation as a hard and fair driver, just the image that we want to promote in our trade."

Owens, one of only two women in the ARCA 200, is entered in 10 races through October and hopes to advance to the nationwide series next year.

## The IBEW's Racing Legacy

*(Continued from page 30)*

age sponsor was more likely to be named Vanderbilt than Boyle. And with his trademark bowler hat and cigar, Boyle—a second generation Irish Catholic, and electrician by trade—stood out among the blue bloods sitting with him in the stands.

But he wasn't looking for attention, preferring not to overshadow his team's historic win. Outside a mention of his "Boyle Maserati," he managed to stay out of sports writers' accounts of the race.

But while keeping out of the sports section, it was hard to find a Chicago paper that hadn't put him on their front page at least once. Boyle was one of the Chicago labor movement's most prominent and colorful figures, and probably the best known leader of the IBEW in the nation.

While Boyle's legacy is more likely to be studied by labor historians than sports writers, author Brock Yates said that Boyle's behind the scene efforts at the Indy 500 managed to revive auto racing and helped to set the stage for its eventual role as one of the nation's most popular sports. Yates wrote the first account of Boyle and the Indy 500 in the book, "Umbrella Mike," published in 2006.

"In (the) tough world of big-time automobile racing, Umbrella Mike Boyle, the classic union tough guy from Chicago; all-American Hoosier hero Wilbur Shaw; and mechanical genius Cotton Henning combined their diverse talents ... to lead their beloved sport into new heights of popularity," Yates wrote.

### A Chicago Labor Legend

Born in 1879 in Minnesota to a family of modest means, Boyle joined the IBEW at the age of 16. He worked as a lineman throughout the Midwest before moving to Chicago in the early 1900s to work for the Chicago Tunnel Company as an inside wireman.

According to Local 134 Vice President Russell Ponder, who wrote his thesis at the National Labor College on Boyle, Boyle moved to Chicago just at the right moment. The city was still rebuilding from the great fire of 1871, which had burned down much of Chicago. Construction remained a booming industry.

Boyle became business manager of Local 134 when he was only 29, and was an aggressive organizer, turning the local into one of the strongest labor unions in Chicago with more than 10,000 members. He also became active in the International, becoming a member of the International Executive Council in 1914.

In 1930, he became Sixth District Vice President, the only International Officer in IBEW history to continue to serve as business manager after becoming a Vice President. The Sixth District soon became one of the best organized districts in the Brotherhood, with Boyle regularly hitting the road to lead organizing campaigns in the construction, utility, telephone and government branches.

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# *The* **IBEW's Racing** *Legacy*

*(Continued from page 33)*

He was known for being a tough negotiator, a quality necessary to survive in the virtually lawless world of Prohibition-era Chicago. His unorthodox tactics made him infamous in the eyes of the press, but a hero to his members.

In 1937, during a contract dispute between the city and bridge operators represented by Local 134, he had the workers raise more than 30 bridges spanning the Chicago River on a Friday evening, sealing off downtown from the rest of the city. The city quickly settled. Boyle was also known to cut the power to street cars and police stations at strategic moments during bargaining to speed up negotiations.

These actions didn't help his image, but they paid off for Local 134 members. During the Depression, Local 134 was the only local to grow its ranks. Boyle also helped start the first health and welfare plan in the Chicago area.

Boyle was also an early advocate of racial equality in the labor movement. At a time when most unions were segregated, he helped recruit the first black member of Local 134 in 1919 and would go on to appoint the first black business representative in the construction industry, Ponder said. Auto racing, like nearly every other aspect of American life, was segregated at the time, but Boyle was a strong supporter of the Colored Speedway Association, the racing association for blacks.

In addition to his role in the labor movement, he also owned the Boyle Valve company, which produced high quality engine valves for racing cars.

## *The Birth of the Boyle Special*

Auto racing was a lifelong passion for Boyle. His interest dates to the invention of the modern car. Yates said Boyle witnessed one of the first organized auto races in American history, in Chicago in 1895. He soon went from

being a spectator to a major player.

By the mid-1930s, Boyle's growing valve business gave him both the resources and contacts needed to start up his own team. He recruited one of the top engineers in the country, Harry "Cotton" Henning, and some of the best drivers in the field to his team. Ponder said most team sponsors would only pay their drivers 35 percent of the prize money, but Boyle split prizes fifty-fifty with his victorious driver. His only requirement was that they not be married or have children because drivers had a high fatality rate in the sport's early days. "Boyle believed that he could not, nor wanted to, have that burden on his conscience if something happened to the driver," Ponder wrote in his thesis.

While American auto companies stayed away from auto racing, German and Italian companies saw motor sports as a great way to promote their brand and outfitted their drivers with the latest technology, putting American drivers at a distinct disadvantage.

Boyle had entered the 1937 Vanderbilt Cup with a homemade design built by the legendary racing engineer Harry Miller, but placed near the bottom of the pack, overwhelmed by his German competition. While European competition would not be a problem at the 1939 Indy 500—the last European entry was in 1916—"he knew that getting his hands on a European auto would give him a real edge," Ponder said.

The German auto makers did not make their racing cars available to private interests, but the economically struggling Maserati brothers—among the top Italian car designers—were willing to part with one of their older models for the right price. Even used Maseratis didn't come cheap, but Boyle knew he wanted to get his hands on one. He sent

Henning to Italy to purchase what would become one of the most famous cars in Indy 500 history.

The "Boyle Maserati," would go on to win Shaw his second Indy 500 trophy in 1939. The bullet shaped, one-seated Maserati managed to average speeds of 115 miles per hour. While considered one of the fastest autos at the time, the average Indy 500 car today often averages up to 200 miles per hour.

1940 would be the last Indy 500 victory for both Boyle and Shaw. Shaw was leading on the 150<sup>th</sup> lap at the 1941 competition, when a wheel collapsed, sending Shaw into a wall.

Shaw suffered from a few broken vertebrae, effectively ending his driving career, but not his involvement in the Indy 500. He would go on to serve as president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, before dying in a plane crash in 1954, becoming one of the most legendary figures in Indy 500 history.

Boyle largely ended his involvement with racing after 1941, turning most of his attention toward IBEW politics, Ponder said. In 1946, at one of the IBEW's most divisive International Conventions, Boyle broke with his former ally, International President Ed Brown, in order to back former International President Daniel Tracy for the top spot in the union, playing a leading role in Tracy's victorious return to office.

Boyle was still serving as Sixth District International Vice President and Local 134 business manager when he suffered from a fatal heart attack in 1958. National news outlets, including Time and The New York Times, ran his obituary, although none mentioned his side career in racing.

"He always kept a low-key profile in the sport, but his involvement in racing is always fascinating for those who have studied his union career," Ponder said. ■

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