

the
**Henry
Ford**



THE 1961 THUNDERBIRD INDIANAPOLIS 500 PACE CAR

Ford Motor Company was given the honor of providing the Pace Car for the 1961 Indianapolis 500 Mile Race. The Thunderbird, with its unmistakably new styling was the obvious choice. This would be the 50th (Golden) Anniversary of the Indianapolis 500 Race, although it was not actually the 50th running of the race; during World War II the race was suspended. Ford would provide a total of thirty-four 1961 Thunderbird Convertibles, including one Official Pace Car, one alternate Official Pace Car, and thirty-two Official "500" Festival Cars.

In honor of the 50th Anniversary of the Race, all would be painted a unique shade of Gold that was not available on any other car, not even other Thunderbirds. All of the cars featured White convertible tops and either Black Leather or Black Vinyl Interior Trim, Rear Fender Shields, and 3.00:1 Rear Axles. Since Firestone Rubber Co. was sponsoring the 1961 Indy 500, Thunderbird pace cars were fitted with that brand of tire.

The Thunderbird's presence at the Indianapolis 500 marked a significant moment in automotive history, combining elegance, speed, and celebration.

The Official Pace Car differed from the others in that it was equipped with a Light Pearl Beige Leather interior. This car had specific markings on it that identified it as the Official Pace Car. These included "THUNDERBIRD OFFICIAL PACE CAR" lettering on the doors in black block lettering, with "Thunderbird" above the crease on the door, and "Official Pace Car" below the crease. "Thunderbird" was also in slightly larger lettering. Below "Official Pace Car" were two 1/2-inch wide horizontal red stripes running the full length of the door. On the rear quarter panel, centered high above the rear wheel opening, were the words "GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY" in small black block lettering. At the crease, "INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY" appeared with "MAY 30, 1961" just above the rear wheel opening in matching lettering. The alternate Official Pace Car would serve as a backup, in case the Official Pace Car developed mechanical problems that would prevent it from operating to begin the race. The alternate car was identical except it had a black interior. Mechanical modifications to the two Pace Cars might have been made prior to the race, but no documentation has turned up to date indicating this actually happened.

The 32 festival cars filled their official capacity by appearing in the parade the week before the race, and to carry the race car drivers around the track during introductions held before the race. The 32 festival cars plus the alternate Pace Car represented the 33 drivers that would start the race. These festival cars all featured Black Leather or Black Vinyl interiors. Specific markings appeared to identify these cars, including a large blue square frame about an inch wide, the center of which was clear and displayed "OFFICIAL CAR" in large black block letters at the center top of the door. Below, "500" appeared in large red numerals, just above the crease on the door. "FESTIVAL" in black script outlined in white was just below the crease, and below that "MAY 30, 1961" again in black lettering with a white outline. On the rear quarter panels, centered above the rear wheel opening and above the body side crease appeared "COURTESY OF" in black script, followed by the name of the Ford dealership sponsoring that particular car in black block lettering just below the body side crease. After performing their duties at the race, these 32 festival cars were returned to the sponsoring dealers who, in turn, probably sold them. They might have been repainted due to the decals that had been affixed to them—or in order to sell them—and the fact they once held a special place in automotive history was quickly forgotten.

Of the 34 cars, only 6 have been located and documented over the years. The Official Pace Car is believed to have been given to A.J. Foyt as part of his winnings, and some believe he in turn later gave the car to his Mother, but this is speculation, no one seems to know for sure. To date no documentation has turned up that sheds any light on the history of the car after the race.

Unfortunately, one of the 6 documented cars was destroyed in a devastating fire at the Wisconsin Dells in December 1999. The remains of the car apparently still exist, and due to the extremely unique nature of the car, the possibility exists that it might be rebuilt someday. Two of the surviving cars are in Indiana, one is in Wisconsin, one in Arkansas, and the final one is believed to be in Iowa.

For unknown reasons, the survival rate of the 1961 Thunderbirds as a whole seems to be very low. However, the possibility exists that the identity of a few unknown surviving Indy 500 cars might be obscured by repaints using another color. This can be determined by the data plate which has no color code on authentic Official Cars.



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Official Car
1961 Indianapolis 500



Lorne Green and Dan Blocker as Ben and Hoss Cartwright from the TV show “Bonanza”
Celebrity Guests of the Indy 500





Leading The Pack

the
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The Victory Lap Goes To A.J. Foyt & His Wife



Restored Official Car, Painted to Look Like The Pace Car



The Same Official Car, Painted as a Pace Car - At a Car Show



The Beautiful Gold Color Ford Used For The Pace Car



Above left: one of the 32 Official "500" Festival cars restored with correct graphics.

Above right: another Official "500" Festival car restored with Official Pace Car graphics.

(This photograph was taken in front of the Brickyard Crossing Golf Resort & Inn, located on the grounds of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, during the 1999 VTCI Meet.)



*1961 Ford Thunderbird Convertible - Indy 500 Pace Car Replica
JCarnutz '12*

Pace Car Replica – Model Car



Pace Car Replica – Model Car



*1961 Ford Thunderbird Convertible - Indy 500 Pace Car Replica
JCarnutz '12*

Pace Car Replica – Model Car







The Owner of the Restored Official Car
With Period Dressed Passengers



A.J. Foyt and His Wife With Their 1961 Thunderbird Pace Car

