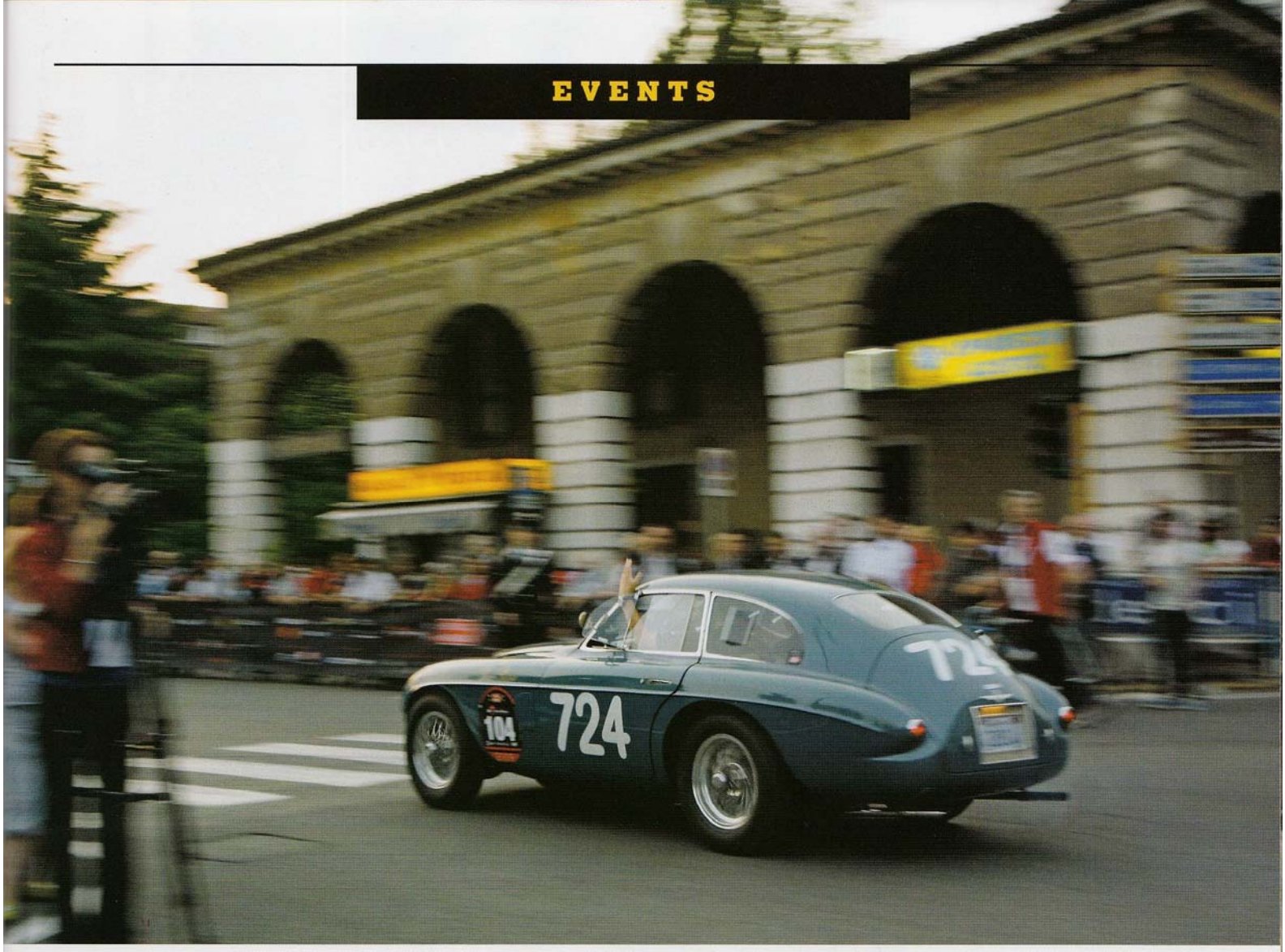


Victory Lap

Nearly six decades after winning the Mille Miglia, s/n 0026M returns to Italy to try it again.

STORY BY LARRY CRANE PHOTOS BY DAVID GOOLEY

On April 23, 1950, Giannino Marzotto drove his Touring-bodied Ferrari 166 MM/195 S Berlinetta Le Mans (s/n 0026M) to victory in the Mille Miglia. The 1,000-mile Brescia-Rome-Brescia open-road race was one of the most famous and dangerous events in the world, and the 22-year-old Marzotto had pulled off his win in the pouring rain.

On May 14, 2009, a freshly restored s/n 0026 *["Return to Rome," FORZA #86]* took the starting flag at the Mille Miglia Storica, the modern-day version of the historic event. While the three-day Storica is more rally than race, it follows the original route and, since this is Italy, is often run at higher speeds than sanity would suggest.

Jack Croul, s/n 0026's current owner, has entered a car—or cars—in every Storica since 1994. This year, he decided to sit on the sidelines, and hand off his famous Ferrari's keys to two friends, Harold Street and Jeff Harris. Street had driven the event in 2007, but Harris was new to the Storica, and quickly had to figure out how things worked.

"There was no briefing for the ramp rituals of a Mille Miglia Storica start," begins Harris. "I was at the wheel, and just followed the lead of the two cars ahead of me. Each was with the Master of Ceremonies and the microphone for only 10-15 seconds—the start interval is 20 seconds—and quickly each was off down the ramp. But when we drove up and stopped, the MC went into a long history I couldn't understand, except that the name Marzotto came up several times, followed by a big crowd response. It seemed to take five minutes.

"I was really anxious—what a terrible time this would be to stall! I didn't, fortunately, and then we were down the ramp and into the street. It was lined with people grinning, pointing and waving. The route went

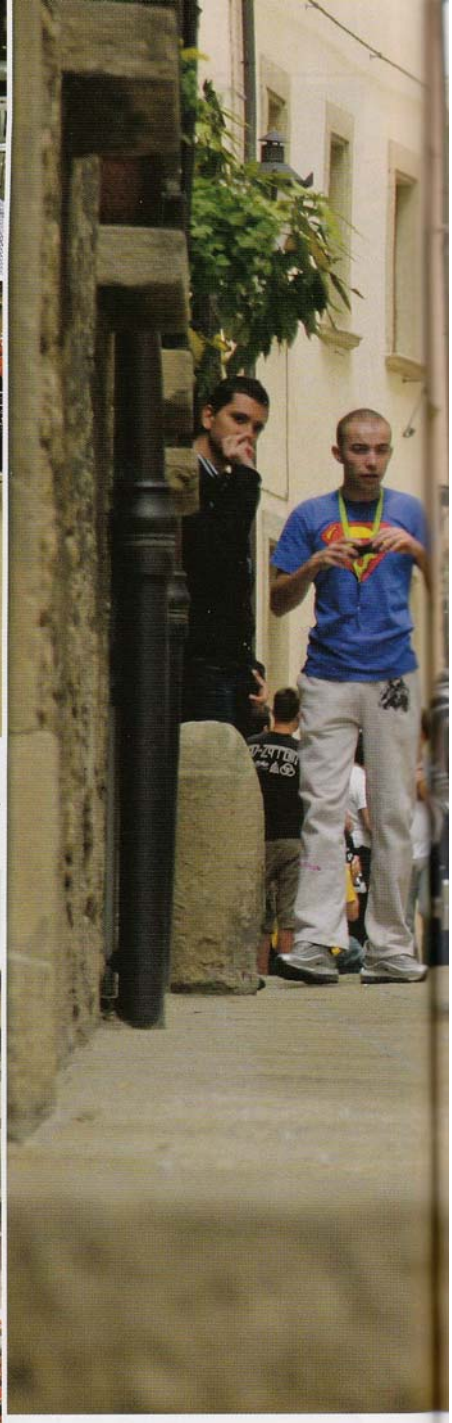
into town and through the Piazza della Loggia, and the excited crowds just kept yelling and waving."

They drove out of Brescia and east through the night. Their plan to save the car by running a moderate pace and letting the fast guys go by fell apart quickly. "In the excitement of 'keeping up,' we found that this Ferrari is not meant to be driven slowly," remembers Street. "It doesn't know how to lope along lazily; without speed, the suspension is not alive, the car is not up on its toes. So we upped the ante a bit, and it really came alive: The pieces started working together, the shifts were effortless."

The caravan stopped for the night in Ferrara, where all the cars were parked together for an easy departure the following morning—early. "We were on a high that only can be felt with such occasions, beyond tired yet not sleepy," says Street. "It was 2:30 a.m. by the time we got in bed, and we were back up at 4:30 to wolf down café, get back to the car and be ready in line for departure to Rome at about 7:30. Forget about sleep! Just shower and shave at night, so you can roll out and hit the road running in the morning."

It was now Street's turn to drive, and he picked up the pace as they ran south through Ravenna, among the soup of participants, seasoned by all manner of local traffic. Mount Titano soon came into view, along with the long climb into San Marino. There, the street-side cafés in the Piazza della Libertá were packed from beginning to end. Harris and Street had brought hundreds of cardboard coasters with the car's photo, specs and history printed on them, and handed or threw them to the spectators along the route. The coasters were a hit.

From San Marino, the duo crossed the foothills of the Appenines to a lunch stop in the ancient, walled town of Urbino. Recalls Street, "The effort was to put out great food quickly and provide rest-



Top: (Left to right) Jim Croul (owner Jack's brother), Harold Street and Jeff Harris. Above: Harris carefully applies Mille race number. Below: Spectators always seemed drawn to the Ferrari.

rooms—all near a gas stop, please. But we were soon on the road again, in high spirits. Then we hit rain in the high passes just short of Rome."

Harris continues, "It got really cold, melting snow and sand became black ice, and two or three corners had Ferraris or Alfas crashed into the barriers. We slowed for the rain and just enjoyed watching the other cars when they passed."

"We found ourselves driving through snow, where snowplows had carved through, leaving snow walls five or six feet tall on either side of the road," adds

"I WOULD NOT HAVE TRADED PLACES WITH THE SULTAN OF BRUNEI," SAYS STREET. "I WAS RUNNING THE MILLE MIGLIA."

Street. "We were lucky to get sideways only two or three times; our car was not overly powerful, except that you had to be straightened up totally when power was added to any extent in second gear, or even third."

The rain continued as they headed down out of the mountains. "We had used Rain-X on the windows, which was a good thing because a 1949 Ferrari has poor wipers," says Street. "The driver's side wiper eventually went out totally, but the car was small enough that Jeff could put his hand out of the side window wing and wipe the front glass. Finally, the rain stopped as we made Rome."

The route ran through the city, past the Coliseum, to the stamp stop. "There was a podium, very much like at the start in Brescia," Street remembers. "Each car slowly climbed the podium while the announcer gave its pedigree. We were supposed to go off the other side along a roadway that had been marked off for that purpose. But the announcer hyped our story to the extent that the crowd closed the road, and we had to wait to descend as everyone rushed in to provide the Italian version of a 'high five,' or at least touch the car. We gave out more coasters to incredible cheering."

They made it to bed around 2 a.m., before rising at 5:30. "Ah, the wonderful café!" says Street. "I lived on it for the entire time. Our total sleep time was five hours for the two nights, but I didn't care. I would not have traded places with the Sultan of Brunei. I was running the Mille Miglia with only one day to go, and it was my turn on the part of the route that I knew and liked best."

The great Futa and Raticosa passes between Florence and Bologna twist and climb and descend through beautiful countryside, and, during the Mille, thousands of devoted fans. "I think the media announced our approximate arrival time," says Harris, "because there were always crowds ready to give the ex-Giannino Marzotto Ferrari an enthusiastic salute. It was incredible."

An equally enthusiastic greeting came at the Florentine traffic bridge across the Arno River, with the famous Ponte

S/n 0026M prefers being driven fast to slow, perfect for roads like the famous Raticosa Pass.

Vecchio in the background. There, Jack, Kingsley and Susie Croul met Harold and Jeff—with a thermos of nicely chilled Bellinis in hand.

After Florence, the route lost some of its charm, notes Street: "We faced long straight boring runs interrupted by sharp turns followed by other long boring runs. The Ferrari factory stamp stop was a real kick, though. We entered from the back and left through the famous front gate."

Disaster almost struck in the closing moments of the event. "We both were tired and anxious for the finish line, and had already decided that we would not stop again for gas," Street says. "However, we had made a wrong calculation, and now all gas stations were closed. Luckily, we came across a small family owned store with a gas pump, and probably put in enough gas to finish at Brescia then drive on to Milan. We loaded up the family with goodies and coasters, and were again on our way. And it's a good thing we found the fuel, as we had over twice the distance to the finish as we thought."

A few minutes after midnight, the pair arrived at the finish, which turned out to be nothing so much as a scrum. "The wait for the finish ceremony must have taken two hours," says Street, smiling, "but this was the time for mingling with fellow drivers, with hugs all around. The public is allowed right up among the cars, and they had a thousand questions. But even our dead-tiredness couldn't dampen the feeling of accomplishment, of finishing the Mille Miglia, especially given the car we were driving."

S/n 0026 had conquered the Mille once again, and owner Croul proudly retired it from competition. However, we can't help but think a car so famous, and so beloved to the Italian people, will be back again someday.