

Ralph De Palma, Gentleman Champion by Gary Doyle

Book review by John Chuhran, Contributing Editor

Accurate information about early auto racing is scarce, which makes *Ralph De Palma, Gentleman Champion* so valuable.

Gary Doyle paints the most thorough description of this pioneer of American motorsports. Emigrating from Italy with his family before he reached the age of 10, De Palma was soon racing bicycles, motorcycles, and finally cars. Later he was also a designer, engineer, developer, pilot, and public relations man. De Palma had adventures not only in competition but also with many celebrities. The author captures it all.

Doyle creatively organizes De Palma's story through the cars he drove. His most famous races occurred in two Mercedes racers, a 140 (a 1908 Grand Prix chassis) and an 18/100 (from the 1914 French Grand Prix). You get a full picture of racing's most famous loss, the 1912 Indy 500, where De Palma led from lap 2 to lap 198 before a mechanical failure stopped the car. What he did became legend, told here through unsentimental eyes. The car subsequently provided his 1914 Vanderbilt Cup win.

Doyle addresses questions that had long begged answers. Though De Palma won the 1915 Indy 500 with the Mercedes, he was nowhere to be seen in stories about the 1916 event. His absence was curious, but Doyle explains. The 25-page bibliography is a wealth of information about early motorsports. Doyle challenges De Palma's accepted 2,557 victories in 2,887 races; his race results list shows De Palma competing in 439 races and winning 221 times, a stunning .503 percentage.

At \$74.95, the book is good value. Color images by Peter Helck and Peter Hearsey add depth, but the outstanding black and white photographs have a plush, rich feel; you can almost reach out and touch the cars and people. The text does have a flaw. In a historian's style, it spends time refuting previous writings, losing a sense of narrative; this can make the story difficult to follow and always makes the reader feel detached. But, overall, *Ralph De Palma, Gentleman Champion* is impressive. This talented driver—always immaculately dressed and as gracious in defeat as in victory—would be proud.

Ralph De Palma, Gentleman Champion by Gary Doyle, 374 pp.; available from Toad Hall Motorbooks, 303/235-0116, www.toadhallbook.com, numbered first edition run of 1,500, autographed by Gary Doyle, \$74.95.

