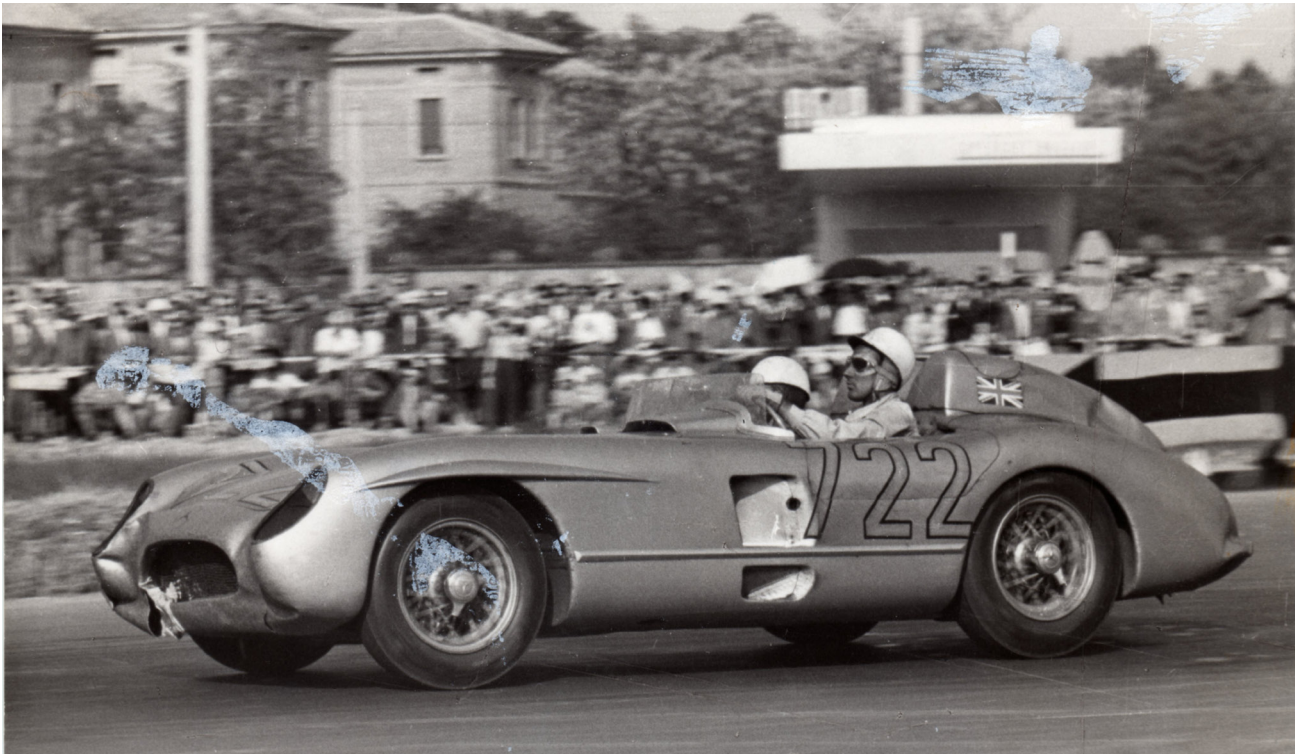


722: Stirling's Time

The legendary record of Stirling Moss and the British challenge at the Mille Miglia

A lecture by **Attilio Facconi**, journalist and automotive historian,
for the **Sirmione Book Club English**

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*English driver Stirling Moss in full action in the Mercedes 300 SLR, winner of the 1955 race.
Moss wins and sets the race land speed record.*

British Cars: From Across the Channel to the Mille Miglia

The participation of British cars and drivers in the Mille Miglia has left a significant mark on the history of the “most beautiful race in the world”. This presence was felt in half of the historical editions. Let’s look at the key British moments.

Participation began in 1932 for experimental purposes with Lord de Clifford in an MG Midget, though he retired on the return leg to Brescia. The following year, the MG Racing Department in Abingdon prepared three cars for the Mille Miglia, which dominated the 1100cc category. This was a success of both sporting and technical significance. In subsequent editions, the fast Aston Martins performed well, securing prominent positions in their class.

In the post-war period, sporting diplomacy prevailed, and four Healey cars arrived from England, distinguished by their robustness, stability, and speed. The constructor Donald Healey himself, along with his son Geoffrey, achieved ninth place overall and second in class. In 1950, British Healeys and Jaguars started from Brescia, but it was the XK 120 “barchetta”—a unique specimen built by Clemente Biondetti in collaboration with the Coventry factory—that secured eighth place overall. This car now belongs to a collector from Verona, often seen passing through Sirmione.

In the following years, British cars became increasingly present at the Brescia start line, with Aston Martin, Healey, and Jaguar—the latter entrusting a C-Type to the young driver Stirling Moss in 1953. However, it was Stirling Moss and journalist Dennis Jenkinson who, with a legendary performance in 1955, permanently etched the British seal onto the history of the Mille Miglia.

Mille Miglia 1955: Stirling Moss's Unbeatable Record

Winning in a Mercedes 300 SLR at an average speed of 157.650 km/h

The history of the 22nd edition is written in indelible ink with one name: Stirling Moss. The British driver triumphed in 1955 with a sensational record average speed that has become legendary. Seven decades later, we revisit that historic feat—a massive sporting event with extraordinary public involvement that made the Mille Miglia unique.

In the mid-1950s, the “Old Continent” was rising from the ashes of wartime devastation; after a decade, signs of improved social and economic conditions were emerging. The Mille Miglia, which resumed in 1947, represented a vital moment of sporting, industrial, and social rebirth. The 1955 spring race was the most attended edition ever, ready to deliver new records given the continuous improvements in cars and roads. Anticipation was high as the race had established itself as a globally popular event. Every manufacturer fielded their best models, entrusting them to the most famous “aces of the wheel” to achieve prestigious results.

The 22nd edition promised to be memorable: 521 cars started from Corso Venezia—a record turnout. Never before had the most powerful racing machines from the great manufacturers competed together. The route was identical to the previous year, increasing interest in the final phase, which included a special stage dedicated to the memory of Tazio Nuvolari. This 135-kilometer flat stretch was ideal for pushing engines to their limit.

Fine weather was forecast for the entire route, foreshadowing a fierce battle for victory between Ferrari and Mercedes. Ferrari sought revenge with the new 6-cylinder cars derived from Formula 2, fielding an official team including Piero Taruffi, Umberto Maglioli, Paolo Marzotto, and the promising Eugenio Castellotti. Mercedes, with the new 300 SLR (an 8-cylinder, 3000cc beast derived from Formula 1), aimed for the podium with Juan Manuel Fangio, Karl Kling, Hans Hermann, and the British prospect Stirling Moss, who drove alongside journalist Jenkinson.

Jenkinson developed a specialized pace-note system using symbols for course features, which he unrolled during the race to provide rapid cues to the driver. This idea would become the ancestor of the modern road-book. As the cars started, the battle was immediately incandescent. Paolo Marzotto's Ferrari was lightning fast, reaching Verona first at nearly 200 km/h, but a tire failure forced him to stop. Castellotti took the lead, but his tires also gave way, forcing his retirement.

The new Mercedes dominated the descent toward Rome; Moss was in first place with a record-breaking pace. He was pursued by an indomitable Taruffi, who unfortunately retired in Viterbo. On the return to Brescia, the situation remained unchanged: it was a triumph for the Stuttgart manufacturer. Stirling Moss won, setting a new race record with a staggering average speed of 157.650 km/h, finishing well ahead of Fangio and Ferrari's Maglioli.

This record remains unbeaten to this day. The Moss-Jenkinson duo, in their powerful “Silver Arrow,” also won the Gran Premio Nuvolari. On the flat stretch of the Po Valley (Cremona-Mantova-Brescia), they nearly averaged 200 km/h, stopping the clocks at 39 minutes and 54 seconds (an average of 198.496 km/h). The places of honor in the grand prix, which honors the “Flying Mantuan,” mirror the final standings of the Mille Miglia.

Mille Miglia: “The most beautiful race in the world”

The first competitions

The period of peace following the Wars of the Risorgimento, in the second half of the 19th century, marked a turning point in the development of an independent vehicle, capable of moving on its own. Industrial development was booming throughout Europe, and Italian entrepreneurs also invested resources in this sector, giving rise to the first automotive industries by the end of the 19th century.

The historic date of the first automobile races in Italy is set as September 10, 1899, with the race taking place along the ring road of the city of Brescia. The following day was even more important because the race took place on the challenging 223-kilometer Brescia-Cremona-Venona-Brescia road route, on dusty dirt roads.

After this milestone in motorsports, circuit races began in Brescia, the cradle of motorsport and a progressive industrial center, as well as the headquarters of the OM automobile manufacturer, as part of the “Brescia Automobile Week” between 1904 and 1907.

At the wheel of the new cars were Giovanni Agnelli, Ettore Bugatti, and Vincenzo Lancia: names destined to leave an indelible mark on the history of the automotive industry.

In the second decade of the last century, the roar of engines gave way to the sinister roars of the “Great War.” Only in 1921 did motor racing officially resume with the Garda Circuit between Salò and Gardone and the first Italian Motor Racing Grand Prix, held on the circuit in Montichiari; subsequently, the race was held in Monza on the new, ultra-fast circuit built in the centuries-old park of the Villa Reale.

Brescia’s passion for motorsports is as strong as their organizational skills, so it’s only natural that a fairytale idea should emerge from the city known as the “Lioness of Italy.”

The Dawn of a unique event

In early 1926, the poet Gabriele d’Annunzio, now settled at the Vittoriale degli Italiani in Gardone Riviera, a passionate car enthusiast, settled a long-standing dispute by forever defining the gender of the new four-wheeled vehicle: “The Automobile is Feminine.” In December of the same year, four car-loving friends—Aimo Maggi, Franco Mazzotti, Renzo Castagneto, and Milanese journalist Giovanni Canestrini—decided to create a new event to revitalize the national motoring world, still reeling from the devastating damage of the Great War.

Society was drawn to the cultural movement of “Futurism,” and the automotive industry, though struggling, was driven by a desire for renewal: these were the conditions for a great revolution.

The four friends envisioned a tough, selective road race, starting in Brescia, rounding the halfway point in Rome (as an act of honor toward the capital of the Kingdom), and returning to Brescia. A route through seven regions and many provinces, with three Apennine passes to overcome, for a total of 1,600 kilometers, equal to 1,000 statute miles.

The idea came to fruition on the morning of March 27, 1927, when car number 1, an Isotta Fraschini, set off from Brescia, destined to launch the legend of the Mille Miglia.

77 daredevils set out for the great 1,650-kilometer race on dusty, narrow, and often poorly maintained dirt roads. After 21 hours and 4 minutes, the first car, car number 14, an OM 665 Sport, crewed by Morandi and Minoja, reached the finish line in Brescia, averaging 77.328 km/h, unthinkable for the time. Fifty-four cars returned to the finish line: it was a resounding success.

The first editions

The event’s triumphant success and its positive impact on industry and society led the Prime Minister to urge the four creators to repeat the race in subsequent years. The exploits of great champions, considered heroes of the wheel, made the first editions epic.

In the 1930 race, Mantua driver Tazio Nuvolari surprised everyone with his extraordinary audacity and skill, taking the overall victory at a staggering average speed of 100 km/h. Driving the Alfa Romeo 6C 1750, he won, becoming legendary for his courageous overtaking maneuver between Desenzano and Lonato, which legend has it was his opponent, who had his headlights off.

The epic phase continued throughout the 1930s with increasingly higher average speeds and more competitive and powerful cars, where the Alfa Romeos of the Scuderia Ferrari dominated unchallenged.

In 1940, the race didn't go all the way to Rome; instead, it ran the flat Brescia-Cremona-Mantua-Brescia circuit nine times. Italy also entered the war, and for a few years, competitions were no longer mentioned in Europe.

Franco Mazzotti, one of the founders, never returned from the war. His remaining friends overcame the great problems of post-war Italy, with destroyed roads and bridges, but with great determination and efficiency. As it once was, the great event resumed.

The post-war race

In the climate of post-war reconstruction, despite the absence of foreign crews and the presence of modest cars in the race, the Mille Miglia restarted with large crowds and a resurgence of popular passion for the sporting and human exploits of the legendary and inimitable Tazio Nuvolari.

The 1950s editions reached their peak splendor. Major international car manufacturers participated with increasingly powerful and competitive vehicles, driven by world-class racing aces. The race attracted ever more competitors, and popular involvement was increasingly felt with the new media of radio and television, which broadened coverage.

Enzo Ferrari, who had become a constructor with his racing cars, distinguished by the black "Prancing Horse" on a yellow background, dominated the post-war editions. The exceptions were the 1954 races, when F1 World Champion Alberto Ascari won in a Lancia, and in 1955, the young Englishman Stirling Moss, in a Mercedes, took a resounding victory. The British ace also set the race average record, which will remain unbeaten forever, completing the Brescia-Rome-Brescia race in a time of 10 hours, 7 minutes, and 48 seconds.

In 1957, the "red" Ferraris dominated, taking the entire podium, putting the final seal on a race that would remain unique in the history of road racing.

On May 12, 1957, a few kilometers from the finish line, tragedy struck when Ferrari driver Alfonso De Portago went off the road and was killed along with ten other spectators on the Goitese state road, near Guidizzolo: it was the end of the speed race.

The Regularity Reenactment

The Mille Miglia, universally considered the "most beautiful race in the world," with its immense wealth of history and culture, cannot be lost. Once again, enthusiasts from Brescia are transforming the Mille Miglia into a regularity reenactment race. The formula is an immediate success, interest continues to grow, and every spring, the most beautiful and significant vintage cars from around the world return to speed down our roads.

Today, we can admire an exceptional transit, a "traveling museum" that bears witness to the technological evolution and ingenuity of man applied to four wheels. A unique event, a key figure in the history of the century and known across every continent.



Morandi-Minoia on OM 665 Superba, the winners of the first Mille Miglia in 1927



Maria Antonietta Avanzo, the first woman to compete in the Mille Miglia in 1928



The first participation of an English car in the Mille Miglia in 1932 with Lord de Clifford in an MG



1936 MG competing in the Mille Miglia re-enactment in 2024



1937 Aston Martin to compete in the 2024 Mille Miglia re-enactment



A rare Frezer-Nasch at the 1949 race



1950 Healey Silverstone competing in the 2024 Mille Miglia re-enactment



1952 Jaguar XK120 competing in the Mille Miglia re-enactment in 2024



Two British cars at the 2024 reenactment race in Sirmione. In the foreground is the TR 2, followed by the Austin Healey



The famous 1953 Aston Martin DB 2/4 passing through Sirmione for the 2024 Mille Miglia



Michele Nocera greets English actor Jeremy Irons, in the 2014 race



English driver Derek Bell in a Jaguar C-Type at the 2015 Mille Miglia

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SPORT

illustrato

SETTIMANALE A COLORI DIRETTO DA EMILIO DE MARTINO

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PIOMBANO SUL TRAGUARDO
LE "FERRARI,, DELLA VITTORIA

The cover of the sports supplement of "La Gazzetta dello Sport," featuring Piero Taruffi's finish in the final Mille Miglia of 1957