

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

THE CROWD ROARS

Racking up ridiculous risks, clocking catastrophic chances, Mario Andretti spent the seven or more decades of his unequalled life and career collecting the world championship of Formula One, the national title of Indy cars, the Indy and Daytona 500s, Pikes Peak, plus, way back in 1970, winning his favorite race of them all the Sebring 12 Hours, the amazing sports car enduro where, Mario memorably exclaimed to me, “ I took more risks and chances than I would in three Grands Prix!



All because of a Hollywood movie actor named Steve McQueen. Prior to Sebring, Mario probably never had met McQueen. But finding himself racing at Sebring against somebody who was just some Hollywood actor, was to Mario, an embarrassment – a giant one.

Particularly because McQueen's name was getting championed and chanted over the public-address system; and also because the actor's racing car was an elderly orsche that was no great chariot of beauty or speed; and furthermore, because McQueen was, incredibly, blowing off Sebring's usual international field, which included a full team of works Ferrari drivers, captained by Mario; and - in the most acutely embarrassing insult of all - McQueen, an erratic desert bike racer, had, just prior to the 12 Hours, taken yet another spill, broken more bones, and was being forced to brake and double-clutch with his left ankle imprisoned in a cast. It was all too much, and Mario already could predict the headlines:

HOLLYWOOD ACTOR WITH BROKEN FOOT BEATS ANDRETTI AT SEBRING

McQueen's co-driver was Peter Revson, ordinarily one of world sports car racing's fastest players, but now was in a growing state of fatigue, and he had a right to be, because he was almost racing the 12 Hours in the style of iron man. The plan was to have Revson drive nine of the 12 hours and McQueen three; McQueen had to be kept out of the Porsche as long as possible, because whenever the actor strapped himself in. lap times slowed down by as much as 20 seconds.



The only reason Revson/McQueen were leading at all was because Mario's works Ferrari, the fastest car at Sebring, had been retired with mechanical problems. Finally Mario had been unable to control his embarrassment any longer. Jumping into the Ferrari of two slower teammate, he tore out of the pits ; went on a win-it-or wear-it mission hunting down the

rattletrap Porsche of the exhausted Revson which he quickly found and destroyed; then sped on to win the 12 hours. It was a lucky thing for Mario that Sebring was an air-strip, lined by pylons, because he'd never survived racing that way on, say, the Nurburgring.

Steve McQueen (1930-1980), who had starred in three hits, **THE GREAT ESCAPE**, **THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN**, and **BULLITT** was in Sebring gathering up hands-on knowledge to use for **LE MANS**, a semi- documentary based on events McQueen had personally witnessed at the real 24 Hours of 1969, when the great enduro had experienced one of its closest finishes in history. Racing was McQueen's passion, and he was obsessed not only with making **LE MANS** but starring in it. Filming was scheduled to start that June. Not since the 1920s, and the silent era of Wallace Reid, had any actor been as obsessed with racing as McQueen.

“Obsessed” truly was what McQueen was. Determined to make a really authentic movie knew about racing - it would be Hollywood's first ever – he had shunned John Frankenheimer's offer to appear in **GRAND PRIX**, Frankenheimer's own racing film, because he didn't think Frankenheimer knew enough about racing to be accurate and probably would imitate the most copied racing film ever made – and made over and over – “**THE CROWD ROARS**”, which established an abominable formula for all Hollywood racing movies, its eight ingredients being:

1. A root-and-gouge finish complete with wheels flying off, tires flattening, mechanical trauma popping loose – all on a race's last lap.

2. A fire. Scratch that. Racing cars suddenly flaming and then detonating, ka-boom!

3. Disposable stiffos who won't live to the last reel. Future corpses with such lovable nicknames as Spud, Breezy and Happy. Doomed dumbbells whose survival depends on talismans - baby shoes, lucky scarfs – that they forget to carry with them. Plus adorable old stokers married to worshipful wives with cuddly children.

4. Grudge races involving brothers, if possible although feuding best friends also will work.

5. Tin-ear dialogue. “Drinking?! He's racing at Ascot tonight!”

6. Women from hell, the curse of a Hollywood racing driver's existence. Jezebels who jump bones. Harpies

who harangue him silly. And sob sisters who persecute him with their preaching.

7. A scheming and sensationalistic press corps.

8. A blood-lusting, ghoulish crowd going hysterical in the grandstands.



9. A happy ending despite Nos 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8

Now nearly an ancient nine decades old, **CROWD**, in its original 1932 version, used to turn up occasionally on late night TV, often the evening before the Indy 500. Devotees of classic movies still enjoy **CROWD** because it features Howard Hawks and James Cagney, both near the starts of their directorial and acting careers. Neither man is at his best, nor is racing, but that's to be expected: Hollywood lore has it that the script for **CROWD** originally was about prize-fighting, or maybe it was the carnie life in the circus.

Cagney is Joe Greer, a frightening egomaniac and woman-hater who barks out commands like, "Watch him cut this guy off, I taught him that!" and gets barked back in return by Ann Divorak and, especially, by Joan Blondell, who, in retaliation, Cagney hauls around by the scuff on her neck. You have to sympathize with Cagney. The pair of women are intense and unrelenting scolds as when Divorak unloads on Cagney with both barrels: "You can't take the roar of the crowd to the bank and cash it!" Her lecturing helps drive him onto the sauce.



And it sets the stage for the film's big scene at Legion Ascot Speedway. Cagney and his adoring younger brother, played by Eric Linden, get sideway with each other and fall into Hollywood's prototype grudge race. A kindly has-been and family friend named Spud

Connor, played by Frank McHugh, attempts to break it up by getting between the antagonistic Greers.

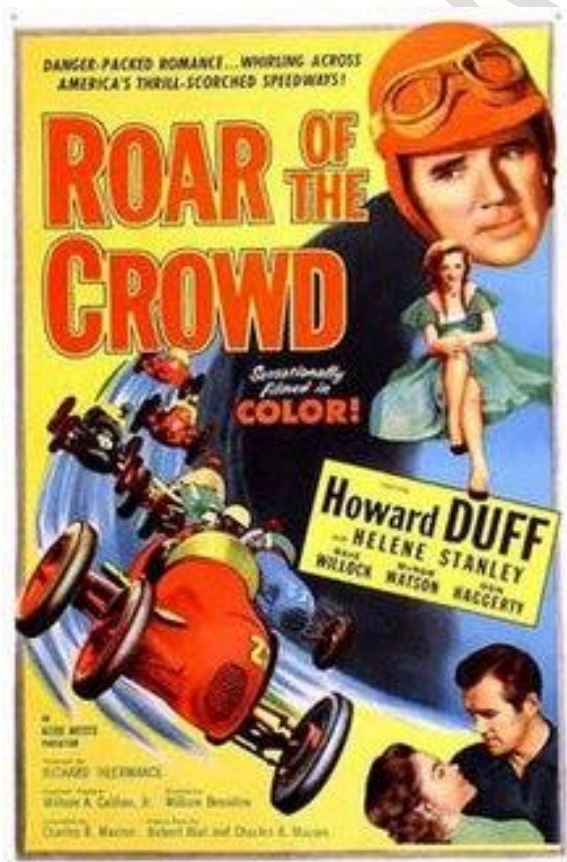
Spud is a real piece of work. In addition to the lovable name, he has a worshipful wife, a cuddly infant son, and, on this particular evening, has forgotten to carry his lucky baby shoes.

In other words, the poor guy is marked four ways, and when Cagney, in a boozy rage, spears him in the tail, Spud goes up in flame with his distraught wife caterwauling her husband's nickname.

Suddenly fed up with racing, Cagney abandons the game, temporarily disappearing. When he resurfaces, at Indy, for the 500, he's become a guilt-ravaged drunk who's so down-and-out he won't even take the trouble to shave. He does, though, get to race in the 500, but under harrowing circumstances: he must steer through a holocaust.

Because he fears fire, Cagney's foot uncontrollably comes off the throttle and his two-man car, in the lead, slows. This is the signal for Eric Linden, now serving as his brother's riding mechanic – the Greers have made up – to save the hour by mashing his own foot hard on the pedal.

So they win Indy. Then they crash on their victory lap. CROWD concludes with the brothers racing each other to the hospital in competing crash-wagons.



CROWD was re-shot in 1937 as ROAR OF THE CROWD, starring a pious-faced Howard Duff, and two years later, in 1939, it was duplicated as INDIANAPOLIS SPEEDWAY, with Pat O'Brien and John Payne in the Cagney and Linden roles, and Frank McHugh back as ultimate loser Spud Collins. The brother vs. brother theme invented in CROWD followed rule no. 3 to horrifying perfection in THE BIG WHEEL. Steve Brody, as a buzzbomb-racing clone of Spud Connor, with the horrifying nickname of "Happy" follows rule no. 3 to perfection. THE RACERS (1955) has Cesar Romero cast as SPUD in Formula One racing.

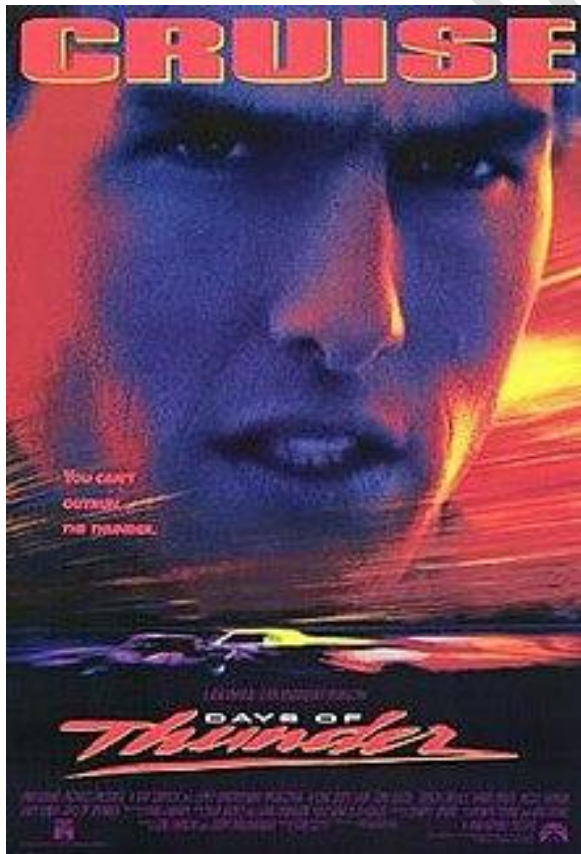
Meantime, exactly like Cagney, Divorak, and Blondell in CROWD (rule no. 6), all the assorted she-devils are

busting the chops of all the racing drivers - and often getting it in return: Clark Gable unloads on Barbara Stanwyck in *TO PLEASE A LADY* (1950) and Kirk Douglas gives Bella Darvi a belt in *THE RACERS* (1955) – in the process exposing himself to a blistering lecture about manhood from Katy Jurago.

Between fights, everybody is hot to trot with everyone else. In Frankenheimer's *GRAND PRIX* (1966), James Garner puts Brian Bedford on his head and in the hospital and then makes off with Bedford's wife, Jessica Walters; similarly, in *THE RACERS*, one of Kirk Douglas's own teammates wants to bed down with Douglas's Bella Darvi, which is an activity engaged in by Robert Wagner and Joanne Woodward in *WINNING* (1969) leaving Paul Newman cuckolded.

Everybody cools off in time for happy endings (rule no.9), though not without difficulties. To win back Stanwyck, Gable must show his sensitivity by somersaulting his own Indy car to give another car room; and, in order to prove to Darvi that he has a conscience, Douglas must stop on the racing track to come to the aid of an injured colleague. Adulterous Jessica Walters, on the other hand, demands macho, not soft-heartedness: banged-up Brian Bedford finally replaces James Garner as the object of her affections, but while doped up on pain killers.

Versions of the skittish finish of *CROWD* (rule no. 1) were written into *BORN TO SPEED* (1948), *GRAND PRIX* (1966), and McQueen's own *LE MANS* (1972). The great fire (rule no.2) turns up in *LE MANS*, *THE BIG WHEEL*, *RACE FOR LIFE* (1954), and in the 1990 stock car turkey *DAYS OF THUNDER*, though with a modern twist: just like James Cagney in *CROWD*, Tom Cruise loses his will, which he must restore by blasting through an inferno. Unlike Cagney, Cruise lacks the companionship of a ride-along mechanic to hammer the throttle for him, so the hour is saved by Cruise's chief mechanic Robert Duval radioing courage-inspiring instructions from the pits. *THUNDER* lacks a dueling ambulance battle for its ending, but the omission is overcome early in the filming when a wounded Cruise and his pal Michael Roker engage in a race of wheel chairs.



Rule no. 7 is about the press getting turned into a mob of mad-dog monsters. Against many contenders, Barbara Stanwyck, femme news hawk in *LADY*, muck-

rakes and temporarily ruins Clark Gable's career. And the paparazzi of GRAND PRIX chase everybody so relentlessly that Eva Marie Saint, mistress of Yves Montand, almost suffers a nervous breakdown when Yves buys the farm. "This is what you come for!" she explodes at all the blood-sucking scribblers and photos, holding up gore-dripping hands.

Jessica Walters, Brian Bedford's two-timing bimbo in GRAND PRIX, is in essential agreement. Obeying rule no 8, she finds the press corps as despicable as "the crowd that comes to see somebody get killed." Ann Divorak got the ball rolling in CROWD, deploring the grandstands "watching for wrecks, roaring for blood!" Hollywood has been rubbishing racing for years, but it's also been a matter of what comes around, goes around. Judging by many of those actors who got too caught up in it, racing probably is an activity to be avoided.

James Dean and his Porsche Spyder go hurtling across Route 46 for a 1955 California sports car meet in Salinas and instead dies crashing into Donald Turnipseed at the Route 41 crossroads - Wallace Reid, handsome devil and morphine addict, makes hundreds of silent shorts, many about racing; buys a Duesenberg; decides he's a racing driver himself, and his studios barely stop him from entering in the Indy 500; as an epilogue, Reid gets stuck in a morphine-addiction ward and dies raving mad - and Steve McQueen, obsessed with making LE MANS the first authentic racing movie, loses his marriage and tarnishes his career.

Filming of LE MANS began with McQueen working with 175 technicians, 18 multi-crew cameras, 26 racing cars and a \$7.5 million budget - big bucks for a movie of this era - for McQueen to spend.

Right away McQueen made one thing very clear: all racing shots had to be filmed at racing speeds and he, McQueen, insisted on performing most of the driving himself. Half a dozen movie cars immediately got wrecked, at \$75,000 per wreck.

He owned full artistic control of LE MANS so no studio could force McQueen to incorporate CROWD's nine-point formula. But McQueen lacked a plot and script to hang together all his ever-accumulating thousand of film footage of raw racing; and so his money men were flying in to examine McQueen's photography and chorusing "Great! But now what?!" McQueen had no answer.



The inevitable occurred. LE MANS was costing 100 Gs a week, and insufficient progress was occurring. There still was no plot, no script. Following a series of tense meetings on the set, and amidst reports that McQueen was being replaced by Robert Redford, McQueen flew off to Morocco for a two-week breather.

Returning, he agreed to forfeit all creative control of LE MANS. New directors and producers were recruited, and from then on everybody was saying lets hose this dog down and go home. Following the picture's wrap, McQueen was permitted no part in LE MANS post-production or screening. He wouldn't even come to the premier.

As a result, LE MANS was a mess. It obeyed CROWD's rules nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7. 8, and perhaps others; about all it lacked were bed-hopping scenes with racing drivers jumping the bones of the wives of other racing drivers wives, the activity engaged in in GRAND PRIX and WINNING.

What a movie LE MANS might have made had it been about the filming of LE MANS! Everything came out in the memoirs of McQueen's ex-wife Neile. Per Neile, the strain of LE MANS so debilitated McQueen that he was blowing off stress with a diet of cocaine and loose women. So, in an astonishing showdown between husband and wife, Neile, herself high-strung and sexy, erupted with a confession of a hot dalliance of her own with some dreamboat foreign actor. Which flipped out McQueen, utterly flipped him out. Per Neile's memoirs, Steve pulled out a revolver, demanding the name of the lover so that he, McQueen could add him to the cast of LE MANS and involve him in a big, disfiguring, wreck.

LE MANS didn't destroy McQueen's acting career but it damaged it badly, and no studio ever conceded him full control of anything again. In May of 1972, Indianapolis was picked to premier LE MANS. Certainly was the worst city imaginable for a picture about sports car racing. And although McQueen may have boycotted the premier, Mario Andretti didn't. For Mario never forgot the 1970 12 Hours of Sebring.

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