

TAZIO NUVOLARI (1892-1953)

*In the March 2017 essay, I dealt with Alberto Ascari, the most famous race car driver of his generation. This month we consider another famous Italian driver who achieved world-wide fame...Tazio Nuvolari. He was the greatest driver of his own generation (which immediately preceded Ascari's generation) and to many followers of Formula 1 racing, he was the greatest driver of all time. Many considered him a legend in his own lifetime. He was nicknamed *Il Montavano Volante*, the "Flying Mantuan". Known for his skill, courage and racing expertise, Nuvolari amazed the racing world for 30 years with his exploits on both two and four wheels.*



Tazio Giorgio Nuvolari was born in Castel d'Ario near Mantua, Italy on November 16, 1892, the fourth son of Arturo Nuvolari, an Italian farmer, and his wife Elisa Zorzi Nuvolari. As a youngster, he nearly died after jumping off the roof of his house wearing a home-made parachute. Nuvolari demonstrated this flagrant disregard for his personal well-being time and again throughout his racing career. His family was well acquainted with racing since Arturo and his brother Giuseppe had both been bicycle racers. Giuseppe, who had been a multiple winner of the Italian national championship, was particularly admired by young Tazio. He was a dealer for Bianchi Bicycles and Motorcycles and introduced his young nephew to motor racing by teaching him to ride a motorcycle at a young age.

Nuvolari obtained his license for motorcycle racing in 1915 at the age of 23, but his racing career was put on hiatus when he was called up to serve in the Italian Army as an ambulance driver in World War I. However, his reckless abandon for his, and others', safety saw him banned from his job of driving ambulances after being deemed too dangerous and reckless to be behind the wheel.

After the War, Nuvolari's racing career on two wheels restarted in 1920. He took part in his first motorcycle race at the Circuito Internazionale Motoristico in Cremona but did not finish. He participated in numerous races during the following years and finally, in 1925, he became the 350 cc European Motorcycle Champion by winning the European Grand Prix on a Bianchi motorcycle. At the time, the European Grand Prix was considered the most important race of the motorcycling season and the winners in each category were designated European Champions.



After his 1925 success, Alfa Romeo, seeking a driver to replace Antonio Ascari, (the father of Alberto who had been killed at the French Grand Prix), tested Nuvolari in their Grand Prix car with a view to running him in the Italian Grand Prix in September. He crashed the car violently when the gearbox seized, and he severely lacerated his back. After he was told that he had not been selected by Alfa Romeo, he ignored his doctor's orders to remain in the hospital for a month and decided to return to racing motorcycles. Six days later, in bandages and with a cushion strapped to his stomach, he started the rain-soaked Nations Grand Prix at Monza physically tied to his bike. His Bianchi mechanics had to lift him onto his motorcycle and hold him upright for a push-start at the beginning of the race, and they had to catch him at the end. The legend of Tazio Nuvolari began that day when he won the race.

He went on to win the Nations Grand Prix four times between 1925 and 1928, and the Lario Circuit race five times between 1925 and 1929, all in the 350 cc class on a Bianchi motorcycle. After these various successes, in late 1930, he decided to move full-time to auto racing.

Nuvolari had begun racing cars in 1924 at the age of 32 while still competing in motorcycles. His first racing car win came in 1924 at Tigulho. In March, 1927 he started his own team, buying a pair of Bugatti 35Bs which he shared with his partner Achille Varzi, (*right*) who was also a successful motorcycle racer. This partnership would later turn into an intense rivalry. Nuvolari began to win races at the expense of Varzi who eventually left the team. After taking a borrowed Bugatti to victory in Rome in 1927, he won twice more that year, at Garda and Rome.



From that point on, Nuvolari dominated European auto racing for the next decade. He won the strenuous 1,000 mile Millie Miglia three times, and captured Le Mans in 1933.

Nuvolari signed on with Alfa Romeo in 1929, whose team manager was Enzo Ferrari, and once again became a teammate of his rival Varzi. It was against Varzi at the 1930 Mille Miglia endurance race that he would truly enter the realm of motor racing legend. Trailing Varzi, Nuvolari caught and fearlessly stalked his rival from Perugia to Bologna, while driving during the night with his headlights turned off at speeds of over 93 mph to avoid being seen in the mirrors of the leader, Varzi. A little less than 2 miles from the finish line, as the oblivious Varzi's thoughts turned to victory, Nuvolari suddenly switched on his lights and powered past his bewildered rival to win.

For the Targa Florio of 1932, he asked Enzo Ferrari for a mechanic who weighed as little or less than he did. Nuvolari took the young and inexperienced mechanic that Ferrari gave him and told him that he would warn him when they approached a particularly difficult corner so as not to unduly frighten the young man. As they approached a corner, Nuvolari would shout for the mechanic to take cover under the dashboard. After the race and another victory for Nuvolari, Ferrari asked the mechanic how he had made out. "Nuvolari started shouting at the first bend and finished at the last one," the boy answered. "I was down at the bottom of the car all the time."

In 1933 he scored many victories but became estranged from the team manager, Ferrari. So he left Alfa Romeo for Maserati. In 1933, he also traveled to Northern Ireland for the Tourist Trophy Race where he drove a supercharged MG K3 Magnette to victory. After totally dominating the race, someone asked him how he liked the MG's brakes. Nuvolari replied he couldn't really tell because he hadn't used them that much!

Nuvolari's greatest performance, certainly his biggest career victory, was what he achieved in 1935 against the might of Nazi Germany. Varzi had vetoed his attempts to join Auto Union (a racing team of the German Auto Union car manufacturer) in 1935, so Nuvolari settled for Scuderia Ferrari, Enzo Ferrari's team. This meant he arrived in Nurburgring for that year's German Grand Prix in an obsolete, underpowered Alfa Romeo, the supplier for Scuderia Ferrari at that time. His opponents were the might of Germany's auto racing fleet: five Mercedes-Benz cars and four Auto Union cars (built by a special department of Auto Union's Horch works in Zwickau, Germany), one of which was being driven by his nemesis, Varzi. In front of Nazi government figures and 200,000 Germans all expecting victory, Nuvolari suffered a horrendous start and then lost two minutes



more because of a refueling delay. But he battled his way back to second by the start of the final lap. He then relentlessly set about cutting Manfred von Brauchitsch's 30-second lead as the German struggled with the tires on his Mercedes, ultimately having to retire from the race with a blowout. Nuvolari cruised to the victory and what some still believe to be the greatest motor racing triumph of all time. Each of the eight cars finishing behind Nuvolari was German. His "Impossible Victory" embarrassed and angered the German high command, but turned him into a propaganda hero for Mussolini's own fascist regime.

[ONE MINUTE VIDEO OF NUVOLARI RACING IN THE 1935 GERMAN GRAND PRIX](#)

After the death of Bernd Rosemeyer in 1938, Auto Union was desperate for a driver who could master their mid-engine racecar. At the insistence of Dr. Ferdinand Porsche, they turned to Nuvolari, who had grown frustrated with Alfa Romeo. He finally got his wish of competing for a dominant German team in 1938 and he was signed by Auto Union. With his new team, he won the British Grand Prix at Donington Park and the Italian Grand Prix. He had a real chance to win a second European Championship with Auto Union but World War II intervened one year later, forcing Nuvolari to stop racing at the age of 47.

When the War ended, he was 53 years old, and he began racing once again at an age when most racers had been retired for years. In 1946 Nuvolari took part in thirteen races, winning the Grand Prix of Albi in a Maserati 4CL, finishing 4th in the Grand Prix of Nations and 13th in the Coppa Brezzi, and retiring from the others. It was noted that when he raced at Milan in September, he mostly steered with one hand; the other held a bloodstained handkerchief over his mouth, due to coughing because of his asthma. He raced at the 1946 Grand Prix of Marseilles doing the fastest lap before his engine let him down. In another minor race, he had the steering wheel come off his car yet he managed to return to the pits holding the wheel in one hand and the steering column with the other.

Through 1947 and 1948 he raced eleven times, winning twice. He finished 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 7th, and retired from the remaining five races. His Maserati did not qualify for the 1949 Marseilles Grand Prix. His last appearance in competition was at the Palermo-Montepellegrino hillclimb on April 10, 1950, driving a Squadra Carlo Abarth Cisitalia-Abarth 204 (right). He won his class and finished fifth overall.

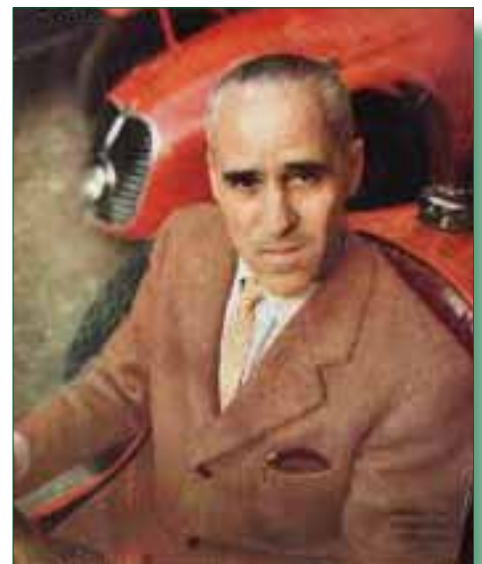


Age and sickness from acute asthma (sometimes coughing up blood), the result of years of inhaling exhaust fumes, would finally take their toll. His last Mille Miglia, in 1948, was a defining moment in his illustrious career. Driving as if possessed, his car was taking a terrible beating. While speeding along, the hood somehow became unfastened, and a gust of wind blew it over Nuvolari's head and down the mountainside. "That's better," shouted Tazio to his terrified mechanic in the seat next to him, "The engine will cool more easily." Crossing the Futa and Raticosa passes, his seat started to come loose. Nuvolari could feel himself sliding which brought along a feeling of sea-sickness. Tossing the seat out, he used a bag of lemons and oranges as a cushion. With his car literally falling apart under his super human effort, the team advised him to quit the race at Bologna since it was foolish to continue under such circumstances and Nuvolari certainly had nothing to prove

by continuing on. He answered with a derisive gesture; then put his foot down hard and shot away along the Via Emilia. At Modena, Enzo Ferrari begged his old friend to retire from the race with dignity. Ferrari could only weep as he realized that the remains of the car could not possibly hold out to the end of the race. Disaster finally struck on the next leg of the race as all three leading cars were out of the race because of mechanical failures, including Nuvolari, who damaged his rear suspension at Leghorn when his brakes failed.

Stopping at Villa Ospizio, Nuvolari went or was carried to a nearby church where he asked the local priest if he could rest while his mechanic phoned the race officials telling them that he had retired from the race and ordering a touring car to take him home. Ferrari later wrote that he had tried to console Nuvolari after retirement from the race. “I said to him, cheer up Tazio, the race will be yours next year.” He replied: “Ferrari, at our age there aren’t many more days like this; remember it and try to enjoy it to the full, if you can.”

Nuvolari never formally announced his retirement, but his health deteriorated and he became increasingly solitary. In 1952 a stroke left him partially paralyzed; and he suffered a second one several months later. It was said that he wanted to die in the sport that he loved so much, but his wish was denied. He died at home on August 11, 1953 from complications of the two strokes and acute asthma. More than 55,000 people, at least half the population of Mantua, attended his funeral in a mile-long procession, with the coffin placed on a car chassis that was pushed by Alberto Ascari, Luigi Villorosi and Juan Manuel Fangio, all famous racecar drivers. As was his wish, he was buried in his uniform—his yellow jersey and blue trousers. Enzo Ferrari, arriving in Mantua for the funeral, stopped at a plumber’s shop to ask for directions. Seeing the Modena license plates and unaware of the identity of the driver, the workman murmured, “Thank you for coming. A man like that won’t be born again.”



He is buried in the family tomb in the Cimitero Degli Angeli, on the road from Mantua to Cremona. The inscription over the door reads: *‘Correrai Ancor Piu Veloce Per Le Vie Del Cielo’* (“You will race faster still on the streets of heaven”).

STORIES OF NUVOLARI’S DARING EXPLOITS THAT ADDED TO HIS FAMOUS LEGEND

During his racing career, Nuvolari had most major bones in his body broken at least once in racing accidents; he lost an index finger; and he ended up with one leg an inch and a half shorter than the other. Some of his daring exploits, in addition to those I have included above, are:

In 1927 during the French Grand Prix, he flung himself out of a car travelling at 99 mph after it suddenly caught on fire, breaking several bones in the process. Two years later he raced at the Coppa Ciano, his body in a plaster corset following a motorbike crash. After breaking his leg in a 1933 crash in Italy, Nuvolari grew bored while recovering in the hospital and entered the AVUS-Rennen in Germany four weeks later, where he finished fifth despite having his leg in a cast. Then in 1936, after being violently thrown from his cockpit in a crash during practice for the Tripoli Grand Prix, he once again donned a plaster corset after escaping from the hospital to take part in the race with a borrowed car. He finished eighth despite his injuries.

One story, from a race in 1930, says Nuvolari drove his car onto a sidewalk to grab a joint of ham from a butcher's window after it had been smashed by the car of another driver.

One is left with awe at his exploits and accomplishments. Perhaps John Cooper best summarizes Nuvolari's life achievement in his obituary: "There will never be another Nuvolari and I shall always think of him as incomparable, the greatest of them all."

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Saunders, Nate. "The Greatest Driver of the Past, Present and Future," in ESPN Formula 1 Magazine (on line edition), August 8, 2014; "Tazio Nuvolari: 1892-1953." International Motor Sports Hall of Fame (online site); Grand Prix History (online site); Cooper, John. "Nuvolari Obituary." The Autocar Magazine, (online edition), August 21, 1953; and Wikipedia.



Statue of Nuvolari in Castel d'Ario, Mantua

[22-MINUTE DOCUMENTARY ON TAZIO NUVOLARI](#)