

Escape Road

1921 Duesenberg: Conqueror of France

By Donald Davidson

Brace yourselves, purists.

Can it really be that a full-fledged European Grand Prix was once won by a car constructed in-of all places—Elizabeth, NJ?

Well, the French Grand Prix had not been held in seven years when the 1921 event was flagged away, but the hosts, known to be less than delighted at having victory go to a country other than their own, were now pretty confident that the formidable Ballot team could ensure a domestic victory.

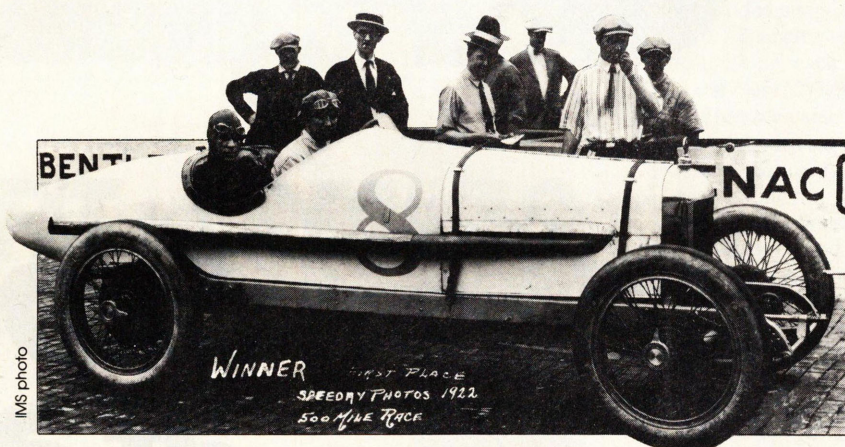
But Ballot did not win the Grand Prix. Neither did Peugeot. Instead, the French were vanquished, along with the Italians and the British, by, horror of horrors, an American driver in an American car.

It was Jimmy Murphy in a Duesenberg who did the vanquishing.

Murphy, orphaned by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and subsequently raised by a prominent judge in that city, signed on with Duesenberg as a riding mechanic for Tommy Milton in 1919. Murphy leaped to the fore as a driver virtually as Milton's protégé and won the 250-mile event which opened the exceedingly fast board track in Beverly Hills, Calif., in February, 1920. Three months later, he placed fourth behind Milton in the Indianapolis 500, and when Milton departed after a season-long dispute, Jimmy was elevated to the number one spot.

It was the joint efforts of Albert Champion, the French sparkplug manufacturer living in America, and veteran motor-sports journalist W.F. Bradley, who was living in France, who helped bolster the rather thin field for the July, 1921, Grand Prix. The entry fee, unreasonably hefty to begin with and a likely deterrent, was sportingly doubled for late-comers, yet Champion wired Bradley enough to cover a team of four Duesenbergs.

Because the Championship events of the day were held almost exclusively on the



steeply-banked board speedways, road racing was hardly Murphy's forte. Neither was it that of his teammate, Joe Boyer, whose father was head of Burroughs Adding Machine Co. But no sooner had practice begun on the 11-mile stone-infested road course than the pair was shifting gears and slewing around tight bends with as much proficiency as anybody.

The cars were dispatched at the start in pairs at 30-second intervals, and elapsed time at the end of the first lap had Murphy and Boyer in first and second. In their favor was an innovation which Duesenberg had brought along. It is believed the other cars in the race used four-wheel brakes, but they were mechanical. Duesenberg, meanwhile, had installed hydraulic brakes, and these allowed their drivers to drive deeper into the turns.

At one point, even after Boyer had dropped to third on elapsed time, Duesenbergs occupied first, third, fourth and sixth, with French teammates Albert Guyot and Andre Dubonnet (of the wine family) more than supporting the effort.

Boyer eventually fell by the wayside, after one of several million flying stones punctured his radiator, and Murphy almost suffered the same fate. But, nursing several ribs broken in an accident during practice and babying a dry radiator, the San Franciscan took the checker first, having led 23 of the 30 laps.

What should have been a joyous occasion, however, was rather subdued as the victors were given the cold shoulder. At the prize-giving celebrations that evening the Americans quietly left before the festivities ended.

Shortly after returning to the States, Murphy purchased the winning car from his employer and set about reworking it for the 1922 500. With the aid of his riding mechanic, Ernie Olson, and some others, an engine swap was performed. In went a straight-eight Miller. Not only did Murphy and Olson win Indianapolis with it in May, they did so from the pole, the first time that had been accomplished.

It isn't known what became of the car immediately after that, since the 1923 Indianapolis rules allowed single-seat cars and most two-seaters were cast aside.

Some 30 years later, Ernie Olson, long since retired from racing, happened to be taking a tour through the MGM studios in Hollywood when he noticed a sorry-looking racing car rotting away on a back lot in the middle of a pile of junk. He left the tour and found himself engaged in a steadily engrossing inspection. He began to realize he had stumbled on the French Grand Prix and Indianapolis winner in which he had ridden and which he helped prepare.

It transpired that the car had been raced on dirt tracks with a chopped tail for a few years until it ended up at MGM as a stunt car. Thanks to Ernie Olson's eagle eye on that day, it was saved.

When the first Indianapolis Motor Speedway museum opened on the corner of West 16th and Georgetown in the spring of 1956, six outstanding racing cars were on display. One of them was the Duesenberg, appearing in its French Grand Prix livery. Some 30 years later, there is, of course, a considerably larger museum at the track. Inside there is a special section set aside for some especially notable racing cars from American history, all lined up next to the glass cases which contain the awesome trophy collection of the great Rudolf Caracciola.

One of the cars included in that group is Murphy's Duesenberg. **AW**