
THE RACERS

HOW AN OUTCAST DRIVER, AN
AMERICAN HEIRESS, AND A LEGENDARY
CAR CHALLENGED HITLER'S BEST



NEAL BASCOMB

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CHAPTER 1

Just one more check. René Dreyfus circled his Bugatti Brescia again. At five feet, seven inches tall with the wiry build of a jockey, René weighed no more than 140 pounds dripping wet. An oversize cap, loose slacks, and suit jacket added to the impression of a young man lost on his way to a neighborhood dance. He sported a nonstop smile and had brown eyes alight with what one journalist labeled *The Look*: “a stare of searing intensity and undying affection that let you know, without a doubt, René was put on earth to drive cars fast.”

Aged only twenty, he needed his mother’s written permission before he was allowed to take part in the race—the La Turbie hill climb—on February 25, 1926. Under a cloudless blue sky, the young man from Nice squeezed himself into the wicker seat.

Preparing to crank the engine into life was his brother, Maurice, the Brescia’s co-owner and René’s ride-along mechanic. René turned the fuel-line knob, then pressured the tank with four strokes of the fuel pump to his left. *Ready*, he nodded to Maurice. A jerk of the crank, and the Brescia’s four-cylinder, 1.5-liter engine** jarred into life with a *blaaaaaattttt...*

** Very generally the bigger the engine, the more power it produces.

blaaaaatttt . . . blaaaaattt.

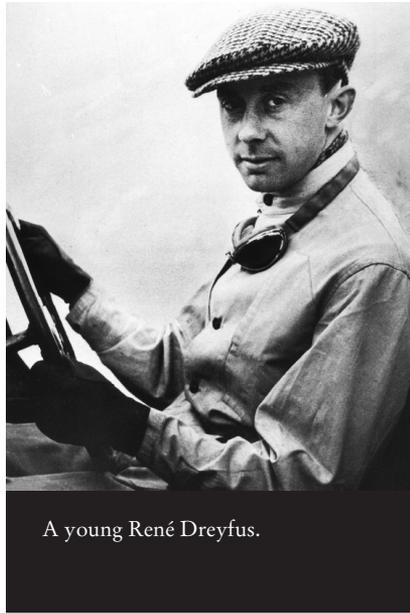
Maurice climbed into the open cockpit beside his brother, as blue oil smoke sputtered from the exhaust pipe.

The race officials waved them toward the slightly inclined start position. Blocks of wood were placed behind their rear tires to keep them from rolling backward when René let go of the clutch.

Pressing down on the accelerator, he roused the engine into a throaty *rrrrraap . . . rrrrrraaaaapp . . . rrrrrraaaaaaapppppp*. More blue smoke cast a pall over the road behind him. Eyes fixed on the starter flag, he curled his fingers on the steering wheel and angled his body forward. A nervous shiver ran through his body. Maurice gripped the windshield frame. Getting away quick was everything.

The starter raised the flag. The race would take mere minutes and would be over before René's nerves calmed. The flag snapped downward. René punched the accelerator as he released the clutch. The Brescia surged ahead, up toward the first sharp turn.

Considered the father of all hill climbs, the course ran along the Grand Corniche, a road built by Napoleon that twisted like a serpent through the mountains along the French Riviera to an



A young René Dreyfus.

altitude of 1,775 feet. The route was famous for its gradients, cliffs, ravines, and twists, and ended at the charming hilltop village of La Turbie. The low stone barrier along the cliff edge offered slight comfort.

René accelerated out of the bend at Mont Gros, by the domed Nice Observatory. If Maurice bellowed at him to slow down, he did not hear him over the engine's bark. There were no other cars against which to measure himself. It was the best time that won. Hundredths of a second could determine the winner. He must race at the extreme, testing his mettle, and the Brescia's too.

Into the next hairpin, René shifted down into second gear. He and Maurice were sandwiched together as they went into the turn. Coming out of it, he accelerated, the *rrraaaappppp-rrrrraappppppppp* of the Brescia echoing across the jagged mountains. There were a couple hundred feet until the next bend. There was no point in saving his engine or worrying about his tires. The race was too short.

René knew every bend, hollow, turn, and rise on the course. He knew precisely where to angle the front wheels into a corner, exactly how far to allow the Brescia to drift for the following turn, and the best gear for every point on the road. Finally, the course flattened out. Ahead, they saw a crowd of ladies in dresses and gentlemen in suits lining the road, children sitting at their feet. The finish. René left nothing in the engine as he shot across the line, a whirl of dust and gravel behind him.

The clock read 5 minutes 26.4 seconds, an average of 43 miles per hour (mph), or 69.2 kilometers per hour (kph). It was a very

fast time—the fastest ever at La Turbie in his small-engine class. Now he had to wait for the others. By early afternoon, all the competitors had finished. René had clocked the sixth-fastest time and was first in his category, beating his nearest rival by almost a minute and a half. Rousing congratulations, a shiny medal, and a celebratory dinner were his rewards for his biggest win yet.

These were all very nice, but René was impatient to be a *professional* race-car driver. There was nothing more he wanted from life.

When he was a boy, his father, Alfred, occasionally allowed him to stand between his knees and hold the steering wheel of the family's Clément-Bayard, a colossal car. One time, René convinced his brother and sister and his sister's friend to join him in his two-seater pedal car on a ride down their hometown's longest hill. The four were already shooting down the hill when they realized that the tiny handbrake could not slow the weight of four children moving at velocity. To avoid plunging into the river at the bottom of the hill, René swung the wheel to the left, flipping the cart over. Maurice threw up everywhere; the girls were traumatized. René thought it a thrill.

War against Germany broke the idyll of René's childhood in 1914. Alfred was drafted into the French army, and as Kaiser Wilhelm's troops advanced into France, his wife, Clelia, and their three children had to flee their home in Mantes-la-Jolie, just outside Paris.

In Nice, and later Vesoul, the young family waited for Alfred to return from the war, which he did. After the armistice, the

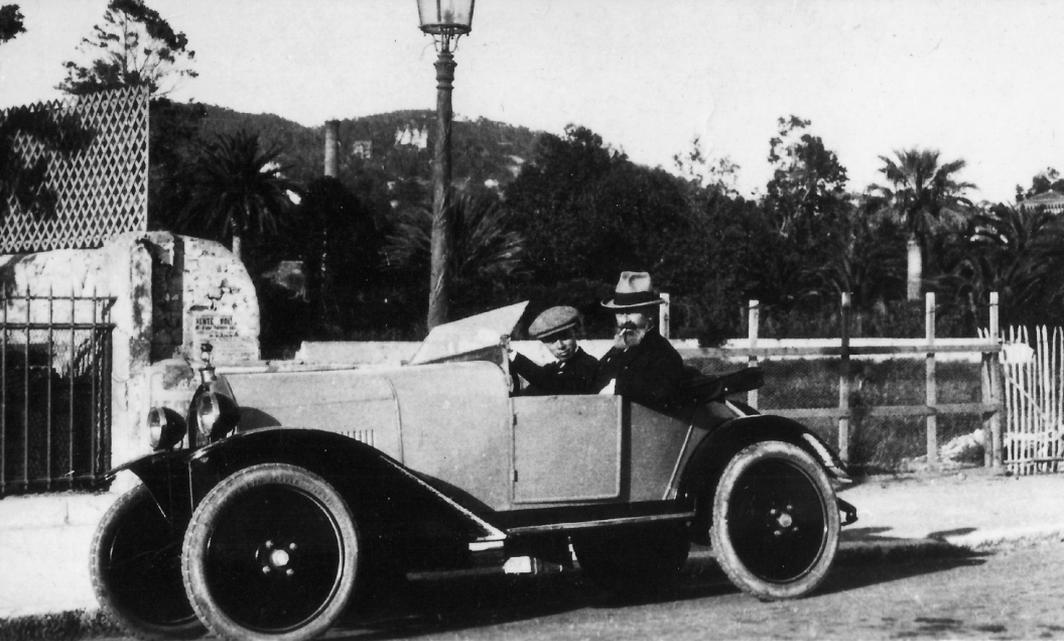
family returned to Paris, and Alfred's business—raincoats and fine garments—blossomed. But he was in poor health. Although he had survived several gas attacks during the war, his lungs never fully recovered.

In 1923, when René was eighteen, the Dreyfus family returned to Nice, now a thriving cosmopolitan city with all the bohemian culture of Paris but better weather, overlooking azure-blue waters. Shortly after the move, Alfred died of a heart attack. René felt unmoored.

The family sold their house and moved into an apartment. Alfred had invested in a paper business for his sons to work in, and they bought a two-seater, 6-horsepower (hp) Mathis for René to travel about Nice and nearby towns, selling paper. On the winding, treacherous roads outside Nice, René schooled himself in how to drive fast. He loved the euphoria he experienced being in tune with the Mathis as it careered through the hills.

He entered his first race in 1924, the Circuit de Gattières, forging his mother's name to do so. His eighty-year-old grandfather helped him fit a huge exhaust pipe to the Mathis and strip off the fenders so that it qualified for its category. Maurice rode aboard as mechanic, always the protective brother. Uncontested in his small-engine class, René won the race.

He was convinced he needed a Bugatti so he could enter more important races, and the local Bugatti dealer, Ernest Friderich, was only too happy to sell a Brescia to another young man with glory in his eyes.



Maurice Dreyfus and his father, Alfred, in the Mathis, the first car René ever raced.

After his grandson's triumph at the 1926 La Turbie hill climb, René's grandfather delicately clipped out any mentions from the Nice newspapers and glued them into a large scrapbook, taking care to note the publication name and the date in his fine handwriting.