

Auvergne Circuit

A CONTINUATION OF CURVES AND HAZARDS

A YEAR AGO not one of a hundred motorists residing even within 100 miles of the Auvergne circuit knew much more about the roads upon which this year's Bennett cup race was run than about the roads which will be selected for the Bennett race of 1906. Seldom has it been heard that tourists went over the La Baraque road or past the iron foundry of Pontgibaud or the serpentine stretch of roads in the neighborhood of Sayat.

Those responsible for having chosen the Auvergne course will be conceded to be experts as far as difficult road choosing is concerned, for it would be almost impossible to find roads anywhere else in France which combine so many natural difficulties. The speed enthusiasts were decidedly disappointed and fought desperately against the selection of the Michelin course, which is the other name for the Auvergne circuit and which was named so because it was M. Michelin, the French tire manufacturer, who first discovered it. It was found right away that no 70 or 80 miles an hour speeding would be possible upon this course with its hundreds and hundreds of short and long, wide and narrow turns. On the other hand the manufacturers of cars and tires were pleased at such a difficult course being chosen, because it would determine the reliability of a car more than its speed ability.

Taken in a general way the Auvergne course is but a succession of short and long hills, with innumerable turns, some of which are at right angles, others so narrow that the drivers must slow down to a speed of 20 miles an hour in order to avoid possible accidents. Although the course is a little over 85 miles long there is not a single part of it where level roads are found for a distance of more than 3 miles. One of the French drivers, while training some time ago, counted the number of difficult turns and curves, and reported that he had noticed more than 400. Taking all the turns, difficult or easy, it is claimed there are at least 600. The most difficult is the one at Rochefort, while those at Laqueuille and on the Baraque road and near Pontgibaud are hardly less dangerous. Even after having been fixed so they would be less dangerous they are more difficult than any of the turns found either on the Taunus course in Germany or on the Irish course of 1903.

Another peculiarity of the course is the quick ascending road at several places. For instance, soon after leaving the starting point, which is in the vicinity of Clermont-Ferrand, the route goes upwards, the Laschamp height being at an altitude of nearly 3,000 feet above sea level. The road again goes down, and when within a short distance of la Baraque it again goes uphill and for the short distance of a mile ascends almost 1,050 feet.

Although the country along the course is not as thickly populated as is generally expected, a few new houses have been erected along, possibly to be demolished after the race is over. In the towns of Clermont and Rochefort, however, a large number of new people are quartered. The country through which the automobilists will drive is picturesque in some sections and very monotonous in other sections.

It cannot be compared favorably with the Taunus course. If the race were one in which the contestants would simply have to maintain a certain rate of speed of not more than 30 or at the most 35 miles an hour, it is possible that the country would be found more interesting.

A member of the sports committee of the Automobile Club of France who was among those who selected the Auvergne course made the following statement about it: "I do not believe it will be possible to drive at more than 45 to 50 miles an hour; around the Baraque hill from 40 to 45 miles will be the limit. From Rochefort to Laqueuille if 25 miles an hour is averaged it will be a splendid performance on the part of the driver, because notwithstanding the fact that the road has grades of 15 per cent, which come down again to 6 or 7 per cent and then again average 12 to 15 per cent, it must not be forgotten that the highway is very tortuous, and that the driver will have to apply brakes most of the time. From Laqueuille to Bourg-Lastic the road is fair and will very likely permit some fast driving. From Bourg-Lastic to Chambon the narrowness of the road will hardly permit two racers to pass, and as there are many sharp and several right angle curves no great speed will be possible. From Pontgibaud to the Cratere a pretty good road is found, which although having many turns is not narrow, even the turns being wide, which will enable drivers to go at pretty good speed. From the Cratere to the finish the roads are good, with the exception of about 5 miles of highway near Sayat.

The start of the race is at a place called Quatre Routes—four roads—located about 1¼ miles from Clermont-Ferrand. The road is wide at the start, and after less than ¼ mile has been covered it becomes a short succession of lace shaped roads, going steadily upward until the Grand Tournant—big turn—is reached. At this point the road is about 700 yards above the sea level. After a number of turns, the road is in the section of the country called la Barque, and in which is located the village bearing that name. Within less than 500 yards three of the most difficult turns on the entire course are found, bearing respectively the names of the first, second and third Baraque curves. The road then leads to the Morine neck and is wide, permitting two cars to easily run side by side for several miles. There are a few turns, but none very difficult.

In going down the Morine neck the road comes very tortuous, but is wide until the hamlet of Quatre Routes is reached. Here one of the most dangerous turns is met, especially so because it is hidden by houses until within a few yards from it. After passing this turn the road is fairly wide for about 8 miles, but it has a great many hills, especially when nearing Rochefort.

The road leading into this town, which is the first important one on the course after leaving the starting place, goes down, with a 9 per cent grade. Almost at the entrance of the town there is a turn which cannot be noticed until one is within a few feet of it, being hidden by a long wall. The streets through the city are

narrow and zigzag. After leaving Rochefort the road becomes fair until near Laqueuille, 5½ miles from Rochefort. An exceedingly sharp turn is to be taken in going through the former town, and another one at the outskirts of the town, where the road suddenly goes down hill. A railroad crossing is located less than a mile from Laqueuille.

The course then continues over a narrow road for several miles, but later becomes wider. It has many short but steep grades until within a few hundred feet of Bourg-Lastic. The road turns at a place called the Virgin turn, and then leads to Lastic in a succession of tortuous roads, with numerous sharp turns and without a straight, level road of more than ¼ mile for about 6 miles. From Lastic to Chadeaux there is a straight, level road in excellent shape and very wide, but only about 1½ miles long. It leads to Herment, a little village located near a hill. Several turns are met before reaching the village. From Herment to Chambon where the road turns again, going to Pontgibaud, there is about 20 miles of up and down highway which, at some places is not wider than 5 to 6 yards, while at other places it is four times as wide, but at no stage of this part of the road will it be possible to develop fast speed on account of the large number of turns, which, although easy to take, come in such quick succession that the drivers will have to use the brakes most of the time during these 20 miles. After Chambon is passed the road becomes better for several miles, being almost level, but having many grades. Near la Goutelle, about 3 miles of exceedingly difficult roads are encountered, with more than a dozen difficult turns. Better roads follow for a short while, but in entering the town of Pontgibaud there is a succession of turns which almost form a three S path.

From Pontgibaud to la Cratere hill the road is wide and level, but like most of the other sections of the course hills are found in quick succession, and there is no possibility of fast driving over a distance of more than about 1 mile. From la Cratere to Sayat will be found the most difficult part of the entire circuit. For about 5 miles the roads are tortuous, and many sharp turns and difficult down grades are met; in fact, some stretches on this part of the circuit are so dangerous in their original condition that they were fixed, in some cases tons of earth being used to level them, while on other parts of them turns were cut off. From Sayat to Durtol there is a fine stretch of about 5 miles, which may be considered as the best part of the entire circuit for speeding purpose. Soon after leaving Durtol the road again takes its tortuous course for more than 2 miles and then again becomes fairly level and wide. The last few miles before the finishing place is reached offer an opportunity of making fast time.

The circuit will test the reliability of the machines and the skill of the drivers more than the speed qualities of each. It will be a race in which careful making of turns, shrewd throttle control, careful brake application, and persistency rather than dash and recklessness, will win in the end.