

Yesterday's Wheels

by
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Seattle, Wash. . . Contrary to a life-long conviction that the initial auto race was staged when two horseless carriages first confronted each other, I find that total of 21 cars made it to the starting line for the world's first official race.

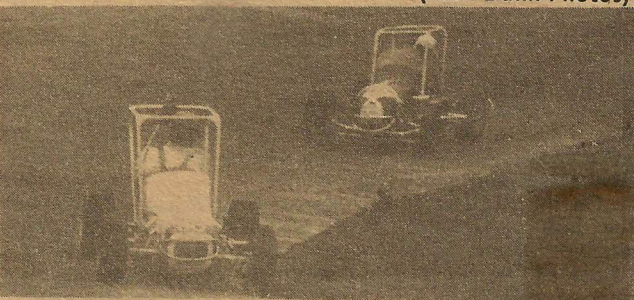
Born in the minds of M. Grifford, a far-sighted newspaper editor, and his friend Jacques Andree while the pair were discussing the merits of various types of the new self-propelled machines, they became the first auto race promoters. Their meeting took place in 1894 at a Paris tavern on the Place Pigale. The following day, M. Grifford announced in his paper "A Race For Carriages Without Horses," offering a 5,000 franc prize to the first one who could safely and economically negotiate the road between Paris and Roen, a distance of 126 km, or roughly 80 miles.

Early on the morning of July 22, 1894, the world's first auto race got under way from the Porte Maillot, where an incredible assortment of machines had gathered. Among the entries were coal burning steamers, electric, hydro, compressed air, gasoline, and even a spring-powered contraption. Heavily favored to win the contest were the powerful steam cars, having had the longest period of development process working in their favor. However, the steam-driven cars in the field were outnumbered by autos installed with relatively simple little gas engines produced by Germany's Gottleib Daimler, who had put his first practical car on the road in 1886. Herr Daimler's 2-cylinder, 3.5-hp engines provided the power for no less than nine racers representing the French companies of Peugeot, Panhard and Levassor, while one other gas-powered entry was the product of Carl Benz from Mannheim, Germany.

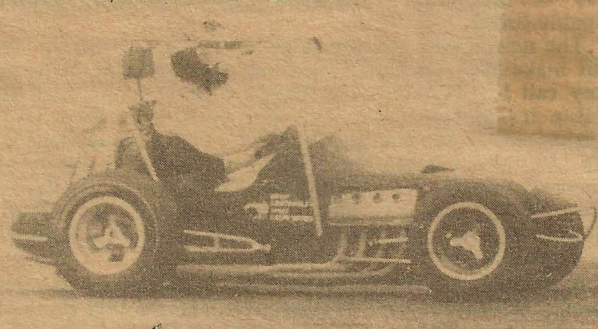
Belching fire, soot, steam, smoke and gasoline fumes, the field chugged across the chalk-marked starting line amidst the cheers of thousands of Parisian race fans, which included a sizable number of official military observers. As expected the steamers jumped into an early lead, with Baron deDion showing the way in his coal burner, yet, surprisingly, they were unable to shake off the challenge from the pesky little underpowered gas engines. Rough roads outside the Paris gates began to take a toll of the heavy steam monsters, while the lightweight gas buggies continued to bounce merrily along.

Meanwhile, Herr Daimler had taken a train to Roen

The No. 160 Daimler in close action with Don Powell (96 Datsun) and Palmer Crowell (12 Offy) during a 1973 WMRA race.



J.P. Standley (60 Daimler) leads Jim Hendricks (42 Offy) in March 26, 1972 WMRA action.



79 years later J.P. Standley still wins with a Daimler-powered WMRA midget.

and was anxiously waiting at the finish line, realizing that his life's work was at stake. With an elapsed time of six hours, the Baron deDion steamed his way into Roen, first across the line, but Gottleib Daimler's disappointment soon turned to jubilation when he heard the familiar sound of one of his creations approaching next.

Daimler then witnessed the beautiful sight of three Peugeot-Daimlers completing the trip in second, third and fourth positions. In all, 15 of the 21 starters made it to the finish line, ten of which were equipped with internal combustion gas engines. Through a complicated handicapping formula, the second finishing Peugeot-Daimler was later declared the winner by virtue of reliability, economy and ease of operation.

Herr Daimler returned to his home in Cannstatt, Germany with the knowledge that because of this first auto race, the public was now ready to accept the auto as a private means of transportation. And the automobile industry came of age that day.