

Sports

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Monday, June 18, 1989 O&E



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Like father, like son Being Little Al just fine with Unser

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

That the first Valvoline Detroit Grand Prix took place on Father's Day was most fitting.

It brought to Motown — and Farmington, too — one of the greatest and most recognizable father-son names in Indy-car racing — that of the Unseers.

Al Unser Jr., who signed autographs during Grand Opening ceremonies Thursday at the new Valvoline Instant Oil Change shop on Grand River, admits he rarely does an interview when he's not asked about his famous father.

"I've never worried about it," Al Jr. said, "because I'm very proud of my dad. If I'm to remain the son of four-time Indy winner Al Unser that's cool. It doesn't bother me."

After seven years of professional racing, however, Al Jr. has become famous, also. He no longer stands in his father's shadow as he did at the start of his career.

Little Al has developed a fan following of his own and a successful career for himself. And, oh, has Al Jr. become a success.

THE 27-YEAR-OLD Unser, who won his first Indy-car race on Father's Day in 1984, was No. 5 in all-time earnings with \$4,495,553 entering the Detroit race, putting him ahead of former Indy winners Danny Sullivan and Johnny Rutherford.

The most-repeated quote from Al Jr. concerns his father's role in helping him to learn the trade. "Dad taught me everything I know," he said, "but he hasn't taught me everything he knows."

It was suggested to the younger

'The reason I love Indy cars is because it is a very precise form of racing. And a street course, where you have walls on both sides of you, is the ultimate test of precision.'

— Al Unser Jr.
Indy-car driver



Unser, who is now recognized for his own accomplishments more than he is for having a famous father, could probably teach his dad a few tricks.

"I doubt it," Al Jr. said. As a testimony to his rise in the sport, Al Jr. came to Detroit as the current point leader in the 1989 Indy Car World Series, having a small lead over Rick Mears, 59-55.

It is a title Unser has never won. He was the International Race of Champions winner twice and has been second in the CART-PPG season series twice. In 1985, in the closest Indy-car finish in history, Al Sr. and Al Jr. finished 1-2 with one point separating them.

"THIS IS the best start I've had," Al Jr. said. "It's hard to stay up there all year long. The points are close and will remain close."

"It would be one of my lifelong goals to win the championship. And, of course, the other is to win Indy."

Al Jr. was four laps from realizing that goal, too, in the latest Indy 500. He had overtaken race-long leader Emerson Fittipaldi, but a collision with the eventual winner sent him spinning into the wall and out of the race.

"We went into Turn 3 — and he came out and I didn't," said Unser, who received \$390,000 for finishing second. He added he has no animosity toward Fittipaldi. "He's a competitor and he'll remain the same."

Since then, people who have seen the tape of the crash are amazed that Al Jr., while his car was demolished, came away unharmed despite traveling 230 miles per hour upon impact.

Unser explained that survivability

auto racing

is the result of Indy cars being made to absorb such shocks. They are designed to break apart, according to Unser, with the exception of the well-constructed cockpit that so miraculously protects drivers time and again.

"I FELT pretty good about the way I went into the wall," he said. "That has a lot to do with the way you come out of an accident."

"I knew I was going to hit it backwards, and I was pretty confident I was not going to be hurt. At that kind of speed, if you hit the front end, you're going to hurt your legs."

Al Jr. and the other Indy-car competitors raced on the Detroit course for the first time, but that was still reason to expect Unser to do well driving his Team Valvoline Lola-Chevrolet in Sunday's race.

He had won five consecutive CART races on street-circuit events. In fact, all nine of his Indy-car career victories have been on road courses, and he is the all-time money leader in those races with \$1,789,134.

"The reason I love Indy cars is because it is a very precise form of racing," Al Jr. said. "And a street course, where you have walls on both sides of you, is the ultimate test of precision."

"It's the inside walls that cause a problem, because you aim for an exact spot on the inside of the track where you want to go through a turn. If you miss that spot on an oval or a

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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Al Unser Jr. autographs a poster for Steve Moyer of Redford during a personal appearance Thursday in Farmington.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Tips from pro

Milt Nokes of the Detroit Tigers offers tips on being a good hitter Friday at City Park in Farmington. Nokes gave a miniclinic for sev-

eral hundred children, most of them members of the South Farmington Little League. See column on Page 3C.

Milford nips Shamrocks in Class A semifinal, 2-1

By Brad Emone
staff writer

They went through their post-game ritual, passing a baseball down the line from player-to-player until pitcher Matt Carter, the last link, slung-dunked it into a canvas bag.

It was only fitting that Carter, a senior left-hander, would do the honors after he outdueled Redford Catholic Central ace Leo Hutchinson, giving Milford a 2-1 victory against the Shamrocks in the state Class A semifinals Friday at Lansing's Municipal Park.

"We started doing that (routine) a few games ago and he (Carter) was the obvious choice today," said Milford coach Mike Shearer, who spent the previous 13 seasons at Livonia Clarenceville. "That's only one run that Matt has given up now in 17 innings."

The chilly 9 a.m. start may have had an effect on the lack of punch delivered from the plate.

baseball

Carter, who struck out six, while scattering four hits and five walks, ran his record to 12-2 with the victory.

And while Carter was deserving of the win, Hutchinson's performance was nearly a masterpiece, even in defeat.

THE SENIOR LEFT-HANDER, possessing an effective fastball, was the victim of two unearned runs. He finished his six-inning stint with no walks and five strikeouts, bowing out with a 15-3 personal record.

"It was a good pitching duel," said Catholic Central coach John Salter, whose team finished 25-10 overall. "We scored seven in each game last week (at the regionals), but he (Carter) was a little better pitcher

today. He was able to shut us down."

"He (Carter) may not be as fast, but he moves the ball around and hits the spot. And he never walked more than one at a time."

It was a scoreless duel until the fourth when Milford struck for its only two runs. With one out, catcher Jeff Irish, a recent seventh-round draft choice of the Toronto Blue Jays, opened the inning with a single.

Joe Gibson then hit into a potential double-play, but third baseman Keith Boyka's throw to Mark Clary at second was a little low. Clary, unable to hang onto the ball, was charged with an error, leaving both runners safe.

CATCHER KEVIN WHEELER was caught off-guard, giving up a passed, moving Irish to third base and Gibson to second.

That set the stage for right fielder Greg Wilhelm, who reached out and

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