

STIRLING MOSS

SELECTED RACES

SIR STIRLING MOSS OBE WITH ALAN HENRY



Read Stirling's accounts of three of his GREATEST races

Mille Miglia

Mercedes-Benz 300SLR

1 May 1955, Brescia (I)

World Sports Car Championship, round 3

Race distance 1 lap of 992-mile circuit **Race time** 10h 7m 48s, 97.95 mph (record)

Co-driver Denis Jenkinson **Car no** 722 **Entrant** Works

The Mille Miglia was the one race I felt genuinely scared of. I suppose that seems strange, bearing in mind that I raced at places such as the old Nürburgring and Pescara at a time when you could really cause yourself a lot of physical damage if you crashed badly, but I did not bat an eyelid at those two circuits. The Mille Miglia was different. I had driven in it with Jaguar on two previous occasions, each of which ended in disappointment. But I was determined that my outing in the Mercedes 300SLR – effectively a two-seater version of the W196 Grand Prix car but with a 3-litre engine – would be different.

I had been toying with the idea of taking a proper navigator, as opposed to a riding mechanic, and after I discovered that Denis Jenkinson – ‘Jenks’ – had been discussing the same subject with my Mercedes sports car team-mate, John Fitch, I really began to think through the whole project in more detail. John very kindly said he did not mind if ‘Jenks’ teamed up with me.

I had known ‘Jenks’, on and off, since I first started racing on the Continent because he was a leading member of the motorcycle racing fraternity, having partnered Eric Oliver ‘in the chair’ when they won the 1949 sidecar World Championship. He later became the respected Continental Correspondent of *Motor Sport* magazine but, of more importance as far as our planned outing in the Mille Miglia was concerned, ‘Jenks’ was someone who understood speed.

Central to our personal preparations was the roller map – affectionately known by some of my more irreverent friends as ‘the bog-roll holder’ – on which ‘Jenks’ comprehensively logged every significant detail of the 1,000-mile run around Italy. The story of our preparations has been well told, including how we bounced off an army lorry on one occasion while practising in a 300SL road car, after which we received a personal apology from the local chief of police, who told us that these sorts of incidents were always happening and that he was fed up with the standards of driving in the military.

We also perfected a system of hand signals with which to communicate. Not only was it impossible to shout to each other above the noise of the Mercedes straight-eight when it was revving at 7,400rpm in fifth gear (about 180mph), but we also established that using an intercom system was a lost cause because we were concentrating so hard on our respective jobs that we had no spare brain capacity to deal with another task. Meanwhile, Mercedes had sited services depots for the cars in Ravenna, Pescara, Rome, Florence and Bologna.

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The starting order from Brescia was determined by ballot *and engine size*. We drew 7.22am and so a red '722' was painted on the Mercedes SLR's bulbous silver bonnet. Unlike the previous Mille Miglias I had contested, the weather was fine and, with 30 seconds to go before the start, I fired up the engine to the accompaniment of a fierce rasp from the side-exit exhausts and drove the car gently on to the starting ramp.

Initially we cruised at around 160–170mph down towards Verona, but nevertheless we were overtaken by Eugenio Castellotti's big 4.4-litre Ferrari quite early on in the proceedings. I was driving hard, but still leaving a bit of a margin and not going too close to the edge of the road at any point. Entering Padua, I made a slight slip when I locked up under braking and slid wide, nudging the 300SLR's nose into a straw bale, but the car bounced off without any obvious damage.

For many miles I kept Castellotti in sight, although I was wondering just how much punishment the Ferrari would be able to take, as it was being hurled from kerb to kerb with blue smoke pouring from its inside rear tyre under harsh acceleration. Through the Ravenna control we went, noticing with little surprise that Castellotti's Ferrari was stationary having its wheels changed, then it was flat out towards Pescara with the shimmering blue Adriatic on our left. At one point 'Jenks' signalled the approach of a blind brow that the 300SLR could easily take without my lifting from the throttle. But we were going quite a bit faster than we had been during practice and the car took off like an aeroplane. We could not have been airborne for more than a couple of seconds, but at the time it seemed like an eternity.

Going into Pescara, I brushed some straw bales, nearly pitching us across the road and into the pumps on a filling station forecourt, but I just held control and within another couple of minutes we were through the time control and slowing to enter the Mercedes pit area. The car was refuelled, the tyres checked, we were handed a slice of orange and a peeled banana, and then it was off over the mountain leg to Rome. I have to confess that, coming out of Pescara, I made another slip and slid through another line of straw bales, thankfully emerging unscathed on the pavement behind, whereupon I selected first gear and immediately resumed the race.

From Pescara we headed across Italy's mountain spine to Rome, by which time I was absolutely bursting for a comfort break. Once they had stamped our route card at the control, I accelerated the short distance to the Mercedes service area, where I braked to a standstill and hopped out of the car to relieve myself. Meanwhile 'Jenks' was handed a piece of paper on which was written 'Moss, Taruffi, Herrmann, Kling, Fangio'. We were in the lead, a hugely satisfying achievement, although there was a nagging worry in the back of my mind because there was an old legend that 'he who leads at Rome is never first home'.

After just 64 seconds we were roaring out of Rome, with a new set of tyres, a clean screen and the oil checked, heading for the hills once again. As we climbed the Radicofani pass, however, one of the 300SLR's front brakes began to grab and I spun to a halt while entering a sharp left-hander. The car stopped with its tail lodged in a shallow ditch. Fortunately, I could select first gear and, with a bit of jiggling backwards and forwards, was able to extricate the car and continue the race.

We were still in the lead when we had the card stamped at Florence, so now I got my head down, determined to cover the next leg over the Raticosa and Futa passes in just an hour. Unbeknown to us, and concealed by a crowd of people, Fangio's 300SLR had limped into the

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Florence control to have an injector pipe repaired. Kling had already crashed and, later, we saw Herrmann's car parked on the side of the road, so we were, in effect, Mercedes' last hope. We arrived at Bologna firmly in the lead and with the 300SLR still running perfectly, so now all that was left was the sprint back up the Po valley, through Cremona, and on to Brescia. Looking back, the one thing I find hardest to believe is that we averaged 132.91mph from Bologna to Brescia, just over 199 miles, and that included stopping at the time control.

For the last few miles into Brescia, 'Jenks' put away the route map after signalling the last marker point on the route and we tore past the line to finish first in this epic motor race. After a slightly nerve-racking wait to hear how Taruffi and Fangio had done, the news was finally confirmed to us that we had won. Remarkably, the car's bonnet had never been opened from start to finish, except to check the oil.

British Grand Prix

Vanwall

20 July 1957, Aintree, Liverpool (GB)

F1 World Championship, round 5

Race distance 90 laps of 3-mile circuit **Race time** 3h 6m 37.8s **Race speed** 86.8mph

Fastest lap 1m 59.2s, 90.6mph (record) **Co-driver** Tony Brooks **Car no** 18 & 20

Entrant Works

After Le Mans I had gone down to La Napoule, near Cannes, for a short break with my fiancée Katie. I was messing around in the surf trying to mono-ski backwards when a spray of water shot straight up my nose as I attempted, too cleverly, to make a sharp turn. That ended up with my suffering from an unpleasant sinus infection, which necessitated a spell in the London Clinic and hardly impressed Tony Vandervell when it became clear that I would have to miss the French Grand Prix at Rouen and the non-championship race at Reims.

Tony Brooks was also unfit for these races, having up-ended his Aston at Le Mans, so Roy Salvadori and Stuart Lewis-Evans stood in for us. In fact, Stuart did such a superb job that he was recruited as the full-time third driver for the Vanwall team.

Fortunately, I recovered in time for the British Grand Prix at Aintree, where we were clearly going to have strong opposition from Maserati, with Fangio and Behra faster than the Vanwalls on the first day's practice. Even though I was still feeling the after-effects of the sinus problem, I managed to qualify on pole position, right at the end of the session. I tried Tony's car in practice, as well as mine, on a 'just-in-case' basis as Tony was still badly bruised, and we arranged that he would relinquish his car to me if such a strategy was required because he was unsure whether he would be well enough to drive competitively for the full 90-lap distance.

After making a fair start, I was second into the first corner and led the race by the end of the opening lap. I pulled away steadily, but at about the 25-lap mark the Vanwall began to misfire. I stopped to have an earth wire ripped out and rejoined in seventh place, but the car was still misfiring so I brought it into the pits again two laps later. Tony was immediately signalled to come in, which he did, and I took over his car. I resumed in ninth place, but was quickly up to seventh. Meanwhile, Behra led by over a minute.

I passed Fangio for sixth place on lap 34, then I closed in on Musso and overtook him for fifth place on lap 40, and then I got past Collins for fourth place on lap 46. Then came a slice of good fortune. Just as I passed Stuart Lewis-Evans's Vanwall for third place, the clutch disintegrated on Behra's leading Maserati and Hawthorn's second-placed Ferrari suffered a punctured tyre running over the debris. With 20 laps to go, Stuart and I in our green Vanwalls were running one-two, although I would soon be left alone at the head of the field, after Stuart stopped on the circuit with throttle problems.

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I took no chances in the closing stages. I even made a precautionary late stop to top up with fuel. The car did not miss a beat and, after 90 laps, I finally saw the chequered flag in the British Grand Prix at Aintree for the second time in my career. And it was my first time in a British car!

Argentine Grand Prix

Cooper-Climax

19 January 1958, Buenos Aires (ARG)

F1 World Championship, round 1

Race distance 80 laps on 2.43-mile circuit **Race time** 2h 19m 33.7s **Race speed** 83.604mph **Car no** 14 **Entrant** R.R.C. Walker

Adapted from a Formula 2 machine, the little Cooper was propelled by a 1,960cc version of the twin-cam, four-cylinder Climax engine. Granted, we were down on power compared with the front-engined Maserati 250Fs and new Ferrari Dino 246s, but we had the potential to run through the 80-lap race without making a refuelling stop. The problem was going to be tyre wear.

Dunlop advised us that, in the gruelling conditions, our tyres would last only 30 to 40 laps, about half the race distance, but a tyre change would cause an insuperable delay because the Cooper wheels had four-stud attachments rather than the traditional ‘knock-off’ spinners. I thought about this long and hard, and then told Alf that I was going to have to run the race non-stop – no new tyres and no refuelling. But we just had to make the others *think* that we were going to make that time-consuming pit stop. I duly went around the paddock complaining to the other drivers, telling them, “Well, it’s all right for you. My car is very quick, but we’re going to have to throw away three minutes in the pits.”

I started from seventh place on the grid, having lapped 2 seconds slower than Fangio’s pole position time in his Maserati. I had a problem with blurred vision in one eye, caused by Katie accidentally poking me in the eye when we were fooling around together, as a result of which I had to drive wearing an eye patch. On reflection, I am amazed that I was allowed to do so. Perhaps this would not have been allowed if the race organisers had appreciated just what tactics the Walker team was going to deploy once the race was underway.

In order to conserve my tyres, I did only three laps in practice, but once the race started I soon worked my way through to fourth place behind Fangio and Jean Behra in their Maseratis and Mike Hawthorn in the Ferrari. Then the gearbox momentarily jammed in second and I was just about to come into the pits when it miraculously freed up. It later emerged that the clutch had broken but a stone had become jammed in the interlock mechanism, enabling me to continue driving with an inoperative clutch.

I drove as gently as I dared, letting the car run as wide as possible out of the corners to minimise tyre wear, and trying to use the slipstreams of other cars on all the straight bits. Slowly, I edged my way through the field. I overtook Behra and Hawthorn, and then, when Fangio pitted for fuel on lap 35, I went through into the lead, which quite soon became a very comfortable lead of a minute.

Alf started giving me signals from the pits that suggested he was counting me down to a pit stop for tyres. Of course, I realised that he was just trying to mislead the other teams so that

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they would continue to relax, waiting for me to come in for a long pit stop. With about 20 laps to go, the penny dropped in the Ferrari team that they were being duped, and Luigi Musso, in second place, started to pile on the pressure just as I saw the first signs of potential trouble with my tyres.

First the tread wore away so the tyres looked pretty much like slicks. A few laps later, I could see the white breaker strip that appears as a warning between the rubber and the carcass. At first there was just the odd spot of white going round but, as the tyres wore further, the spots became continuous white lines. A few laps later, the lines gave way to the canvas, which then grew hairs and flashed round. This was becoming a real concern because I realised that either front tyre, or even both of them, could easily burst.

So here I was, leading the Argentine Grand Prix outright, with relatively few laps to go and a damned Ferrari catching me very fast. By now I was using as little steering as possible, letting the car ride up and over the low chamfered kerbs on to the grass to cool and save tyre wear. I finished just 2.7 seconds ahead of Musso's Ferrari – and that was after over two hours of racing.

I am not sure if that was brave or stupid. Mind you, only a very fine line divides the two!

A surprising fact is that if I had driven my car at my pole position time for all 100 laps, it would only have taken 40 seconds less than the actual race time.

And read Stirling's account of one of his WORST races

Ulster Trophy

BRM V16

7 June 1952, Dundrod, Belfast, Northern Ireland (GB)

Race distance 34 laps of 7.5-mile circuit **Reason for retirement** Clutch and overheating after 4 laps **Car no** 8 **Entrant** Works

Looking back, it seems extraordinary that I did not get round to racing the BRM V16 until the summer of 1952, considering that I had taken part in the tests at Monza some nine months before.

Having missed the Turin Grand Prix in April, the BRMs were scheduled to compete next at Albi in France on 1 June. It then emerged that the BRM Trust had promised none other than Northern Ireland's Prime Minister that three BRMs would be on the grid for the Ulster Trophy at Dundrod on 7 June. Given the cars' unreliability, this looked like a tall order.

My first impression was that the car handled better, but on the narrow Dundrod circuit its tendency to wander and feel unstable seemed extremely pronounced compared with its handling on the broad asphalt at Monza. In practice, I thought the BRM certainly did not feel safe, particularly in view of the fact that a wet race was predicted. In the event, only two BRMs were fielded, the first for Fangio and the second for me, but the whole meeting degenerated into a fiasco as far as I was concerned.

Unknown to me, my car was switched with Fangio's overnight. I had agreed that such a step might be taken if necessary because Fangio was the number-one driver, but it would have been nice if they had mentioned it to me before the race...

When the starter held up the 30-second board, I put the clutch out and selected first gear. I always did that earlier than strictly necessary to make sure I was in gear when the flag dropped. There were about 10 seconds to go when the clutch began to take up and the car began to creep. There was not much I could do because I had the clutch hard down. I had to heel-and-toe with my right foot on the brake as well as the accelerator to hold the car still. Just as the flag was about to fall the clutch burned out and the engine stalled.

I looked across and saw that Fangio had stalled his engine on the line too, seconds before the flag fell. So while the field rushed off in a cloud of spray, we were just left sitting there on the back of the grid. The mechanics rushed out and push-started us.

My clutch was slipping badly so Fangio quickly lost me. Then, as I came round the left-hand corner before the hairpin, I encountered Fangio facing me, going backwards quickly. So there were two BRMs, nose to nose, going down the hill towards the hairpin. I think Fangio was going faster backwards than I was forwards!

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On the second lap the gear knob came off in my hand. I think I slung it to somebody as a souvenir. Both Fangio and I were having big trouble getting round the hairpin and therefore we had to slip our clutches – and, of course, it did not help that mine had virtually burned out on the line. Anyway, that was the least of my problems because I came into the pits at the end of the second lap with chronic overheating. I crawled round a bit more and was almost relieved to call it a day after four laps.

I later wrote to Raymond Mays telling him that I did not want to drive the BRM again in its present state. The truth was that, at this stage in its history, the BRM organisation just was not up to the job. Those guys thought they were on a par with Alfa Romeo or Mercedes, but the sad truth was that they really had not got a clue.