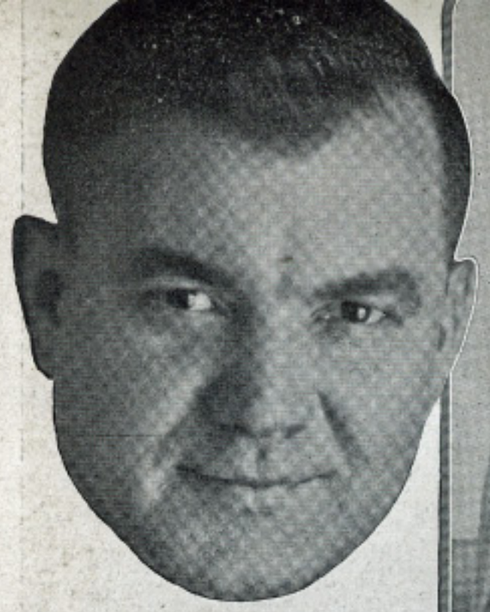
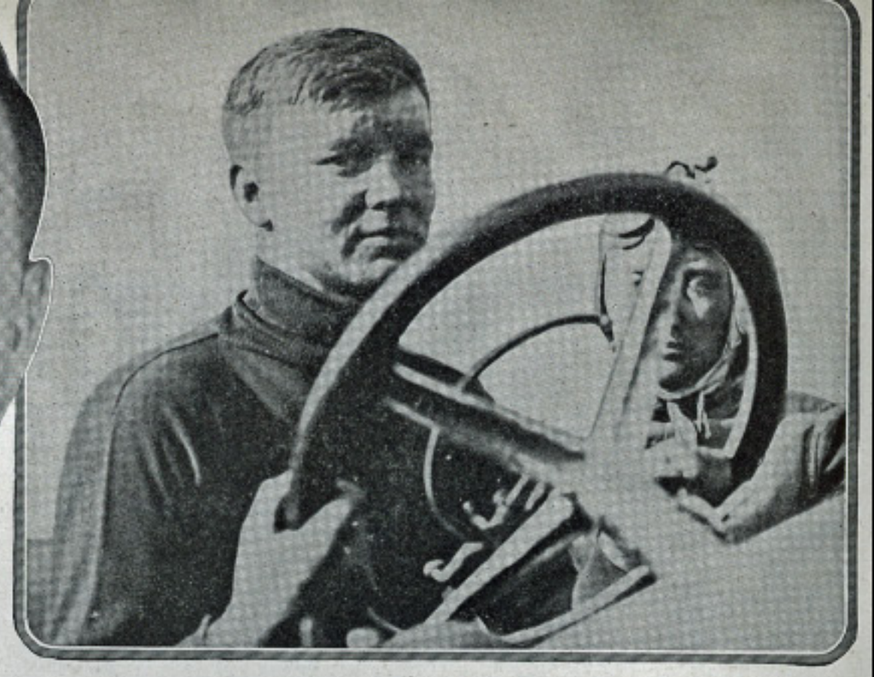




There's little difference in the face of Dawson, winner in 1912, and Dawson of today, service manager for Marmon in Philadelphia

Joe Dawson Hero *of the* *and* Winner *of*

A SPECTATOR stood behind the pits at a race on the Atlantic City speedway. Round and round the tiny cars powered with straight eight cylindered motors flew. So effortless seemed the speed that the spectator was moved to remark to a black eyed youngish man who stood alongside him:

"It must be quite different from the races back in the earlier days of the game. They tell me that racing used to be done mostly on the roads of America when I was not quite old enough to go to see them, and from what I have heard of them they must have been much harder work than these are today. I imagine that most of the drivers who kicked up the dust in those days probably are dead and gone. I guess you wouldn't be old enough to remember any of them, would you?"

The youngish-looking man smiled momentarily, then his face assumed an habitually sober expression. "Yes, I remember a little about them. Those were the days, I guess. Cars not quite so fast as they are now, but just as fast—or faster, maybe—comparatively, when one considers the condition of the surface over which the races were held. I imagine some of those old drivers might still be able to handle these fast little cars of today, for, after all, once a driver, always a driver."

Just then some one called: "Oh, Joe, got time to run down here a minute?"

The black-eyed young man moved out of hearing. I had been standing by a silent listener to the aforesaid conversation.

"That chap used to wheel them when it took hair on the chest and plenty of intestines," I opined, thinking that the young man was a friend of Joe's.

"Probably not old enough to remember the stirring days of road racing," came the answer, and then I knew he did not know to whom he had been talking.

"Not so old," I informed him, "but taken by and large there are not so many drivers in America who have had the experience Joe Dawson has had, nor who have won in such a wide variety of races, not to mention defeating practically every topnotcher of his time in some race or another."

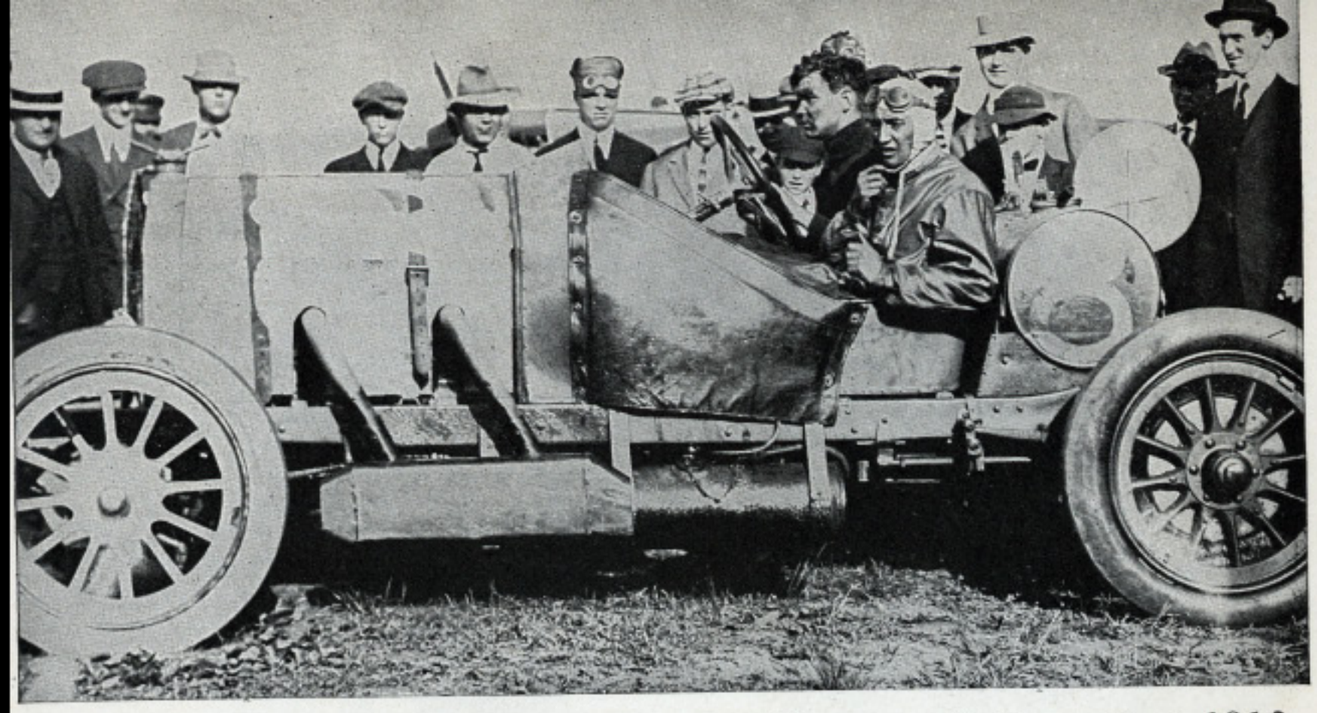
"That Joe Dawson!" came the incredulous reply. "Why, according to my figures Joe Dawson should be old enough to be walking with a cane."

"Well, if they start walking with canes at forty, Joe should be putting in his order for a support," I countered. And then I let my memory drift back. It seems only yesterday that I first met Dawson back in 1909, when at the age of twenty he was a mechanic on the Marmon racing team. He isn't so different now. His 150 pounds of steel in those days has given way to 200 pounds of, say malleable iron, but his spirit is just as young and as for wheeling cars down the road it is my positive opinion that there isn't a faster man at that gentle art in the whole country.

It was in the 1910 Vanderbilt Cup Race that Joe Dawson, the kid of the racing game, first came into national prominence. He did not win this historic struggle, yet he was a greater hero after the race than if he had.

All night long on September 30 the crowds had been massing at advantageous points around the twelve and a half mile course on Long Island. The hegira from New York and surrounding towns had started at dusk and continued without interruption through the night. The Vanderbilt Cup Race was easily the racing classic of America in the glorious days of road racing when an event had to be some event to top them all.

Born in 1904, the race sponsored by Vanderbilt had been won the first three years by foreigners: Heath, in a Panhard, in 1904; Hemery in a Darracq, in 1905; Wagner, Darracq, 1906; followed by Robertson, Locomobile, in 1908 (no



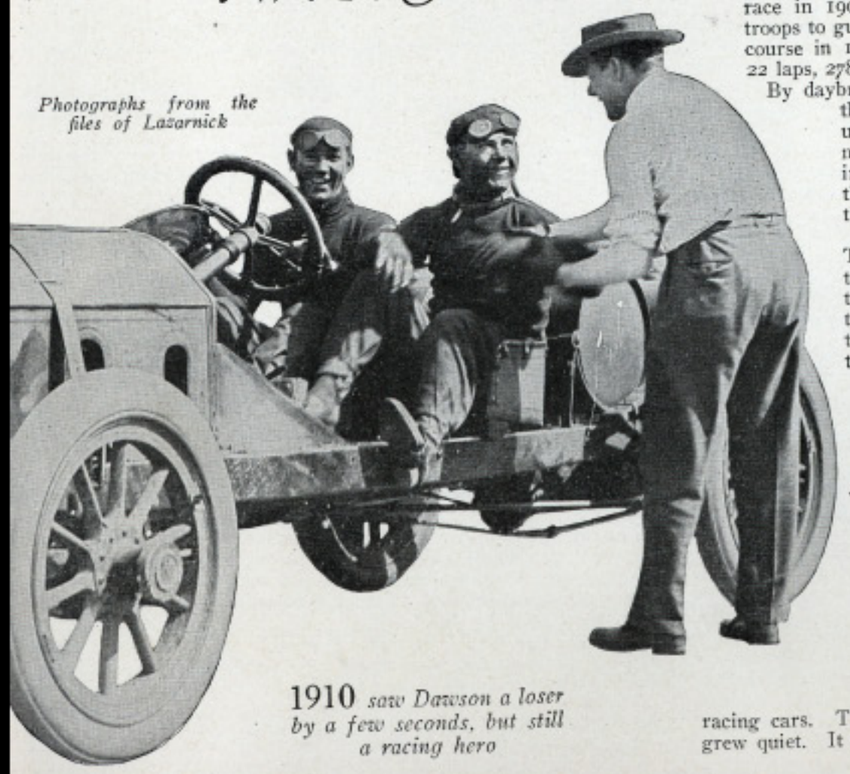
Winner at Indianapolis in 1912

1910 VANDERBILT

the 500-MILE RACE *of 1912*

By W. F. Sturm

Photographs from the files of Lazarnick



1910 *saw Dawson a loser by a few seconds, but still a racing hero*

race in 1907 because of inability of the promoters to get troops to guard the course); Grant, in an Alco, in 1909. The course in 1910 was a circuit of 12.64 miles, the race being 22 laps, 278.08 miles.

By daybreak the huge grandstand at the starting line on the paved Long Island Motor Parkway was filling up. The dangerous Massapequa turn was a solid mass of pushing, crowding spectators, anxious to be in the thickest of the danger, where they could see the cars skid, the dust rise, aye, and perhaps hear the groans of the injured and the dying.

Daybreak of October 1 broke with a cold drizzle. The spectators shrugged their figurative shoulders—the race was the thing. In the dim light of dawn the racing cars moved up to the starting line, where they were arranged in single file, to be started in the race by twos at fifteen second intervals. All the giants of motor racing were there. A glance revealed the famous Marquette-Buick team, with Louis Chevrolet and Bob Burman, together with Louis's younger brother, Arthur; Harry Grant, 1909 winner, driving the same Alco which had carried him to victory a year earlier; Eddie Hearne in his huge Benz; Belcher in a Knox; Beardsley in a Simplex; Dingley, Pope-Hartford; Bruce-Brown, in his Benz, and enough others to make up a total of thirty starters.

Into this den of roaring lions, as it were, came young Dawson from the middle western city of Indianapolis, the home of the Marmon automobile, which had followed the lead of other factories in making advertising capital out of the sturdiness and speed of its stock racing cars. The milling thousands at the starting line suddenly grew quiet. It was five fifty-five a. m., (*Continued on page* 382)

Hero of the 19

(*Continued fr*

a time when most folks are still asleep in comfortable beds. Starter Fred Wagner looked up into the sky. The look was saluted by the constant drizzle. With the flash of his flag Wagner sent Al Livingston, in a National, away.

No one noticed young Dawson, who started his stock racing Marmon in the greatest free-for-all race in the world in twenty-fifth position. As the cars roared around the course the crowds moved accordion-like, closing the roadway almost entirely at times to stand out in the middle of the long stretches to see a car coming, jump back out of danger as it drew near, see it whiz by in a cloud of dust, then surge back into the middle of the road to watch it disappear in the distance.

DAWSON soon found, like all the others, that the cement parkway was dustless, but rough. In many places on the dirt road part of the course the ruts were deep and bad. The turns were bad, especially the one at Massapequa Lodge, where the course left the cement parkway and swung on to the unpaved section. The cars in practice had made this spot soft and dangerous, and to add spice a telegraph pole was located in just the right place to have a car or two wrapped around it. Three cars were wrecked on this curve.

Louis Chevrolet, starting twenty-ninth, had the lead all to himself for eight laps.

Starting in the race in twenty-fifth place, Dawson moved so rapidly through the field of thirty cars that the end of the first lap saw him in sixth position. In the second lap he moved up to fifth, held it through the third lap and moved up into fourth on the fourth lap. He rode through the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth laps in third place, and then burst through past the second and third place holders into the lead, taking the front position from Louis Chevrolet in a Marquette-Buick. The ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth lap saw him leading. In the fourteenth lap he dropped back to second place, moving back to first in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth. For reason discussed later he dropped to third in the eighteenth and nineteenth laps, but climbed back to second in the twentieth, holding it through to the end.

With half the race in the discard, the kid driver from Indianapolis was flying down the cement parkway and boring his way through lanes of spectators on the dirt roads and around the dusty, rutted turns in first place. Behind him in second place rode Louis Chevrolet and in third place Disbrow, in a National.

As Dawson thundered down the back stretch with the race three-fourths over, a spectator got too close to his speeding car. There was a thud of hard car meeting soft flesh and Dawson came to a grinding stop. The spectator was carried away dead or dying, Dawson did not know which. He lingered at the spot, horror-stricken by the catastrophe. Finally he drove his car on down to the pits and sat dejectedly while his tank was filled up. With the car ready to go and his pit crew urging him on, he still sat, lost in contemplation of the dread fact that he probably had killed a man.

Meanwhile Harry Grant, in his Alco, who had been going through the field like a hawk through a flock of quail, flew by and went into first place. Still Dawson refused to be roused. Then the pit manager bethought himself of a clever ruse. He rushed over to the apathetic driver: "The man isn't dead, Joe; not even badly hurt; he's come around. Just got word on the telephone. Go out and beat it!"

The young Marmon pilot was galvanized into action. He left the pits with his wheels spinning. Meanwhile Johnny Aitken, fellow-townsman of Dawson's in a National, had moved up into second place behind Grant. Then the Vanderbilt Cup race saw such driving as it rarely, if ever, had seen before. Dawson's car was not as fast as some of the others, but Dawson clamped his throttle foot down on the straight stretches and lifted it grudgingly on the dusty turns. He roared over bridges, where a skid would have let him down with a sickening roll forty feet below. He passed Aitken as though the latter were going backward. Then he pushed on after Grant, who had more than a two minute lead on him. Far ahead of him Grant sat at the pits with his car while attendants changed a tire. The seconds wore on. Grant's lead had dwindled to forty-three seconds when he pulled away from his pits.

GRANT now literally burned the road in his effort to keep ahead. Dawson burned it likewise in his effort to reach and pass Grant. But it was not to be, even though Dawson covered the last lap eighteen seconds faster than did Grant, finishing the race just twenty-five seconds behind the two-time winner. Dawson's soft heart had undoubtedly cost him one of the greatest victories in the annals of racing. Grant's average for the 278.08 miles was 65.348.

It is a far, far cry from those early days of racing to that of the present. If a motor then turned up to 1800 r.p.m. it was considered turning over with lightning like rapidity. Designers then achieved their power by low motor speed and big displacement. Today power is achieved by small high-speed motors. Present day racing motors are turned up in excess of 6500 times a minute. Today the drivers race exclusively on board or dirt tracks from which the spectators are kept by ample safeguards. Then the pilots

(From page 91)

were nervous wrecks after a 278-mile ride over narrow roads packed with people who crowded so closely on the course that at times they obscured the road ahead. In those days the drivers wrestled with the split Michelin rim. They often changed tires at the roadside, elevating their car with a hand jack. Today tires are all changed at track pits with a jack that raises the car with one motion.

Dawson has had his share of wrecks, but they didn't dampen his nerve. His first race was at Atlanta, Ga., on the two-mile dirt track built by the Candlers, of Coca-Cola fame. He failed to finish there and immediately shipped his Marmon to the Indianapolis speedway, which had been built in 1909. A program of short races was carded on the big two-and-a-half-mile brick track, the first of the 1910 series of races. Joe was booming along the back stretch when the right steering knuckle of his car crystallized and broke and the right front wheel immediately parted company with the rest of the car. Unmanageable, the car shot off the track, hurdled an eight foot ditch and wiped the other three wheels off in landing on the other side. The car stopped right side up and Dawson climbed out of the seat, where he had stayed throughout the plunge, gave one look at the wrecked car and called it a day.

July 4 of 1910 was a great day for Indianapolis, Dawson and the Marmon. The speedway had scheduled the Cobe Trophy, a 200-mile event, for that day. Burman and Strang were driving Buicks, and they were considered unbeatable. Dawson and Ray Harroun formed the Marmon team. Dawson had been instructed never to pass Harroun, since the latter's name was of much greater value from a publicity standpoint. As the race wore on Burman, who naturally had no such inhibitions, put Harroun behind him and moved into first place. Joe, considering that Burman's move had broken the taboo forthwith passed the great Burman and kept on to victory, finishing 3 1/5 seconds ahead of Bob.

THE Marmons moved to the Elgin road races in August, with Joe entered in the Illinois Cup and the Elgin National. These races which were uphill and down over the country roads, called for quite a bit of gear shifting. He managed to finish third in the Illinois Cup, Mulford, in a Lozier winning, with Al Livingston in a National second.

In the Elgin National Dawson got too energetic with his shifting lever and broke it off right at the floorboard. He came to a stop and he and Bruce Keen, his mechanic, got out and looked the situation over. Gear changing was important, almost an absolute necessity, but he decided that if he kept going hard enough he might make the hills and the corners on high. So the two proceeded to slip the lever in high, knowing full well it would be the only gear they could use. Things went along well enough for a while, until Joe popped over a hill and slid down to a culvert on the flat road. One of the other cars had been smashed on the culvert and Joe was too close on it to stop with the brakes and there was not enough room to go around. Without a moment's hesitation he headed his car off the road, down into a side ditch, through a dry creek bed which the culvert spanned and with the help of God and plenty of momentum he made the rise back on the road in high. But his car frame could not stand such blows as he gave it and on arrival at the pits he decided, on the insistence of the officials, that he was through and washed up for the day.

In those days the Fairmount park race at Philadelphia was one of the important events of the year. Joe raced the Fairmount in 1910, but a broken axle stopped him. Today he passes the Sweetbriar turn of that one time famous course every morning as he drives down from his Cynwyd home to the Marmon agency on Broad street.

In winning the Savannah Challenge Trophy race in November of 1910 Dawson set a nonstop record that survived for many years. He made the 276.8 miles at 62.75 miles an hour to win the event.

In 1911 the Indianapolis motor speedway inaugurated its now world-famous international sweepstakes, popularly known as the 500-mile race. Marmon was anxious to win this great event in its home town. Harroun improvised a six-cylinder car by adding half of a four-cylinder motor to the standard four cylinders. What followed is racing history. The six-cylinder Marmon Wasp won the first 500-mile race at 74.59 miles an hour. Dawson, driving his old standby four-cylinder Marmon, had third place all tied up and ready to deliver when a car which he was passing flipped a bolt from the track and punctured his radiator. With two laps—five miles—to go the water began running out of the hole in his radiator in a stream.

ONE lap passed. Dawson was in agony. His speed had dropped to a mere thirty miles an hour. If the old Marmon would only hold out for just another two and a half miles! Gallantly the old bus tried to make the grade, but in the effort she froze up tighter than a bucket of water at the North pole. With one convulsive shudder she came to a jerking stop on the back stretch a mile and a half from the finish line. Meanwhile three other cars had finished behind Harroun. When the timing tape was checked it was found

Hero of the 1910 Vanderbilt

(*Continued from page 382*)

that Dawson's car really had completed the race, with a half a lap to spare and he was awarded fifth place.

The following year at Indianapolis he realized the ambition of every race driver since 1911 to the present day—and won the 500 mile race. With Marmon deciding to abandon racing, Joe accepted the wheel of a National. As his team mates he had Bruce-Brown and Howard Wilcox, both now dead, the former killed in 1912 at Milwaukee and the latter in 1925 at Altoona.

Admittedly Ralph DePalma, then at the zenith of his racing career, had the speed and the pit organization to beat everything in the race. Brown was out of the running before the finish of the race, Wilcox finished at the tail-end, while Dawson had driven so well that he was riding securely in second place, with the third man far to the rear. But ahead of him twenty miles rode the great DePalma, who had only five or six miles to go to receive the checkered flags.

SUDDENLY DePalma's motor began to falter. Dawson, driving at undiminished speed, passed DePalma on the back stretch and he knew by the sound of his rival's motor that it was ready to quit at any moment. It had cracked a water jacket and was slowly dying, just as Dawson's had died the year before.

Could Dawson cover the twenty miles while DePalma covered his five? Would DePalma's motor continue to function long enough for him to finish? These and other questions raced through Dawson's mind. It was up to him to do his part. He threw all caution to the winds. Previously he had been nursing his threadbare tires to make them last. But ahead of him now loomed first place, glory and over $20,000 in prizes. The spectators sensed the situation, too.

DePalma continued to crawl around the bricks at ever-diminishing speed. Dawson was fairly burning the track. His speed was above eighty, DePalma's was falling below fifteen.

The Mercedes crossed the tape and started falteringly on its last lap. Dawson passed him once, twice, three times. The stands were wild. Thousands stood by cheering the greatest drive ever seen on the historic bricks. Thousands cheered the brave effort DePalma was making in his crippled Mercedes. Eyes strained after DePalma as he staggered around the south turn and into the back stretch. A mile and a half to go—would he make it? The answer came to the waiting thousands as the Mercedes made her weary way down the stretch and started into the northeast corner of the track, faltered on for another quarter of a mile and was seen scarcely to move as she entered the northwest turn, the entry into the homestretch.

Dawson roared past DePalma on his final lap. It was now a race between tires and time. Would the National's frayed shoes stand by for another half mile or would they blow out, causing delay, perhaps death to the daring driver?

A half mile lessened to a hundred yards. DePalma was forgotten for the moment. The hundred yards gave way to fifty; to twenty-five; to ten; to five. The checkered flag flashed before the nose of Dawson's National. He had won first place!

Instantly the stands became a bedlam. Dawson was intensely popular in Indianapolis and the National had its friends, too.

Then attention once more went back to the gallant DePalma. Was he moving? Eyes strained northward from the stands. Yes, he was a little bit. No, he wasn't. Yes, he might be. There was no doubt about it now. He was not moving. He and his mechanic were walking about the car, which now had stopped just at the head of the homestretch. A scant half mile ahead lay second place, even if disaster had cheated them out of first.

The mechanic attempted to crank the car, but it was useless. Then the two of them pushed the car down the hot bricks tearing their lungs into shreds almost at every breath after the terrific strain of five hours of racing. As the Mercedes was pushed across the finish wire. DePalma stood there, a whimsical smile on his tired face.

Then the blow fell. He was ruled out of the race because his car had not crossed the finish line under its own power! Dawson's average of 78.72 was considered phenomenal, exceeding Harroun's by more than four miles an hour, and it was destined to remain until the 1914 race.

Dawson did no racing in the fall of 1912 and the spring of 1913, being under the displeasure of the Contest Board of the A.A.A., through no fault of his own. He had been misled by the man handling his affairs and had raced on an unsanctioned track, with consequent disbarment.

Though reinstated in 1913 he did not drive at Indianapolis.

In 1914, with the Frenchmen coming back eager to repeat their 1913 victory at Indianapolis Dawson entered the lists as America's hope against the invaders. He assembled his Marmon racing car carefully and when it reached the starting line it was ready for a long fast race. As the race wore on, Dawson entered the south turn on his second 100 miles. Gilhooley's Isotta wrecked before his eyes and the mechanic was thrown out falling to the track below the car. To turn up the track and clear the car was impossible. To go straight ahead meant to run over the mechanic. To turn off the track into the soft earth meant a sure wreck for the speeding Marmon. Dawson chose the latter course.

For weeks his life was despaired of and for a year he wore a brass brace to hold his shattered vertebrae in place. The doctor forbid him ever to undergo the strain of another race. So Joe traveled for his company for a year or two.

BUT the speed urged would not die. He accepted a position with the Chalmers Company where he could at least gratify his desire to his heart's content on the roads of the southwest. He made many intercity records with the sturdy little Chalmers. Many of these records, particularly those between Galveston and Dallas, San Antonio and Dallas, Oklahoma City and Amarillo, stood for years, until in fact, the then rough roads gave way to improved surfaces.

In August of 1917 Dawson came to the Sheepshead Bay speedway, a two-mile board track and drove a 224-cubic-inch Chalmers to a world's twenty-four-hour record. For a day and a night he whirled around the great saucer, through sunshine, rain and fog, and when the twenty-four hours was up he had covered 1898 miles at an average speed of 79.08 miles an hour. Joe Gardham, of the Chalmers experimental staff, relieved him in this drive. This stock car record has only recently been broken.

Today Dawson is service superintendent of the Philadelphia Marmon Company. He keeps his contact with racing by serving on the technical committee of the America Automobile Association in the numerous events conducted at the Atlantic City speedway. In the 1928 500-mile race at Indianapolis he acted as pacemaker, driving a Marmon roadster over the bricks which in years gone by had rolled back to him the thundering roar of racing cars.