

reG^{ender}enmeister

[the rain master]

ON DISPLAY AT THE INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY'S HALL OF FAME MUSEUM IS AN IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION OF TROPHIES WON BY ONE OF THE GREATEST GRAND PRIX DRIVERS IN HISTORY - RUDOLPH CARACCIOLA

| Story by Mark Dill |

Asked to list the best drivers of all time, fans may respond with names such as Michael Schumacher, Ayrton Senna, Jackie Stewart, Jim Clark and Juan Manuel Fangio. Perhaps less well remembered than his 1930's contemporary, Tazio Nuvolari, Rudi Caracciola was no less a talent than any other legend.

The story behind the man who earned a treasure in trophies from 1922 to 1939 spans the pinnacle of triumph to the depths of heart breaking tragedy. Caracciola, a hotel owner's son, entered the family business at age 14 when his father died. But the inexorable pull of a passion for automobiles called him to follow his own path.

He began his career as an apprentice at the Fafnir auto factory in Dresden. He raced their cars, finishing fifth in his first race in 1922 at AVUS, a high speed course near Berlin.

A year later, 22 year-old Rudi had his first victory, a 40-lap race at Berlin Stadium.

This success led to a sales job with Daimler that provided the benefit of borrowing cars to enter minor races. He recorded 42 victories from 1923 through 1925.

The race played out in a downpour and Caracciola... was in his element.

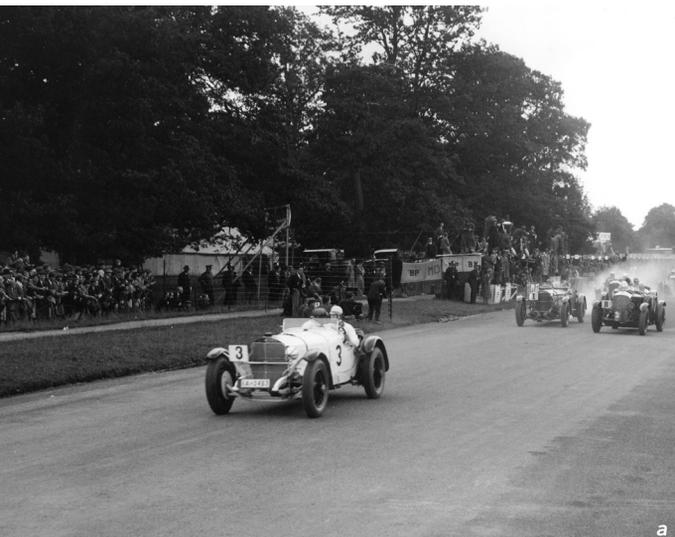
His breakthrough came in July 1926 when he pleaded his case to Mercedes to let him drive for them in the first German Grand Prix. In a special arrangement, Mercedes provided a car, but he entered as an independent, the

factory distancing itself from the performance of a driver they deemed still unproven.

Caracciola stalled his racer at the start, but his riding mechanic fired the engine and they were off in last place. The race played out in a downpour and Caracciola, who later earned the nickname, "Der Regenmeister" (the rain master), was in his element. He slithered

PRE-WAR DOMINANCE

By the time the dapper Caracciola appeared at the Speedway in 1946, his pre-war dominance in Europe was unquestioned. Along with Nuvolari and Rosemeyer, they defined early Grand Prix racing.



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RETROSPECTIVE
 (clockwise from top left)
 a) Caracciola leading 1930 Grand Prix of Ireland b) Winning trophy from that event, on display at the IMS Hall of Fame Museum c) Rudi with car owner Joel Thorne at Indy in '46 (before donning safety helmet) d) The unique helmet Rudi wore for practice at Indy e) The crumpled Indy entry that sent Caracciola to the hospital f) The streamlined Mercedes at the Autobahn, setting a world speed record of 269mph g) The huge Caracciola trophy collection on display at the IMS Hall of Fame Museum.



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through corners with incomparable car control to win the 1926 German Grand Prix.

That year, Caracciola captured another 14 victories, got married and opened a Mercedes showroom in Berlin. His wife, Charlotte, whom he called Charley, accompanied him as he won over 30 races in the subsequent four years, including the 1928 German Grand Prix and the 1930 Grand Prix of Ireland. He was also the 1930 European Mountain Champion.

A decisive moment that elevated his career to greatness came in 1931 when he won the 1,000-mile Mille Miglia. Facing a field of 150 drivers, including the master, Italian Tazio Nuvolari, Caracciola was a man of destiny. Despite mechanical setbacks, he overcame the Alfa-Romeos of Nuvolari and Giuseppe

Campari to become the first foreign driver to win the Italian Classic.

Caracciola joined Nuvolari and Campari at Alfa when a depressed economy forced Mercedes to recede from competition in 1932. Caracciola scored GP wins in Poland, Italy and Germany. Yet, at the end of the season, he made the fateful decision to form a team with driver Louis Chiron for 1933.

Called the Scuderia CC team, Chiron and Caracciola purchased two factory Alfa racers and headed to the Monaco Grand Prix. Tragically, Caracciola's brakes failed in practice as he entered the Harbor Turn and he slammed into a stone wall at 70 mph, crushing his left thigh. Doctors said he would never race again.

Under the care of specialists, he retreated to Lugano, Switzerland. Here Caracciola was dealt a second, more devastating blow. Charley was killed in an avalanche while skiing.

Aided by legendary manager Alfred Neubauer, Caracciola and Mercedes returned in 1934. Despite intense pain from his leg, he won the Italian Grand Prix. But 1935 was his true comeback year. On the road to his first European Driving Championship he won GPs in Tripoli, France, Switzerland, Belgium and Spain.

In the era of the classic rivalry of two German marques, Mercedes and Auto Union, Caracciola was at the peak of his powers. He won several GPs, including Monaco (1936),

HOMELAND SUCCESS

The "Streamliner" Mercedes on the high-bank of AVUS in 1937. A young Caracciola made his racing debut at AVUS in 1922.



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and two more European Championships (1937 and 1938), the closest prize to today's World Championship. In 1938, he drove a Mercedes to a 269mph world land speed record on the Autobahn and in 1939 won his sixth and final German GP.

World War II curtailed racing in Europe and Caracciola, a critic of Hitler, returned to Switzerland with his second wife, Alice, in 1939. They became Swiss citizens.

By 1946, the world emerged from war and Tony Hulman had purchased the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to revive the Indianapolis 500. Speedway General Manager T.E. "Pop" Meyers invited Caracciola to return to racing at the Indy 500. Caracciola struggled to locate and transport two of his Mercedes GP racers

to the United States. The complexities of post-World War II customs made this impossible, but car owner Joel Thorne approached Caracciola about driving his entry.

A promising performance in practice ended in another Caracciola tragedy when the 45-year-old driver hit the Turn 2 wall and was thrown from the car. He suffered a severe concussion, but his life was spared by Speedway management's insistence that he wear a crash helmet – something he had never done before.

Caracciola was in a coma for ten days at Methodist Hospital. He spent much of his recovery at Lingen Lodge, Tony Hulman's Terre Haute country home. Ever the gracious hosts, Hulman and his wife Mary visited

frequently with food and supplies. "They took care of us more than anyone in this world ever had," Caracciola wrote in his autobiography.

With Mercedes, Caracciola returned to racing in 1952, and came home fourth – at age 51 – in the Mille Miglia. But he suffered another devastating accident in a minor event at Bern, crushing the thigh of his healthy leg and ending his career. Cancer cut his life short just seven years later in 1959.

Alice Caracciola remained a friend of the Hulmans the rest of her life and returned to Indianapolis regularly. The priceless treasure of trophies at the Speedway's Hall of Fame Museum is testimony to the Hulman-Caracciola friendship forged 61 years ago. ■