

1906

# birth of the **GRAND**

*Born amid controversy, grand prix racing emerged 100 years ago.*



# PRIX

story by ★ mark dill  
photos by LAT photographic

International road racing twisted in a whirlwind of controversy in 1906. The French automotive industry was the dominant force in the sport with more performance car companies than any other nation. Dissatisfied with the prevailing rules of international competition, they announced a new form of the sport and the Grand Prix was born.

In 1905 the biggest auto race in the world was the James Gordon Bennett Cup. American James Gordon Bennett, the Paris-based editor of the New York Herald, commissioned a silver cup and started the race in 1900. The race grew in stature and when a Mercedes won in 1903 the German auto industry enjoyed \$5 million in new orders that year, which equates to \$104 million today.

Bennett's vision was an international contest pitting the three best entries of each of the automobile

manufacturing countries. The French opposed this format because they could assemble large fields of cars from a variety of domestic companies and saw this as an unfair equalizer for the rest of the world. In 1905, the

French drew on established manufacturers like De Dietrich, Darracq, Richard-Brasier, Renault, Panhard, Clement-Bayard and Hotchkiss. Germany offered only Mercedes and Italy only Fiat. Britain entered two Wolseleys and a Napier. America had two Pope-Toledos and a Locomobile. Indianapolis Motor Speedway founder Carl Fisher attended the race as a spectator and returned on the White Star Liner "Celtic," alarmed at the superiority of European automobiles, especially the French.

French resentment festered because they felt penalized for having a successful automobile industry. As winners of the Bennett Cup in 1904, they were the host country in 1905. After much debate, they announced that this would be their last participation in the Bennett Cup and that they would host a new format that allowed an unlimited number of entries from any country in 1906. They called this new race the Grand Prix.

**The Renault of Ferenc Szisz speeds through the countryside surrounding Le Mans, France, closely pursued by American Elliot Shepard.**

## The Course

The course for the first Grand Prix was what was called a "closed course" as opposed to a city-to-city contest. The earliest great European races were on public roads between cities. After several fatalities among both competitors and spectators in the 1903 Paris-Madrid race, organizers decided to plot closed courses that forced drivers to complete laps over a circuit. These were still on public roads but offered the dubious reassurance that they were easier to police.

The French Grand Prix was a 64-mile course in the neighborhood of Le Mans and roughly in the form of a triangle. The corners were at the towns of La Ferté Berand, St. Calais, and St. Mars-la-Brière, which was the closest point to Le Mans. The circuit ran clockwise.

Early on in preparations there was a great deal of concern over the quality of the road in St. Calais. The roads through the town were deemed treacherous

and some believed a control point, or a spot where cars would be stopped and forced to proceed at low speed, was necessary. Town officials responded by building a wood plank road through a nearby field by-passing the town altogether. Another board road was constructed over a marsh area near the town of Vibraye. Despite the effort, these wooden roads proved unsafe and produced accidents.

The course was three undulating straights connected by corners with which nobody was happy. Twists and kinks along the course forced drivers to slow to as little as three mph. Top speeds exceeded 90 mph. The dirt and crushed stone roads were treated with tar to tamp down dust. While effective, fine particles combined with chemicals to irritate drivers' eyes so severely some complained they could not see.

## The Race Format

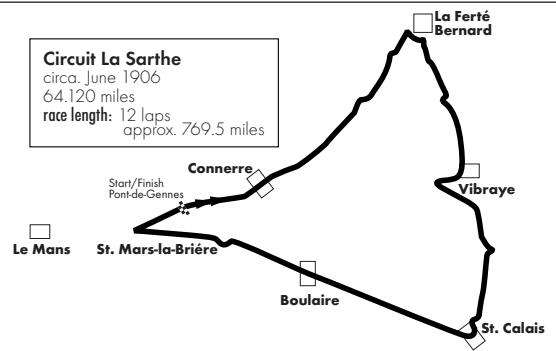
The first Grand Prix was a two-day affair, ran Tuesday and Wednesday, June 26 and 27, 1906. Each day's run was six laps (384 miles.) Typical of the early days of racing, the cars started one at a time at ninety-second intervals, beginning at the painful hour of six o'clock in the morning. Thirty-two cars entered the race, but only nine were not French entries. Six were from Italy with three Fiats and three Italas. Three entries were German Mercedes. Each of the cars carried a driver and riding mechanic and, in an interesting twist, organizers ruled that only those two people could work on the cars during the race, effectively eliminating team crews.

Thousands gathered at the starting point at Pont-de-Gennes. Most had camped there, some sleeping in the newly constructed wood grandstands positioned on either side of the road. Enterprising Frenchmen constructed thousands of tiny wooden huts and charged people as much as 30 Francs to use them.

**Though the circuit was simply a series of roads connecting small towns in the French countryside, construction efforts were made in the interest of safety.**



**Circuit La Sarthe**  
circa. June 1906  
64.120 miles  
race length: 12 laps  
approx. 769.5 miles



## Day One

The automotive trade journal *Motor Age* estimated that 180,000 spectators attended the first day, even though seating was provided for only 35,000. On what was described as a tropically hot day, a cloudless sky allowed an unrelenting sun to beat down so mercilessly on the gathering the tar treated crushed stone roads smoked.

Only 28 of the 32 starters survived the first 64-mile lap. Twelve of those took more than an hour to finish it. The plank roads extracted their toll as Maurice Fabry's Itala turned over at Vibraye and Hubert Le Blon ran off the wooden road at St. Calais to clobber a stone wall and buckle the right rear wheel of his Hotchkiss. Neither driver was hurt.

Vincenzo Lancia, in a Fiat, was the first to complete the initial lap, but in the confusing world of early road racing, he was not in the lead. The true leader was Paul Baras, driving a Richard Brasier, who started behind Lancia and completed the circuit in a faster time. Baras turned the lap in 52 minutes and 31 seconds to Lancia's 53:42.

By the third lap the primary factor in the race's outcome – tires – was apparent. Ferenc Szisz, driving a Renault, emerged the leader and would never be headed. Szisz, a Hungarian-born locksmith turned automotive engineer, stepped into the driving job after the death of company founder and racer Marcel Renault in the tragic Paris-Madrid 1903 race. Only the three Renaults and three Fiats were fitted with a new, patented wheel mount technology from Michelin that proved a huge advantage.

Prior to this race, metal rims were permanently affixed to wooden wheels, making tire removal a laborious process. Race crews typically cut the rubber away with knives and then wedged

new tires on. The advancement came in affixing separate rims with a system of steel wedges held in place by bolts. The bolts were loosened and the wedges, which were sandwiched with the rim in a groove in the wooden wheel, were tapped out with a hammer, and the tires were swapped out. Two trained men could change two tires in four minutes while previously the task required 16 minutes.

The stark contrast was apparent when, on the sixth lap, Szisz arrived at a repair station to change tires. Panhard drivers Georges Teste and Henri Tart had already been at work changing theirs for 15 minutes before the Renault driver appeared. Szisz and his mechanic completed their work and were on their way while Teste and Tart were still toiling away.

Of the 32 starters, 17 finished the first day. Szisz motored away from the field, finishing a full 26 minutes ahead of second place Albert Clement in his father's Clement-Bayard racer. Clement, a 22-year-old daredevil, made one of the most impressive drives. Despite employing the old wheel mount technology, he was able to hold off Felice Nazzaro's Fiat, who ended the first leg in third.

## Day Two

The surviving cars were impounded in a specially constructed garage for the night, which was fenced and padlocked. Gulag style, a two million candlepower search light flashed repeatedly across the area, casting surreal shadows and generally looking very important. The racers resumed a few minutes after 6 a.m., starting in the same order they finished the first leg.

The cars were drawn to the starting line by horses, leaving no doubt that anyone had even

**During a stop Vincenzo Lancia in his Fiat makes good use of Michelin's new tire mounting technology, a deciding factor in the race's outcome.**

started their engines prior to the race resuming. The cars were started in intervals matching their finish on the first day, which imposed a wearisome two and a half hour wait for the relatively few spectators who returned for a second day of brutally hot weather punctuated by the occasional appearance of a car. This painful and tedious experience forced a rethinking of the format, which became a single day event in 1907.

Szisz completed two laps or 120 miles before the last driver was allowed to restart. His lead steadily expanded, leaving little doubt of the outcome, barring mechanical failure. The contest for second place was more suspenseful. Nazzaro and Clement dueled throughout the final six laps, with the Fiat driver prevailing by just over three minutes. To put Clement's drive into perspective, most drivers stopped every other lap for tire changes and he gave up ten minutes to Szisz and Nazzaro per stop. Despite his heroic effort, he was chastised by his father after the race for his decision to forego use of the new wheel mounts.

There were two American drivers in the race, Elliot Shepard, an amateur driving a French Hotchkiss, and Panhard's George Heath, who finished sixth.

Shepard finished fourth in the first leg, but broke a wheel in the first lap of the second day. The only serious accident was to Teste on the second day when, on the second lap, a wheel flew off his Panhard and the axle dug into the ground, abruptly stopping the car and flinging him and his mechanic into the air. The driver broke his leg, some ribs and his wrist, but there was no report on his mechanic's condition. The grind was hard on all the drivers and mechanics as the relentless heat made the strain of doing all the work on the cars almost unbearable. Virtually all of them suffered chemical burns on their face and hands from gooey tar flicking off tires. Spectators, too, suffered, with over 300 people treated for sunstroke and eye irritation at the grandstand medical services tent.

Szisz' success nearly knocked the bookmakers out of business. They had a stand near start-finish and gave 200-to-1 odds on the Renault driver at the start of the race. Favorites such as Darracq driver Victor Hemery and Baras, both 8-to-1, and Lancia

at 10-to-1 fell by the wayside. Szisz' winning time was 12 hours, 14 minutes at an average of 63 mph.

While Szisz would return to the French Grand Prix in 1907 and finish second, he never again scored a victory in a major race. He retired in 1908 but reappeared in 1914 for a final French Grand Prix. The rest of Ferenc Szisz' life is less clear. As a resident of Paris, he took on the name "Francois" and joined

the French army in World War I. He joined an aircraft company after the war and passed away near Paris in 1944. But his life had drifted so far from the sport by that time most people had lost track of him.



**At 200-to-1 odds, a bet placed on Ferenc Szisz surely paid good dividends as the Renault driver averaged 63mph on his way to the win.**

For the French, Szisz' victory spared them the embarrassment of an Italian triumph in a race born of their dominance of the sport. Ironic, too, that the 100th anniversary of a great Renault triumph comes in a year when the company is defending a Formula One World Championship.

The prominence of other great automotive brands such as Fiat, Mercedes and Michelin is testimony to the value of experience accumulated over time. ★

