

Motorsports Part 3

Most Difficult Road Race Adventure of All Time?

The Carrera Panamericana

By Bob Vitrikas

“There are those who keep out of mischief, and there are the adventurers. We racing drivers are adventurers; the more difficult something is, the greater the attraction that comes from it.” Juan Manuel Fangio



Herschel McGriff, winner of the first Carrera Panamericana in 1950 at the wheel of his winning Oldsmobile 88.

Following in the footsteps of the great open road races, the Targa Florio, Mille Miglia and the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the Carrera Panamericana a.k.a. Mexican Road Race, was the last one to the “table” in 1950 but is generally agreed to have been the most difficult of them all. Why is that? It wasn’t the first, having been first run in 1950. That honor goes to the Targa Florio which started in 1906. It wasn’t the longest, that honor goes to the 24 Hours of Le Mans clocking in at over 3,000 miles. It wasn’t the deadliest. That dubious distinction goes to Le Mans where 22 drivers and 83 spectators have died over the past 100 years. The Carrera Panamericana lasted just five years, 1950-54, making it by far the shortest lived open road race. If you would like to have your own “Walter Mitty Moment” there are modern day re-enactments of the Carrera Panamericana, Targa Florio, Mille Miglia and the 24 Hours of Le Mans. So what makes the Carrera arguably the hardest road race ever? Thank you for asking. Here’s why:

- It was a long race, just under 2,000 miles which certainly was a factor. The 1950 winner, Herschel McGriff (USA) drove his \$1,900 Oldsmobile 88 the distance, on one set of brakes, in 27 hrs 34 min. The big boys were changing brake shoes every night. Ol’ Herschel’s Olds engine ran the last miles with no oil, crossing the finish line in a smoking, rattling spectacle! In the final race, Umberto Maglioli drove his Ferrari 375 to

victory in 10 hours less time! With oil in the engine. That's just one factor of this grueling test of drivers, crews and machines.

- The weather is another factor. The race begins in a tropical climate, hot and humid. The road runs along the coast climbing from 328 feet to 10,482 feet! Along the route the temperature ranges from 88 degrees to just above freezing. These widely varying conditions make engine tuning all but impossible. As a result adjustments to carburetors (remember those?), ignition timing and spark plugs had to be made every 100 miles or so. Those who didn't adjust their engines to the changing conditions paid the price!

- The road surface itself is another major factor to deal with. Made from volcanic ash, the road surface is very abrasive. It is known to have worn down a new tire to its cord in just 1,000 miles. That is if it lasted that long... In 1952, Douglas Ellinger drove a modified Jaguar XK-120 roadster to 10th place in the Sport Class, suffering nine punctures and trashed more than 20 wheels in the process. He should have won the Perseverance Award, eh? On the first day, American John Fitch's Mercedes 300 SL destroyed its tires on the smoking hot first leg, flinging bits of tread which destroyed the lightweight rear bumper, necessitating a roadside repair. Groan...

- Road hazards abounded. The Mercedes team of Karl Kling and Herman Lang complained of cattle wandering across the road and famously encountered a rather large vulture at over 100 mph which smashed their windshield, injuring the navigator Karl Kling with cuts from flying glass. The Mercedes team attached eight very strong steel bars over the windshield to prevent a reoccurrence! Famously the Mercedes went on to win the 1952 race.



Fortunately Karl Kling was wearing his helmet when a vulture introduced itself to his face at 100+ mph!

- The lack of guardrails, especially on the twisty mountain passes and narrow wooden bridges contributed to the drama. Locals often volunteered to help errant competitors back on the road sometimes at their peril.

- It was deadly. Sixteen competitors and nine spectators died in the five races.
- An indicator of the toughness of the race, in the 1952 edition 75 stock and 34 sports cars started in Tuxtla. Two-thousand miles and five days later in Juarez just 11 sports and 39 stock cars crossed the finish line.
- It wasn't all bad. The difficult conditions led to a strong feeling of camaraderie among the teams. Experienced U.S. drivers happily shared their knowledge with the European Grand Prix newcomers. Crews loaned tires, tools and equipment to those in need demonstrating the atmosphere of international good will and cooperation that marked the event. Come to think of it, this is exactly what goes on at vintage races these days!

The Carrera Panamericana was truly an international competition with teams from the U.S., Italy, Germany, U.K., Spain, Mexico and France. The first race in 1950 drew 132 entries, 9 of them women. Many of the entrants were unsponsored U.S. drivers. One of these was accomplished race driver Troy Ruttman who reportedly bought his flat-head Mercury V8 for entry for a measly \$1,000 from a used car lot in El Monte, California! That old American rattletrap beat several factory entries from Ferrari and Lancia. Oh boy! U.K. entries included Jaguar (9), and Austin Healey (2). The race favored big, strong and powerful cars so the entry list was full of full-size American iron. Two of the U.K. entries were big 'ol honkin' Jag sedans, a Mk V and a Mk VII. Yeah baby, roll on Coventry! Well truth be told the 1950 Jaguar Mk V dropped out with a broken piston and the 1951 race saw the Jaguar Mk VII retire. Sigh...



Umberto Maglioli drove his Ferrari 375 Plus to victory in the last Carrera Panamericana in 1954. American Ray Crawford won the stock class in a Lincoln.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention VW participation in the 1954 race. Seven VW "Beetles" were entered and all seven finished! Now that's a humbling result! Nuf said.

The overall winners were:

- 1950: Herschel McGriff, Oldsmobile 88
- 1951: Pietro Taruffi, Ferrari 212
- 1952: Karl Kling, Mercedes 300 SL
- 1953: Juan Manuel Fangio, Lancia D24
- 1954: Maglioli Umberto, Ferrari 375

British entries

- 1950
 - Jaguar Mk V
- 1951
 - Jaguar Mk VII
- 1952
 - Jaguar XK120 (3)
- 1953
 - Jaguar C-type
 - Jaguar XK120
- 1954
 - Austin Healey 100 (2) entered by Donald Healey, BMC
 - Jaguar C-type
 - Jaguar XK120
 - VW Type 1 (7)

Ferrari came home first after a nail-biting last pit stop when the car refused to start allowing the second place Toyota to close in but not pass it as the Ferrari fired up and took the checkered flag for the first time since 1965! Speaking of numerology, 2023 was the 100th anniversary of the first 24 Hours of Le Mans, marking 50 years since a Ferrari factory car last ran there, and was Ferrari's 10th Le Mans win.