

A TEST ON THE 'RING

The day following the 1952 German Grand Prix was sunny and clear, with a slight breeze from the mountains cooling the circuit. Three of the winning SLs were being run in and out of the pit area by test drivers in order to determine what had made them a shade less than perfect in the prior day's event. The portly Neubauer, Uhlenhaut, and a dozen mechanics were on hand to chase down the trouble; carburetors, plugs and the fuel itself were all being carefully checked, minor adjustments made, and the cars sent out again to circulate at speed.

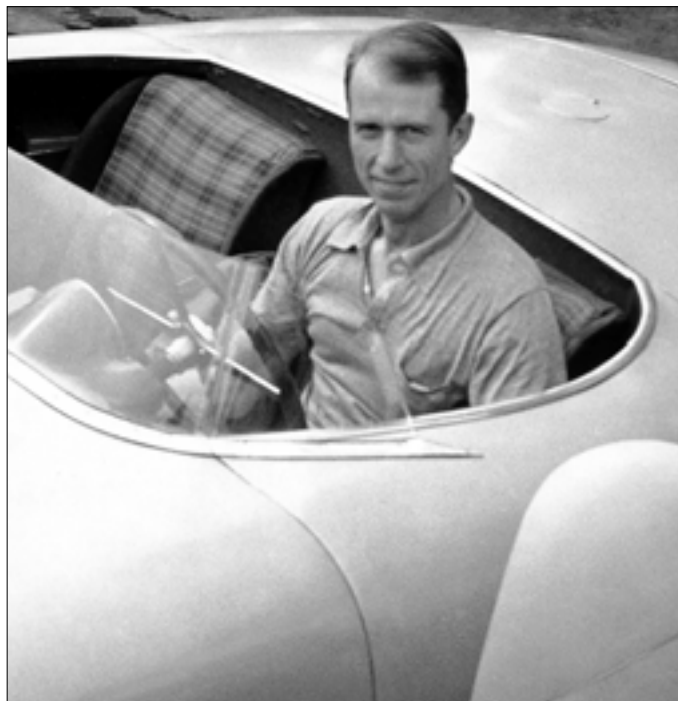
In contrast to the noise and color of the previous afternoon, the huge, empty grandstand along the pit straight seemed almost ghostlike. I was sitting with Elizabeth over a cup of strong German coffee in the Sporthotel's block-long restaurant that faced the pits, and though I tried to stay calm, my patience was growing short.

"They seem awfully busy out there," I said. "Relax, John," Elizabeth assured me. "You'll get your chance to drive, but not before Herr Neubauer has his lunch. Let's make sure he's watching you on a full stomach."

She was right. After he'd eaten a plate of pork chops and boiled potatoes, Herr Neubauer beckoned to me—I'd put myself, by careful coincidence, in his direct line of sight all day—and now he finally would allow me to take out one of the silver cars.

After signing a paper releasing the Mercedes organization from any responsibility in the event I killed myself, or if the car had a mechanical failure with the same result, I looked over the superb 300 SL I was to drive. Neubauer told me that the SL wasn't running right, that I had absolutely no insurance and no legal recourse if I crashed, and that I must drive carefully and slowly.

This was a strange and depressing turn of events—a driving test for a racing team with orders to go slow. Neubauer knew, and I knew, that this was all a complete waste of time unless I was very fast and it occurred to me that after spending hours trying to tune a miss out of the engine without success, they were now probably sorry they'd agreed to try out a new driver under these circumstances. It would delay, if not completely disrupt, their systematic pur-



suit of the problem. I could only assume they would prefer to cut their losses and get it over with as quickly as possible.

Before World War II, Mercedes had dominated the Grand Prix scene. Since the war, their bombed-out factories had been rebuilt, markets regained, and, with this new sports car, built from production car components, they'd become the most successful team on the European circuits. Already in about half the season, they'd taken second in the Mille Miglia and had won outright at Berne, Le Mans and here at the Nürburgring.

It followed that if they could do this well when they were just starting, using their production car engine, transmission and suspension, they'd do very well indeed when they got serious with dedicated designs and adequate funding. Briggs Cunningham had been dropping a number of melancholy comments to our team about giving it all up, and he didn't mind my trying out for the Mercedes team, so I felt no disloyalty there.

By now it was late in the afternoon and I knew practice was out of the question. It was obvious I'd immediately have to go very fast in a strange car on this extremely difficult course and make no mistakes.

During my discussions with Neubauer and Uhlenhaut, an unpleasant and insistent fact kept hounding me. The Nürburgring was the longest, most challenging circuit in Europe. It was the most feared and the most respected, and I'd just begun to learn it. I had no clear mental picture of its tortuous layout, looping and plunging unpredictably through the Eifel Mountains for 14 harrowing miles.

The 'Ring had been built as a kind of WPA project during the middle twenties to relieve an economically depressed area. Designed as a pure racing circuit, it was never intended for use as a public road. Because of this, none of the usual engineering practices of road design were followed. Intentional hazards were cunningly placed, and the road often doubled back on itself unexpectedly, climbing straight over hills a normal road would logically circumvent, leaving pronounced humps that caused a speeding car to become airborne. With no need to make allowances for the underpowered vehicles with poor brakes that used the public roads, the gradients resembled a roller-coaster track, at extreme angles up and down.



On some of the extreme down grades, good brakes were almost useless. At a touch of the pedal the tires slid, making the situation worse. Topography offered no clue of which direction this undisciplined road would take. At racing speed you just had to *know*. There were 174 turns and curves to each lap, most of them hidden by hedges and banks, which had to be memorized in order to take them at the highest speed.

The most frightening feature of the circuit was the blue sky that silhouetted the blind crests one frequently approached at 100-plus mph. If you didn't know which way the road went on the other side, you could be in deep trouble. I'd concentrated on these, trying to commit them to memory, and I thought I knew them. It was that creeping doubt that bothered me.

Rudi Uhlenhaut knew the circuit and spoke fluent English, so I begged a scrap of information from the volume I needed. Could the Mercedes be taken through the last S curve before the pits at full speed? This was the fastest section of the course, and the difference between braking and going flat here would mean precious seconds gained or lost.

He looked uncertain. "If you start the curve before you see it, just at the bridge, you can make it by releasing the throttle for just a moment. Back off just a bit," he answered in his perfect Oxford accent. He wanted to be helpful I'm sure, but his face betrayed his uneasiness. Perhaps it was concern for their car, which was about to be entrusted to someone who hadn't driven it before and was trying to learn the circuit secondhand. "Shouldn't try it, you know," he added seriously. I couldn't think of another question to ask him about the rest of the 14 miles that were rife with danger. I suddenly realized how thoughtless it was to have had only one. It was too late for questions now. With helmet in hand, I walked toward the waiting car.

Based on its design and construction, one could see the aerodynamic roadster represented an entirely new school of uninhibited engineering thinking. The wheels weren't wire but steel discs, radically dished over small but extremely wide brake drums. The shallow door hinged forward and swung straight up from a web of surprisingly small tubes making up the frame.

I noticed there was a telltale hand on the tachometer that would reveal whether the engine had been over revved. When pushed, a small lever unlocked the steering wheel so it came off completely for ease of entry. I didn't like the idea that something so essential to controlling the car could be so easily disabled, and I felt uncomfortable holding the wheel awkwardly in one hand as I slipped into the seat.

The unmistakable smell of burnt brake lining mixed with hot oil permeated the cockpit. I adjusted the seat and found plenty of leg and elbow room to accommodate my tall frame, a pleasing novelty. The gas and brake pedals were ideally placed in relation to each other for performing the classic heel and toe maneuver. The gearshift lever was ergonomically positioned with a positive feel. There were no safety belts, contrary to what I was used to, but the seat was so deep and enveloping I didn't miss them.

When I fired the engine it idled roughly, as did most highly tuned engines set up to produce their best power at high rpm. It was well insulated from the driver's compartment for a race car, and its muffled tone gave the impression that, though sharp and clean, it was apart from the rest of the car. Its balance was remarkable—more like an electric motor than a reciprocating engine with flailing innards.

A curt nod from Neubauer and I realized I was as ready as I was going to be in this make-or-break situation. With an effort to push any second thoughts and misgivings from my mind, I slipped the synchromesh transmission into first gear and pulled away. Winding up close to the 5,800-rpm limit in first, second and third, I felt a pronounced squat under load, and noticed the miss they were trying to cure.

The transmission was a delight, the lever seeming to jump into place when moved toward the desired gear. The feel was light and engagement immediate, with a high first and the other ratios ideal for wringing the maximum power from the responsive engine.

After completing a warm-up lap at about 5/10ths effort, I was ready to give Herr Neubauer what he wanted to see: an all-out flying lap. I crossed the start/finish line at racing speed and soon approached the Sud Curve, which was forgivingly wide, making it just the place to safely determine exactly what kind of car this was. A hard jab on the firm brake pedal killed just enough speed to position the car for the entry, then I jumped back on the throttle and tried to break the back end loose. In spite of the primitive swing-axle design, it responded to correction with a neutrality that was reassuring. The car was a sweetheart!

Approaching the turn near the bottom of the Hatzenbach hill, I really stood on the brakes, locking the wheels briefly at the end for good measure to see if they'd fade. They didn't, and although the pungent smell of hot lining was evident, the pedal remained hard and positive. It was evident they'd stand the worst I could give them. The steering was light and positive; which typified the feel of the entire car.

I was quite sure the three blind lefts that climbed out of the valley could be taken at full speed by staying near the center of the road until the true apex came into view. And so they could.

The long sweep along a ridge near the abandoned airstrip at Flugplatz was broken by a vicious hump in the middle of a fast left, which I was positive could not be taken at full speed. That would be too fast as the hump would lift the car and lose tire contact while scrambling for traction in the curve. The question of how much to brake was made no easier by the fact that the curve beyond was hidden by the hump.

It was only a guess when I stabbed the brakes hard twice and turned, trying to straighten a little over the hump itself. It was a good guess, but I wouldn't want to try it any faster. This recurring problem was compounded by the rebound stops that were required to limit the positive camber inherent in the early VW-type swing-axle design. This caused some rear wheel steering that had to be anticipated.

I didn't like Wehrseifen. On a steep downhill rounding a mountainside, there was a series of blind right-hand curves, baffling because they all looked alike, but were not. They ended with a very sharp left over a bridge, and this is where I thought I'd really blown it. The left over the bridge was one of a dozen hazards of the Nürburgring one absolutely had to remember. It was completely blind and gave no indication whatsoever, either by the road that was visible or the contours of the adjacent mountainside, that a turn of such severity was

ahead. The deception was compounded when the apparent apex of the road, which one aimed to clip with the left wheels, changed to the corner of the bridge 20 feet farther on when it became visible.



Apparently Daimler-Benz Racing Manager Alfred Neubauer was pleased with me.

Just as I committed myself to the steep downhill left, I remembered that this was Wehrseifen. An instant later I saw the wall of the cement bridge that marked the true apex of the corner. There was an ugly patch where some unfortunate had made his mark—not too long ago—and several deep gouges made by protruding wheel hubs. I thought I was about to make my mark there as well.

Since there was no time to correct my line, the entry was at once tenuous, untidy and thoroughly frightening. I'd allowed my attention to drift into a state of semi-mesmerized blankness that drivers are prone to.

My mind had become fixed in a state of passive fascination with the ribbon of road rapidly unwinding before me and I was driving by what I saw rather than by what I knew or could rationalize. This was bad policy since the road that was visible looked fast in places where it was slow, and vice versa.

I braked as hard as I dared and, while sliding through the corner, made a series of drastic corrections. To my relief, the SL responded, although I gave the earth bank on the far side of the curve a healthy wallop with the right side tires. My scalp tingled with the realization of what had almost happened due to my lapse in concentration and I resolved not to repeat it.

The road swept down through the steep gully at Brännigen past the very fast Pflanzgarten and the double back at Schwalbenschwanz—names already legend in the annals of racing history—and out into the comparative open of the last few kilometers to the finish. It was past the bridges the track now crossed that Seaman, Von Delius and Chiron were catapulted through the hedges and into the trees. This was the fastest section of the circuit and the tachometer needle climbed, slowly now in fourth gear, to 5,200, 5,500, 5,700 rpm, equaling 138, 142, 145 mph. The macadam surface grew rough with speed, and corrections for rear-end steering effect became more demanding.

Ahead were the bridge and the last S curve. Remembering Uhlenhaut's advice, I backed off a bit and started turning before the curve came in sight. A slight hump tossed me across to the edge of the road where the car wallowed unsteadily for a dicey moment. Then it was over! One more gentle bend, easily taken at full speed, and I was past the timing tower and into the pits.

I thought I liked to drive, but I was glad to be finished as I pushed the lever on the steering column and removed the wheel. As I climbed out, a shout from the tower gave a time faster than some of the laps for the team in the previous day's race. (Of course I didn't have any traffic to contend with.)

Herr Neubauer and the mechanics soberly circled the car, inspecting it for any marks that weren't there when I started. They silently leaned into the cockpit to check the telltale hand on the tachometer, which rested a shade under 5,800. Caustic-smelling white smoke rose from the brakes and hot metal snapped and popped as it cooled.

A semblance of manners returned with my hearing and I expressed my enthusiasm for the car, exhausting the few words of German I knew: "Sehr Gut! Prima!" Smiles broke out on the faces of the engineers and mechanics, the proud parents of their new Rennsportwagen.

I liked the car. It was nothing short of brilliant from a driver's viewpoint. Driving under such pressure, however, on the absolute ragged edge around a circuit I barely knew was certainly no pleasure, and I can't imagine that any driver would enjoy it. I'd driven only three laps, though at 14 miles each, it felt more like I'd just finished the 24-Hours of Le Mans.

Before I left the sleek SL behind me that afternoon at the 'Ring, I turned another fast lap at the request of Neubauer, who now seemed more interested, and managed to better my time by a few seconds. I was told I'd be notified when and if I'd be needed and we shook hands all around.

Elizabeth seemed optimistic, but I was anything but certain I could even hope for a position on the team, so I had no intention of letting them forget me. In fact I'd discussed with Neubauer the possibility of Mercedes entering the Mexican Road Race that November, telling him I felt it would be a perfect chance for the 300 SL to score a victory in the Western Hemisphere. I said what we both knew; that though it would not have the highest top speed in the race, the car had already proven in the current season that it could win in spite of that and its humble origin. I said I thought it had everything needed to win this singularly difficult event. It was small and light for the mountains, fast enough for the long straights and, above all, dependable. Neubauer admitted he was interested, but stated that it was out of the question with the time and budget constraints.

However, on my return home I received a letter from him asking for more details. Thus we began a rather involved correspondence in which I supplied him with reams of information regarding the 5-day event: average speeds over certain sections, rainfall charts, temperatures, altitudes, interspersed with observations based on my personal experiences in the Panamericana with Karl Keikafer's team of Chryslers the year before. I emphasized the importance of the right tires in Mexico where higher speeds were run at higher temperatures over longer straights than anywhere else in the world, one on the first day to subtropical Oaxaca being over 40 miles without a turn. I always hinted strongly that I'd be available to drive one of his cars. Meanwhile, I hoped to keep his interest with information on the glamorous Panamericana of both a technical and mundane nature. I could do nothing but wait for his decision.

As the season wore on, it seemed less and less likely that Mercedes would enter, but when I rolled into the pits at the end of General Curtis LeMay's Turner Air Force Base race at Albany, Georgia on October 26, 1952—which I won in a Cunningham C4R—I found a telegram waiting for me. Could I, it asked, leave immediately for Mexico City in order to compete with Mercedes-Benz in the Carrera Panamericana? Signed, Neubauer, Daimler-Benz, Stuttgart. Wonderful! This was the break I'd been hoping for. I dispatched a return wire to the effect that I'd most assuredly be there.

My dream had become a reality. I was to compete as an official member of the great Mercedes team. Now, my boy, I thought, you've really got to perform in the best possible opportunity for anyone who imagines himself to be a race driver. I immediately began preparations for the trip to Mexico.



Herr Neubauer confers with me while journalist Günther Molter looks on. Later, Günther became the public relations director for Mercedes-Benz.