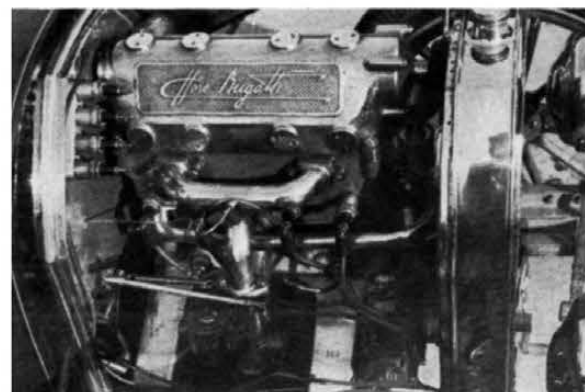


Battling for second place, the little white Bug driven by Friderich overtakes the Rolland-Pilain piloted by Gabriel.
Illustration by Carlo Demand from The Big Race, courtesy Robert Bentley

BY MERWIN DEMBLING

The Day Bugatti Slew the Giants



Bugatti type 13 engine shown here is almost identical twin of the Grand Prix car which amazed the Sarthe boys.

THE era of the 2000 pound, 10 liter, fire-snooting "racing machines" came to a screwball end one scorching July Sunday in 1911, at the wildcat Grand Prix de France. When that carnival of comedy and catastrophe had run its course over the 33.5 mile Sarthe-Le Mans Circuit, one French journalist rubbed astonished eyes, dipped his quill, and solemnly declared: "Never, since the first races at the dawn of the automobile, has one seen such a slaughter."

He was a little too dazed to realize it, but he had just seen David slay Goliath. A pipsqueak 660 pound, 1.3 liter voiturette, entered by a cocky young designer so little known that advance stories carried his name as Bergati and Babati, had wiped the track with tradition. It proved that a racing car didn't have to be oversize and overweight, and that while it was spectacular to be fast and furious, it was better to be fast and efficient. Though the newcomer only took a theoretical second place, experts recognized it as the racing car of the future. A few were so impressed that they even learned how to spell Bugatti.

Race crowds were ready for anything in those days when chain-drive juggernauts tore the top off roads that had no particular surface to begin with, and tire trouble was generally ignored until the lumbering lumps had shed their rims and begun hopping along on their spokes like dicky birds. Two drivers in an 1896 race dropped out when they were charged by a bull; another, in the same race, retired suddenly when a tree fell on him. In the 1908 Grand Prix, a contestant was treacherously torpedoed by the tread off one of his own tires, which sneaked up from behind and knocked him cold.

These were odd mishaps in otherwise normal races, but nothing in the 1911 Grand Prix was normal. Ten out of fourteen starters fell victim to mechanical disintegration, sudden death, thirst, and a furious attack by sun-crazed white butterflies. Only one car managed to complete the required twelve laps within the allotted eight hours, and when exasperated gendarmes finally threw the roads open to traffic, three cars still trying to finish were engulfed by enraged spectators.

1911 was the best possible year for Bugatti's epoch-making runabout to show its stuff against the big machinery. French manufacturers were so horrified at Germany's clean sweep in the 1908 Grand Prix that they signed an ironclad agreement to shun racing — a case of sulks that knocked out official competition in 1909 and 1910. By 1911, the populace was hungry for a little of the real thing, but the big manufacturers still refused to come out and play. A race might only prove how much better somebody else's product was!

Nevertheless, the Automobile Club de la Sarthe decided to scratch up a wildcat contest. Maybe the cars wouldn't be the latest thing, but at least they'd be big, and with nothing else worthwhile taking place in France, practically all the important drivers were available and eager.

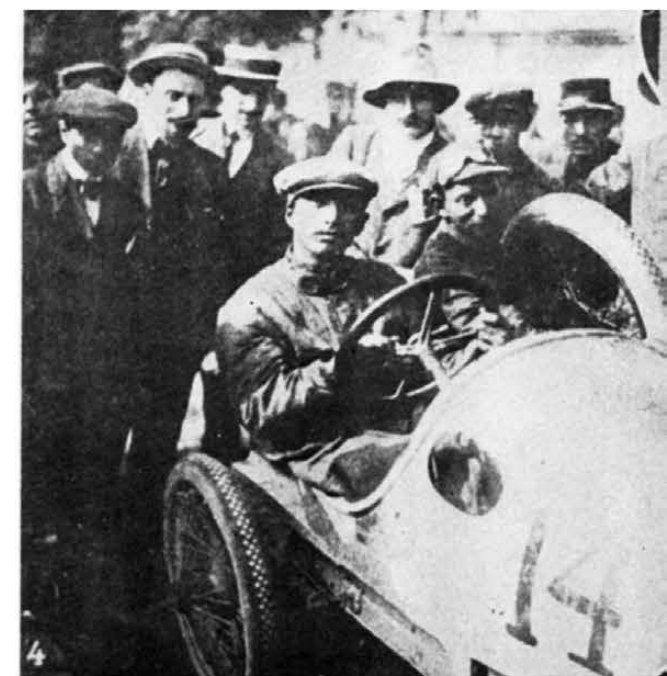
July 7th was pencilled in as the day, but near the end of June there were so few cars entered that it looked as though the drivers were going to have to put on short pants and run around the track. Private owners were reluctant to risk their vehicles in such a rough-and-ready event, and a trio of barnstorming Americans scornfully brushed off an invitation on the grounds that for them to compete against the old, sketchily-prepared cars that had signed up would just be taking candy from a baby. The Club called the whole thing off.

Then, encouraged by the promise of a Savannah Grand Prize F.I.A.T., they called it on again for two weeks later, with a new, vague formula: "Mechanical vehicles with four wheels." A gagster might have entered a trolley car, and the organizers were so hungry for starters they probably would have accepted it. What's more, it would have stood a better

(Continued on page 58)



Hémery, in his Fiat just after winning the race is congratulated by the SAC members who sponsored the event.



Friderich and mechanic after race. Poor mech looks beat after holding tire throughout entire ten laps.



Plagued by clouds of dust and butterflies (stuck to grille), Fournier and Louvel dog their last lap together.

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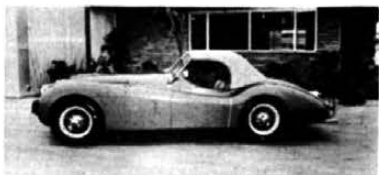
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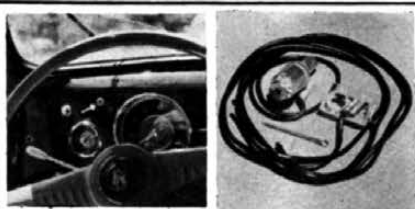
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Bugatti

(Continued from page 25)

than halfway chance of finishing in the money.

Dry Run

There were many problems that Sunday, July 23rd. It was one of the hottest days of 1911, and, through an organizational slip-up, the local cafes had run out of wine. (In France this amounts to a national disaster.) According to a chorus of press jeers, violent even for France, eight of the fourteen automobiles ready to go into action at Le Mans on the humid, cloudless morning of the 23rd, weren't worth bothering about. The Porthos, the Alcyon, the Excelsior-Boulogne and the Corre-La Licorne were old heaps resurrected for the sake of starting money, they suggested. The three 2 stroke Côtes were racing above their class, and as for the Bergati or Babati, or whatever its name was, nobody had ever heard of it.

The F.I.A.T. was the star of the line-up; a chunky, heavy-sprunged vehicle with a bluff expanse of dashboard and a steering column that came almost vertically up from the floorboards. It sounded like a locomotive; under the hood were 10.5 liters of slow-revving engine.

Next to the F.I.A.T. in size was a 185x160 Lorraine-Dietrich, driven by young Arthur Duray, another popular favorite. Almost as big was an ancient Cottin-Desgouttes. The only cars that bore any resemblance to a team, were three brand new Rolland-Pilain — racing-looking, four cylinder monsters with long, aerodynamic tails, a bore and stroke of 110x160 millimeters, overhead cams, and chain drive. In charge of these were three of racing's top names: Gabriel, Fauquet, and Rigal.

First to get the starting flag, at 8:01, was Maurice Fournier, local garage owner, motorcycle champion, and kid brother of a prominent driver. In the mechanic's seat of the four-year-old Corre-La Licorne was a Le Mans youngster named Louvel, who had never been in a race before. He had helped Fournier prepare the car after the garage closed for the night.

The others followed them off at one-minute intervals. The Fiat was ninth to start, with the Bugatti, driven by Ernest Friderich, right behind it. The

crowd's first reaction to the Bug was a howl of laughter. Not only did it look too much like a toy to be taken seriously, but with typical Bugatti cockiness young Ettore had neglected to provide any place for the spare wheel. Since race regulations required a spare wheel, the mechanic had to sit holding the thing in his lap.

The cars started going to pieces at the first curve, when De Vere, shifting down on one of the Côtes, suddenly had an unemployed gear lever in one hand and a fast motorcar in the other. He abandoned ship. Fournier was the first around the course, having done the lap in 30 minutes, 29 seconds. This came as a surprise, for both Barriaux and Duray, who started within two minutes of him, had cars fast enough to make up the differences over 33.5 miles.

Les Boches

Though it was hardly 9 A.M., the sun was already fierce. Sweat misted the drivers' goggles, while spectators, rinsing their parched throats with white wine, fought a losing battle with the dust. At this point the butterflies went berserk. Great clouds of them, white and innocent-looking, rose from the fields. The drivers immediately dubbed them "les Boches," because they were wearing the German racing color, but in a few moments it was clear that this wasn't anything like a strong enough name. Windshields and goggles went opaque with the remains of smashed insects, and radiators were so completely plugged up that clouds of steam were soon trailing the contestants.

The first car to be put out of the race by the butterflies was Ollier's, Côte, whose radiator burst like a geyser. Fauquet's Rolland-Pilain sizzled to a dead stop, its magneto gummed up with broiled butterfly hash. The Porthos, too, was in bad trouble. It limped to the pits with a cracked cylinder, winning the peculiar distinction of the least dramatic retirement of the race. Amusement was changing to respect as the little Bugatti burbled confidently along, the only car not bothered by butterflies or tire trouble. Friderich's mechanic would have welcomed the chance to get the heavy Rudge-Whitworth wheel off his knees for a while, but the Bug took the grandstand hair-pin elegantly in top gear without a skid. All the other cars had to shift down, and most left black rubber on the road anyhow.

Only an hour and a half of the scheduled eight hours had gone by, and already the heat, the butterflies, and the generally ropy state of the competing cars had reduced the field

to nine. The pits were a puddle. Duray, who had a reputation for easy-going cheerfulness, was fed up with his old Lorraine-Dietrich which chewed up its fried tires and washed them down with radiator water. His sunny disposition was partially restored by his mechanic, who dumped the first bucket of water into the radiator and sloshed the next one over Duray.

Dust, Breakdowns, BUGS

Perhaps the biggest name in the race was Gabriel, who had made his reputation during the Paris-Bordeaux race of 1903, which he covered in such a dense cloud of dust that he had to steer by watching the tops of the popular trees planted alongside the roads. What the dust had failed to do the butterflies almost accomplished, for his magneto was also piled thick with corpses, just as Fauquet's was. However, Gabriel and his mechanic managed to clean it up sufficiently to return to the race. The only retirement during the fourth lap was Riviere, whose Excelsior broke its timing gear.

As Maurice Fournier passed the grandstand, spectators remarked on how pale, tense and nervous he looked. He seemed to be driving in a way best calculated to tear the wheels of his Corre-La Licorne as he whipped around the dangerous curves at speed, pursuing Duray, who was in the lead.

Lying third, Hémercy decided that the sixth lap was his time for moving up in the F.I.A.T., and his Le Mans neighbors, Fournier and the young Louvel, were to be his first victims. Although he had started almost a quarter of an hour after the Corre, he had cut its lead down to under two minutes. On the 13 mile straight between Le Mans and the village of Ecommoy, he determined to wipe it out altogether.

For a while Fournier managed to keep a hood's length ahead of the F.I.A.T., but the Italian car relentlessly closed the gap, and, being newer and healthier, began to pull ahead. Hémercy was two-thirds past the Corre when the French car's axle snapped in the middle. The wheels chuffed crazily on the brass radiator, the broken ends of the axle plowed a hundred yard furrow in the road, and then the car spun off, overturned into the ditch, and caught fire. Fournier was killed instantly; Louvel died in the hospital that evening.

Next on Hémercy's list was an attack on the lead position, held by Duray. This was really a battle of titans, for while Duray's Dietrich had an engine capacity of 9.3 liters, (each of its four

(Continued on page 60)



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(Continued from page 59)

pistons had an awe-inspiring diameter of well over seven inches!) the F.I.A.T. topped it with more than 1,000 c.c. to spare. It had 10.5 liters under its hood.

Victory At Last

Hémery caught up to Duray almost opposite the smoking wreck of Fournier's car, but history was not repeating itself. The Dietrich was fighting valiantly for every inch—until suddenly Hémery had matters all his own way. There was a crunch and the Lorraine-Dietrich's engine raced madly. Its differential had ceased differentiating between the relative merits of go and blow.

This left Hémery in the lead, followed by Barriaux in the Alcyon, Friderich in the Bugatti, Gabriel in the Rolland-Pilain and Leduc in the last remaining Côte. The crowd had completely lost interest in the race, since watching it consisted of long and thirsty periods of nothing to see but dust and butterflies followed at half-hour intervals by a chugging automobile. Only the Bug retained its charm; it was the liveliest thing on the track or in the stands.

There was hardly a flicker of interest when, in the eighth lap, Barriaux and the Côte failed to appear. Spectators were busy making scenes at the race buffets and roadside cafés which had run out of cool drinks. Officials, though, feared the worst, and were completely baffled by the fact that there were no reports of an accident along the 33 mile course. It wasn't until the race was over that the Barriaux story came out. His engine had started to miss. He got out to investigate, and keeled over. His mechanic bundled him back in the car and drove to a nearby farmhouse, where officials later discovered him, much improved by some apple brandy—the selfsame calvados that aided so many G.I.'s in the Normandy invasion.

It would be wrong to say the race ended. It just petered out after Hémery brought the F.I.A.T. in after its twelfth lap, for the police kept to the letter of their permit and opened the roads despite the fact that Friderich on the Bugatti was two laps behind, and the last Rolland-Pilain and the last Côte had three laps still to go. When the crowds were let loose the two big cars pulled over to the side of the road and waited. Friderich snaked the Bugatti back to the pits. Though there was hardly anyone left in the stands to see a tired official give him the checkered flag, he had made racing history. The orders that started coming into the new Bugatti plant at Molsheim soon proved that.

Merwin Dembling