

## Backyard Le Mans

THE LE MANS organizers didn't invent 24-hour races — Eugene Mauve did. Mauve's fantastic Bol d'Or, first staged at Whitsun in 1922, jumped the start on Le Mans by more than a year. Too, Mauve mixed stronger medicine in his bowl of dubious gold than anything the Automobile Club de l'Ouest has ever dared serve.

In these effete days, of course, twosome crews are obligatory in both of France's *Vingt-Quatre Heures*. But back between the wars, when single-handed drivers were merely tolerated at Le Mans — and practically everybody in the act opted for a partner anyway — the Bol was strictly on a solos-or-nothing basis. To make it tougher still, the St. Germain circuit, original home of the Bol d'Or, was only 2½ miles around. Like most French road courses, it consisted of two straightish and reasonably surfaced legs and a third that was hell on wheels — a twisty, narrow byway with the potholes built in permanently. Apart from fixing an engine displacement limit (1100 c.c. in the beginning, 1500 c.c. later) and barring relief drivers, M. Mauve's thinking was altogether *formule libre*. Competitors could be of either sex: once the Bol was actually won by a woman — a high-tensile Parisienne by the name of Violet Morris. Previous experience wasn't necessary. Cars could have either three or four wheels, and any sort of fuel was okay. Specifications could be anything from full race to watertight stock.

Fields, in the result, had a riotous variety, both personal and mechanical. Established manufacturers like Salmson and Amilcar would usually provide a lonely element of respectability with teams of recognizable automobiles, handled by drivers of international standing; but for the rest, the lineup was a bedlam of screwball amateurs on every sort of backyard contraption the mind could conceive: three wheels, four wheels, engines at the back, engines in front, at the side, drive by chain, by belt, by shaft and by luck more than judgment.

That no-experience-necessary concession was a surefire attraction of the Bol, and in an average race at least 20 percent of the runners were total tyros. The consequences of this learn-as-you-go formula could be seen to advantage at the first corner on the opening lap. There was one thing Eugene Mauve didn't invent and that was the Le Mans start. He simply lined his clientele up in rows across the pit area, Grand Prix style, and when he dropped the flag they clutched in and went. The only trouble was, of course, that they all arrived together in a wild hub-rubbing stampede at the first turn, which came dangerously soon after the takeoff. Entanglements from this cause sometimes crippled six or seven cars, temporarily or otherwise, before the race was a half-minute old. Casualties were specially prevalent among entries consisting of a driver who had never raced before and a car that had never *run* before.

Once this first-round mayhem was over, things would generally settle down until early morning. The last hour of darkness always brought its crop of one-way trips into the surrounding forest. Some drivers just nodded off to sleep at the wheel. Others, bugged by the strain of navigating by lamps giving about as much illumination as a cigarette lighter, turned thisaway when the course went thataway.

A fellow who was both smart and lucky, however, could deal with the mind-over-Morpheus problem very satisfactorily. It was Mauve's habit to divide his race into a multitude of classes and subclasses, because he liked people to be happy; and this system enabled him to donate the maximum of almost worthless prizes. So, after a few retirements had taken place, a driver would likely find himself the only surviving runner in his particular subclass. As, therefore, he couldn't lose, he sensibly pulled off into some convenient glade and took a couple of hours out for sleep.

Eugene Mauve was — and for all I know still is — a man of massive build and incredible endurance. On paper, the Bol d'Or was organized by the A.S.M.C.C.F. — l'Association Auto-Moto-Cycle-Cariste de France; in fact, though, big Eugene was the A.A.M.C.C.F. in its entirety. He not only filled every official post, but was also the only paid-up member.

If Eugene Mauve put a lot into his beloved races, he also took a lot out. Attendances at the St. Germain circuit reached 70,000 in the peak years, and kept Mauve in comfort for the rest of the year. In spite of his trophy's grandiose name, his prize bill was nothing to worry him. The Bol wasn't gold at all. It was tin, with peeling remnants of gilt veneer. Moreover, the winners never took it home. Mauve did.

By Dennis May

## Unloved Genius

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Neubauer's conversation, conducted simultaneously in German, French and English, the languages of his drivers, pours forth like a torrent. It is 90 percent concerned with cars, 10 percent with women. Those who listen collect such nuggets as these. The object of racing: "To get the sport of driving from the race tracks to the highways, that's what we're after." Mass production of cars: "I'm against it. To make a car as individual as possible, to give it its own character — that's sport."

He dislikes being interviewed. Said Neubauer to a journalist who wanted to write his life story: "Don't ask me any questions if it concerns cars. As for your book, I'm writing three myself — and don't ask me about what."

This attitude has not endeared Neubauer to the press, and some of his own company officials speak of him as "difficult." But it is not Neubauer's aim in life to be liked. He is single-mindedly and passionately devoted to improving the performance of Mercedes automobiles. This preoccupies him totally.

He has certainly been successful. In racing Neubauer is regarded much as the late Knute Rockne used to be in football — a giant in his field.

Chief among the qualities that have won him this regard is a vast Teutonic thoroughness. Under the Neubauer regime, every detail is planned in advance — nothing is left to chance.

Added to this is a colossal memory. "Neubauer can tell you," said a driver, "about every race a Mercedes has ever been entered in: the driver, the time, the condition of the car, the other drivers and their cars, plus the barometric pressure and the temperature of the road and air that day. Altogether not a bad man to have around."

But it was in the race itself that his enormous experience was put to acute use. "He was the key man," said Stirling Moss of him, defining the racing chief's role. "He fixed the strategy of the race. It was Neubauer who set the pace and who by signals to the drivers and mechanics decided if the race should go faster or slower."

The pace that Neubauer set was best described by someone who watched Moss and Fangio leading the field in the British Grand Prix and Aintree. "Both sat in their cars with the comfortable ease of chauffeurs at a wedding, and yet the pace they set was so fast that the opposition fell to pieces