

HOW THEY MADE "THE RACERS"

One of America's top sports car drivers takes you behind the camera during filming of the year's best movie on cars

BY PHIL HILL

GRAND PRIX and sports car racing in Europe are colorful and exciting spectacles. But not everyone in this country fully appreciates how great they really are. So when the action is put on film, as it was in "The Racers," it helps to create better understanding of the sport.

One of the problems in producing a good movie on racing is making it authentic. This isn't easy, since dramatic situations in the story plot often need emphasis so what's happening on the screen is perfectly clear to everyone in the audience. The need for closeups, proper backgrounds and crash scenes further complicate the filming.

I happen to have had the good luck to be one of the technical advisors on "The Racers." A lot of people have asked me how the movie was made. It's an interesting story and I hope this article will answer many of the questions.

The right start was made, of course, with the book by Hans Ruesch, who was a competition driver both before and after World War II. I read recently that when he was injured a couple of years ago under circumstances something like one of the scenes in his book, he said: "I'm the only author who wrote first and had the experience afterwards."

Ruesch, however, knew what he was writing about. When I first saw the book about three years ago, I read it at one sitting of a few hours.

Twentieth Century-Fox studio also had the right idea when it chose John Fitch and Baron de Graffenried as the chief technical advisors in Europe. Fitch is so well known in this country because of his sports car driving that he needs no introduction. De Graffenried is a European driver with years of experience on both sports car and grand prix circuits.

I might say, incidentally, that in Europe there is little real difference between grand prix racing and major sports car events. Virtually the same drivers and teams are active in both.

Director Henry Hathaway took the first camera crew to Europe in the spring of

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MOTOR Life, May, 1955

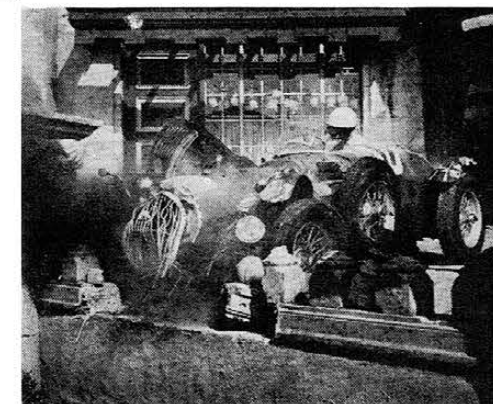


At Monte Carlo, Ford station wagon served as camera car in filming action leading up to crash scene shown at right.

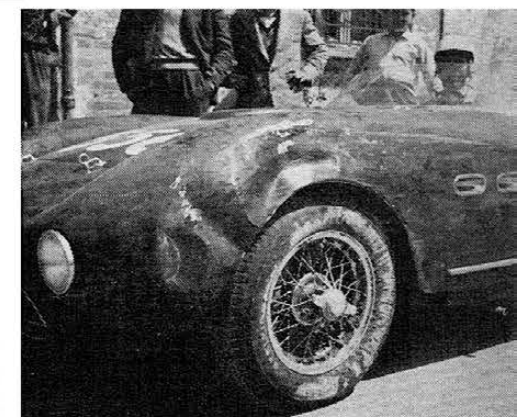
In Hollywood, Kirk Douglas finishes out the horrible spin. Cable attached to car gave it a jerk for last few feet of motion.



John Fitch, facing camera, was one of two technical advisors in Europe. He did much driving in background action shots.



Sports car actually smotes the Ravenna arch. Action required Fitch to squeeze thru ahead of De Graffenried, close behind.



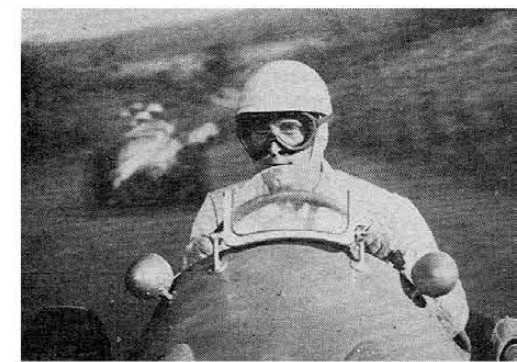
Note damage to car after it hit the bricks. Steel hook attached to side was installed to make sure John Fitch caught arch.



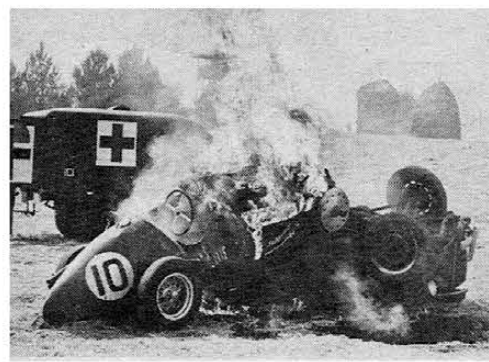
For Mille Miglia, Fitch (at the wheel) listens to Director Hathaway (center) before starting run into arch, shown at right.



Final crash scene was filmed in San Fernando Valley, with cable attached to Army truck yanking cars into this position.



Typical process shot with Douglas in front of screen showing background action. However, Douglas often drove the cars.



MOTOR Life, May, 1955

Camera is attached to grand prix car in Europe for shooting genuine race scene.



1954. They were equipped with 12 CinemaScope lenses and subsequently shot some 90,000 feet of color film, much of it during famous races like the Mille Miglia, the Grand Prix of France, Nurburgring, Spa and the Grand Prix de Italia—all during 1954.

At Spa, for instance, they actually entered a car with a camera attached. De Graffenried drove and was in one of the back rows when they started. But his car was deliberately equipped with a lower gear ratio so he passed a large part of the field, charging right out in front for a short distance.

Fitch and De Graffenried were much more than technical advisors during all this. They drove for about five months making scenes when not on hand at actual races. A lot of work was done on the Monza circuit, but the crew travelled all the way from Italy to Germany to get authentic locations.

One most noticeable incident in the movie takes place during the Mille Miglia when Gino (Kirk Douglas) hits the archway at Ravenna as he goes around another car. Fitch was driving for this scene and there was nothing faked about it. The only trick was attaching a steel hook to the side of his car to make sure he'd catch plenty of the arch as he ripped through. In one of his letters he said, "I would be suspended for this at home—but get paid for it here!"

When this enormous amount of footage had been shot, the director brought his camera crew back to Hollywood, while Fitch and De Graffenried remained on the Continent. The rest of the picture was made at various locations in Southern California, on the back lot of 20th Century-Fox and in the big sound stages.

Since none of the actors in "The Racers" went to Europe in connection with the production, fantastic photographic tricks—called process shots—were used. In addition, the studio built replicas of the pits at Rheims, Nurburgring, Spa and Monza. I joined the company last August and functioned as technical advisor and driver, doubling for various actors in the film, and had the job of preparing the cars used in front of the cameras in Hollywood.

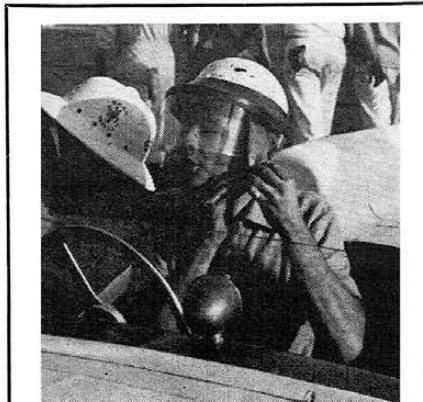
The cars employed in Hollywood were two four-cylinder grand prix Maseratis, two two-liter and one 2.6-liter Ferraris, and one HWM. The fact that so few cars were used may seem surprising, but if you understand process shots and plates, you'll get the idea.

A "plate" simply is a filmed sequence of background which may be an actual race shot or merely a scene made especially for the purpose of projecting it upon a screen in a sound stage. The actors and additional cars are then photographed against this background in a "process" shot. This explains how with only two Maseratis, three sometimes appear in the picture.

A good example is the tire-rubbing scene where Gino tries to get one of his rivals out of his way. The preparatory shooting took place on a pre-selected road at Rincon Springs, near San Diego.

Dave Sykes was one of the drivers that day and I was the other. Before we started, one of the directors showed us stills of a complete crash. This, he kidded, is what we were going to do.

First we made a few plates with one car in the picture and then a couple more with two cars. As with many shots like this, they would be undercranked by the cameras as we went through the bends



PHIL HILL, who put this story on tape the same day he left Sebring, is in the top bracket of U.S. sports car drivers. His competition record, which includes major events in Europe, is a long and successful one. A few days after completing work on "The Racers," he was setting a sizzling pace in the 1954 Mexican road race, gave up the lead to another Ferrari in the final stretch and finished second in the big sports car class. He is also a fine tuner of foreign cars.

at about 60 mph. Such "undercranking" means the film goes through the cameras slowly. When it is projected on the screen at normal speed, the illusion is complete.

Sykes was told to move over on the road and pinch me off as I tried to get by. So we started down the canyon following the camera car, which was an old KB Lincoln with a full-house Chrysler engine. We came up to a fast bend that was topped by a small rise. Here I began rubbing tires, as the script required.

UNSCRUPULOUS CRACK-UP

When anyone's tire touches mine, my natural instinct is to get away fast. But we had to rub and rub. Suddenly my front tire caught the rear tire of Sykes' and climbed right up his wheel. The two cars, locked together, spun beautifully off the road at 55 mph, wiping out a post as we slid into the ditch. The camera caught all this in CinemaScope, but it couldn't be used because it didn't fit the story outlined by the script.

This, and other race scenes, were finished off with closeups in front of the process screen. That meant endless re-

takes so the movements of the actors at the wheel could be coordinated with the action being projected upon the screen behind them.

FAST PIT STOP AT "RHEIMS"

Kirk Douglas, Cesar Romero, Gilbert Roland and John Hudson did quite a bit of the actual driving in front of the cameras, particularly in sequences where they could be identified or were shown coming into the pits on the studio's back lot. None of them had any racing experience and the Maseratis were hard to get off the mark without losing the engine and stalling in front of the pits.

One afternoon the fast pit stop at Rheims was filmed. We did a little cheating to make it look good, such as using four men instead of the three allowed on the other side of the pit board, leaving gaskets off special short plugs and lubricating the hubs with 3-in-1 oil rather than the heavier type. After some hard practice, we got so four tires and the plugs could be changed in 25 seconds.

A most spectacular crash in "The Racers" is Gino's terrific one early in the picture as he leaves the course at Monte Carlo. It shows him going through a stone wall and ending up in a wild spin inside the courtyard of a house. The first part, of course, was done in miniature, with small amounts of explosives creating the damage. By keeping the action slow and controlling the camera speed, the effect of reality results when the scene is projected at normal film speed.

For the latter part of this scene, a full-scale duplicate set suitably damaged is used. The car is put into position and Kirk Douglas is in the seat. Just as the action starts again, cables give the HWM a jerk—for the last few feet of movement—and bounces Douglas very realistically. Fire then breaks out and the whole thing blends neatly together.

In contrast, the final crash scene in the movie was not in miniature. It actually was filmed near the corner of Devonshire and Reseda in the San Fernando Valley. To show the race car leaving the course and hitting a parked car, a long cable was attached to a winch mounted on a big army truck. It was then run along the ground, under a spectator vehicle and tied to the race car.

As the cameras rolled, the army truck started off with its winch turning. The combined pull gave the race car an enormous yank into the spectator's car. With other cars in the scene suitably tipped over, the scene of destruction was complete.

It was the combined efforts of many hard-working people that produced this and similar scenes for the picture. At times, some fine points had to be overlooked in order to concentrate upon those which were really important. But it all resulted in "The Racers" being pretty authentic as well as exciting. •