

MOTORING



THE IMPOSSIBLE VICTORY

Guilherme Marques

HISTORY || On July 28, 1935 – 90 years ago – an Italian man only 1.52m tall beat the Nazis at their own game. This is the story of that day.

THIS week marks the 90th anniversary of what was the greatest race in the history of motor racing. That is only my opinion, of course – and it's not like I watched it on television – but, maybe, at the end of these two pages, some of you might come to agree with me.

The year was 1935. Motorsport was, obviously, nothing like today. There were much less categories, teams, constructors and venues. Countries raced against each other and that is how racing colours got established and became as iconic as they are today. England raced in British racing green, France in blue, the Germans in silver, Belgians in yellow and the Italians had their cars painted red.

Let's quickly rewind to 1932. The German auto industry was facing extinction. Mercedes had lost half of its workforce and four smaller constructors – Audi, DKW, Horch and Wanderer – merged to form Auto Union. Curiously, the four rings that symbolised the new company survive to this day at the front of every Audi on the road.

These were the years leading up to the Second World War. The Socialist Party took power in 1933 and immediately introduced a program where the state funded the nation's two racing teams, in order to quickly advance their efforts and unequivocally demonstrate the superior prowess of Germany.

In just three years, the so-called Silver Arrows – that is what the Mercedes and Auto Union GP cars were called – became the most advanced racing cars the world had ever seen. With 200 dedicated members at each team, there was no way the opposition from Italy, France or the UK could compete.

The Mercedes W25B was the most powerful car in the world, with a cutting-edge

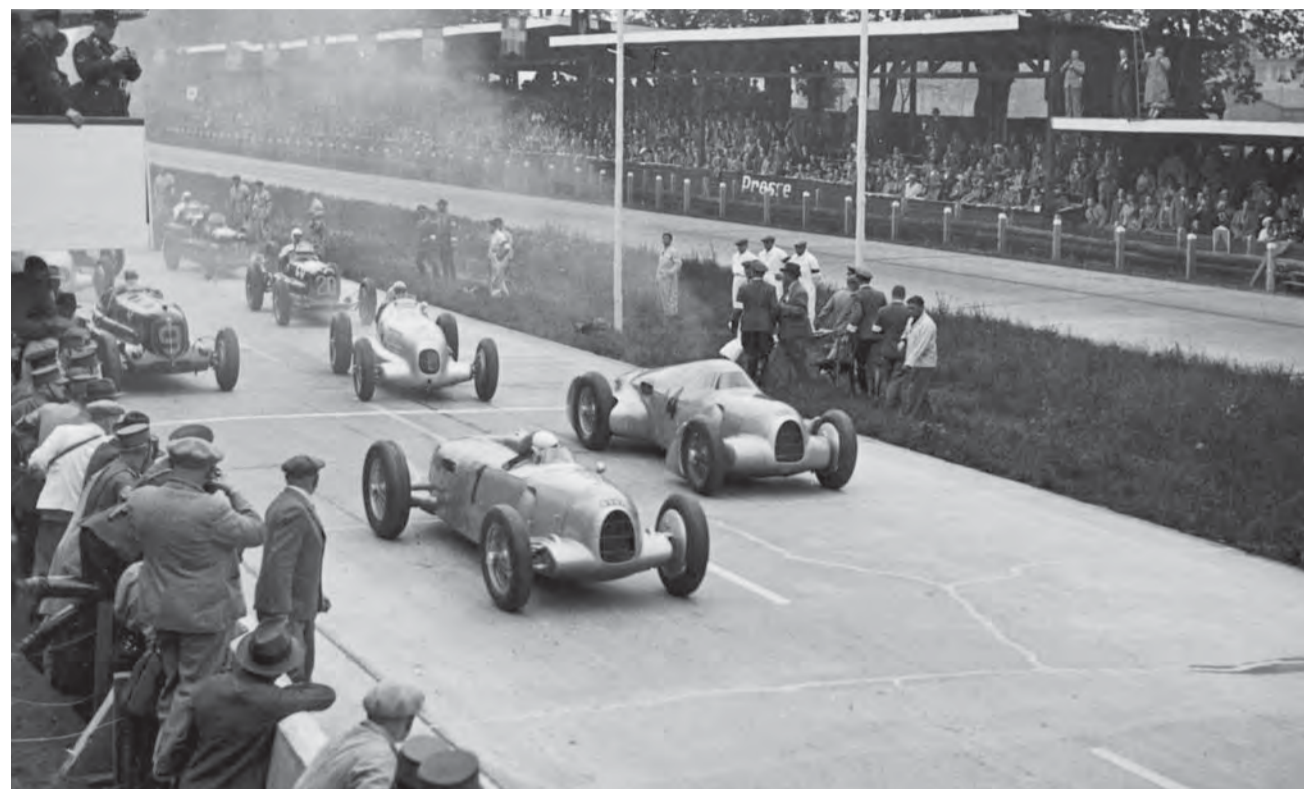
4-litre, 32-valve supercharged straight-eight producing 430 horse power. With independent suspension, hydraulic brakes and a super streamlined body, the Mercedes was capable of 310km/h in 1935. I don't think any of us, today, can conceive of what that meant.

The Auto Union Type B was just as frightening. Developed by Dr. Ferdinand Porsche – yes, that Porsche – it had a 5-litre V16 engine with 400 horse power.

The results achieved by the two teams in the years that followed were everything the Nazi regime expected. Between 1935 and 1939, the Silver Arrows won every championship Grand Prix bar one. The drivers were national heroes and, whatever we might think of the politics behind their machines, these were some of the most gifted people ever to sit in a racing car.

Rudolf Caracciola was the team leader at Mercedes. Known as the *Regenmeister* – Rainmaster – for his superior car control in the rain, he won the European Drivers' Championship – the equivalent of today's F1

“From 1935 to 1939, the Silver Arrows from Mercedes and Auto Union won every race they entered bar one. Turns out they lost the greatest race in the history of racing.”



1935 German GP

Drivers' Championship – an unmatched three times. On the other W25B was Manfred von Brauchitsch, the nephew of one of the most important Nazi generals. Spectacularly quick, von Brauchitsch had a reputation to race on the razor's edge, being very hard on the machinery.

At the wheel of the four-ringed cars was arguably an even better line-up. The most famous at the time was Hans Stuck, but, for me, the real star and one of the drivers I have always admired was Bernd Rosemeyer. An absolute genius at the wheel, Rosemeyer is widely recognized as one of the most naturally gifted in the history of motorsport. On the day of his death, on January 28, 1938, on a closed stretch of the Autobahn between Frankfurt and Darmstadt, he set a world record of 432km/h, before one last attempt at improving that run ended in a fatal crash. The foreign Achille Varzi completed the Auto Union trio.

When the teams arrived at the Nürburgring for the 1935 German GP, the Silver Arrows looked like they had descended from an alien spaceship ready to take on the terrestrials, whereas the Italians, the French and the British entered machines whose origins laid in the Twenties and seemed to be there to serve only as props in a triumphant day for Germany.

Chief among the competition was the newly upgraded

Alfa Romeo's Tipo B, the P3. Those upgrades meant it now had a 3.8-litre, producing 300 horse power. Its second biggest asset was that it was lighter and nimbler than the German machinery. Its biggest wheel: Tazio Nuvolari. The Flying Mantuan, as he was called by his countrymen, was a legend in his time, but the reality was that, by 1935, he was already into his sunset years as a racing driver at the age of 43.

The son of a farmer, his speed at the wheel made him an ambulance driver during World War I. Rumour has it he was demoted after soldiers started arriving more wounded from the ride in the ambulance than the enemy mortars.

After the end of the War, he started racing motorcycles

before switching to four wheels in 1925. In 1932, he was European Champion and the tally of his career reads like this: 150 overall victories across all categories, including 72 in major official races, including two Mille Miglias, two Targa Florios and a Le Mans 24 Hours.

He survived a scarcely believable 17 life-threatening accidents and died from a stroke, at his home, in 1952. Fifty-thousand people attended his funeral, where his coffin was placed on a four-wheeled chassis and pushed by Juan Manuel Fangio, Alberto Ascari and Luigi Villorosi.

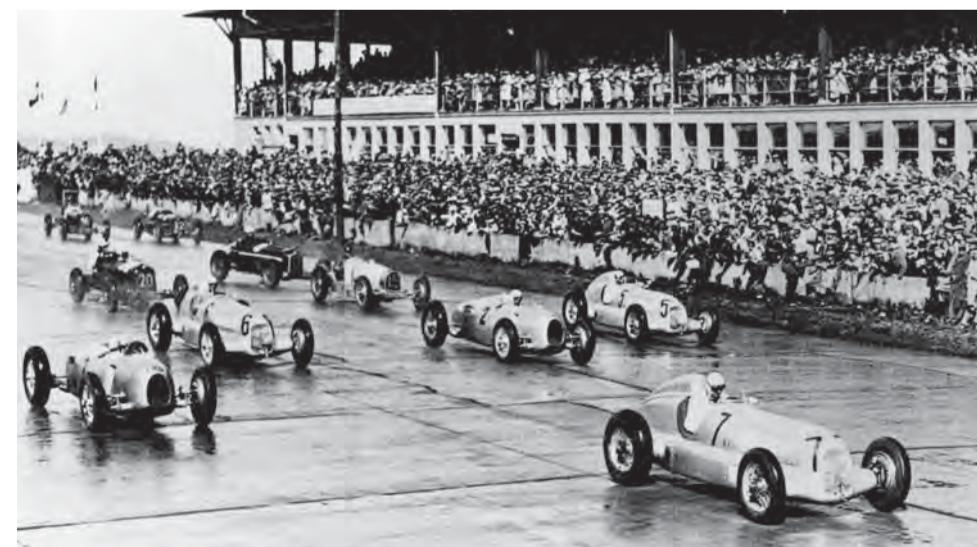
The most famous story told about Nuvolari is one where, after he had just won the Tourist Trophy race of 1933, a journalist asked what the Mantuan thought

about his MG's brakes. “I don't know” – he said – “I didn't use them.”

Lining up on the grid for the German GP, Nuvolari was up against five Mercedes and four Auto Unions. The rumble of the engines was mighty and the crowd of 300,000 attendees' only doubt was if a three-pointed star or a four-ringed car was going to win.

And then, it started to rain.

The Nürburgring Nordschleife and all of its 21km and 73 corners was – and remains – the most dangerous racetrack on planet Earth. In 1935, with no run-off areas and trees as crash barriers, if you lost control of your car, you would most likely die. These men were racing in linen helmets, in cars with the same power-to-weight ratio as a modern Ferrari, but



Race start



Tazio Nuvolari

with 1930's brakes and cross-ply tires – for almost 500km under heavy rain.

The start was chaotic. Stuck stalled the Auto Union, his mechanic ran over to help (yes, in 1935 this could happen) and got hit by Varzi, fracturing his skull. Less than 100 meters into the race and already something very wrong had happened.

At the end of the second lap, Caracciola was leading. The Rainmaster made no prisoners in such conditions. Rosemeyer was in pursuit, having dropped his team mates von Brauchitsch and Fagioli. Until lap 5, no one could touch the two in front, both drivers in complete sync with the wet track and their cars. In third place was now Stuck – who had sliced through the field after that botched start. Amazingly,



Refuelling by hand

Nuvolari was sixth, making the most of the nimbleness of the Alfa Romeo P3.

On lap 9, Rosemeyer pitted for a new set of tires. Two of the three Alfas Romeos had by now retired with gearbox problems and the Mercedes were leading 1-2-3. It seemed the German GP would be the triumph of a certain Adolf Hitler and his ideas of supremacy had planned.

No one knew it at the time, but that ninth lap of the German Grand Prix of 1935 was to become one of the most important laps in racing history. At the end of it, something dawned on the 300,000 people on the stands. Tazio Nuvolari was not just hanging on to the Mercedes W25Bs anymore – he was catching them. It was the first time someone had lapped the Nürburgring

Nordschleife in under 11 minutes.

Losing time on every straight, the Alfa Romeo was reeling the Mercedes in on every corner with a technique Nuvolari had all to himself, called four-wheeled drifting. When the Italian took the lead, the crowd went silent.

This, however spectacular, would still not have made for the greatest race of all time. The drama had just begun to unfold. Rosemeyer had climbed back up to second and was chasing down Nuvolari. Manfred von Brauchitsch, in the meantime, was a man on a mission to prevent a foreign driver and foreign team from winning the national Grand Prix. He set a new lap record of 10:32.

The first four arrived at the last pit stop almost at the same time. Forty-seven seconds later, the military-precise Mercedes crew had von Brauchitsch back out again. Caracciola and Rosemeyer followed 20 seconds later. As for Nuvolari, he was nowhere to be seen.

The fuel-pressure pump had broken and the P3 would have to be refuelled by hand. It took them 2 minutes, 14 seconds. The Alfa was back in sixth place with six laps to go. Mercedes's manager, Alfred Neubauer, signalled von Brauchitsch, now with a lead of over a minute and a half, to slow down, preserve the car, save his tires and bring the Silver Arrow home.



Enzo Ferrari at the wheel of a Tipo B. Nuvolari by the side.

He did not comply. Fed by a nationalistic frenzy and cheered on by his countrymen, von Brauchitsch pressed on.

Behind him, though, the Flying Mantuan had crossed some metaphysical line and entered a new dimension. In one lap, he overtook Fagioli, Rosemeyer, Caracciola and Stuck – in a car which was, at best, 40km/h slower than the competition on the straights.

Neubauer, usually icy-cold calm, could not believe what he was seeing. He ordered von Brauchitsch back in the pits to change tires once more. Again, his driver did not comply. He felt that if he stopped, he would not catch Nuvolari – he had to remain in front. When the Mercedes entered the final lap, it was 30 seconds ahead. 21km to go.

As the German dignitaries heard the winning car coming out of the last corner, they were sure they had won. But as soon as they saw it, one must wonder how they

felt. Nuvolari was holding the steering wheel with one hand and patting the Alfa Romeo with the other.

The von Brauchitsch Mercedes left rear tire had disintegrated half a lap from the end, with the Alfa right on its tail. The German eventually finished fifth. He stopped his car far away from the finish line and started crying. By then, the only sound heard on the circuit was the small Italian Scuderia celebrating.

The organisers, so sure a German car would win, didn't have a copy of the Italian national anthem. Nuvolari, though, kept one as a lucky charm and the Marcia Reale echoed louder than ever to celebrate what was named The Impossible Victory, a triumph against all odds and, objectively, still impossible to explain today.

So, there you have it. To me, the greatest race of all time. I hope it elicits some discussions over a cup of coffee or a beer next time you sit

down to watch an F1 Grand Prix, or any kind of race.

And what about Nuvolari and that Alfa Romeo P3? Well, more so than the races, I guess the typical discussion revolves around who actually is the greatest driver of all time. I tend to consider Fangio as such; many say it's Senna, others Clark, Moss and, most recently, Schumacher or Hamilton.

However, on the sidelines, on that afternoon in the Eifel mountains, there was a man that, until the day he died, always maintained that Tazio Nuvolari was above all others, never to be surpassed. He was the manager of Alfa Romeo's racing division from 1929 to 1939. His team shield, a black prancing horse with the letters SF over a yellow background, adorned the side of the tiny Alfa which had just beaten a whole country.

His name was Enzo Ferrari and that's how his legend began. With an Alfa Romeo.



Victory at the 1935 GP

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