

IN THE ANNALS OF MOTOR RACING history, especially in the period 1925-1949, Tazio Nuvolari was one of the fastest, fiercest, and the most skillful of drivers out there. Certainly, if one were to take up on his number of victories in percentage to his starts coupled to his giant slaying triumphs, there never could be anyone but Tazio Nuvolari who could lay claim to be just about the greatest Italian race car driver, ever! In my books, and in the most romantic of Grand Prix racing eras – the 1930s, there were only three men who hogged the upper crust, and these were the Swiss-German Rudi Caracciola, the German ace Bernd Rosemeyer and the Italian Tazio Nuvolari. These three could find their way into any enthusiasts’ short list and invariably there was little to choose between them.

On my recent visit to Italy, I was determined to take in the Museo Tazio Nuvolari to learn more about my hero and had made arrangements with them. The good folks at the Automobile Club Mantova e Museo Tazio Nuvolari made a special case to open their premises for me on a day they normally have a weekly off on! Here is a shrine to the man who walked with a slight limp, his giant killing exploits writ large in photographs, artefacts, medals and trophies, videos and a couple of his racing cars which sadly weren’t there as they had gone for classic car events. There was even a recreation of his office room in his house in the quaint city of Mantova where his personal artefacts including his cameras and photos plus writing desk and stationery were housed.

Tazio was a daredevil in the literal and figurative sense and there was no knowing what he would do on his giant killing sprees. Once while driving his Cisitalia in the 1946 Coppa Brezzi, the steering wheel came off in his hands while in the thick of battle! He managed to try and drive by attempting to knock it into place and staying away from hitting anyone before coming into the pits, getting repairs done and then storming back out!

Then there was also the time he scored the first of his great victories, in the Mille Miglia no less, driving his Alfa Romeo 6C 1750 GS in 1930. His great rival and Scuderia Ferrari teammate Achille Varzi was the acknowledged leader but on the return leg, legend has it that Nuvolari switched off the headlights of his Alfa and hounded Varzi driving in pitch darkness using just the taillights of Varzi’s car to keep his car on the road but more importantly out of sight. Lulled into a false sense of security, Varzi was driving with cool, calm assurance but just a few miles from the finish, Tazio put on his headlights and flashed past his teammate to score his first Mille Miglia victory, at an average speed of over 100kmph. In the process the legend of “*Il Mantovano Volante*” or in simple English, The Flying Mantuan was established.

Much before he started racing cars, Nuvolari was a bicycle and motorcycle racing star. His exploits on two wheels were just as hair raising as they were on four but that we will keep for another day. I recollect from Enzo Ferrari’s memoirs on their first meeting, at the Circuito del Savio, on May 24, 1924. Enzo wrote and I quote: “At the start I was not too worried about that skinny guy, but over the race I came to realise he was the only one able to challenge me and my Alfa Romeo 3-litre with his tiny Chiribiri 1500cc!”

However, the one incident that stood out for me was when he went stag hunting! Not armed with a gun but using his fearsome rear-engined Auto Union 3.0-litre V12 Grand Prix car at the 1938



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TAZIO NUVOLARI THE FLYING MANTUAN

A visit to the Museo Tazio Nuvolari on the outskirts of Milan, a space that pays homage to possibly the most prolific Italian race car driver to have ever sat behind a steering wheel



Clockwise from left: Tazio with the embalmed stag head at Donington Park 1938; recreation of the stag strike; Enzo Ferrari with Tazio Nuvolari and his Chiribiri 1500 at Circuito del Savio 1924; Tazio with his Cisitalia's steering wheel askew in 1946. **Facing page:** Adil with the embalmed stag head and Auto Union fuel tank at Nuvolari museum



TAZIO WOULD HAVE CARRIED HIS FERRARI IF HE HAD TO WHILE LEADING THE 1948 MILLE MIGLIA

Commendatore who knew that the car entrusted to Nuvolari was wilting. And it quit finally with brake and suspension failure just after Leghorn! What best summed up everyone’s feelings were echoed by eventual race winner and Ferrari teammate Clemente Biondetti who acknowledged Nuvolari’s spirited drive by opening his speech with the words “Excuse me for having won.”

Tazio Nuvolari died peacefully in his sleep on August 11, 1953 and with that the curtains came down on perhaps the greatest Italian racing car driver the world had ever seen. In fact, no Italian driver in any era has matched, let alone surpassed his exploits to this very day. In closing, perhaps it’s best to quote the great Ferdinand Porsche who thought The Flying Mantuan was “the greatest driver of the past, the present, and the future”. Nuff said!

P.S.: If you ever find yourself in the Mantova-Brescia area south-east of Milan and you want to soak up on the legend and history of Mantova’s most famous son then a visit to the Automobile Club Mantova e Museo Tazio Nuvolari has to be on your itinerary.

British Grand Prix at Donington Park. It was during practice that a stag dashed out of the shrubbery adjoining the circuit and Tazio who was barreling down that section at over 150kmph hit the stag but given his steely resolve and ample skill, he managed to control his rear-engined projectile and motor back to the pits, shaken and stirred no end! The stag wasn’t so lucky and it died on impact or was it of fright one will never know. The Grand Prix organisers, to make it up to Tazio, embalmed the stag’s head and presented it to the Flying Mantuan who hung it in his personal office and that now resides in the Nuvolari Museum in Mantova.

So many experts, rivals, even many of his most ardent fans always beseeched him to drive within himself and were sure that he would die through injuries sustained on a race circuit but Tazio who was nearing 55 years would have literally carried his crumbling Ferrari 166SC if he had to while leading the 1948 Mille Miglia. A bonnet strap got undone and the bonnet flew off at high speed, scaring his riding mechanic to no end! “Don’t worry,” he told his mechanic whose nerves were shot to pieces, “this way the engine will stay much cooler.” Driving like the devil was on his tail, Nuvolari hammered away on roads he knew like the back of his hand but that day the Ferrari was not keeping the faith. His seat came loose and that should have been enough to park the car and retire but Nivola (another of the nicknames given to him by his adoring fans) just threw it away, grabbed his gunny sack of oranges and snuck it below his bottom to cushion himself while hurling the 166 to even greater speeds. At the Modena control, even Enzo Ferrari pleaded with him to stop for there was nothing to prove but Tazio was undeterred and shot away from the