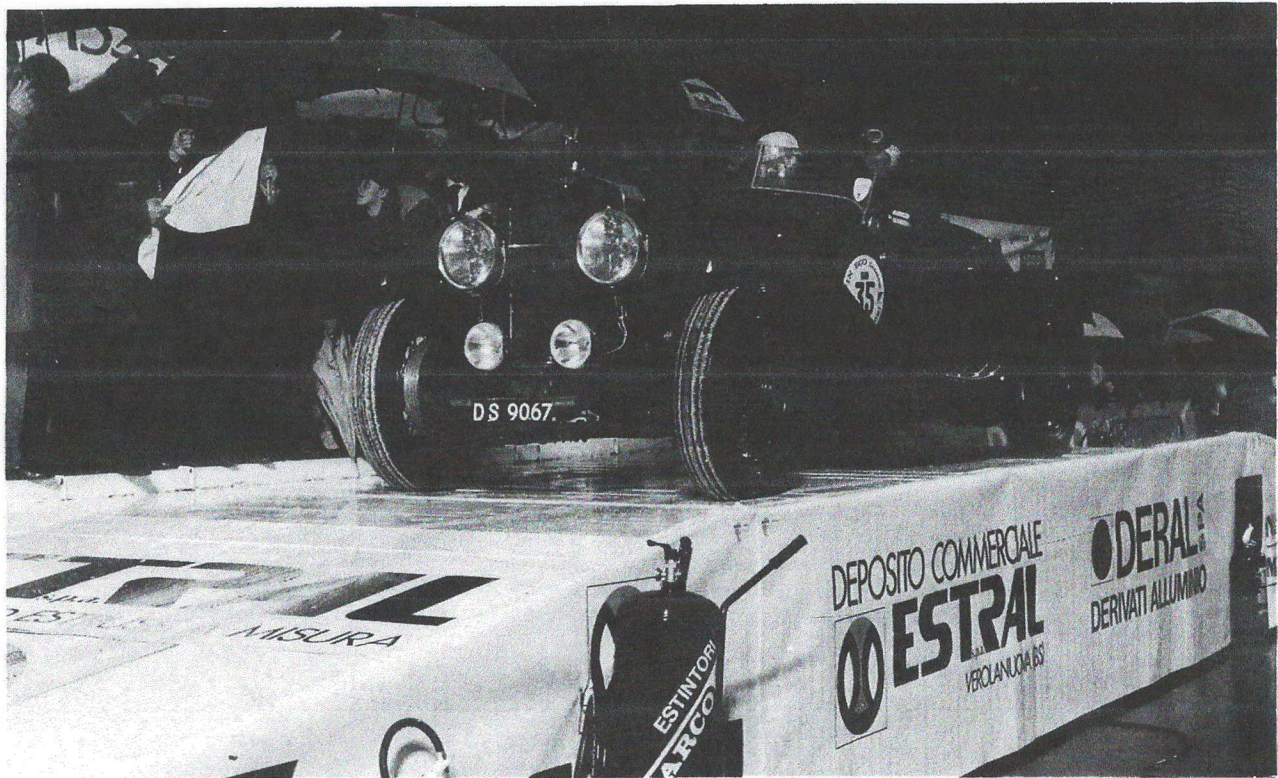


MILLE MIGLIA BY HISPANO

by Tom Walduck



On the ramp at the start.

Mine is an interesting car, Hispano-Suiza H6C 12400-320387, that started life as the property of an aeroplane heiress who took the body off an earlier car and put it on this chassis. As a skiff body it was of limited use in European weather and the next owner, a banker in Paris, put on a large Binder body. This was roughly as it was found after the war, ferrying Americans to the Paris opera house in a rather run-down state, both the car and the opera house.

Restored by Jabby Crombac, the well-known Belgian motoring enthusiast, it was rebodied as a short chassis roadster with a body designed by him and John Bolster pretty much by eye, with photos of the 1928 Indianapolis scratch race car as inspiration. The result is very impressive and with an authenticated 120 mph the car is no sluggard, although at this speed other aspects of the car became unsafe such as handling, steering and braking.

How we got involved in the 1992 Mille Miglia is largely a question of wishing to do the event, which we had done four times previously in younger cars, in a pre-1930 car this time competing in Class A and having the distinct advantage of getting to the hotels in the evening in time to get some food and some sleep—not

really possible in a post war car.

As anyone with experience of the Mille Miglia retrospective will tell you, it is certainly no doddle with the long second and third days proving a real trial of endurance for man and machine—fourteen hours in the saddle can be quite tiring in a modern car—in a pre war open tourer with no weather equipment in heavy rain and even hail over mountain passes and over some distinctly questionable roads separates the real enthusiasts from the posers. If we started as the latter we ended up very much as the former.

They do not close the roads to other traffic so one is doing battle—often literally, with all manner of machinery, whilst being encouraged by all, including the Carabinieri, to go as fast as possible almost regardless of other factors. Under the circumstances I suppose it is remarkable that there are comparatively few accidents, the main cause of elimination being mechanical failure.

Starting at dusk from the familiar “launch” ramp under bright floodlights and often heavy rain, most drivers hold the intermediate gears to amuse the crowd with rorty exhaust notes echoing around the old buildings and the cars head into a solid mass of humanity. All are car enthusiasts and show their enthusiasm by pressing forward

into the path of the speeding cars and trying to pat the car or the drivers on the head. All one can do to clear a path is to swerve from side to side, pretending the steering has failed, as advocated by Stirling Moss in the "real thing" nearly forty years ago.

After the excitement and anticipation of the start, actually doing four hours quite hard driving, on strange roads at night and for we "Brits" on the wrong side of the road, is something of a new sensation. Many of the drivers have limited experience of driving their cars at night under these conditions and so the first check point, with again a huge crowd, is most welcome. Two more hours to Ferrera seem to take twice as long as the fatigue and excitement, combined with concern for the state of the car, combine to make the prospect of a bed most attractive and well overdue.

Because we had only just reassembled the engine on the Hispano with new bearings and a reground crank, we were holding our speed at a leisurely 60-65 mph, which frankly is the safe limit of the headlights. While the brakes are admirable for a car of its age, emergency stops with a ton and three quarters on a wet road at night are definitely to be avoided.

The next day we started at dawn with little substance for the inner man, just a coffee and roll, if you're lucky. The first cars are off at seven-thirty and have to be extracted from the *parc-fermé* in their correct numerical order, no matter how they arrived, quite an exercise if one imagines 300 assorted cars packed into a small medieval square. In our case we check the carburettor, which is prone to silting up, probably from a dirty fuel tank. Fortunately dismantling the carburetor is extremely simple and quick, otherwise the Hispano seems to be running as intended.

At least the road is dry to start with but the sky is overcast as we approach San Marino, often shrouded in mist with its incredibly narrow cobbled streets, lined with all manner of shops selling tourist trinkets. Negotiating the steep hills and slippery cobbles called for extreme caution. Although only a two seater, at times it seemed there was insufficient space for the big car to pass between the high and very solid looking walls.

We descend once more to the plains via some extremely testing hairpin turns with the suspension being strained and the big car lurching wildly as first one full lock is applied, followed immediately by the other. The format for the next few hours is quite fast driving down the east coast of Italy with fairly regular time checks, often in ancient medieval towns, nearly always, it seemed, located at the top of the steepest hills.

Our Hispano has the multi-plate clutch which can be a bit suspect if asked to move the dead weight away from a standstill on a steep slope, so invariably we would wait for a decent gap in



In some towns it was a very tight fit.

the traffic and charge the hill.

On one such occasion the road followed round the hill and on arriving at the top, obliged the driver to swing the car hard right, through a large, solid but narrow stone arch. I yanked the wheel over, only to feel a solid resistance, whilst we lunged towards the ever present and over eager crowd. I braked hard, reversed, and tried again whilst my co-driver enquired whether it was a deliberate ploy to "thrill the fans."

On the contrary, after two further attempts we realized something was wrong and parked by the roadside to discover that a combination of the angle of the car, the vigorous driving and the fitting by a previous owner of hydraulic lever shock absorbers and rather chunky brackets had contrived to foul the steering arm on right lock.

As luck would have it, someone appeared from the crowd in an overall with a tool box, removed the offending bracket back to his workshop, less than a hundred yards of where we were stopped and reappeared shortly afterwards with the bracket appropriately "modified." We had no further problems of this nature for the rest of the run. Needless to say, no charge was made for this service, so enthusiastic is the crowd.

As we got closer to Rome the weather deteriorated and it started to rain quite hard. With no hood or weather protection, map-reading and time-keeping became a pointless exercise, but we were determined to continue. We had not reckoned with the organisers' choice of route, however. This involved a six thousand foot mountain pass!

The foothills were very attractive but quickly any interest in the countryside was subdued by the rain turning to hail with stones the size of grapes. I looked down and within seconds the

floor of the car was filled with white hailstones.

Confident that these conditions could not last, we carried on climbing, the big car's top gear well suited to preventing wheel spin as long as we kept going. The higher we got the worse things became, until we were driving on a layer of packed ice and every corner became an exercise in keeping the car moving straight and moving up.

I was only too aware that if we had to stop, the chances of getting going, particularly with the multi-plate clutch, would be very slim. In fact, we had nearly reached the summit when I saw two cars abreast and stuck across the road, blocking it. There was nothing for it; we had to stop.

With the help of other drivers who arrived behind us we pushed the smaller cars off the road and tried to move forward ourselves. There was nothing along the side of the road between our car and a thousand foot drop. It was freezing cold and the car just spun its wheels and the clutch smelled cooked—we were worried.

Visions of getting trials cars up muddy slopes encouraged me as the "heavier" driver to spread myself precariously over the two rear-mounted spare wheels and bounce. Whilst my co-driver did his best with a distinctly reluctant clutch and some hastily plucked branches placed under the wheels, a few other competitors lent some weight to the Hispano's back and we moved slowly forward.

Sadly, the clutch was never the same after this and for the rest of the event we had to switch off, select first gear and then restart whenever we needed to move off. Luckily the battery held up. Of course when we arrived home and dismantled

the clutch, we found two of the plates badly distorted which explained the drag.

Although some fifty miles short of Rome our troubles were not yet over. Cruising along steadily in drizzle and failing light, the engine suddenly died. We managed to pull off the road and run through the normal series of investigating tests. The culprit proved to be the fuel pumps; one had clearly cut out earlier without our being aware of it and now the other had followed suit, perhaps under the onslaught of flying ice particles from the pass. By careful cleaning and refitting of the terminals we were able to get the car started and gratefully completed our run into Rome.

We were up early on the Saturday morning to see if we could improve the clutch operation or our temporary repairs to the fuel pumps. The clutch was not to be remedied but we had no further fuel pump trouble. On the way back to Brescia, however, we had the prospect of crossing the Radicofani, the Futa and the Raticosa passes.

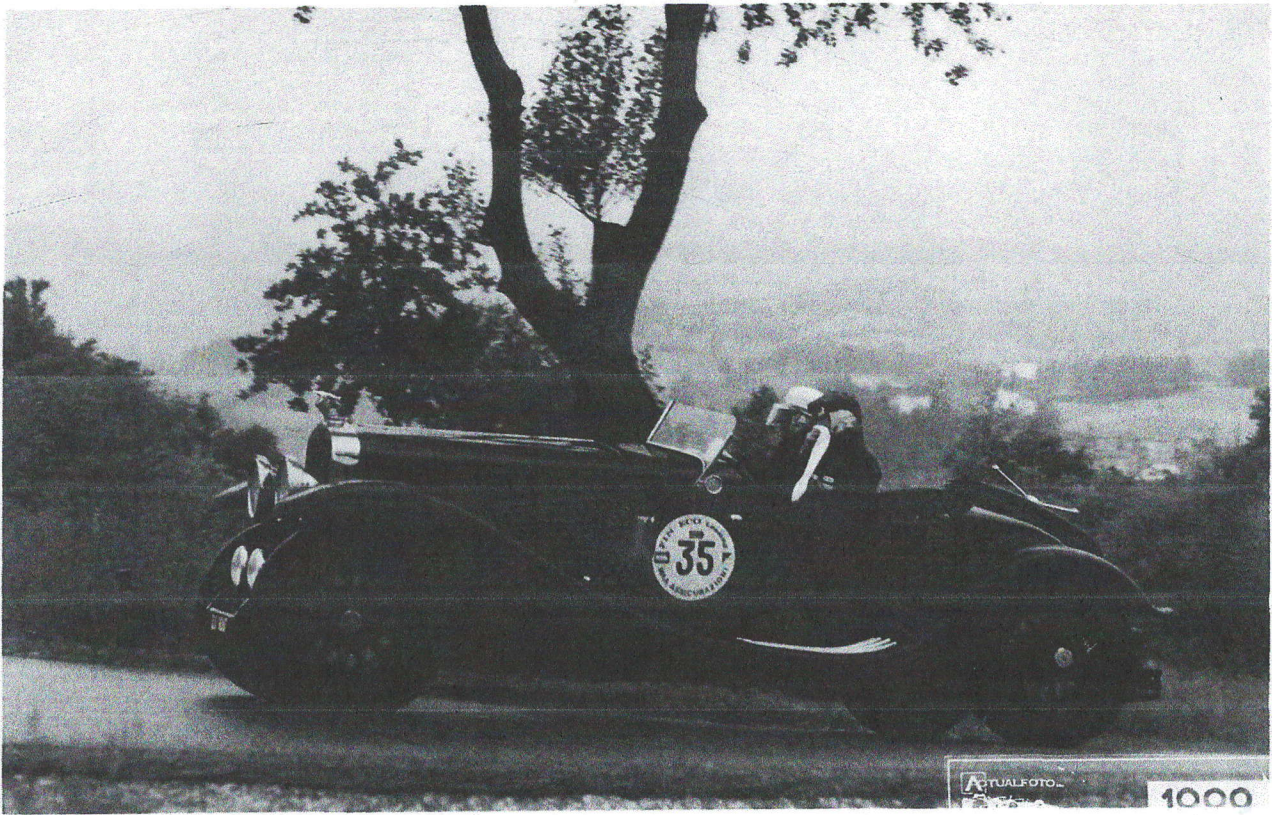
Contrary to what one might misguidedly believe from reports of Stirling Moss's remarkable 98 mph average speed on the 1955 race, these passes are by no means, wide, sweeping, long curves through the hills.

On the contrary, the roads are narrow with poorly made edges and many of the bends are hairpins. Add to this the rapidly changing altitude and a little rain and mist and these passes become quite exciting, not to say lethal.

In fairness there are many compensations. For example: wild enthusiasm from, if press reports are to be believed, up to 15,000,000 watching



Graphic proof of the weather conditions.



12400 looking her best on the road.



The thrill of the finish.

Italians who give everyone a warm reception. They will, if pressed, even drive into the ditch if their car is in danger of blocking one's route. At regular intervals, particularly at time controls in the many medieval towns, one is plied with gifts, often of local wine which of course has to be consumed instantly along with a kiss from the local May Queen.

The Hispano's main drawback, in fact discovered early in the event, is that it is simply too quiet. The prerequisites for a Mille Miglia entry are a bright red car that is fast and extremely noisy. The Hispano is too quiet to be heard by passing pedestrians, let alone echoing through mountain passes. Since the event this failing has been rectified with a straight through exhaust system installed. Not very Hispano-Suiza, I'm afraid.

After the last of the passes the route runs across the Lombardy plains, through Bologna with some good, open and very flat roads. After nearly two thousand miles the engine is definitely much looser and is happily cruising between 80 and 90 mph on the straight sections. At these speeds the

Hispano is an easy match for other cars of the period and certainly surprises some drivers of modern cars who are hurrying back to Brescia to greet the competitors' return.

We finally get back to Brescia ourselves about 9.30 pm. It is already dark and again, the welcoming sight of the floodlit ramp, chequered flag and reception committee is a most gratifying one for our very sore eyes.

This last day has been an almost continuous fourteen hours and over five hundred miles – it certainly feels it.

By and large the Hispano behaved extremely well throughout and proved to be a most satisfactory "mount" for the journey. If chosen as the car for the 1993 event, driver comfort would be greatly improved by some anti-bad weather equipment. A lower final drive would also improve performance as the present one was designed to run with 18 inch wheels. From a spectator point of view I have mentioned a louder exhaust but perhaps we should paint the car Ferrari red. On second thoughts I think not!

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