



Mercedes mechanics swarm over cars along Mexican race route during secret practice. Car in right foreground is Mercedes 300 sedan. John Fitch, in coveralls, stands to left of number 3 with back turned. Methodical Germans made carburetion and spark plug tests at all altitude extremes all the course, from sea level to over 10,000 feet.

MERCEDES IN MEXICO

Chief threat to a repeat Ferrari win in the Mexican road race was the German team. How they would do, only the finish at Juarez would tell. But this report, written during practice, reveals their characteristic approach to the event.

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY DON POPE



YOU can argue indefinitely about which were the best cars and drivers entered in the Third Mexican Pan-American race, but there is no argument as to which team was best prepared. With traditional German thoroughness, the Daimler-Benz organization threw its full weight into getting full effectiveness from the three Mercedes 300 SLs entered in the sports class of the Mexican classic.

They began by putting the team under the direction of Alfred Neubauer, who probably knows more about directing race teams than anybody in the world. Neubauer, a huge good-natured man who is an amiable father to the whole group, has the last word on every detail. Unlike some other European teams, each driver is free to win if he can, but when it comes to procedure, Herr Neubauer is the absolute boss.

Flown from Germany was a contingent of two dozen drivers, mechanics, and newspapermen. A reserve driver, Fritz Reiss, waited in Germany, ready to be summoned by

Herman Lang, senior Mercedes driver, is a prewar great. He won Le Mans last June in a SL 300. In 1939, last race year before the war, Lang won seven times in 10 starts, was European champion.

cable if needed. In addition to the three entry cars (two hard top and one open) a fourth 300 SL was brought along for practice use. The practice car was driven along the entire route in advance of the race.

To see how the Germans operate, I went out with them on a test run. Heading north from Mexico City along the route, the three competition cars, staff car, and Mercedes diesel truck went about 60 miles before they found a suitably remote spot for the tests. Then the mechanics went to work, and there seemed to be at least two of them for each race car. Actually, the mechanics are not assigned to specific cars, but each is a specialist. The area was quickly an orderly litter of spark plugs, carburetor jets, and assorted precision tools.

Timing and mixture combinations were tried endlessly with reference to the altitude, which an altimeter showed to be 2,400 meters. After an hour or so of tinkering, a driver would be sent out on the road with detailed instructions. For instance, John Fitch would be told to gun his car up to full throttle and then cut the ignition and coast on in. Examination of the plugs then indicated effectiveness of the tuning. Pretty soon he would be on the road again, this time to throttle down until the engine pinged.

Endless notes are taken. Fitch has language difficulties with the German mechanics, but is helped out by Gunther Molter, press representative for Daimler Benz. The work goes on until nearly dark. On the way back to Mexico City, it rains hard and Fitch (in the open Mercedes) gets soaked. This is the third or fourth day he has been drenched and he has a cold coming on.

Next day the whole outfit took off early in the morning for Tuxtla Gutierrez, where the 2,000 mile grind begins. The practice car went along. At selected spots along the way, they planned to stop for more spark and carburetion tests. The road would be logged and blind curves, hazards, bumps carefully recorded. Some of the team, including Fitch, had already been to Tuxtla a few days before, but they wanted to do it again.

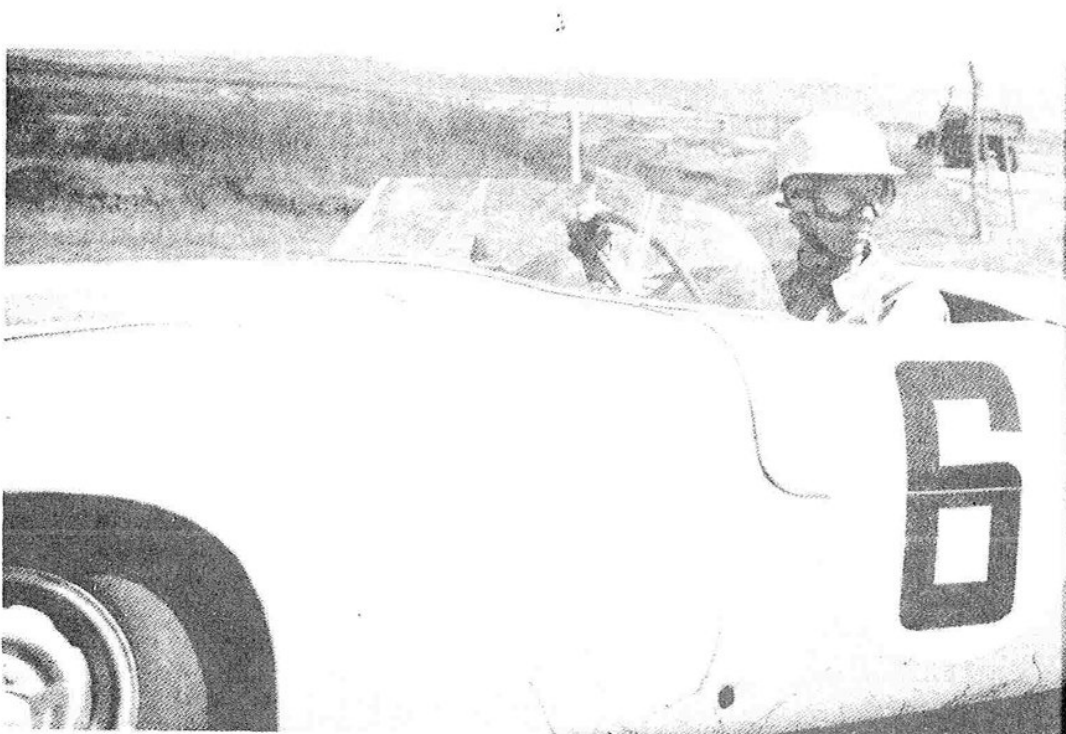
As for the Italians, they brought a couple of mechanics this year and probably feel they are over-doing it.

Leave nothing to chance—that's the German way. A race like the Pan-American is won ahead-of-time. But in the end, of course, the last word lies with the man behind the wheel. And to chance. Even the Germans can't get an ironclad guarantee from Lady Luck. The old gal rides in every car and no man can stop her when she decides to get out and walk.

An Indian (right) looks up from his dugout, in which he gathers reeds, as race cars pass on Mexican race highway near Toluca. Race not only is longest classic, but probably is one of most scenic.



Karl Kling, in his Mercedes Benz SL 300, speeds along the Pan-American race route (above) north of Mexico City.



John Fitch (above) is only American on Mercedes team. He was chosen for the Mexican race after winning his class at Nurburgring last summer in a Porsche. Here he makes ready for a trial run over route in car assigned to him.

