

Replicarz 1971 Johnny Lightning PJ Colt Indy 500 Winner

Big Al's birthday bullet

When the Vel's Parnelli Jones (VPJ) team unloaded Al Unser's PJ Colt at Indy in 1971, they were understandably confident. Unser had won the 500 from the pole the previous year in essentially the same car, and gone on to capture the 1970 USAC (pre-IndyCar) National Championship—the first of four each in Unser's career—in dominant fashion, winning 10 of 18 races. For '71, Unser's qualifying speed was up more than 4mph from the year before—a huge gain. His 174.622mph should have been enough for pole, but it wasn't.

The McLaren team, still reeling from Bruce McLaren's death just three days after that '70 Indy 500, had been feverishly at work in the wind tunnel, continuing their founder's pioneering aerodynamic work. They arrived at Indy in '71 with a powerhouse driver lineup of Mark Donohue, Peter Revson, and Denny Hulme driving brand-new McLaren M16As wearing huge wings on the nose and tail, and powered by the dominant Offenhauser turbo engine. Revson set the pole at a scorching 178.696mph, with Donohue just a couple of ticks behind. Only Al's brother Bobby Unser prevented a McLaren sweep of the front row by qualifying his Offy-powered Gurney Eagle in third. Hulme's McLaren started fourth; Al's lap was only good enough for a fifth-place start.

That start was shrouded in controversy—not for anything that happened on the track but for a near catastrophe in pit lane. Coming to the start, Eldon Palmer—the Indianapolis Dodge dealer who had been given the honor of driving in exchange for supplying the '71 Dodge Challenger convertible pace car—sped up

to 125mph to get the field to the green and pulled down onto pit lane as is standard procedure. In the car with him were Indianapolis Motor Speedway owner Tony Hulman and hero astronaut John Glenn. But in all the excitement of the field thundering by, Palmer somehow missed his pit-lane braking marker (he claimed it had been removed), and he realized too late that he was quickly running out of road. He slammed on the brakes, the Dodge slewed sideways and careened into a

The Lola-based PJ Colt was the last car to win Indy without a rear wing for downforce. (Photo courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway)



The Johnny Lightning livery is one of the coolest in Indy history—more so because it won two years in a row!

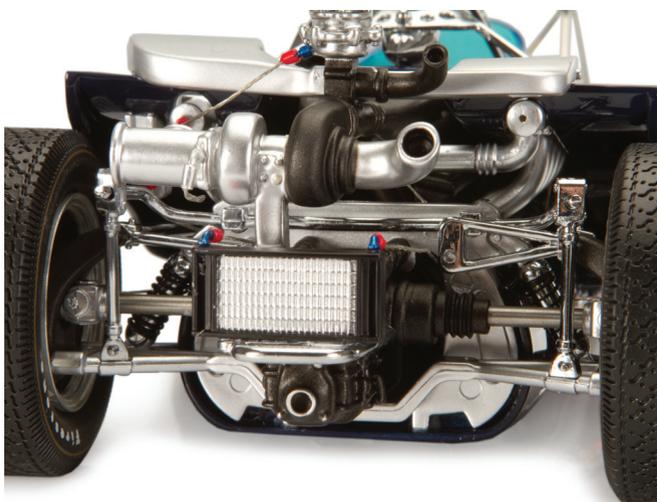
AT A GLANCE	
 MODEL	1971 PJ Colt
 MANUFACTURER	Replicarz
 GENRE	Classic Indy car
 SCALE	1:18
 PRICE	\$250

- | WHAT WE LIKE | |
|---|---|
|  | The diecast-sponsored car that won Indy—twice! |
|  | Removable ducktail shows off stellar engine detail |
|  | Brings together two Indy legends: Al Unser and Parnelli Jones |



The 1971 race was infamous for a near-catastrophe, when the Dodge Challenger pace car plowed into a photographers' stand at the end of pit lane at the start. Miraculously, no one was killed! (Photo courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway)

EVERYTHING IS SO WELL DETAILED THAT COLLECTORS CAN UNDERSTAND HOW THIS ODD ENGINE FUNCTIONS JUST BY LOOKING AT THE MODEL.



Above: With the ducktail rear bodywork removed, the amazing levels of detail in the engine, transmission, and suspension can be clearly seen. Below: The cockpit is accurate but primitive by today's standards. Check out the interesting way that the roll bar is braced on the intake tubes for the Ford V-8, and note the exhaust exits down the center.



photographer's stand at the end of pit lane. Thirty people were injured in the wreck and the pace car was badly damaged, but fortunately no one was killed.

The race itself got underway with considerably less drama. Donohue led early, with the Unsers, and Al's teammate Joe Leonard running well. The pace took a toll on reliability; Donohue suffered a gearbox failure barely a third of the way in. Hulme dropped a valve. Leonard and the Unser brothers traded the lead until Leonard lost a turbo with about 80 laps to go and retired. From there, it was all Al—he led the final 82 laps unchallenged and took the checkered flag with half-a-lap

and beautiful molding on the fuel socket, panel lines, and rivet marks.

It's interesting to note the Ford Four Cam V-8, despite Ford having abandoned the motor program after the 1970 season (eventually selling it to A. J. Foyt). VPJ switched Unser to the more powerful Offy for the second half of the season, but for Indy, Ford power served him well. It's a fascinating powerplant, and the nest of exhaust tubes that exit unconventionally through the valley between the cylinders are beautifully molded and painted, and you can just glimpse the "FORD" name cast into the tops of the cam covers. The turbo plumbing is all out in the open to see and just mesmerizing. The blow-off valve sticks up like a periscope, while the intake charge is transferred from the turbo to a T-pipe that feeds the tubelike intake manifolds. Everything is so well detailed that collectors can understand how this odd engine functions just by looking at the model. The tail section of the body is removable, giving a wonderful view of the transmission cooler, various lines and fittings, and the suspension system.

The Firestone tires are immense, and as was the convention of the day, they are treaded rather than slicks. The wheels are beautifully crafted two-piece affairs; aluminum outer rings with black 6-spoke centers and etched-metal knockoffs that do not spin with the wheels. Brake discs are visible behind the spokes.

FINAL LAP

As the last wingless car to win Indy, this car represents the end of an era. The team switched to Offy power and Johnny Lightning would end its sponsorship deal amid financial turmoil at the end of the season, so this car is something of a turning point for the team as well. But what will really draw collector interest is that paint scheme—it's one of the most beautiful and memorable in Brickyard history. Al Unser would go on to win Indy four times—a record he shares with only A. J. Foyt and Rick Mears—and one of only five men to win back to back. This model is as loaded with history as it is with detail. It's a must-have. 🏆

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