



## Tuskegee Airmen to be honored at Indy 500

Racing series **INDYCAR**

Date 2009-03-11

### Tuskegee Airmen to be Honored At This Year's Indianapolis 500; Efforts Are Underway for 'Red Tail' Race Car

INDIANAPOLIS, March 11 - A group of original Tuskegee Airmen will be among America's servicemen honored in festivities leading up to the Indianapolis 500 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway this May, including the pre-race festivities on race day morning, Sunday, May 24.

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first all-black aviation unit in the United States military. Formed in July 1941, its members trained at a segregated base at Tuskegee, Ala., from whence they got their name. Despite great odds and outright prejudice, they helped America win World War II and end racial segregation in the military through courage, tenacity, perseverance and patriotism.

"People have to understand we were forced to train, fly and go to war as a separate air corps, not because we wanted to, but because it was the only choice we had," said retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Spann Watson, one of the first Tuskegee pilots to go overseas and fight. "We couldn't let black America down, and we couldn't let America down, so we persevered and excelled, and America is a better place because of it."

The 332nd Fighter Group, composed of Tuskegee Airmen's 99th, 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons and known as the "Red Tails" for their aircrafts' distinctive paint scheme, went on to complete 1,578 combat missions, compiling the best bomber escort record of the war and paving the way for the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties. In all the Tuskegee Airmen were credited with damaging or destroying 409 enemy aircraft, garnering 744 medals, including 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Also launched at Tuskegee was the 477th Medium Bomb Group, four B-25 squadrons that didn't have an opportunity to go overseas before the war ended. "Those guys are too often overlooked," added Watson, "but like the 332nd, they proved that any American, given the chance, could compete and contribute like all the rest."

At 92 years of age, Watson and his comrades are ready to take on one more mission - supporting Junious Matthews, a longtime racer and African-American who is striving to enter a "Red Tail" car in the Indianapolis 500 in their honor.

"The way we see it, he's carrying on in the spirit of the Tuskegee Airmen," said Watson. "That, and the way the Speedway has opened its arms to us, is quite an honor. So we're happy to be part of this great event, and we're behind what Junious is trying to do."

"We've formed a team, Top Cover Racing, which pays tribute to the airmen with a Red Tail paint scheme on our cars," explained Matthews. "We're very close to officially entering the

race. If we get the sponsorship we need, there'll be a Red Tail race car attempting to make the 500."

Among the activities planned are appearances by some of the original Tuskegee Airmen in the IPL 500 Festival Parade in downtown Indianapolis on Saturday, May 23.

The airmen are also slated to attend Miller Lite Carb Day and the Freedom 100 Firestone Indy Lights race on Friday, May 22, and the Indy 500 itself.

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway has a long tradition of honoring America's armed forces at the Indianapolis 500 over the Memorial Day weekend each May. The track's invitation to honor the Tuskegee Airmen this year grew from a relationship formed by Firestone Indy Lights driver Andrew Prendeville and Watson. They were introduced by Matthews, a mutual friend.

Prendeville invited Watson and his son, Weyman Watson, to last year's Freedom 100 Firestone Indy Lights race as his guests. Watson's presence brought special significance for Prendeville, whose paternal grandfather, Edward Joseph Prendeville, was one of the white bomber airmen the Tuskegee Airmen protected in World War II.

Prendeville drives the No. 2 Firestone Indy Lights car prepared by Indianapolis-based Team Moore Racing.