

Back In Time

Henry Ford Senior was interested in racing since the beginning. During the very first years of his business ventures, he was even alienating his investors with a near fixation on racing.

The infamous "999" Model A-based race car drove Henry's point home to everyone around. Working with the renowned driver of the time Barney Oldfield, this car set a world record for top speed on July 25, 1903! The mile run was covered in slightly over 55 seconds. The car generated a speed of 64.5 miles per hour.

The cigar chomping Oldfield was a former bicycling star. He would later joke that he and Henry "made" each other. Oldfield continued... "but I did much the best job of it".

This car used a two-handed tiller to steer with. It was the last variation on the theme before an actual steering wheel became the norm.

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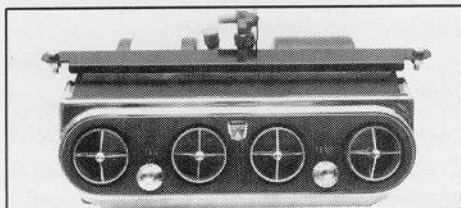


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The following year on January 12th, Henry himself drove old "999" to another world speed record for the measured mile. The setting was New Baltimore, Michigan. Over a cinder covered 'ice course' on Lake St Clair, Mr. Ford covered the distance in 39.4 seconds. The previous record was 46 seconds! His official speed was listed at 91.37 miles per hour.

The event was described as "the fastest time ever made with an automobile on any race track in the world". This "time trial" was held under the official scrutiny of the American Automobile Association. To ensure accuracy, three watches were used to start the run, and three more were used at the finish. The 'average' time of the watches prevailed.

This record lasted just seven days before being broken by W.K. Vanderbilt in a Mercedes. The good news is, it would be 90 years before Mercedes would beat Ford again in a major race. And that was only because Penske exploited a loop hole of questionable ethics at Indy in '94 with his purpose-built push rod race engine posing as a "stock block".

- RJ