

# 'Gomer Pyle's' ties to Tahoe, Indianapolis 500

By Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS – Jim Nabors is back home again in Indiana, this time to say farewell.

The actor whose bumbling Gomer Pyle character endeared Nabors to an entire generation, and whose rich baritone has provided the soundtrack for the Indianapolis 500 for more than four decades, will perform "Back Home Again in Indiana" on Sunday for the last time.

"I'll be honest with you, I didn't want to stay too long at the fair," the 83-year-old Nabors said with a hearty chuckle. "Everyone has been so incredible to me so many years. The first time I was here was 1972, so I guess most people have grown up with me."

Indeed, millions of race fans have come to know Nabors not for his character on "The Andy Griffith Show" and its spinoff, "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.," but for his Memorial Day weekend tradition.



Jim Nabors will sign "(Back Home Again in) Indiana" for his final time at the Indianapolis 500 .

Photo/Darron Cummings

“To many Indianapolis 500 fans the pre-race pageantry is as important as the race itself,” Indianapolis Motor Speedway president J. Douglas Boles said this week, “especially as the lead-up reaches its highest point with Jim Nabors singing ‘Back Home Again in Indiana’ and Mari Hulman-George giving the command to start engines.”

People tend to forget Nabors was actually born in Alabama. He moved to California when he started out in show business, and was performing in Lake Tahoe one day for an audience that included Bill Harrah. The casino magnate happened to be a car aficionado, and he invited Nabors to attend the Indy 500 for the first time.

Nabors was supposed to be there as a fan, but Tony Hulman had also seen Nabors perform in Lake Tahoe, and the speedway’s owner asked if he would sing along with the Purdue marching band prior to the race. With that, Nabors picks up the story:

“So to the conductor of the Purdue band, I said, ‘What key do you do this in?’ And he looked at me funny and said, ‘We only have one key.’ I said, ‘No, the “Star-Spangled Banner” has two keys.’ And he said, ‘You’re not singing that!’ And I said, ‘Well, what the hell am I singing?’ It was only five minutes to race time, too, and there’s 500,000 people here,” Nabors said.

“He says, ‘It’s the traditional song that opens the race, “Back Home Again in Indiana.”’ I kind of looked at him and go, ‘I’m from Alabama!’ And he started laughing and asked if I knew it. And I said, ‘Well, I know the melody but I don’t know all the lyrics.’ So I’m writing them on my hand. The first time I ever sang it, I wrote it on my hand.”

He knows every nuance by heart these days. While missing the race a handful of times over the years because of illness and

other conflicts, Nabors' rendition of the Hoosier State's unofficial anthem is as much a part of race day as the milk swilled by the winner in Victory Lane.

In truth, his health is a big reason that Nabors is stepping away.

"I had a liver transplant, then I had a pacemaker put in, then I had a new knee put in, then I had a heart valve put in," he said. "I'm almost brand new. I have a lot of new parts."

There is always emotion when Nabors grabs the microphone on race day, and there will no doubt be tears flowing when he does it for the final time. But when asked who he would like to see take over, Nabors gazed out at a throng of fans gathered in the infield.

"I think y'all should do it. You know the words," he said. "I know y'all can sing better than they can at the Kentucky Derby, and they all sing. So why can't you sing?"

With that, a fan called out for Nabors to sing a few lines.

He did, and the crowd took over: "When I dream about the moonlight on the Wabash," they sang in unison, as Nabors leaned back and smiled, "then I long for my Indiana home."