

# 'Don't tread on me' has special meaning at Indy

## ON THE GREEN

BY DOUGLAS BOLES

Charlie Thompson isn't pledging a fraternity. But cleaning up following one of the biggest parties anywhere in the world has become an annual duty.

Every year following the running of the Indianapolis 500 Mile Race, Thompson cleans the inside of the 2.5-mile oval, including a nine-hole golf course, located in the middle of the 81-year-old racing circuit.

Located on the west side of Indiana's capital city, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway golf course was originally built in 1928. It consisted of nine holes inside the track and nine more just outside on grounds owned by the Speedway.

In 1964 another nine holes were added outside the facility and the course attracted the Professional Golfers Association. The PGA played a couple tournaments on the grounds in the late 1960s.

The 27-hole course is open to the public from April 1 to mid-October and its surroundings provide an interesting atmosphere. When practice is being held on the race course during May, golfers can follow the sounds of the cars all the way around the superspeedway. They can also see the cars as they speed down the back stretch at nearly 230 miles per hour.

But it's not just the atmosphere that makes this course unique. It's the abuse the nine holes within the facility endure on one particular day in May ... Race Day.

Preparation for "Race Day" and the nearly 500,000 spectators who jam into the grounds begins early in the month. Thompson, the IMS grounds superintendent, has the greens and tees roped off and striped with a white water-based paint to keep people from walking on them, or worse, driving their vehicles across them. Later, the fairways themselves are striped with white paint forming a makeshift parking lot for 10,000 vehicles.

"We have approximately 10,000 cars park on the golf course on Race Day," Thompson said. "It becomes the world's biggest used car lot."

And Race Day isn't all the golf course endures. The three weeks prior to Race Day, the



Charlie Thompson, right, surveys his course, above, which turns into a parking lot each year for the Indianapolis 500.

grounds are open for four qualification and 13 practice days. Total attendance reaches nearly 250,000 on a couple of those days.

When the gates to the Speedway open up at 5 a.m. Race Day, the thousands of people who roam the streets surrounding the track move the party inside.

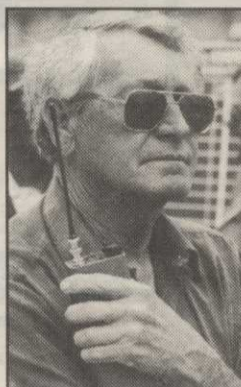
Motorcycles race across the fairways. Jeeps, cars and trucks battle for the best vantage points. And people in droves run for their favorite spots to throw down their lawn chairs, coolers and grills.

It's been said that the "human race" into the track is more exciting than the automobile contest. But for anyone operating a golf course, there is no nightmare scarier than thousands of people and vehicles scurrying across their course.

Thompson, maybe from his nearly 30 years at the Speedway, takes it all in stride.

"We really don't have any problems," he says. In fact, he claims that no racegoer has ever done damage to the course's greens. And any damage done to the fairways is accidental. "They don't do anything intentionally."

Exiting the Speedway after the race is much slower and more controlled than the morning entrance. Nevertheless, the automobile and pedestrian traffic, along with the mounds of



trash piling up on the golf course, transforms the playing surface to look more like the local landfill than a unique recreation area.

This is where Thompson gets excited and senses his monumental challenge of cleaning the course.

The day following the race, a Monday, Thompson heads a crew of 100 strong as they set out on the primary objective of the Speedway clean-up — making the golf course playable.

"We've got a ladies' league that plays on Tuesdays and Thursdays and they don't want to wait for us to get it clean," Thompson says. "They want to play."

At 7:30 a.m. the dew-covered golf course resembles a floor following a fraternity party. And a quick look around says the party was a bash.

But the only thing quicker and more efficient than Thompson and his crew are the 700-horsepower Indy cars being hauled out of the grounds on their way to Milwaukee, the next Indy event.

"We can clean it in one day," Thompson spouts with the confidence of Mario Andretti.

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Then he changes his mind. "Well, really, it depends on the trash. A lot of times we can have it done in half-day."

Spread out at equal intervals along the course, the crew of temporary help makes an initial pass across the garbage-covered golf course. Armed with nothing more than bare hands and a push basket, the crew carefully removes debris, occasionally emptying the contents of their baskets into one of two carts ready to haul garbage out of the grounds.

The care-free attitude of the spectators is evidenced in the garbage left behind. More is found than the usual pop and beer cans.

"We find everything out there," Thompson says. "Cars, burned cars, motorcycles, sofas, chairs, coolers, lawn chairs. Just about anything. It's amazing what people will leave."

And it's amazing that Thompson and crew are able to pick it all up. They don't even leave a sofa as a resting point for tired golfers.

After a second pass across the course, not a piece of trash can be found. Following the clean-up, a damage assessment is performed on the fairways. Ruts, burned grass, spots with no grass and other defects are quickly attended to.

The ruts are filled in and reseeding is completed where needed throughout the course.

Areas are roped off to keep golfers from slowing the healing process.

And, in under a week, the golf course is as good as new, Thompson says.

"It's an interesting transformation," he says of the clean-up. "I think it's rather unique."

The party may be over, and there may not be a fraternity pin on his sweater, but Charlie Thompson certainly deserves a hand shake. Even if it's not secret.

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