

Vintage Collection

Classic Cars and
Chopard go hand
in hand as Simon
de Burton found out



The 1957 Mille Miglia car race was a memorable event for all the wrong reasons. That was when an aristocratic driver, the Marquis Alfonso de Portago, lost control of his Ferrari and ploughed into the crowd, killing himself and 10 spectators. The authorities, understandably, slapped a blanket ban on all forms of racing on the public highway and the final chapter seemed to have been abruptly closed on half a century of Italian motor sport tradition. No more road racing, they said. Ever.





The Mille Miglia was first run in 1927, having been conceived by four members of the Brescia motor club who, unlike many more sceptical individuals, realised that the motor car was here to stay. Led by club chairman Franco Mazzotti, the four decided that the best way to ensure advancements in car design was to create a race that would allow manufacturers to show off their wares and, just as happens in top-level motor racing today, learn from their experiences to pass on improvements in their vehicles to their customers. But the main criterion for the event, said the club, should be that the race is made open to everyone – not just the wealthy elite, but any skilful driver who can handle the rough and winding roads of the thousand-mile course that would test a car to the limits of its capability. Purpose-built racing cars were barred, with entry being open only to production vehicles or pre-production prototypes.



Fast-forward 57 years to 1984. It is 27 years since the tragedy of the Marquis, his Ferrari and the 10 dead spectators, and the western world is falling deeply in love with what are loosely termed “classic” cars, and Italian ones in particular. People are beginning to pay serious money for important Ferraris, Maseratis, Cisitalias and other marques that, to a greater or lesser extent, made their names through success in the Mille Miglia. But what is the point in owning such a vehicle if all you do with it is potter quietly through country lanes on sunny afternoons? These cars beg to be driven, and driven long and hard against one another just as their makers intended.



The answer? Re-invent the Mille Miglia, not as a race but as a safety-conscious, timed endurance and reliability trial taking in the same arduous route. Starting at Brescia, it heads south to the turning point in Rome and loops back north past Ravenna, through Ferrara and on to a glorious finish back where it all started. It was a great idea and one that met with considerable enthusiasm from the old car world, not to mention the townsfolk of Brescia, who could see vast commercial potential in the event. So it was given the green light and has been one of the most anticipated fixtures on the classic motor sport calendar ever since.



Exclusive

There is, however, a notable difference between the Mille Miglia as it is now and the way Franco Mazzotti and his Brescia motor club chums originally conceived it. This has very much become an event for the wealthy elite, simply because the majority of cars that meet the strict conditions required for them to make the start line now realise sums way beyond the purse of the average enthusiast. The fact that a car is “Mille Miglia eligible” – that is, made between 1927 and 1957 and of a type that competed in the original event – often ensures that it commands an additional premium. That is why the Piazza della Vittoria in the heart of Brescia becomes heavy before the start of the 4-day competition, with the smells of old leather and warm oil mingling with the wafts of expensive perfume drifting

The smells of old leather and warm oil mingle with the wafts of expensive perfume from wealthy women drivers.

from the skin of wealthy women drivers who find the attraction of the Mille Miglia just as magnetic as do their male counterparts.

The Piazza is, ostensibly, where scrutineering and registration take place. But the gathering of tens of millions of pounds worth of metal is really an opportunity for the crowd to soak up the Mille Miglia atmosphere and to see, hear, touch and smell the exotica that make up the 375-car entry



Karl Scheufele and Albert Carreras in a gull-wing Mercedes 300 SL.

list. More often than not, the Piazza is awash with rain for the event, but this year the sun beat down dutifully as the cars rolled in for inspection and the application of racing numbers. The list, as usual, represented a roll-call of great marques of the pre- and post-war eras: Bugatti, Lancia, Alfa Romeo, Bentley, Lagonda, Invicta – all evocative of a time of fearless gentleman drivers wrestling steering wheels as their roaring vehicles threw up rooster-tails of dirt. But as I watched one fabulous machine after another arrive, the thought of any of them encountering dirt seemed an anathema. Almost every one was restored to perfection and beyond, with paintwork deeper than it ever was when new, and chrome shinier and more prolific than the designers at Bugatti, Mercedes et al. could ever have intended. (In future years, however, things could be different as there is currently a backlash against over-restoration in favour of original patination and signs of arduous use.)

However, whether or not you consider some of the cars to be over-restored, there is no denying

that the atmosphere at the beginning of the event is electric, as the first of the entries crests the ramp onto the podium start area in the magnificent, chestnut tree-lined Viale Venezia shortly after 8 pm. It is still daylight as the flag drops for the first time, but as car after car rolls up, darkness gradually falls and the Mille Miglia takes on its full romantic atmosphere amid the glow of headlamps as drivers roar off into the night at 30-second intervals, putting on a show of noisy acceleration as they squirt their cars down the Viale Venezia and out of town to tackle the first, 4-hour leg of the competition.

It is more of an adventure for some than others. The only lone driver in this year's event was a woman who must have had the heart of a lion to coolly embark on the 1,000-mile solo trip in her Siata 750 sport. Then there was the couple in the 1957 Ferrari 250 TDF who left the start ramp oblivious to the water pouring from their burst radiator, while the crew of number 149, a Fiat Topolino (little mouse), can hardly have been relishing spending 4 days in the tiniest car of the entry. In contrast, King Carl Gustav XVI of Sweden and his co-driver Prince Leopold of Bavaria (as I said, the Mille Miglia is no longer an event for the common man) must have found the feeling of adventure sadly lacking as they were tailed throughout the trip by a brace of security vehicles, although the handsome young Italian Prince Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia was probably in greater danger: at one point it seemed certain he would be suffocated by the number of girls clamouring to get close to him in his 1927 Bugatti.

By the end of the 4 days, during which the drivers had powered their cars over the 2,200-metre Monte Terminillo, weaved them through the narrow streets of little-visited villages and attracted the crowds in the tourist hotspots of Florence and Siena, almost 100 of the entrants had fallen by the wayside, serving to confirm that the Mille Miglia is just as tough a test as ever, although outright speed is now no longer of the essence. And the winners? A determined pair of Argentinians driving a



1923 Bugatti Type 23 – built, appropriately enough, in Brescia.

The Chopard connection

Chopard president Karl Scheufele and his son, Karl-Friedrich, the company's vice-president, are well known for their love of fine old motor cars. Since 1988, the firm has been one of the principal sponsors of the Mille Miglia, each year producing a new Mille Miglia watch to mark the occasion, an example of which is given to each team taking part.

The Scheufeles are regular entrants, and Scheufele junior often competes with the legendary six-time Le Mans winner Jacky Ickx as his co-driver. However, the 2003 event was not the most auspicious for the Scheufles – Karl Scheufele and his co-driver Albert Carreras, son of the celebrated tenor Jose, were left stranded when their Mercedes 300 SL broke down relatively early on, and Karl-Friedrich and Ickx were forced to retire a frustrating 200 kilometres from

the finish when their 1955 Ferrari 750 Monza barchetta petered out with an electrical fault, the Achilles heel of many old Italian cars.

However, as far as sales went, the 2003 Mille Miglia seemed to be a great success for Chopard. The stand in the Piazza Vittoria was rarely less than packed before the start of the event, with people eager to own one of the limited number (2,003 were made) of this year's special-edition wristwatches, complete with perforated leather strap designed to reflect the drilled spokes of a 1960s racing steering wheel.

Even more exclusive are the Mille Miglia Racing Colours watches, which are produced with dials in either red, racing green, blue, silver or yellow to represent the respective national colours of Italy, Britain, France, Germany and Belgium. Each colour is limited to a production run of 1,000 pieces, and the watches sell in sets of five for £10,000 per set, each housed in a presentation case appropriately designed in the shape of a toolbox. ◉

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