

Bacon's

3324 AUTO RACING

This season, Tracy's figured out how to win

By Tim May

Dispatch Sports Reporter

In another life, it wouldn't be hard to imagine Paul Tracy assuming the role of arsonist.

But in this life he goes around with rosy cheeks, wire-rimmed glasses and a soft-spoken demeanor. The fire is hidden. Obscured by the visor of his full-face racing helmet, it manifests itself in his right foot 16 Sunday afternoons a year.



Paul Tracy

Seated in one of the Marlboro Penske-Chevy IndyCars, Paul Tracy, 24, is a totally different person.

"I am no nice guy when I put the helmet on," Tracy said as he prepared to begin practice today for Sunday's Pioneer 200 at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course. "It's something like a split image. I turn into a different person, much different from the way I am when I'm sitting around talking with the crew, or reporters, or fans.

"I think that's the way you have to be in any sport, whether you're putting on a racing helmet or a hockey helmet."

The only thing the hockey guy has going for him is that stick. Tracy has nearly 800 horsepower in a 1,550-pound race car to do his bidding. And he bids with an aggressive flair.

"I'm a competitor. I do like to race," Tracy said. "If a guy wants to get by me he's going to have to work hard to do it. Ever since I was a kid, that's the way I've always raced."

Except there has been a noticeable change in Tracy's style this year. Oh, he's still fast and fearless, demonically so at times.

But last year, when he drove most of the season in relief of the injured Rick Mears, fast laps, spectacular crashes and no wins pretty well summed up the venture.

Since blowing the second race this year on the mile oval at Phoenix — he had a huge lead but lost control and crashed while losing patience with a slower car — Tracy has won three times.

He goes into preliminary qualifying for the Pioneer 200 today as one of the major players, third in the season points standings behind Nigel Mansell and Penske Racing teammate Emerson Fittipaldi.

"The first part of the year was pretty tough. I had a lot of bad luck

and put myself in the position to have some bad luck," Tracy said. "But the middle and the end of the year have been great.

"I've been able to fulfill most of my goals, which was be in the top five at the end of the season and win some races. This Marlboro Penske team, we've challenged for the lead at almost every track we've been to."

There have been races the second half of the season in which he has appeared invincible in the Penske car.

"I wouldn't say invincible, but there is the feeling of, when I get out of the car after a qualifying session, if I'm not one of the two or three quickest guys, I'm not very happy about it," Tracy said.

That's the kind of attitude team owner Roger Penske appreciates. That's one of the reasons a rumor earlier in the season seemed so preposterous: Penske was not going to exercise his option to re-sign Tracy, a driver he has developed from IndyCar infancy three years ago.

"I heard a lot of those rumors, and I'd listen and laugh," Tracy said. "I knew I was planning on staying with Roger Penske. ... We have re-signed through the '95 season."