

# Motorsports Part 1 In The Beginning ...

Over the past ten years or so we've discussed a variety of topics related to our beloved British rides and our enjoyment of same. Starting off the new year, I'd like to explore the topic of motorsport which is nearly as old as the motor car itself and certainly related to our enjoyment of them. Indeed, our SVBCC mission statement states we are "dedicated to the enjoyment and preservation of British automobiles" so let's enjoy!

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, motorsport is defined as "any of several sports involving the racing or competitive driving of motor vehicles, especially automobiles". The first known use of the term "motorsport" was in 1901. Other first use terms that provide insight into the world of 1901 are the terms lighter-than-air, autoworker, battle cruiser, Blighty, bollix, chain store, concentration camp, consumer goods, Ms., sweet talk, taco, teriyaki, third-party, and tonneau. We have the French and wine making to thank for that last one. Huh? Thanks for asking .... According to my sources on the Internet, the term tonneau a.k.a. tonneau cover is derived from a "French word referring to a barrel or cask used in winemaking. As transportation transitioned from the horse-drawn carriages and wagons of the 19th century to the nascent automotive industry of the early 20th, so did the terminology for open-compartment covers." Now let me see, where was I ... oh yes, motorsport.

Determining the first of anything is fraught with potholes but I'll take a swing at it. The first recorded race between two self-powered road vehicles over a prescribed route was held at 4:30 AM on August 30, 1867. The 8 mile route was between Ashton-under-Lyne and Old Trafford, in northwest England. Why on earth start a race at 4:30 AM? At the time there was a so called "red flag law" that required a person to walk ahead of the self powered road vehicle and wave a red flag. Clearly this was not going to work so these guys became the first speed limit violators. Their vehicles were re-purposed steam powered light rail vehicles. Unfortunately I could not find a source for the average speed.

Meanwhile across the pond the Wisconsin legislature passed an act in 1875 offering a \$10,000 prize for 'any citizen of Wisconsin, who shall invent, and after five years continued trial and use, shall produce a machine propelled by steam or other motive agent, which shall be a cheap and practical substitute for the use of horses, and other animals on the highway and farm.' This was later revised to read, 'contestants to complete a 200-mile route not less than five miles per hour working time'. The act further

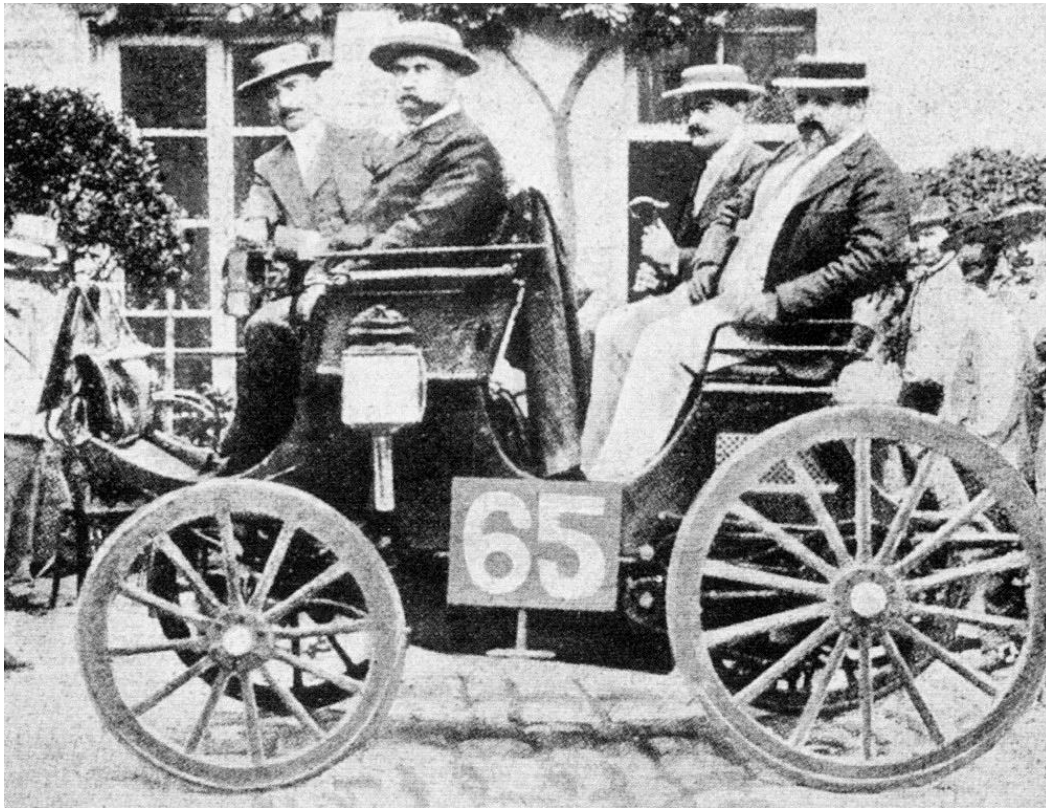


Oshkosh is steamed up and ready to run!

specified that any machine competing be able to function in both forward and reverse, as well as plowing and pulling loaded wagons. Appointed state representatives were in attendance to verify performance. The act called for trials to commence in July 1878 and to end 10 days later. Sure as shootin' the race was run on July 16, 1878 over a 200 mile route from Green Bay to Madison, Wisconsin. Just two steam traction engines out of the six original entrants made it to the start line. The 'Oshkosh' by gosh won in 33 hours 27 minutes. You betcha! You can read more about it in 'The Great Race of 1878' by Richard Backus, Farm Collector, May/June 2004. Here's the url:  
<https://www.farmcollector.com/steam-traction/the-great-race-of-1878>

Fast forward to July 22, 1894 when the Parisian magazine 'Le Petit Journal' organized what is regarded as the first motorsport competition. Running from Paris-to-Rouen, France, a distance of about 50 miles, the event combined the aspects of a reliability trial, a general event, and a race. In the early days of motorsport, events outside of Britain were typically held on public roads since the only racetracks were for horses. This is commonly regarded as the first motorsport event. One hundred and two competitors entered the race for a fee of 10 francs, about 3 days wage at the time. A selection (qualifying) process narrowed the field to 25 entrants. The winner was Count

Jules-Albert de Dion completing the course in 6 hours and 48 minutes at an average



speed was just a bit over 10 mph. Hmm.

The next year, June 1895, marked arguably the first real motor car race from Paris to Bordeaux, France and back covering a bit over 700 miles. Impressive! The winner was Emile Levassor in his Panhard-Levassor. He covered the 732 miles in 48 hours and 47 minutes, about 15 mph, besting the second place finisher by almost 6 hours. Yikes! Just nine of the twenty-two starters finished the grueling course. Also in 1895, the first American automobile race, the Chicago Times-Herald race, was held on Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1895. It ran for 54 miles from the south of Chicago to Evanston, Illinois and back. Beating the other five entries, Frank Duryea won in 7 hours and 53 minutes. For you math majors out there, that's about 8 miles per hour.

Albert Lemaître and friends are set to compete in the Paris-to-Rouen competition. He finished second, sadly six hours after the winning de Dion came in first. Oh well.

These city-to-city races were popular in France until tragedy struck in 1903 when Marcel Renault was involved in a fatal accident in the Paris-Madrid race when nine fatalities



forced the French government to ban open-road racing.

Nevertheless long distance road races remained popular including such epic events as the 9,317 mile Peking-to-Paris race which was won by Italian Prince Scipione Borghese in an Italia. The longest road race was the 22,000 mile 1908 New York-to-Paris Race sponsored by the NY Times and the Paris based La Matin newspapers. Six teams from the U.S., France, Italy, Germany competed. Alas no British entry. Three teams finished the grueling course, led home by the U.S. team's (yea!) Thomas Flyer driven by George Schuster from Buffalo, NY. In 2010 George was inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame, joining Henry Ford, Mario Andretti, Carl Benz, Enzo Ferrari, Ransom Olds and Carroll Shelby. You can see the Thomas Flyer in the National Automobile Museum in Reno, Nevada.




The New York-to Paris Race was reprised in 2011 beginning at Times Square on April 14, 2011. Four of the starting vehicles finished the race. The oldest was a 1929 Ford Model A, a 1932 Ford three window coupe ('Little Deuce coupe'), a 1967 VW Beetle and a 2007 Corvette. Again, no British entry. Don't you think a Land Rover would have made an excellent showing? These cars reached the Eiffel Tower on July 221, 2011, three months and one week after starting in New York. One of the participants was Jeff Mahl, great-grandson of George Schuster, the winning driver of the 1908 race! Here's a link to the Wikipedia article with references to several publications on this epic race. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1908 New York to Paris Race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1908_New_York_to_Paris_Race)

Greater top speed was a determining factor in the automobile vs horse competition. We all know who won that one. A horse's top speed is about 30 mph. The first recorded land speed record was set by Frenchman Gaston de Chasseloup-Laubat (imagine putting that name on the back of a football jersey) in 1898 when he set the record and handily beat the horse's land speed record, at 39.24 mph in an electric Jeantaud Duc. The race was on and just one month later Belgian Camille Jenatzy raised the record speed to 41 mph. Over the next 10 years the record was raised in quick succession. Henry Ford in his 999 racer set the record at in 1904, the first time the record had been

The winner of the 1908 New York-to-Paris endurance race. The Thomas Flyer covered the 22,000 mile route in 169 days, enduring cold, snow, mud, poor (non-existent?) roads, robbers, and other hardships. American team members were Roberts. Schuster. Miller and Willams. Roberts is shown at the wheel.

set outside of France and Belgium. Louis Rigidly took the record back to France and Belgium at 103.56 mph. American Fred Marriot took the record back to America in his steam-powered Stanley Rocket blasting across the Daytona Beach sands at an incredible 127.66 mph in 1906. Inevitably Frenchman Victor Emery retook the record at the recently opened Brooklands track at the end of 1909. And so the record breaking continues to this day. Brit Andy Green, former RAF pilot, currently holds the absolute Land Speed Record set in 1997 breaking the sound barrier at 760.343 mph. His ride, Thrust SSC was powered by twin Rolls-Royce Spey jet engines. Wow what a ride! For those of you keeping track, the land speed record has been set by electric, gasoline,

S T A N L E Y S T E A M C A R



**THE FASTEST CAR IN THE WORLD**  
(Rate of 127.66 Miles an Hour)

This car, at Ormond, Fla., Jan. 21 to 28, 1906, established the following World's Records:

WORLD'S RECORDS		FORMER RECORDS	
1 Kilometre	.18½	Darracq	.21½
1 Mile	.28½	Napier	.34½
1 Mile in Competition	.31½	Napier	.41½
5 Miles	2.47½		
2 Miles (World's record for cars eligible under the rules)	.59½		

The 5-mile record was made in competition, with a scoring start, and was at the rate of a mile in 33½ seconds, which is faster than any gasoline car built according to A. A. A. rules ever made for a single mile.

The power-plant in this car is exactly like that in the regular Stanley cars, except that it is larger, of about twice the power as the Touring Cars (Model F). It weighs 1,600 pounds, and has margin enough for another boiler of the same size (512 pounds) without passing the racing weight-limit of 2,204 pounds. The boiler is 30 inches in diameter and 18 inches deep. It contains 1,475 tubes, and has a total heating surface of 285 square feet. A steam pressure of 800 to 900 pounds is carried. The engine is 4½ x 6½, and makes 350 revolutions to the mile. The wheels are 34 inches in diameter, and make 600 revolutions to the mile. They are equipped with 3-inch G. and J. tires. The body is so designed that the largest cross-section it presents, including the wheels, is only 9 square feet.

*NOTE—While Mr. Stanley appears in the driver's seat, this record breaking car was driven by Fred H. Marriott of Newton, Mass.*

steam and jet powered vehicles.

In England motorsport competitions were held on private estates since Parliament severely limited automobile speeds on public roads which led to the development of dedicated motorsport facilities. The oldest venue for British motorsport events is commonly regarded as Shelsley Walsh (sounds like you've had one too many pints in the pub?) located in the British Midlands. Officially named the "Shelsley Walsh Speed Hill Climb," it was first used in 1905. It pre-dates Indianapolis (1909), Monza (1922), and LeMans (1923) and is still in use today. A 99 year lease was obtained in 2005 so its future is assured! Its innovations include the first use of electrical timekeeping and broadcasting of a motorsport event. The steep and narrow (just 12 feet wide in places) course is 1,000 yards long and rises 328 feet putting a premium on power and rear wheel traction. Fastest time of the day at its opening was 77.6 seconds. In 2021 that record was reset at 22.37 seconds, over 90 mph. Blimey! Of course (see what I did there?) being a hill climb Shelsley was a one car at time against the stop watch event.



If you want wheel-to-wheel racing around a circuit course, the first purpose built motor racing circuit, opening in January 1906, was at the Aspendale Racecourse in Australia. Fittingly it was built inside a horse race track oval. The track was pear-shaped, nearly a mile in length and featured banked turns. The surface was crushed cement. Just two races were held in January and November 1906, then it was revived from 1923-1930 and again just prior to WWII when it was permanently closed. It is now a residential housing development. Oh well...

In the UK Brooklands, located in Surrey, England, is regarded as the first purpose-built banked motor racing facility. Opening in June 1907, it was built in just 8 months. The concrete course with high speed banked turns was 2.75 miles long. Over the years the concrete course became notoriously rough sending speeding cars airborne with all four wheels off the pavement. That'll get your attention! In addition to motor racing, Brooklands also served as a test track for British car manufacturers as well as a manufacturing and test facility for British aircraft companies. Surprisingly 19,000 aircraft were built in Brooklands! Bomb damage during World War II meant that Brooklands' days were over but you can still visit this historic site today. Part of the original banking

Shelsley Walsh Speed Hillclimb in the early days.  
Photo courtesy of Classic & Sports Car magazine.



has been preserved as have several of the motoring and aviation related buildings.



Well worth a day's visit I can tell you from personal experience!

Back in the good ol' USA, the first purpose built circuit racing tracks had their origins as horse racing tracks. The first closed circuit automobile race was held on September 7, 1896 at the Narragansett Trotting Park in Cranston, Rhode Island. The winner was a Riker electric car. The Knoxville Raceway in Knoxville, Iowa held its first automobile race in 1901. The Milwaukee Mile started automobile racing in 1903. Of course the grand-daddy of them all, the 2.5 mile Indianapolis Motor Speedway first held automobile races in 1909. The seating capacity, largest in the world, is 257,000! The oldest asphalt-paved oval track in the U.S. is Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park in Thompson Connecticut. It was once known as the Indianapolis of the East. The 1.7



mile road racing circuit and the 0.625 mile oval are used today for sports car (SCCA and



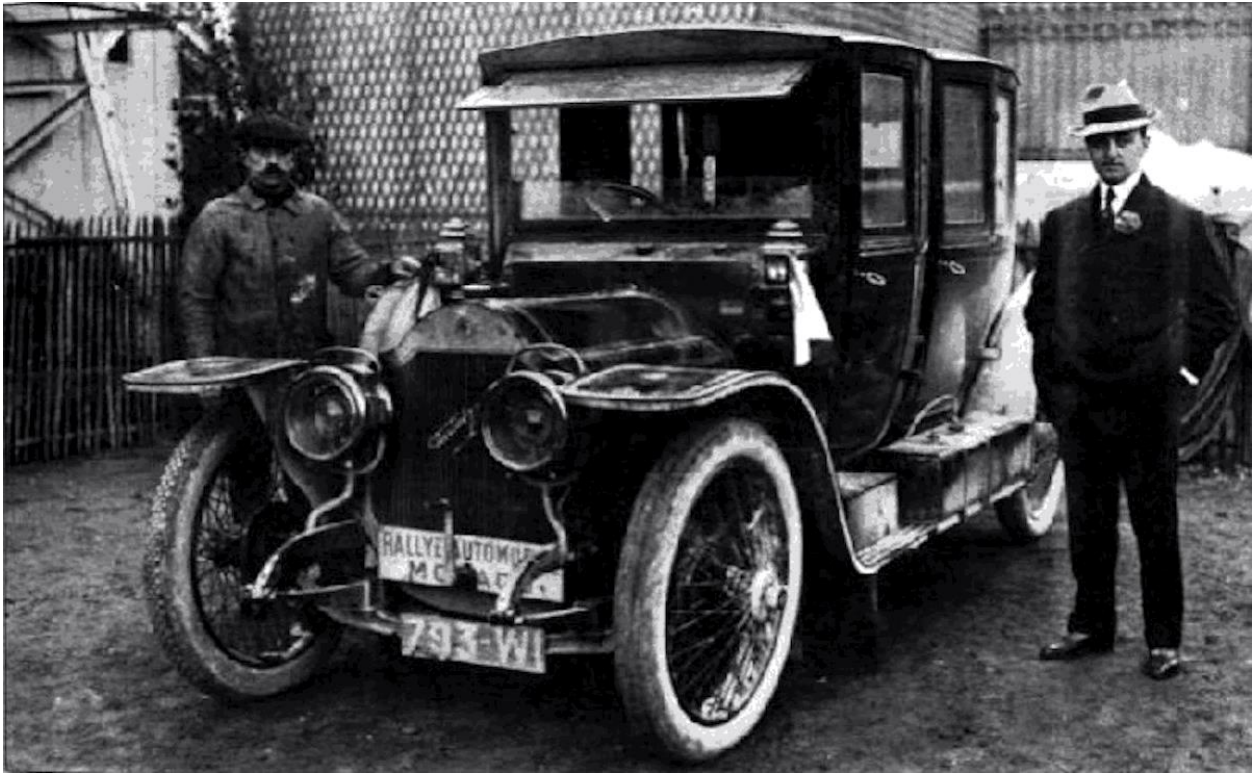
vintage road racing clubs) and stock car (NASCAR) races.

Rallying is very popular today, especially in Europe where it draws huge crowds. This madness started with the 1911 Monte Carlo Rally whose stated goals were to assess the reliability and comfort of the cars, as well as their ability to travel long distances. Judging criteria included average speed, distance covered, number of passengers or mechanics, ride comfort, luggage layout, appearance of the car, condition of the engine and body after the race etc. Cars started in January 1911 from St Petersburg, Berlin, Rome, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Geneva and Lisbon, converging at Monte Carlo in the warm south of France. First Monte Carlo rally had 23 entrants, 18 of which finished.

Rallying is not for the faint of heart! Run in  
Januarv. "The Monte" is a winter weather

The winner was Frenchman Henri Rougier who started in Paris in a Turcat-Mery. It was

a large car and reportedly he had “quite a few passengers.” His average speed was 18



mph. Not bad considering.

So there you have it, the first twenty years or so of motorsport around the world. In subsequent articles we will explore the various types of motorsport competition which still exists today; open road racing, closed circuit racing, rallying, speed record runs, trials, and hillclimbs. Remember to fasten your seat belts!

Winner of the first 'Monte,' Henri Rougier on the right, and his mechanic prepare to start the rally in their trusty 25 hp Turcat-Mery. Never heard of the marque? Neither have I. The French manufacturer made cars from 1899-1928. In addition to winning the Monte Carlo Rally, they were known for their Grand Prix racing exploits and producing 'The Car of the Connoisseur'.