



## Don't Forget About Black Race Car Drivers During the Indy 500

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Last year during Black history month, I created a [Black excellence series](#) for Keep Indiana Learning. It was important to me that students like my Black sons learned the history of Black Hoosiers. Many times, when they had to learn about famous Hoosiers, with the exception of Madam CJ Walker, the Hoosiers they learned about were typically male and typically white. When people think about the Indy 500, people do not tend to think about Black people. Today, for a few minutes, I want people to learn the local history of Black people and race car driving.

One of the most famous Black race car drivers was Charlie Wiggins. He was born in Evansville, Indiana in 1897, and he died in 1979. When he was young, his dad was not able to take care of him and his siblings. Additionally, his mom died when Charlie was 11. Despite not having a strong parental foundation, he was determined to be great.



Charlie Wiggins

He decided to start a shoe-shining stand to have a way to take care of himself. While he was earning money shining shoes, he was watching mechanics work. He picked up the skill and

worked his way up to becoming a lead mechanic. Working on cars was not enough; he wanted to race them. Unfortunately, during this time, Black people were prohibited from racing with white drivers. This did not stop Charlie or other Black men who wanted to race cars. The Colored Speedway Association (CSA) was created to allow Black men to race.

Later, the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes became for Black drivers a prestigious race to win just like the Indy 500 is for race car drivers in the present day. The Gold and Glory Sweepstakes, a 100-mile race, took place on a dirt track at the Indianapolis fairgrounds. In addition to winning several CSA races, Wiggins won the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes four times which is more than any other Black driver. He won the Sweepstakes in 1926, 1931, 1932, and 1933. During the 1933 race, the runner up was Lawrence Wiggins, his brother.

This is how he earned the nickname “Negro Speed King.”

The Gold and Glory Sweepstakes only lasted from 1924-1936. In 1936, there was a 13 car pile up and Wiggins was injured. The crash cost him his right leg and vision in one eye.

Although these injuries stopped his racing career, they did not stop Wiggins. He lived by his motto “race on” and pivoted. He built himself a wooden right leg and started training Black mechanics. He continued to fight and advocated for Black race car drivers for the rest of his life.

When I am teaching children, I love to ask, “Do you think Black people were part of this?” or I say, “I wonder what Black people were doing during this event.” Many times people advocate for Black people to be part of something thinking they were not ever part of it to begin with. Before these assumptions are made, I challenge people to go do some research.

When “Back Home Again in Indiana” is sung and the checkered flag is waved, take a moment and think about the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes and the Black race car drivers who decided to “race on” despite racism and barriers.

To learn more and to see the names of the Black race car drivers that participated in the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes, people can visit the [PBS website](#).