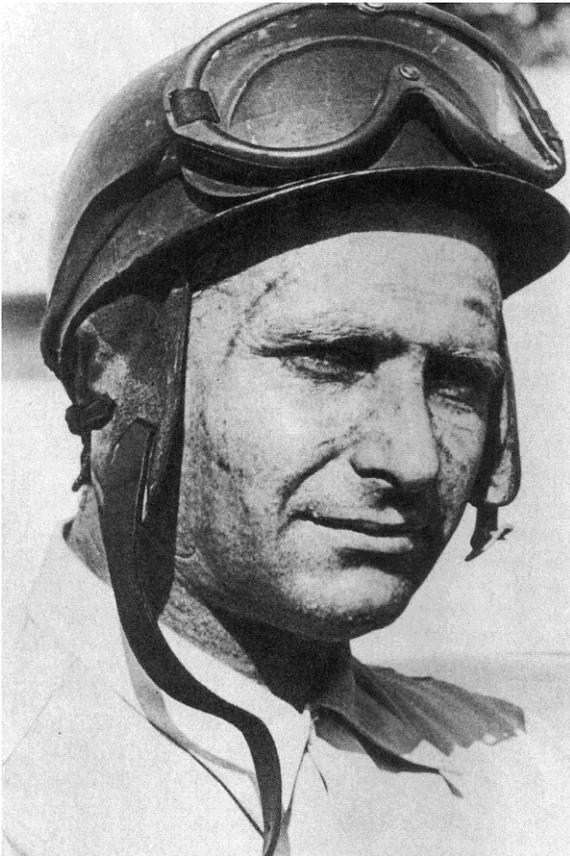


Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Fangio

Fangio -- his first name was Juan, his middle one was Manuel, but a deity requires only a surname – was to the Formula 1 racing of the 1950's what Lewis Hamilton is today. Barely a handful of Ferrari and Red Bull drivers, and his own teammate, can beat Hamilton, and only a trio of fresh-faced Brits named Hawthorn, Moss, and Collins, could get in Fangio's way.



Fangio won in Italy, England, Spain, Germany, France, Switzerland, throughout North and South America, and five times was Champion of the World. Formula 1 was Fangio's brilliant specialty, but he could do tricks with sports cars too, including winning Sebring and conquering the Mexican Road Race, still celebrated as one of his great accomplishments. Wherever and in whatever he raced, Fangio always made his competition look ruined and stupid, and left lap speed records hanging by shreds.

The great man was second-generation Argentine, and when he first hit Europe, and couldn't even speak English, rumors circulated that he'd once been personal chauffeur of Eva Peron, hot Senora and spouse of the dictator. The truth was much better. Before and after the Second World War, Fangio had earned his bones as a kind of one-man Unser family, only not racing up Pikes Peak but throughout the Andes.



This was in the insane and uniquely dangerous South American activity of marathon mountain racing in hopped-up taxicabs. The Gran Premio International del Norte, a 13-day monster contested at altitudes of 12,000 feet, hurtled back and forth, between Argentina and Peru, for 6,000 hallucinating miles. The devouring

night-and-day melee was vaunted and notorious throughout the hemisphere, and Fangio was its perennial winner; he also won both the Doble Vuelta and Premio Primavera.

High altitude survival tactics he learned in the Andes gave Fangio a sixth sense for avoiding disaster and served him well when he got to Europe and started racing at sea level. Take Monte Carlo's Grand Prix of 1950. Careening along but misjudging the downhill run into Tubac, a trick corner, all five swarming enemies immediately behind Fangio cracked up and took themselves out; he avoided the big pileup and won again.



At Italy's bitterly contested GP of 1953 at Monza, his sixth-sense kicked in still again and he won by steering clear of another massive leaders' wipeout, this time on the last lap at Lesmo. Back at Monte Carlo in 1957, he watched Moss and Collins wreck right in front of him, then raced on to win still another GP. Unable to avoid the Moss-Collins wreck, even though he'd been behind

Fangio, Hawthorn clobbered straight into it.

Never did Fangio's sixth sense look better than at Le Mans, in 1955, when the 24-hour sports car marathon was marred by the worst accident in the history of racing. Fangio and Hawthorn, 300 SLR Merc and D Jag, both speeding down the pit straightaway fighting for first place, prepared to pounce on a pack of lapped traffic, including

another SLR and a Healy 100S. Delivering the chop to the 100S, Hawthorn sent it swerving across the track, right in the path of the other SLR, which then jumped onto its trunk, got catapulted into the air, caught on fire, and exploded amongst the spectators, killing 100 people.

All this flaming horror was occurring all around Fangio, who, typically, squeezed clear of it, nobody knew how.

Heat couldn't stop him, even 104 degree heat, even though it stopped everybody else during his home race, the blistering 1955 GP of Argentina. Five different drivers had to co-pilot the second- and third place cars. One of the other cars changed drivers eight times. Fangio's vehicle was an oven. It scarred his legs, yet for the entire GO he continued tooling along in first place, not only making himself the winner but the only driver to race iron man.



Whenever Fangio couldn't quite win, when his car was lacking something, he could go berserk. In England, in 1954, when he was hopelessly chasing nimble and open-wheel Ferraris and Maseratis, he smacked so many of Silverstone's barrel corners markers that he bashed a Merc streamliner into scrap. And while hunting down Moss during the Monte Carlo GP of 1956 – skimming telephone poles and stone walls for better than an hour and still coming up six seconds shy of nailing Moss –

Fangio by the finish had his Ferrari reduced to such rubble that even the steering wheel was bent.

So hard did Fangio try winning the Mille Miglia's 1953 running that he damaged his steering and was forced to spend hundreds of miles grappling his Flying Saucer model Alfa lock to lock, stubbornly ignoring the pleas of his petrified passenger in the shotgun seat, who wanted him to stop and let out. Warped steering and all, Fangio finished an honorable runner's up.

Fangio's greatest race, it is agreed, was on the 14-mile Nurburgring, during the 1957 German Grand Prix. He was in the lead until making the fateful 13th lap pit stop which plunged him behind Hawthorn and Collins. Just you wait, my beauties, Fangio seemed to say, preparing to chase down the two Brits.

He shot from 32 seconds behind to 20, 13, 3. The he passed Collins for second, got repassed, passed him again, and then flew around Hawthorn to win by breaking the track record 10 times, the final time by 11 seconds.

Fangio was a diety, and throughout Formula 1 there was a Fangio cult. He wasn't in the F1 business for very long, 1950 through 1957, yet won world championships for Alfa Romeo, Mercedes, Maserati and Ferrari. The one single seater he could not race well was the Indy 500 roadster, but he never caught the chair of a fast one. In sports cars he beat Sebring and its 12 hours and also captained Team Lancia's mighty sweep of the Mexican Road Race.

He never was young. Already 40 when he won his first global title, he was 46 when he won his fifth. Even for him, that was packing a lot of age for an F1 driver, so he retired at 47. The only time I ever saw him was in the 1990s, at one of the Laguna Seca historics, when he was approaching his 80s, had just a few years to live, yet twisted the tail of one of his old Merc GP rides, making it roar.

Nobody can tell Fangio's whole story without confessing that he was no Latin American dream boat: balding, bow-legged, somewhere between tall and short, he even had a gut on him. His voice was so high and squeaky that Peter Ustinov once recorded a parody of it. Racing was all that ever mattered to Fangio. When not racing he liked amusing himself watching cowboy movies on TV.