

The Improbable Messiah

How Christopher Pook became the savior
of street racing and a city by the sea

By Leon Mandel

Mother Pook's Race Architect Pie

(Serves as many as the place will hold)

Two heaping measures Walter Mitty
One box Willie Sutton
Three tablespoons H. Ross Perot
One quart Flo Ziegfeld
One (brimming) Gallon Professor Harold Hill

One pinch Rube Goldberg
One tank car Kaiser Wilhelm
Essence of Edison, a mere whiff
Generous measure Lewis Mumford
A little pinch of Ponzi

Dump ingredients into baking pan. Stuff into oven. Leave for four or so decades. Peer inside very, very carefully. Do not singe eyebrows. Close door firmly. Call business rival. Tell him a real treat is waiting. Leave town.

It rises like a planner's idealized model from the wreckage of a toy city which has been randomly scattered by the hand of a malicious child.

Except the model and the city are real, and the new buildings are now so numerous that the outlines of the future can be seen growing from a Southern California landscape still dotted by great stucco edifices in pink and in white, their quatrefoil windows posing modestly behind decorative grilles, their roofs covered in tile and surrounded by parapets and topped with bell towers.

Long Beach used to be a sagging island waystop for the elderly, pierced here and there by volcanic tips of enlisted men's bars and porn movie houses that catered to the town's major industry, the Navy.

People lived in Long Beach, in houses like those described a quarter of a century ago by Raymond Chandler: "It was a dirty brown house with a dirty brown lawn in front of it. There was a large bare patch around a tough-looking palm tree. On the porch stood one lonely rocker.

"The afternoon breeze made the unpruned shoots of last year's poinsettias tap-tap against the front wall. A line of stiff, yellowish, half-washed clothes jittered on a rusty wire in the side yard."

Now the new, glass boxes of the Ocean Center Building, the Sumitomo and Security Pacific banks, take shape behind multiple praying mantis French-built cranes. There is a fresh-faced Ramada Renaissance Hotel rising. The city has built a futurama civic entertainment cluster of blue/green glass-clad arenas and halls and meeting places that look ready to receive visitors from

some intergalactic council. In fact, they are at their most dramatic when the event that pulled Long Beach into the present, the Grand Prix, comes to town.

Wally Edgerton, vice mayor of Long Beach, said last year: "The Grand Prix has been one of the great dynamics in the growth of Long Beach." Mario Andretti, elegantly tailored in a dinner suit for the Grand Prix ball, sitting one place away at the admiral's table at the San Pedro Officer's Club overheard: "The growth is more impressive than that. It is almost awesome to look around and see how the city has changed.

"In a way, it is a legacy of motorsports that all of us can be proud of."

This would be the same Mario Andretti who won a grand prix and two Indycar races through the streets of the city. That he was there to do so was thanks to the fact that Long Beach was perhaps the only town in America naive enough to believe in a transplanted Brit who emerged in 1974 promising instant nirvana. Like the *Music Man's* charming flim flam man, Professor Harold Hill, he swung into action, carpet-bag in hand, vowing to create not a boy's band, but a circus of speed and a vault full of riches.

"Chris is in the racing business," says Robert McCabe, president of Detroit Renaissance, Inc, the quasi-capitalistic entity responsible for the US Grand Prix. "He was a consultant for a brief time when we began six years ago. Chris's life is spent primarily promoting racing for profit. We are in the city building business."

Tell that to the citizens of Long Beach.

And while you're at it, ask them how a man once described as "...variously thought of as...the inventor of urban racing, Rasputin of downtown speed ghettos, high-binding huckster who tap dances so fast you see neither the brass on his Ballys nor the hand picking your pocket..." came to be the president of the Chamber of Commerce of the city of Long Beach.

II

"There's a cadre of guys who look at me and say, 'Who is this guy?' (Some of them) think I sail pretty close to the wind."

Christopher Simon Robin Pook was born in England. That is established. Much of the rest of his early history is not. According to one account, a certain Miles P. Shook, citizen of Long Beach and apartment building owner, sponsored Pook's entry to the US at the request of his—Shook's—sister, a friend of the Pook family.

Pook himself talks about his business background as being in "construction; airplane charter, used equipment, and brokerage." There are informal interviews that suggest much of his very early career was spent teetering. In fact, Pook might very well qualify for a Gold Medal in Thin Ice Skating. It is clear, whatever you choose to believe, that Pook was in training to become a world class race promoter, a vocation which requires intensified tutorials in a variety of forms of edgework.

At any rate, Pook appeared in Long Beach in 1969 as a participant in the travel agency business. Five years later, Pook emerged in front of a passel of Long Beach bureaucrats proposing a street race in their town. Let us inquire no more deeply into



Mike Levashoff photo

Christopher Simon Robin Pook, in his Long Beach Grand Prix Assn office, finalizing plans for the city's PPG Indycar race and other municipal street races

what took him there. By that time, he had formed an alliance with Don N. Dyer, a highly respected lawyer in the community who thought that not only was a street race a dandy idea but so was a partnership, in fact a whole corporation.

Long Beach was hurting in 1973. To town pessimists it was unfortunately situated. It may have been just 22 miles from Los Angeles, but 22 miles was a culture away ever since L.A.-Long Beach, the last route of the Interurban, The Big Red Cars, that connected the string of beach towns comprising the sprawl of the South Coast, was torn down in 1961.

But where some citizens saw remoteness, Pook saw proximity if only there were a suitable attraction. Long Beach is 11 miles from Disneyland and barely a half hour's drive from Los Angeles International Airport. Better still, Long Beach had the resources to save itself, its shoreline embraced a bay of oil. The Tidelands, as they are called, provide revenue not only to the companies that exploit them, but by California and federal law, to the communities which they abut. Thus there may have been widespread sadness, sleaze and apathy in

Long Beach about restoring what had become a camp follower's shantytown; but among some of its people there was also anger and a fierce desire to crawl out from under its tar paper shack image. What's more there was the money to do it and a start already made. Fifty million had been committed to a convention and exhibit hall. A \$65m renovation of that Great White Whale, the *Queen Mary* was underway.

The Long Beach boosters had coalesced, as such people always do, around the Convention and News Bureau. To them, Pook and Dyer, joined now by a magic American name, Daniel Sexton Gurney, and a man with a reputation for brilliant management of the racing facility at nearby Riverside, Les Richter, came. In harmony before the diehards at the Convention bureau, the quartet sang a siren song.

A grand prix through the streets would bring, said one story written during the time the race was under consideration, "economic strength, an excellent all-around tourist market, enhanced interest for major hotel developers, increased economic credibility...and a true International Identity."

In these days of street racing as a commonplace—racing around a basketball arena in New Jersey (originally Pook produced), street racing in Miami, street racing in Toronto, street racing in downtown Detroit (as we have seen, another crypto-Pookistry)—those words are nothing extraordinary. But back then, before Pook *invented* the idea of bringing auto racing to population centers to rescue a sport that was failing at bringing populations to remote racetracks, when they were spoken they sounded like the gargle of snake oil.

Pook and company, incorporated as the Long Beach Grand Prix Assn, encountered fierce resistance. Reactionary elements (some called them 'prudent') in the city resisted. A new California Coastal Commission, created by environmentalists in that environmentally conscious period, resisted. But most of all, since the money to put on a race was to come in part from a stock offering, the California Corporations Commission, joined by an eclectic collection of doubters, scoffers, revisionists, anarchists, trust officers, and protectors of the Little Sisters of the Poor resisted. A stock offering? In a corporation formed to put on an



The Many Faces of Pook: Above, with friend and client Emerson Fittipaldi, the Brazilian Indycar pilot...



Making the rounds (top) before this year's LBGP, headsets help Chris keep tabs on Pook Central...

automobile race through the streets of a city? In a state that contained the most notorious collection of con men and schemers to be found on the face of the globe?

For a while, it looked as if Pook & Co would have had it easier trying to convert the State House in Sacramento to condos. Eventually, the overseers of financial propriety in California allowed as how if an investor had an annual income of at least \$30,000, assets of \$50,000 and by "connection...employment or vocation," identification with the auto industry, it would allow shares to be sold to him. But only in blocks of \$12,500. Said one observer: "That's a hell of an expensive pit pass."

From the perspective of a decade later, not so very. The stock was issued at \$6.50. It is trading, if you can buy it from the few shareholders who took a chance in 1975, for about \$25. It has paid its first dividend, 50cents a share. It also helps you get a pit pass.

(An interesting side note. One of the partners of the law firm of which Don Dyer was also a partner, RDDW&D, which helped steer the LBGPA through the white water of an intrastate offer, and who was the second "D" in the acronym, was George Deukmejian, who holds his stock these days in blind trust as the beyond-reproach Governor of California.)

So far as California was concerned, the race was a go. Not, however, according to the then-equivalent of the FISA, called the *Commission Sportif Internationale*, the CSI. The CSI wanted an application from its American affiliate, the Automobile Competitions Committee of the US, the ACCUS. If Pook thought there were labyrinthine passages to traverse in the municipal and state bureaucracies, the auto racing maze almost made him berserk. Canny Richter suggested Pook go straight to the CSI from the beginning, bypassing ACCUS. Pook wanted to do it right. He ended up, after an agonizing delay, following Richter's advice.

The race was on.

First there would be a Formula 5000 race to determine the suitability of the circuit, then a full-on grand prix. "(The) event sent me sideways," Pook says; reflecting on 10 years of skating, slaving and scheming, survival, and finally, enormous success.

Nothing came easily, particularly the survival part. The LBGPA went into enormous debt, paid off that debt, established its Formula One race, lost its F1 race, started over with an Indycar race, went into debt again, got out of that debt too, and built its Indycar race into the same magnitude of attraction its grand prix had been.

Through it all, Long Beach, year-by-year, acquired just what Pook had said it would, a true international identity. Right up to the day before that F5000 event, September 28, 1975, you could have gotten 100-1 against.

III

It is 7am at Long Beach. A slight mist, like vaseline on the lens of a camera, serves to glamorize an already dramatic panorama burned into the cathode ray tubes of 100 million world television viewers. There is the *Queen Mary*, now profitably managed by the company that once produced *Lassie*. A blossoming corsage of white concrete overpasses leads to the green glass tower of the Hyatt Regency, which gazes at its own image in a reflecting pool by its side. The shooters lucky or important enough to have rooms there this weekend, enjoy a vista on the race circuit. But the vista that counts is inside the track, on the second floor of the Arena. Through an enormous looking glass, out onto the paddock, gazes *Il Maestro*. This is Pook Central.

The night before, Chris has sat by wife Ellen's side as she manipulated the complicated strings that make the Grand Prix Charity Ball at the San Pedro Officer's Club work and allow impressive contributions to the likes of the California Pool for the Handicapped and the Long Beach Special

Olympics. Now it's puppet-master Pook's turn and he hasn't missed a thread.

Here are some excerpts from the 1986 Long Beach Grand Prix Master Schedule. Just some mind you:

Tuesday, May 14: Association notifies city of any changes to race circuit and deposits its 100percent of city's cost for change.

(Two months and several items further on in the master schedule)

Sunday, July 11: Newsletter I to typesetter.

(A month and a half and three priorities after that)

Sunday, September 5: Hospitality worksheet to be printed by 10/5.

(Turn page. Turn page again)

Tuesday, October 1: Press (department) to itemize number of hats, shirts, beverages, etc. that may possibly be supplied via sponsorship by 10/1 to marketing.

There are 41 pages of this stuff. It ends when the race weekend begins, to be replaced by a whole new schedule, now being presided over, on the second floor of the arena, by Himself.

Pook Central is a kind of Terrarium. Besides Pook, there are about five people manning phones, their skulls gripped by headsets. Pook Central has two television monitors, two telephone PBX miniboards each with six and eight lines.

Pook has long ago learned to run the race as a field marshal runs a war, by theatre, through theatre commanders. There are three theatres and within them seven areas and within the areas there are zones. Each zone has a manager, two assistants and 60 to 70 noncommissioned personnel. All problems within the zone are logged, all zones have phone lines to the Long Beach



At Grand Prix ball with wife Ellen (left), huddling with PPG power broker Jim Chapman

PD and race security.

The Pookian Theatres, by the way, are quite apart from the operation of the race, which is in the hands of the SCCA the moment the weekend arrives.

The theatre commanders each have a copy of the schedule. The schedule for the race seems even more obsessive than the schedule for the weekend.

Saturday, April 12, 1986, "FINAL", page one: 5:00-6:00am radio check out.

6am: Synchronize watches—all staff.

6am: Sweepers on circuit.

6:01 Verify all signs.

6:01 Commence hospitality check.

6:20 Check public address system.

6:30 Confirm night barricades removed.

Twelve pages later, the area managers meet for 15min, there's a radio check and "good night."

Because Sunday ends with the race, and that ends early, Sunday's schedule is only seven pages worth of minutiae.

If all this sounds as compulsive as some excerpt from a German general staff report on invasion plans of the lowlands in World War I, attend Walt Czarnecki, Roger Penske's race boss for Cleveland: "That's the way you have to do it. You just can't run a race right any other way." In case that one went sailing by, a little emphasis. Roger Penske, the modern major general, instructs his number one man to go by the Book of Pook. It sends the senses reeling: Pook teaching Penske about order in the universe.

"Quite frankly, I don't have anything to do anymore," Pook says at 7:01 Saturday morning, assuring a bystander that the race is in good hands and that the Field Marshal must now sit back and watch things happen. Whereupon, coffee cup in hand, speaker clipped to his belt, dressed in a cream vest, checked shirt, blue trousers and tassled loafers, a headsetted Christopher Simon Robin Pook sets out to make damn sure that the weekend is going to plan.

Pook encounters a CART doctor sitting in his parked car also in the paddock and

orders him to leave. "I don't care if he's the ...governor. If a doctor has to operate out of his car, get another doctor. We have rules. There are no exceptions to our rules.

"It's like the hooker," Pook explains. "The moment she compromises and charges \$20, she'll never get \$50 again."

Pook demands to know what happened to the canopy on the press grandstand. He walks at a brisk pace. This weekend, no matter what they've said during the rest of the year, everyone knows and likes Pook, everyone smiles a greeting. He returns almost every one by name, complaining throughout he can never remember anything, particularly names.

Pook orders a lock removed from a Port-a-John. "If you're going to keep them locked, sell tickets to them."

These days, Pook is said to charge upwards of \$150,000 as a consultant's fee to anyone who contemplates holding a race. It seems a fair price.

IV

What began as a four-man partnership is now a subdivided corporation engaged in a variety of offshoot activities. Race Circuit Management creates, helps create, and manages races.

Marketing Services sees to it those races, and other sports events, are profitable.

Sports Consultants, International helps the bottom line for the Long Beach Sea Festival. Its American Golf Corp division advises cities how to operate municipal courses as profit centers. Its Hospitality Services division books suites not only at races (the Meadowlands, National Hot Rod Assn drag meets) but at events such as the Los Angeles Open golf tournament.

None of which is to say Chris Pook has abandoned racing.

He manages his friend Emerson Fittipaldi.

He stands by to make a CART race in Dallas as overflowing with gold as Long Beach, if only CART would grant it a date.

He is about to stage a spectacular vintage car weekend, weeklong car show, and

IMSA GTP race at Del Mar race track, "Where the surf meets the turf."

For a while, Del Mar citizens resisted. Given Pookian persistence and Pookian political skill, it was a foolish thing to do. Race Circuit Management had gone for authorization not to the city but straight to the State of California, Del Mar being a part of the 22nd Agricultural District. The city filed a lawsuit.

Pook is no stranger to lawsuits. When he had done a deal in Las Vegas with Caesars Palace hotel for an F1 race, and Caesars and the Formula One Constructors Assn had agreed to abandon the losing proposition, Pook sued. It was settled out of court and Las Vegas became a CART race, co-promoted by CART president John Frasco.

"I get tough. I dig in. It took a lot to make this company survive." So Pook looked at the Del Mar filing and the 3-2 vote in council that had rejected the Agricultural District's Environmental Impact Report, which was the pretext for the suit. And then he looked again at the city's conditional ultimatum which was to allow him to run the race once as a test, at which point the city would see. And he dug in.

"We called their bluff," he says. "We went to court and said the city of Del Mar had to proceed with the suit it filed. We forced the issue." Del Mar backed down. IMSA will hold its finale in 1987 at Del Mar at the end of a 10-day orgy of car show and old-box race: courtesy Race Circuit Management, Inc.

Not long ago, the phone rang in Pook's Long Beach office. It was the *Los Angeles Times* whose special events department wanted Pook to drive on up the 22 miles to talk about a street race through the City of Angels to benefit the prestigious *L.A. Times* Charities.

Target date is 1988. If the *Times* Charities is involved, the odds the race will happen are very strong indeed. With the consummate Hessian Pook also involved, the *Times* has made them stronger.

Christopher Simon Robin Pook is back skating again. But these days on golden blades. **AW**