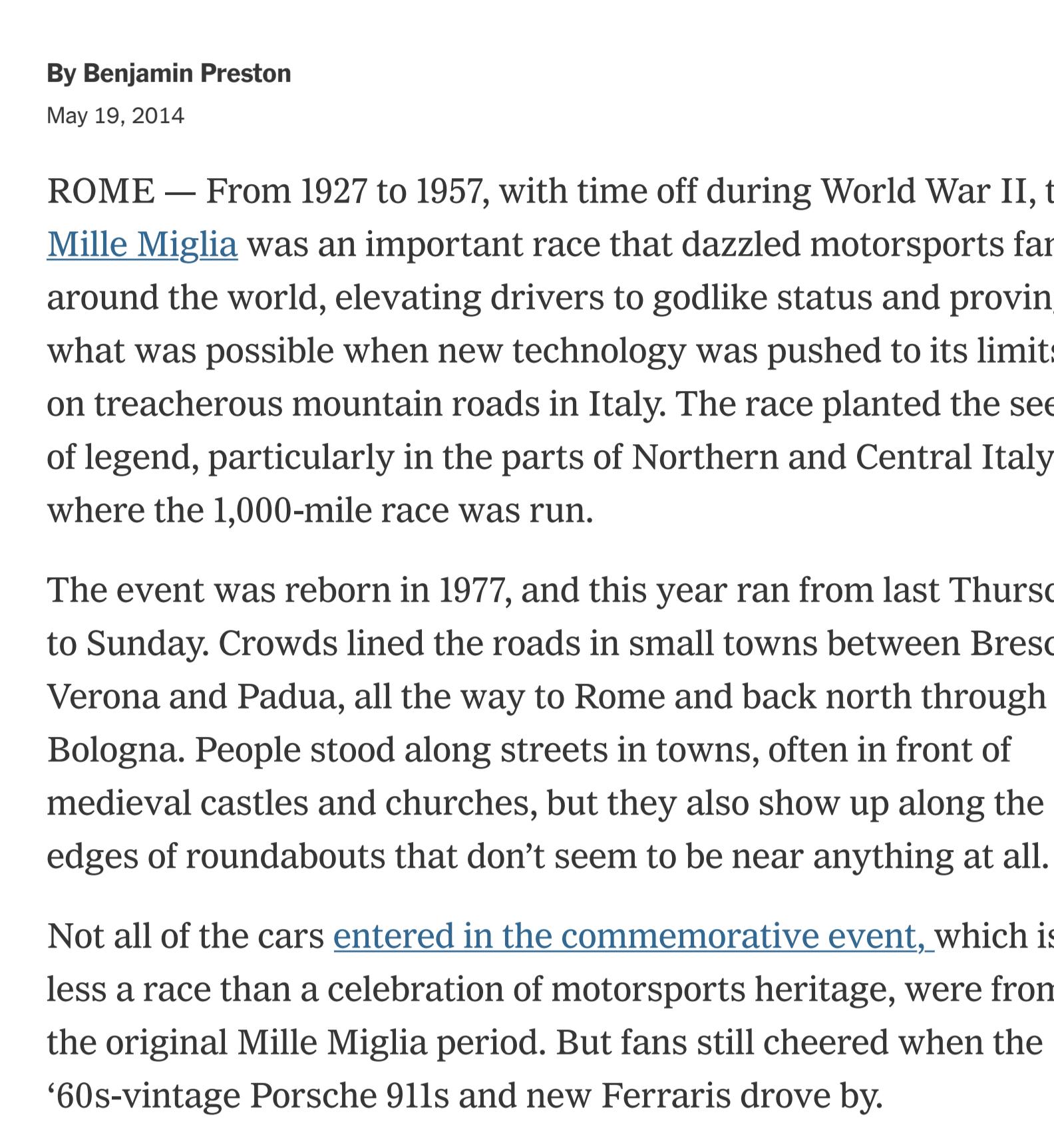


Mille Miglia Celebrates Cars From Motorsports History

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Luke Evans, an actor featured in "The Hobbit," drove a 1955 Lancia Aurelia B20 GT 2500 Berlinetta with Stéphane Gerschel. Benjamin Preston

By Benjamin Preston

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ROME — From 1927 to 1957, with time off during World War II, the [Mille Miglia](#) was an important race that dazzled motorsports fans around the world, elevating drivers to godlike status and proving what was possible when new technology was pushed to its limits on treacherous mountain roads in Italy. The race planted the seeds of legend, particularly in the parts of Northern and Central Italy where the 1,000-mile race was run.

The event was reborn in 1977, and this year ran from last Thursday to Sunday. Crowds lined the roads in small towns between Brescia, Verona and Padua, all the way to Rome and back north through Bologna. People stood along streets in towns, often in front of medieval castles and churches, but they also show up along the edges of roundabouts that don't seem to be near anything at all.

Not all of the cars [entered in the commemorative event](#), which is less a race than a celebration of motorsports heritage, were from the original Mille Miglia period. But fans still cheered when the '60s-vintage Porsche 911s and new Ferraris drove by.

Naturally, the cars that captured the spotlight were ones that created history: 1950s Mercedes 300 SLs, prewar Alfa Romeo roadsters, wagon-wheeled Bugattis and curvaceous Maserati roadsters.

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Aside from the 451 cars in the race, a few celebrities attended. Jay Leno drove a 1951 Jaguar XK 120 with Ian Callum, Jaguar's lead designer. Mr. Leno, whose [prodigious collection](#) includes many cars with interesting stories, said in an interview that the Jaguar had been run in the 1951 Mille Miglia.

Jeremy Irons, the British actor, drove a 1950 Jaguar XK 120 Lightweight. Wolfgang and Ferdinand Porsche, members of the Porsche family drove, naturally, a 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster. Adrien Brody, who won an Academy Award for his role in "The Pianist," began the race in a black 1956 Mercedes 300SL.

"I've always had an appreciation for cars — classic cars in particular," he said in an interview, adding that he raced Mazda RX-7s when he was younger and participated in a short benefit race before an IndyCar event at Laguna Seca last month. "There's something wonderful about this being in Italy; it's like being in a Fellini movie. This is a very charming adventure."

Mr. Brody dropped out of the race after driving the first leg on Thursday evening. He was preparing for the Cannes Film Festival, and although he said he enjoyed driving the first day, the event's grueling dawn-until-dusk pace made him decide that it was more prudent to pass the baton to someone else.

His withdrawal actually worked out. Fritz Kaiser, the owner of the 300SL Mr. Brody was driving, had been behind the wheel of 1947 Cisitalia 202 SC Berlinetta he also owned. The car broke down during the first day of driving, so Mr. Kaiser and his wife, Birgit, took over the Mercedes.

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Mr. Kaiser, who owns a wealth management company, was also one of the event's main sponsors, through the auspices of an organization he recently founded called the [Classic Car Trust](#). The company seeks to aid antique and classic-car collectors by providing an online platform with which to organize information about cars they own or would like to own. The company created the Link App for the Mille Miglia that provided participants with road condition updates, route information, the positions of other drivers and towing information, among other things.

"Everybody has a mobile device, so we put everything on this app," Mr. Kaiser said in an interview.

There were many people at the Mille Miglia who were passionate about their cars, including the members of two American teams who participated in a rather incongruous, but very charming pair of 1954 Oldsmobile 88 sedans.

Dave Frederick of San Diego said in an interview that he and his driving partner, Vince Sadd, were there to have fun and seemed to enjoy driving a huge, chrome-drenched American car among so many small European models.

The Mille Miglia was once an important endurance race. Now, it is dedicated to enjoying beautiful classic cars and getting an opportunity to engage in what some call "spirited driving." But really, it's a way to take something special from history and bring it back to life for a few days every year.

Even so, there is still a spirit of competition, and bursts of legitimate racing could be seen during the event. The sight of Porsche speedsters and low-slung Maserati A6 GCS roadsters jockeying for position around blind curves on mountain roads brought to mind black-and-white images from road races of a different era.

Giordano Mozzì and his wife, Stefania Biacca, [won the race](#) in a 1928 Lancia Lambda type 221 spider. Francesca Grimaldi and Lucia Fanti won the Ladies' Cup in a 1949 Jaguar XK 120 OTS. Jay Leno came in at a more leisurely 205th. Mr. Kaiser finished — driving the car in which Mr. Brody had started — in 291st place.

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