

El Chueco I
(Fangio)

Laguna Seca Raceway, California, summer 1991

The one-name immortal Fangio's preposterous nephew, Juan Manuel Fangio II, is supposed to be some kind of hot racingdriver. Fangio deuce well and truly pushes my button anyway.

It's the Roman numerals. The effrontery! The arrogance! Juan Manuel Fangio is a cult unto himself. He can't have a successor because nobody can equal him. He was the Formula 1 racingdriver who made history not by the season but by the race: wherever he competed, lap speed records afterward were hanging in shreds, his competition was ruined and looking stupid, and the grandstands were gasping and rubbing their eyes in disbelief. Fangio II is like somebody calling himself A.J. Foyt II.

The great man was second-generation Argentine. His parents were northern Italians who'd immigrated to Buenos Aires. And "El Chueco" himself was a real Latin American dream boat: balding, bow-legged, beak nose, someplace between tall and stocky, and he had a gut on him. Peter Ustinov once recorded a spoof of his high squeaky voice. Between races he rested up watching cowboy movies and reading Tarzan comicbooks.

Hitting the European grand prix circuit, Fangio was shrouded in mystery, the fraudulent dope about him being that he was once a bus driver who later had become personal chauffeur to Eva Peron.

The reality was better. Before and after the Second World War, Fangio made his bones as a kind of one-man

Unser family, only not up and down Pikes Peak but throughout the high Andes.

This was the insane but uniquely South American activity of marathon mountain racing in converted taxicabs. The Gran Premio Internacional del Norte was a two-week long monstrosity of 6,000 day and night miles, at altitudes of 12,000-feet, from Buenos Aires to Lima, and back to Buenos Aires again.

Wheelmanship and survival tactics that he learned winning that maniac enduro, as well as similar ones like the Dobe Vuelta and the Premio Primavera, served Fangio equally well at sea level in Formula 1 openwheelers. He had some kind of sixth sense for avoiding disaster. Not only did he manage to steer free of a terrific Stirling Moss-Peter Collins wreck that occurred directly in front of him at Monaco, on the Mediterranean harbor front, but previously at the same circuit he'd had similar good luck when five cars behind him piled up at the Tabac corner.

He not only avoided both spills, but won both races. Additionally he won a dark and sinister Monza, magically veering clear of a four-car crackup on the last lap when Alberto Ascari put the squeeze on Giuseppe Farina, or vice versa. Never did Fangio's sixth sense kick in as it did during the 24 Hours of Le Mans, when he had a hairbreadth miss with a faltering team Mercedes that next disintegrated into the crowd.

Whenever Fangio couldn't quite win, when his racingcar lacked something, he went berserk. At Silverstone, when he was vainly chasing nimble open-wheel Ferraris, he clouted so many barrel corner markers that he bashed a streamlined Mercedes to scrap. And at another Monaco, while hunting down Moss – skimming the telephone poles and brushing the stone walls for an hour but still coming up six seconds shy of nailing him –

Fangio by the finish had reduced his Ferrari to such rubble that even its steeringwheel was bent.

The reason Fangio had fallen so far behind at Monaco was that his own factory Ferrari had gone on the fritz, and he'd had to commandeer somebody else's. He was regularly bumming rides from his Italian, English and German teammates who'd been dragging their butts before he took over. Fangio never cared whether it was an Alfa Romeo, Mercedes, Ferrari or Maserati – he captured world championship seasonal titles in all four – but always demonstrated to the other fools how to race.

At Spa-Francorchamps, he once carried a borrowed Maserati from nowhere to third place and got thrown out at Stavelot, reinjuring his neck. His neck had first gotten jammed the previous year at Monza. Having raced in Ireland the afternoon before, he'd flown to France but found Paris fogbound and all flights postponed. With no other option, he set out at 3:30 in the morning to drive the dozen sleepless hours to Monza.

His fatigue bit him in the race. Losing control, he got hurled out neck-first at Lesmo. Afterward he was in plaster for a long time. But his mettle was restored in the Mille Miglia, where he proved he could go as fast in sportscars as F1s by overcoming an Alfa Romeo Flying Saucer with damaged steering and finishing second. He didn't like the openroad anymore, but just to prove he could do it, won the Mexican Road Race in a works Lancia.

Anybody in the Fangio cult knows that on the Nurburgring was where his classic victory occurred. Two fresh-faced Brits seemed to have him safely blown off by half a minute. Just you wait, my beauties, Fangio seemed to say, and then he cut the pair of them down by plastering the lap record 10 times.

He wasn't in business for very long, barely seven seasons, 1950-1957, but he was world champion five of them. At these Laguna Seca historics was the only time I ever got to watch him race. He was in his eighties, only had a couple of years to live, but going up the straightaway hill past the pits, completing his final historic lap, so hard did he stand on the gas of one of his former warhorses, a roaring Merc F1, that I raised a cheer of admiration.

Hearing other cheers, I turned and saw they were coming from the old Indy 500 big cucumber constructor Quin Epperly and from the old Corvette hot dog Joe Freitas, pal of Davey MacDonald. The Fangio cult embraces all racing backgrounds.