



Al Unser Sr. and his PJ Colt Johnny Lightning Special in which he won the 1971 Indianapolis 500

REV IT UP

LOS RANCHOS UNVEILS UNSER MUSEUM

STORY BY JOHN RICHARD ARNOLD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE LARESE

Four-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Sr. scored another victory in September 2005, this one an \$8 million museum nestled in the village of Los Ranchos de Albuquerque in the green North Valley.

The Unser Racing Museum, with its collection of race cars, engines and numerous other trappings that make the name Unser synonymous with unmatched success, is a testament to one family's record-setting victories and continuing love of racing and winning.

On the day before the museum opened, Al Unser Sr., wearing the 1987 Indy 500 winner's ring on his right hand, took a break from the last-minute, we-open-tomorrow hustle to explain why he and his wife, Susan, devoted themselves to the project.

"This museum represents so much of my family's life," he says, watching as three workers struggled with an uncooperative

video projector. "Opening the museum provides me with the self-satisfaction of doing something that's very good. I want visitors to leave here with a great feeling of learning something about racing and what the Unser family has achieved."

Anyone with even a minor interest in the Indianapolis 500 has heard of what the Unser family has achieved. And anyone who has heard of the Unsers is aware of their unwavering desire to win, whether it's driving an Indy race car, zooming up Pikes Peak in Colorado or opening a museum dedicated to their success as America's No. 1 racing family.

Dr. Clay Gish, director of writing and

communications for ESI Design, the museum's lead designer, says she quickly learned about speed when dealing with an Unser, noting that her firm had just six months to complete the project.

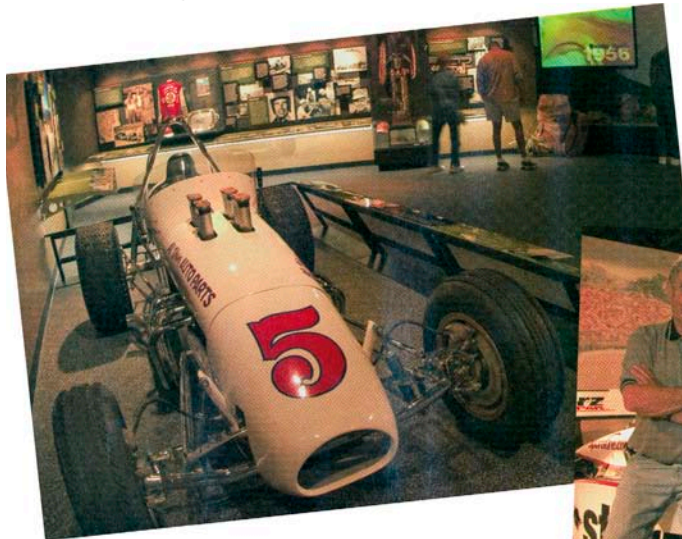
"We were very caught up in the Unser's enthusiasm, which certainly was an exciting challenge," she says with a chuckle. "Al Senior is a racing driver, so he's used to this."

One of the most compelling things about the museum, which was funded by Al Unser, private donors and the State of New Mexico, is that it portrays these legendary drivers and their legendary accomplishments in a relaxed and folksy way. Arranged in what Al Sr., known worldwide as "Big Al," refers to as

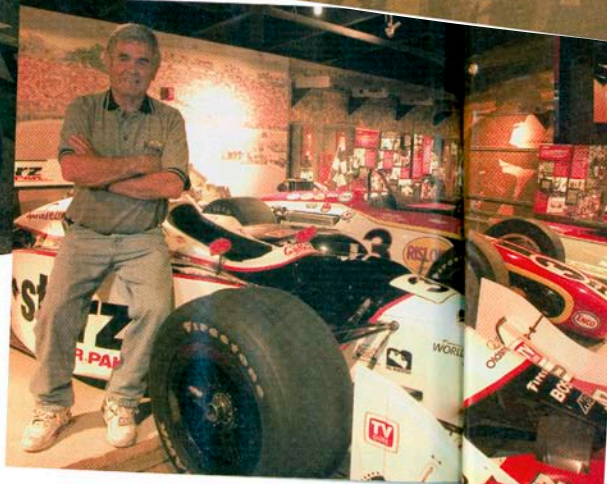


Displays of Unser racing items and photos detail the history of this New Mexico family.

Below—Mario Andretti won the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb in 1969 in this car, which Al Unser Sr. was slated to drive. Unser broke his leg while racing motorcycles days before the race, and competitor Andretti was hired by the car's owner, Grant King, to replace him.



Right—Big Al and the Starz Superpak G-Force that his son, Al Jr., used to win the Indy 250 in 2001.



spokes, the museum has five galleries relating to the world of racing and cars.

Taking a few slow-paced laps around the museum reveals numerous facts, not only about New Mexico's ambassadors of speed, but also about racing in general.

In the hub of the museum, visitors are greeted by the Johnny Lightning Special in which Big Al won the 1971 Indianapolis 500 at an average speed of 157.735 miles per hour, his second consecutive victory at the brickyard.

Asked why he chose that particular car—bearing the No. 1 and slowly rotating above a mirrored deck that allows an above-and-under-the-car view—as the focal point,

he matter-of-factly replies, "Because it's so pretty." (When Big Al says "pretty," it comes out "purty".) "Everyone I asked about what car I should display said the Johnny Lightning Special."

Surrounding the Johnny Lightning Special is a simple winner's circle with a powerful impact that details every Unser racing victory. It begins with Louis Unser's 1934 win at Pikes Peak (Louis was Bobby and Big Al's uncle), and it ends with Robby Unser's (Bobby's son) successful assault of that mountain in 2004. It is an incredibly telling circle in that it notes, among other things, that Jeri Unser, one of Bobby's daughters, was the Pikes Peak Rookie of the Year in 1988, the same year

Robby was the Indy Racing League Rookie of the Year.

From the winner's circle, you learn that in addition to the nine Indy 500 victories and the 37 Pikes Peak wins, the Unsers amassed 16 national championships, with Big Al and Al Jr. finishing first and second in the national championship in 1985.

And 1985 national championship runner-up Al Unser Jr., touring the museum a week after it opened, said it met all his expectations. "It's beautiful," he says, absorbing the museum during a 360-degree turn while waving at a bevy of visitors snapping pictures of the two-time Indy 500 winner. "It turned out so well. It's just awesome."



Left—Visitors watch racing videos in the Jerry's Garage section of the museum. Jerry Unser Sr., father of Al Sr., Bobby Sr., Jerry Jr. and Louie, opened a garage in Albuquerque in 1963 and started the family's path toward cars and speed.

Below—Among the many items on display are the helmets that Al Jr. wore during his two victorious Indy 500 races, his rings and trophies.

Below— A 22-year-old Al Unser Sr. built and raced this Legends Car in the 1961 Pikes Peak Hill Climb, finishing second behind his brother, Bobby. Al crashed the car the next year, but had it restored in 2002.



Below—The new museum is available for rent for social functions.



Two generations of Unsers—starting with Bobby in 1968, then Al Sr. in 1970, then Al Unser Jr. in 1992—have claimed nine Indy 500 victories. A total of six Unsers have raced in the Indy 500.

The Indy 500 gallery includes videos showing an Unser winning that race nine different times. This exhibit hall is an Indy car fan's dream come true, and it has a fascinating assembly of facts, objects and intriguing information (Why do the winning drivers drink milk?), not to mention the car that Bobby Unser drove to victory in the 1968 Indy 500 at an average speed of 152.882 miles per hour.

Two generations of Unsers—starting with Bobby in 1968, then Al Sr. in 1970, then Al Unser Jr. in 1992—have claimed those nine Indianapolis 500 victories, which is more than 10 percent of all the Indy 500 races ever run. (A total of six Unsers have raced

in the Indy 500, including Bobby and Al Sr.'s brother Jerry, who died 14 days after he had an accident on the opening day of qualifications for the 1959 race.)

Another gallery tells the story of the Unser's successful assault on 14,100-foot-high Pikes Peak, and it features a pair of cars Big Al drove: The No. 56 car, built in 1963, and the No. 5, built in 1967.

A dozen different Unsers have competed in the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb in Colorado Springs, Colo., and they have won the event so many times—37—that the peak is known locally as Unser Mountain.

Jerry's Garage, a gallery that can be rented for private meetings, features the Unser

family story, complete with the world's only "GoodStone" and "FireYear" racing jackets. (Accompanying text and photos explain this down-home story about Mom and Pop Unser not playing favorites.)

Less than a week after the museum opened, Big Al spoke of satisfaction and with appreciation.

"Everybody seems to like it and is happy with it, and that's just what we wanted," he said. "Of course, we were happy with it, but you begin to wonder if you're wearing blinders. Seeing other people enjoy what we've done makes us feel good."

And visiting the museum to see what the Unsers have accomplished is another feel-good activity for all.