

Sports Car Racing in Camera 1950–59

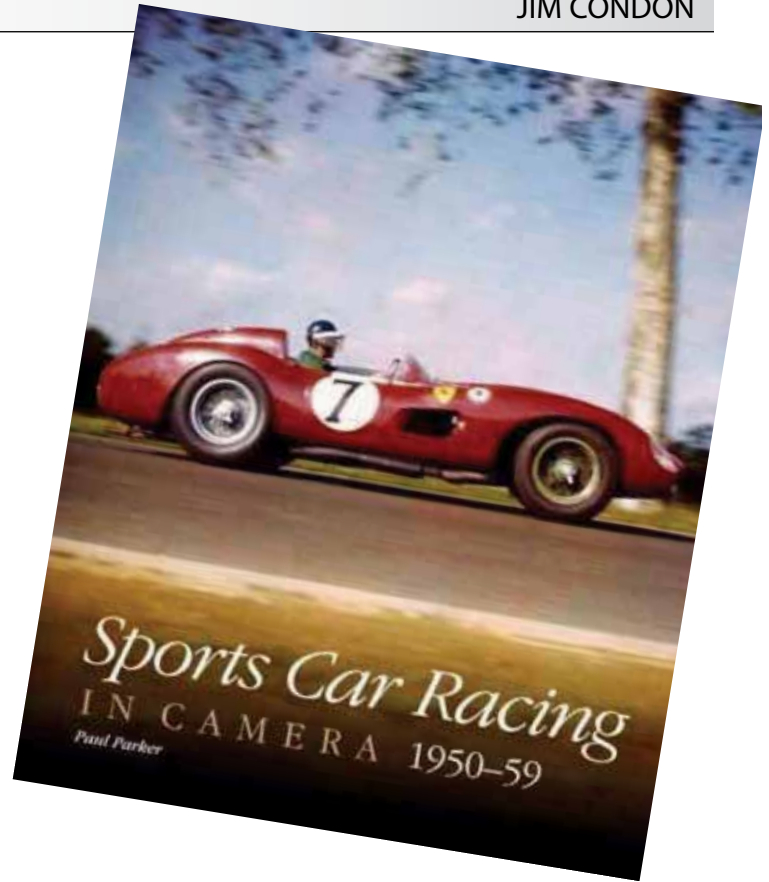
By Paul Parker
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This coffee table book is the third in a series by Paul Parker, following earlier volumes for the decades 1960–69 and 1970–79. It is divided into ten chapters covering one year each, with photos and captions showing the major European sports car races (Le Mans, Mille Miglia, ...) plus the Carrera Panamericana. The 1950s were dominated by the likes of Ferrari, Maserati, Lancia, Jaguar, Aston-Martin, and Mercedes-Benz, with Porsche playing only a minor role. Even so, it is an engrossing and informative book for vintage racing fans of the Porsche persuasion.

Most of the text appears in the photo captions, which are full of fascinating anecdotes and details to guide the eye, so the captions add considerable value. For example, below the picture of a Porsche 550 at Le Mans on 1953 is the comment "Note the five-stud wheels (changing tyres must have been quite time consuming) and the ventilated drum brakes just visible behind the rim." Or "Note what appear to be two large air intakes under the headlights [of a Jaguar XK120] — an ad hoc modification, perhaps in an attempt to stop the feeble cast-iron Lockheed drum brakes from fading through overheating." The author appears to be exceptionally well informed about most of the cars and drivers of that time, and even the most expert readers are likely to receive an education. He is not infallible, however. The photo of a truck with "Mercedes-Benz Rennabteilung" painted on the door is captioned "The extraordinary 1954-built Mercedes-Benz rennabteilung (race transporter)..."; "Rennabteilung" is actually German for "Racing Department."

Sometimes I had to consult a dictionary to translate from English as a foreign language, however. Did you know that "utterly knackered" brakes are worn out?

The photos come from another era, and many seem to come from another planet. When is the last time you saw a driver smoking a cigarette? Nearly all of the cars were open and had minimal windshields, and they must have given their occupants a really unpleasant cold soaking on rainy days. Most drivers wore aviator goggles and "helmets" made of metal, leather, or even linen! Seat belts, harnesses, Hans devices, roll cages, fire suits? What are they? Spectators often stood right next to the track, separated not by a tire wall, Armco, and a high chain-link fence, but only by low wattle fences (woven twigs, according to my dictionary) that couldn't stop a runaway horse, much less an out-of-control car going over 100 mph. All too many times captions contained phrases like "...he had crashed a Ferrari during the 1951 race and fatally injured a spectator" or "...car lasted another 40 or so laps before an even more extensive self-destruction and immolation left Wisdom with nasty burns" or



"However, the combination of no warning flags and an already slippery track made worse by the heat was disastrous..."

Mechanical preparation and maintenance were often careless by today's standards. John Wyer, working for Aston Martin at Le Mans, explained why their DB2 prototype broke a crankshaft after eight laps: "It is fair to say that in practice John Gordon was sent out with soft plugs by mistake and cooked them in about two laps. Instead of coming straight in he went on driving, with a lot of pre-ignition, which could have helped the crankshaft on its way. We should have changed the engine after that, really, but we didn't." In the 1953 Mille Miglia "the ever-determined, courageous, and resourceful Parnell finished fifth despite a broken Panhard rod mounting ... and a snapped throttle cable that obliged him to drive on the ignition switch. It is even more amazing that the crank did not break given this abuse." Maybe one of the reasons early Porsches were "giant killers" is better attention to detail: they just kept running while the giants killed themselves.

The author's introduction neatly sums up this era of racing with a single sentence "Yes, there was a terrible price to pay in human lives, but it was nonetheless a magnificent spectacle that mocks the sterile artifice of its modern successor." That's why I would much rather be reading this fascinating book than watching a NASCAR race on TV.

The list price of this book is \$59.95, but you can get it from Amazon.com for \$37.77.