

Swan Song of the Pan American

If the Mexican road race is dead, then political intrigue and financial chicanery are murderers

By **EMIL ZUBRYN**



The new world invades the old. An ancient structure is used to house cars, mechanics and parts as a modern Ford roars by.

THE PAN AMERICAN ROAD Race, which had soared to international fame in its brief span of five years, was buried under a formidable rain of impassioned, exaggerated eulogies, little tempered by truth, in August of 1955.

Rivers of impetuous ink flowed in the public press justifying the "death," blaming the administration, including President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines for "unsportsmanlike" behavior; and blaming sundry officials for minimizing the importance of the event.

Ever since its inception, there were debates in Mexico over the "conveniences" or "inconveniences" of the sporting event in the public life of the nation. But no one seriously believed that the race would be so

brusquely shunted aside.

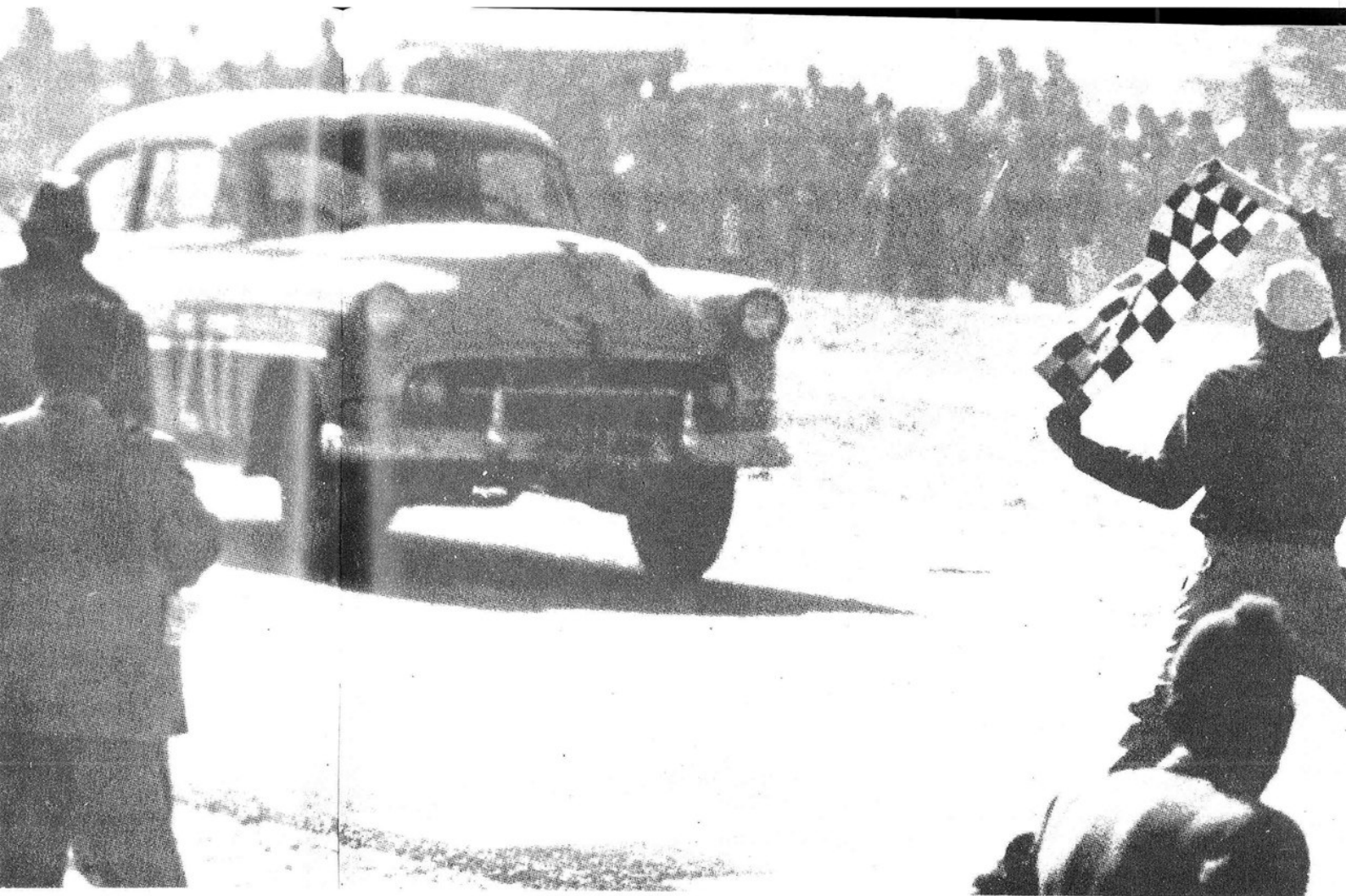
After the first stunned impact, champions fought for the reinstatement of the Pan American. Sports world leaders, racing aces, automobile industry executives, races officials and the fans challenged the administration to give "a sufficient and satisfactory explanation to the public for the suspension of the Pan American Race."

To date, the "satisfactory explanation" has not been forthcoming. Despite the hopeful inclusion of the event in the FIA International Calendar (with the assigned date from the 19th to the 23rd of November of this year), the probabilities are that the curtain has gone down on the spectacular and popular event for good.

"It was an error to suspend the Pan American Race," says Ricardo Marzolini, Mexican representative of the Lancia interests. He said that neither the 24-hour Le Mans duel nor the Italian Mille Miglia were as popular or internationally important as the Mexican race.

Enrique Martin Moreno, a director of the 1951, 1952, 1953 and 1954 events, mourned the "death of the greatest automobile sporting event in the world." But it had to die, he added, because "triumph is never forgiven." This is a left-handed slap at the jealousies and intrigues fostered by the speed trial.

The truth is that the federal crack-down was inevitable, and the Pan-American was doomed from the very start by the bad seed that was flour-



1953 saw Evans' Chevrolet take the title in the light stock car class. Juan Manuel Fangio was the overall winner that same year which was the Carrera's bloodiest—in which four drivers died as well as some spectators. Race was run again in 1954.

ishing around it. Partly in embarrassment and shame, the government decided on drastic action.

Actually, the Pan American Road Race was organized back in 1950 to publicize the "Cristobal Colon" Mexican section of the Pan American Highway. A fiesta is always necessary to celebrate a holiday or event in Mexico, and some unknown came up with the brilliant idea of a border-to-border road race, from Guatemala to the United States line.

Racing fever caught on in the right official circles and so, under the auspices of the Department of Communications, the event was planned as a one-shot publicity stunt that, it was hoped, would pay "dividends" by giving the nation a lot of international press space and modify many of the

erroneous impressions and opinions of a modern Mexico.

Within three years the event had proved itself one of the most exhausting test of cars, motors, accessories and drivers. The Pan American, by 1952, rated with the 24-hour Grand Prix d'Endurance of Le Mans and the Mille Miglia, and FIA had accepted it as the final qualifying test for the newly established international road racing championship.

As an indirect offshoot of the event, the Fiat interests initiated negotiations for the establishment of an assembly plant in Mexico. Other foreign car manufacturers such as the Volkswagen, Renault, Austin, etc. are looking into possibilities of Mexican production for Latin American export as well as the national market. A

seamless tube plant came into being; the government oil monopoly boomed and the national economy was stimulated.

In other words, everyone was happy, including a tight-knit group of influential citizens and politicians exploiting the race to the hilt for the benefit of their own pocketbooks. Deposed organizers of earlier events intrigued to regain power, attacking new officials, charging corruption and incompetence. Politics and greed had entered the Pan American for it had become "big business."

Despite heated denials by the Pan American Road Race Committee, Mexicans looked askance at the maneuvers of the officials and selected friends. Ignacio M. Beteta, one of the

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