

When Ford and Chevy Were Argentine: The Great Era of Turismo de Carretera

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Abstract: This article focuses on Argentine car racing, and more specifically, the car racing class that from the 1930s through the early 1970s was the country's most popular racing event, Turismo de Carretera (touring car racing or TC). For decades, TC drew thousands of fans on paved freeways, on closed speedways, and along rough-and-tumble dirt routes through cities, towns, and the countryside. In the performance, consumption, and narratives of TC, Argentines made U.S. car brands their own. American autos became Argentine. In part, this is an analysis of a culturally constructed hybridity, the Argentine-American car. But more than that, the paper argues that in the 1950s and 1960s, TC transformed quintessential U.S. brands and cultural markers into representations of Argentine daring and mechanical know-how. The central figures in that transformation were the legions of local mechanics who made American cars Argentine through their brilliance under the hood and sometimes, behind the wheel as well.

Keywords:Argentina, Car Racing, Turismo de Carretera, touring car racing, Ford, Chevy

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Was the Ford Falcon Argentine?

Late one Friday in 1976 on a street in Brandsen, a rough-and-tumble industrial town in Buenos Aires province, Argentina, fifteen-year-old Juan Martín Coggi fought anybody willing to take a chance. A future World Boxing Association light welterweight world champion, Coggi was already a local celebrity who punched far above his weight. And like boxing in many places, in Argentina fighters sometimes found their way into amateur, then professional boxing by excelling first on street corners. On that night in particular, a Ford Falcon appeared in the distance.¹ People scattered. Years later, I asked Coggi why they had run. Months into the most brutal military dictatorship in Argentine history, he told me, people knew that an unmarked Falcon could be deadly. It was the car of choice for police and military patrols on the hunt for suspects targeted for arrest, illicit detention and worse.² Coggi's recollection dovetails with the memories of many Argentines who identify the small sedan as an iconic tool of dictatorship terror.³

But such is the cultural force of American cars in Argentina, that there are additional memory reference points for the Falcon. In working-class urban and rural Argentina, the Falcon was a workhorse among American cars built in Argentina. It was rugged and could be kept on the road forever. Unlike Canada or the United States, in an economy with inexpensive labour and the attendant possibility of keeping old cars going for longer, Argentines have long seen American cars as more reliable than Japanese and other models. From the Ford Model T forward, as in the United States, American car companies often advertised toughness and durability in Argentina. A magazine ad for the 1951 Ford F-100 boasted that Ford trucks were hardy. But here, toughness was cast in an explicitly Argentine context. "Ford never specialized in the wool business," the ad noted. "But [Ford] places the F-100 at the disposal of those who know that sector well." The ad underlined the indestructible vigour of the F-100 and provided an insert map of sheep producing regions of Argentina where the F-100 was hard at work.⁴ In addition, Ford Motor Argentina capitalized on the popularity of the Falcon by sponsoring the seven-year run of a television series that first aired in 1963. *La familia Falcón* (The Falcón Family, where their last name was Latinized with the accent over the "o") highlighted the ups and downs of a "typical" Argentine family, featuring a selfless mother, a hard-working father, and children with a new set of problems to be resolved each week – with their Ford Falcon in the background as the family's reliable sedan.⁵

Argentines hold on to one additional Ford Falcon memory, their most lasting and powerful recollection. It was fast. Falcons recorded twenty Turismo de Carretera (touring car racing or TC) season series victories. Each of the above cases tells us something of a long-term process by which Argentines transformed American cars, built both in Argentina and the United States, into culturally "Argentine" vehicles with Argentine identities. In this

context, Argentines continued to race Ford Model Ts through the 1960. First built in Argentina in 1925, the 1960s TC versions had been reassembled dozens of times in some cases. As a matter of mechanics, these were Ford Model Ts in name only. While they looked something like a Model T, and bore the imprint of early twentieth-century Ford emphases on the durability and affordability of the model, sometimes nothing of the original hardware remained of the 1960s versions that raced at speeds over 100 km/hour.⁶ In 1964, for example, the Aero Club Puan (Buenos Aires province) organized a multiple vehicle 190 km circuit race whose winner, Onofre López, completed the course with an average speed of 118.6 km/hour in a Model T. Carlos Lanata placed third in a Chevrolet while Norberto Pascuali placed sixth in a Ford Model A.⁷

This article focuses on Argentine car racing, and more specifically, the car racing class that from the 1930s through the early 1970s was the country's most popular racing event, TC. For decades, TC drew thousands of fans on paved freeways, on closed speedways, and along rough-and-tumble dirt routes through cities, towns, and the countryside. In the performance, consumption, and narratives of TC, Argentines made U.S. car brands like the Falcon their own. American autos became Argentine. In part, this is an analysis of a culturally constructed hybridity, the Argentine-American car. But more than that, the paper argues that in the 1950s and 1960s, TC transformed quintessential U.S. brands and cultural markers into representations of Argentine daring and mechanical know-how. The central figures in that transformation were the legions of local mechanics who made American cars Argentine through their brilliance under the hood and sometimes, behind the wheel as well.⁸

American Car Companies in Argentina

While never the company with the highest Argentine sales, the Packard Motor Car Company resonated with Argentines in one of the earliest of dozens of important and widely known cultural touchstones for American cars. In 1928, Ernesto de la Cruz and Carlos de la Púa wrote the milonga, "Packard," made famous by the singer Eduardo Rivero, who included it in his repertoire for decades. Laced with nostalgia, the song lamented the slow decline of the singer's luxury car as an allegorical elegy for an aging beautiful lover. The song's wistfulness for an "old" car underlined the familiarity Argentines already had in the late 1920s with imported Packards, among other U.S. vehicles.⁹

Ford first shipped cars to Argentina in 1913 and four years later, opened an assembly plant in Buenos Aires. The company launched its first factory in 1925 to produce the Model T and by 1927 was building 100,000 vehicles a year. Ford Motor Argentina began producing the Model A in 1928. The V-8 was built for a decade through 1942 when production halted due to the Second World War. In 1957, Ford Motor Argentina began to assemble F-series trucks and in 1961 began to produce B-600 bus chassis and the Ford Falcon. The Ford Fairlane was built

from 1969 to 1981 and between 1977 and 1984 Ford led all Argentine car manufacturers in sales, reaching a 38 percent market share in 1982. When production of the Falcon ended in 1991, almost half a million had been built in Argentina.¹⁰

General Motors Argentina was formed in 1925 and sold 6,663 Chevrolets in its first nine months of operation, through 400 dealerships across the country. In 1929, GM opened its first factory in Buenos Aires producing cars under the Buick, Chevrolet, Marquette, LaSalle, Cadillac, Vauxhaul, and Opel brands. By 1940, GM held 40 per cent of the Argentine car market. As did Ford, GM ceased production in 1942 having built a total of 250,000 Chevys in Argentina. In 1959, GM Argentina built its first Chevrolet truck and in 1969 began production of the Chevy Nova.¹¹

Kaiser Motors holds a key place in Argentine history in reference to government-business relations during the first administrations of populist president Juan D. Perón (1946-1955). Through the late 1940s, Perón staked out a largely hostile position toward international capital while advocating worker rights. After 1950, no event was more emblematic of a dramatic shift in that position than a 1954 partnership agreement between the Argentine government and Henry J. Kaiser for the construction of a multi-million dollar Kaiser Motors manufacturing plant set to produce 40,000 cars, trucks and jeeps each year.¹²

Just as TC racing peaked in popularity, car manufacturing in Argentina spiked, immediately following a 1959 government decree permitting the assembly in Argentina of foreign made parts for five years. Automotive vehicle production leapt from 32,952 vehicles in 1959 to 89,289 vehicles a year later. In 1960, Chrysler Argentina built 4,500 Dodge Fargo and DeSoto trucks and in 1961, announced plans to manufacture the 1962 Dodge Dart. Between 1958 and 1961, the Industria Kaiser Argentina (IKA) plant in Córdoba tripled its size. By late 1960, it employed 5,203 hourly workers (with 20,000 more seeking work there). In keeping with industry norms in Argentina and equivalent working conditions at IBM and other U.S. companies, IKA offered employees a wide array of benefits that included a heavily subsidized daily meal and full medical care for all family members (for which a worker paid just over 1% of their salary). In 1960, IKA built 9,000 cars, short of the projected 40,000 but representing fully a third of all passenger vehicles built in Argentina. General Motors, Kaiser, Ford, and Chrysler combined to build 93% of all trucks manufactured that year.¹³

Despite these successes, through the early 1960s, car manufacturing in Argentina was small compared to other countries including Canada, a nation of roughly the same population. In 1962 alone, Canada produced 427,600 cars while 6,704,800 were built in the United States.¹⁴ This was indicative of Argentina's ongoing twentieth-century economic slide. But in addition, it reflected an important component of what TC racing boasted in a

country where few could afford a new vehicle – a car industry and car culture flush with refurbished and rebuilt automobiles made to look and function good-as-new.¹⁵

The Birth of TC

During the late nineteenth century, professionals in Argentina and Anglo-Argentines promoted sports that contributed to a cultural Europeanization of Argentine elites, and in their minds, Argentine society. Their preferred sports were golf, polo, horse racing, fútbol, and car racing where they celebrated the attributes of courage and physical conditioning. Argentines raced from the moment the first cars were imported from Europe in the late 1880s. The first formally registered race, on November 16, 1901, covered a distance of 1,100 m and was won by Juan Cassoulet in a steam-powered Rochester. The race featured a cast of upper class, wealthy drivers and passengers that included future president Marcelo T. de Alvear, accompanied in the passenger seat by his chauffeur. The first Gran Premio Nacional (National Grand Prix) from Buenos Aires to Córdoba was held on March 29, 1910. The winner, again, was Juan Cassoulet who completed the 711 km course in thirty hours and forty-two minutes. Car racing took off as a popular spectator sport between the world wars. Through the 1920s a majority of those racing were now working-class, as the sport became less a gentleman's pastime and more a well organized, faster, and dangerous sport.¹⁶

In the 1930s, the federal government oversaw and financed the improvement of hundreds of kilometres of roads. That expanded prospects for the annual Automóvil Club Argentina (ACA)-sponsored Gran Premio touring car event onto longer, better-conditioned routes. ACA, which like the American Automobile Association in the United States, advocated for tourism by automobile, maintained that TC helped entrench the nationalist narrative that the new highways were crucial axes for national integration. In 1931, the creation of the Dirección Nacional de Vialidad (National Directorate of Transit or DNV), which oversaw federal highways, also gave the state a role in regulating car racing.¹⁷ In 1933, when the driver Domingo Bucci died in an accident, Buenos Aires province banned racing. Another death during the 1934 ACA Gran Premio prompted the DNV to suspend for several months all races in Argentina. The 1935 Gran Premio Internacional traversed Argentina and Chile over 4,400 km. To avoid hitting a drunken fan that had wandered onto the course, one driver swerved into a crowd of onlookers killing thirteen. The DNV had had enough. In 1937, with the goal of promoting the safe transit, the DNV ended races on national highways. However, thanks in part to lobbying by ACA, exempt from the prohibition were races that promoted knowledge of Argentina and that encouraged tourism. TC was created to take advantage of that loophole, and was immediately broadcast regularly live on an immensely popular radio program hosted by the sports journalist Luis Elias Sojit.¹⁸ Government authorities anticipated that mechanics would try to supercharge

their cars. As a result TC cars were limited to models sold at dealerships with limited modifications, and whose chassis and motors were of the same make and model as the original consumer model itself. Cars had to have a closed roof and a maximum speed of 120 km/hour. It would not take long for those limitations to be bent and broken.¹⁹

The creation of TC and its rapid evolution into a massively popular sport reflected an ongoing drawing of Argentines' cognitive map of their nation. Urban Argentines and many in rural areas understood the early twentieth-century consolidation of the nation state as a long conquest of an amorphous frontier covering much of country's vast interior. In 1911, a year after Argentina celebrated its independence centennial, accompanied by a scientific mission, the Army marched on the Chaco and Formosa territories along the border with Paraguay in a process that replicated nineteenth-century military campaigns against First Peoples. As late as 1929, an Argentine military expedition returned to Chaco province with a scientific corps in tow, illustrating to many non-indigenous Argentines a chasm that still separated them from a largely unconquered interior.²⁰ Until the 1950s, Argentines continued to view the "interior" of their country as an undiscovered frontier, where military and non-military expeditions sent to map territory, climb mountain ranges, survey geological formations, and collect flora and fauna strengthened the nation by bringing the poorer interior closer to more modern urban centres.²¹ On August 5, 1937, when Agustín P. Justo waved the chequered flag to start the first TC race, covering ten stages across fourteen provinces, fans understood the moment as yet another advance of Argentina's modernizing project in the physical consolidation of the nation.

TC racing thrived. Thousands turned out along the route to watch five drivers in Fords win seven of the stages of the first TC race, a Plymouth driver win two, and a Chevy driver win one. The rally winner was Angel Lo Valvo in his Ford at an average speed of 80.5 km/hour. Organizers breathed a sigh of relief when there were no fatal accidents. Also in a Ford, Eduardo Pedrazzini won a second TC rally in 1937 but this time, when his Ford flipped over en route, another driver, Américo Traba, crashed and died. Along TC routes, racers needed a support vehicle, a team of mechanics, and a range of replacement parts. Ford and GM Argentina saw immediately the value in promoting their rivalry in an immensely popular sport.²²

There were persistent dangers that contributed to a prevalent sense that drivers were heroic. The Chevrolet coupé in which Kiko Risatti won the 1938 Gran Premio featured a 10-gallon metal milk jug holding extra gasoline directly in front of the passenger seat, one of a handful of reasons why drivers and passengers sustained multiple blows to their knees and other bones during a race. Other perils included the small, inadequate windshield wipers and a windshield that shattered easily. Seats were small and only went half way up the driver's back. Bolted to the

car floor, they frequently came off their moorings on fast turns. Seat belts were often not used for a driver's fear of being trapped in a car fire. The gas tank was inside the car cab itself and would be refilled without stopping the car.²³

There was an inauspicious start to the most famous driver rivalry in Argentine car racing history, that between Oscar Gálvez and Juan Manuel Fangio. The 1938 Gran Premio Argentina was suspended only two stages into the race as a result of heavy rains. Gálvez finished the two wet, muddy stages in his Ford at an average speed of only 33.8 km/hour while Fangio finished twenty-second in his Chevy. Despite a paucity of races in the 1940s due to a 1942 government ban on rally racing as a function of gasoline shortages during World War II, the decade was shaped by the Fangio-Gálvez, Chevy-Ford rivalry. Thousands of race fans divided their loyalties evenly between the two drivers and the two American car companies whose vehicles they represented. In 1940, the Gran Premio Nacional del Norte pushed Argentine TC into Bolivia and Peru. Not far from the finish in Lima, Gálvez's Ford flipped over and the driver ended up in hospital, cementing Gálvez's image as a tough guy. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Peruvian race fans saw Fangio cross the finish line first. Julio Pérez, a Chevy driver, died in an accident in another rally that same year. In the 1947 Buenos Aires-Caracas race, when Fangio's car flipped, his passenger Daniel Urrutia died. In 1949, Fangio moved on to Grand Prix racing in Europe while in the 1950s, Oscar Gálvez and his brother Juan, also in a Chevy, excelled in Argentine TC. In 1951, some long distance races shifted to the new Autódromo de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Speedway) where the Gálvez brothers immediately rose to the top of the field as they had on the open road.²⁴

The Mechanics of Hybridity

In both Europe and the United States, there had long been a strong link between car companies and rally racing where circuits often served as experimental labs for technical advances on speed and quality.²⁵ In Argentina, as early as the late 1930s fans began to follow news of local garage mechanics – not car companies or star designers like Carroll Shelby or Harley J. Earl – adapting vehicles to the hardscrabble terrain of TC car circuits. The media crafted a popular image of the local, tough-minded mechanic, often a car driver or passenger as well, able to fix just about any problem on cars coming off a race all but destroyed. In the 1960s, the image combined a popular notion of the industrious, technically clever Argentine mechanic with fast cars that marked a widespread fascination with technological advances as modern. The mechanic-driver of American cars became a glorified Argentine everyman archetype with parallels in the sort of personality often celebrated on the soccer pitch – gutsy, inventive, physically tough, and able to conquer unfavourable odds. Only a handful of mechanics became famous for rebuilding “new” American cars for TC. However, hundreds more not only worked on TC vehicles, but ad-

vertised their expertise to everybody else. Much as they did for TC drivers, many local mechanics were willing to take a failing Ford, Chevy or other American or European model and rebuild it to perfection for a consumer. And as the neighbourhood Motor Salvucci garage (Buenos Aires) advertised in 1964, their work on Fords was always guaranteed.²⁶

In Argentina, American car companies adopted a range of strategies to sell cars. But frequently the message dovetailed with what TC sold – toughness, speed, modernity, hard work, and danger. Often more than important national championships, hundreds of smaller races defined Ford, Chevy, and other U.S. cars as “Argentine” not only in their perennial roles in popular sports culture, but in their having been modified by the Argentine mechanics that gave them the victory. While American cars were made in American or Argentine factories, Argentines understood their TC heroes to be driving cars that had been modified, adapted, and improved by Argentine know-how, technical savvy, and pluck. Often, like the Model Ts in the 1960s racing circuit, a “Chevy” or a “Ford” might have almost nothing left of the factory original. This, and its mechanical pedigree, was part of what made the car Argentine. In 1963, the Automóvil Midget Club of Sunchales (Santa Fe province), for example, owned the Chevy driven by Vicente Cipollati that had won the 500 Millas Argentinas race that same year. The firm of Campetelli and Montalenti had rebuilt the Chevy for that race. Fifteen years earlier, Alfredo Pian had rebuilt the chassis and had raced the same car in 1949. After Pian, the car had gone through two more drivers (Jorge Descotte and Jesús R. Iglesias) before being sold in Uruguay, then brought back again to Argentina. In 1949, the car had raced with a Ford Model “A” motor. Iglesias put in a Chevy, 6-cylinder motor. For the 1963 race, there were three carburetors from a Studebaker truck, and a distributor from a 1932 Nash. The clutch system was from a Ford V-8.²⁷

The 1961 Gran Premio reaffirmed the dominance of Ford and Chevrolet on the TC racing circuit. All but one of the 79 cars competing in the race were Fords or Chevys. Drivers broke speed records, the winner of the first leg to Mendoza registering an average of 139 km/hour, with some drivers hitting 170 km/hour at their fastest speed. On the first stage through Colón, Julio César Castellani hit a patch of oil on the route and ploughed into spectators killing several, one of a handful of deadly crashes in the race.²⁸ Like other cars, Manuel Mantinián’s Chevy was a patchwork of parts from a variety of cars that included a 1955 6-cylinder Chevy motor and a 1939 Chevy chassis.²⁹

Car parts companies distinguished in their advertising between factory models and, with an outreach to consumers driving older vehicles, cars that had been rebuilt. When such ads discussed a particular rebuilt TC car (often known to fans), they sometimes used amorphous descriptors that did not reference the make of the vehicle. A 1965 ad for Yucatán pistons boasted that six of the top eleven finishers in the Two Races Rally in Buenos Aires province had used their products. Hugo A. Gimeno’s Valiant and Rodolfo Alzaga’s Falcon were identified

as factory models. Rebuilt cars with a long mechanical pedigree included Carlos Loeffel's "Chevrolet" and Dante Emiliozzi's "Ford" identified obliquely by make only.³⁰ Small Argentine manufacturers of all sorts relating to the auto sector proliferated. Pedro V. Caffarena built folding chairs, tables, barbecues and more, for TC fans stationed along the route.³¹ S.A.D.A.R. produced shock absorbers.³² T.A.M. Retenes S.A.I.C. boasted in a 1966 ad that they were the first manufacturers of synthetic rubber gaskets in Argentina (1952), and the first to export Argentine made gaskets (1962).³³ Many small Argentine manufacturers also built auto parts under license from US corporations. E. Daneri of Buenos Aires, for example, built piston rings under license from the Perfect Circle Corporation of Hagerstown, Indiana.³⁴

Every Monday night, Champion Baterias (a subsidiary of U.S.-based Champion) sponsored "Cadena Champion de Mundo de Autos y Volantes" (The Champion Network of the World of Auto Racing), a radio program that profiled outstanding drivers on 100 stations across the country.³⁵ Thousands tuned in to the "¡Coche a la Vista!" (Car in Sight!) radio show from 19:30 to 20:00 every night but Sunday, with a focus on TC and with correspondents covering racing events across Europe.³⁶ Luis Elias Sojit, who had first broadcast car racing in 1937, hosted the radio program "Automovilismo" on the Radio Libertad network from Monday to Friday, 22:30 to 23:00 in 1961, boasting a team of six additional sports journalists. The station also regularly broadcast races live, including the XIV Tour of Santa Fe province in May 1962.³⁷ By 1962, Argentines were following races on television. Channel 7 ran the show "El Deporte es Así" (This is sport) with Dante Panzeri and sports journalists Ernesto Lazzatti, Raúl Goro and Ulises Barrera at 19:30 on Sundays. Also on Channel 7 from 12:00 to 12:25 the U.S. series "Speedway" aired, while on Channel 9, from 11:15 to 11:45 AM on Fridays, viewers could watch "Touring Club Argentina" with Luis Miguel Sánchez and Perla Alvarado, and Tuesdays on Channel 11 from 12:12 AM to 12:17 AM, "Carburando" (Carbureting) with Andrés Rouco.³⁸

Excellent mechanics became famous for adapting American cars for tough Argentine road conditions. One journalist described a visit to Vicente Formisano's garage on Avenida Las Heras in Buenos Aires where he saw the mechanic's "new" Chevrolet coupé. Formisano had begun building it on January 7, 1965 and had finished it two months later. The six-cylinder motor was from a 1964 Chevrolet. The pistons were Sylicum (an Argentine brand). The Argentine firm Val Hermanos had built the radiators, the transmission was from a Corvette, the differential from an Impala, the disk brakes had been manufactured by the Argentine firm, Disco-Fren, and the wheels were by Protto, also an Argentine company.³⁹ Of the fourteen drivers who finished a 1965 TC event in Pergamino, six drove Chevrolets while eight drove Fords, including the winner Dante Emiliozzi. Eighth place finisher Juan Roberto Machado told journalists before the race that his Chevrolet "knows the hands of the maestro, Bernardo Pérez." Machado was boasting that because his car had once belonged to the famed mechanic, Pérez, it had a pedigree that promised success.

Sometimes, cars had a life of their own, shaped by the work of previous drivers and mechanics.⁴⁰

Early in 1964, when the mechanic José Froilán González wanted to start racing on TC circuits, he began work on a Chevy 400, installed three Weber dual carburetors, a transmission rebuilt with parts from a Chevrolet pick-up, and two 100-litre gas tanks behind the driver's seat. Froilán González assigned the mechanic Rinaldo Bellavigna to prepare the car. Bellavigna worked out of his small shop, alongside his brother Aldo, in the town of Saénz Peña (Buenos Aires province), whose residents numbered fewer than 10,000. The pistons and valves installed were Sylicum and Frezia, both Argentine brands. The bearings and connecting rods were from an unspecified Chevrolet, and the spark plugs were Champion. The gearshift was taken from a Corvette.⁴¹ Two years later, after several racing wins, Froilán González decided that the car was too light and too dangerous. Still working with the Bellavigna brothers, Froilán González lowered the height of the car by 5 cm, though the chassis remained the same distance from the ground for the rigors of the course. The front of the car was rebuilt for better aerodynamics. The mechanics created openings along the driver side doors and at the base of the chassis to ventilate the cab. The car was rebaptized "Chevitú" (or Chevy II). As a young man, one journalist gushed, Froilán González had followed his father's wishes and become a physician. Now, he's the "chief physician" of the Chevitú.⁴²

For Argentine parts makers like Radiadores Arévalo, fan interest in the mechanics that rebuilt racing cars primed their sales to everyday mechanics, and to drivers who wanted their Fords and Chevys to run like the Chevitú.⁴³ Moreover, mechanics known for their work on building and rebuilding fast racing cars also sold rebuilt models to the public that approximated TC cars in some regards. Ramón Requejo rebuilt his Chevrolet into a single-seat V-7 with a chrome-molybdenum frame. Other mechanics imitated the design for consumer sales, building about 100 more on this model with motors that ranged from 4 to 16 cylinders.⁴⁴

Fans continued to be attracted to the violence of the sport as a backdrop for the courage of drivers. In May 1962, the Consejo Publicitario Argentino (Argentine Publicity Council) took out an ad asking drivers to keep both hands on the wheel with the admonition, "You won't survive with just one hand..." and the image of a man hanging from a multi-story building with two hands.⁴⁵ A 1964 advertisement for Salvex, a maker of safety belts, featured a comment from the driver, Carlos Menditeguy, whose car had flipped over multiple times during an accident at the Fourth National TC Championship: "We were saved by fastening our seatbelts."⁴⁶ Such was the enthusiasm of the public for TC events that in April 1966, the journalist Luis Miceli lamented the dangers of fans enthusiastically jumping onto the course and placing themselves and car drivers in danger. Miceli suggested a variety of steps to professionalize the sport that included the closer supervision of the mechanical state of cars and rigorous exam process to ensure driver quality and skill. But in the end, what Miceli's suggestions underlined was that the rough-and-tumble world of

TC that authorities had tried to clean up in 1932 persisted into the mid-1960s, and that for fans, while safety made sense, it offset the thrill of high risk and ongoing mayhem at TC events.⁴⁷

TC also gave fans – many from Buenos Aires and other rapidly growing cities -- a sense of adventure as they followed races in more remote regions. In 1961, the third run of the Campeonato Fueguino (the Tierra del Fuego Championship) was held over thirty laps of a 6.2 km circuit. The two key contenders for what was billed as the southernmost car race in the world were Raúl G. Chiflett, a veterinarian from Córdoba now living in Tierra del Fuego and José Muñiz, a Ford dealer from Río Gallegos who had been driving late model Fords off his lot in TC races. The competition had an international flavour with the participation of four Chilean drivers in Ford Rancheros with Thunderbird motors. Muñiz faded quickly with mechanical problems. Chiflett won the race in 2.5 hours, averaging 76.4 km/hour in his Chevy with the words, “El sueño de un yacaré propio” (The dream of one’s own alligator”) cryptically painted on the side of the car.⁴⁸ In the 1964 version of the race, the Argentine Army was on hand to help out.⁴⁹

For Argentine fans, Dante and Torcuato Emiliozzi marked the archetype of Argentine mechanical ingenuity combined with fearless TC driving. Dante generally drove with Torcuato in the passenger seat. During the 1950s, the extended family practically lived in the garage in the days before a race, as the brothers tinkered with and finalized their mechanical preparations. Fans loved the image of a workshop of men who worked hard and played hard, as well as the fact that when the Emiliozzis were on the road before a race, they always had dinner and a bedroom waiting for them at the house of a local racing fan. Often, towns hosting a race might have one small hotel. When up to a hundred drivers, mechanics, and others descended on the village of Hughes (Santa Fe province) and dozens of similar small towns for a race, they had to be billeted in homes. TC racing was often a days-long festival that involved all the locals. In 1949, over seven months, the Emiliozzis converted a Ford sidevalve motor of the sort used in the Model T and the Ford V-8 to an overhead valve design, five years before Ford Motor Argentina developed a similar model. That set off a winning streak for the Emiliozzis that only ended when, as underdogs from a rural town, they were unable to push back against a 1956 decision by racing officials in Buenos Aires to ban overhead valve engines of the sort the Emiliozzis had pioneered. Fans remained convinced that the decision to eliminate the overhead design was specifically targeted at the Emiliozzis’ success, particularly on long straightaways on rural, dirt roads where they could reach unbeatable speeds.⁵⁰

Their engine sidelined, the Emiliozzis left the TC circuit for a year to build a new “Ford” motor among whose innovations were more durable piston rods and an additional, fourth carburetor. On their return to racing in 1957, they were back to winning. There were new heroics. At a 1958 race in the town of Mercedes (Buenos

Aires province), driving with a broken cylinder cap, the brothers were leading the pack by only fifteen minutes so were reluctant to stop to make repairs with only 50 km left in the race. Their motor stalled as a result of water seeping through the broken cap and as they tried to manoeuvre around a curve the car hit an old fountain in the middle of the road and flipped over. Fans raced onto the course to right the car, injuring Dante's vertebral column. While Torcuato suffered only a few minor scratches, a local physician gave him a tetanus vaccine after the race. The disease was endemic to the area, Torcuato recalled later, as a result of the many local pig farms.

TC No Longer Dominates

What made TC unique to Argentina, but in addition, what provided the link between a U.S. car culture argentinizada (made Argentine), the excitement of off-the-beaten-track high-speed racing, and the enthusiasm of fans was proximity. In the 1930s, TC had been planned and set in motion as a sport that might advance everyday tourist, car culture in vehicles that were meant to look like and vary only modestly from factory models sold to the public. While TC cars departed increasingly from that norm in more powerful engines and in other alterations, the modifications were executed as part of that notion of a national or local proximity. Local mechanics in neighbourhood garages, some famous in racing circles and beyond, altered designs as a triumph of Argentine know-how, in a context of long-term economic decline in Argentina, and the growing need over the twentieth century for most car owners to find ways to keep their vehicles on the road frugally. TC racing inspired fans to see their own rebuilt, older models as more than just tired, used cars.⁵¹

There is no precise end to the first era in TC. The sport changed slowly over time, beginning perhaps as early as 1949 when Juan Manuel Fangio made his famous leap from TC to Grand Prix racing in Europe, and ending in the mid-1970s when new TC regulations were implemented; only four models remained approved for racing, the Chevy Nova, the Falcon, the Dodge GTX, and the IKA Torino, all limited to 3,000 cubic centimetre-engines. By the 1980s, the familiarity of the local in TC racing was gone and the sport now resembled GT racing in Europe. Visually and mechanically, cars no longer brought to mind what a consumer could purchase and drive. Racing cars became mechanically and visually closer to rally cars in the United States and elsewhere, serviced and altered by highly specialized mechanics, not the local garage down the block. Races were staged increasingly on closed circuits with viewing stands for hundreds or thousands, not on dangerous rural courses in remote areas of the country. There were equivalent changes in other sports. By the 1980s, soccer in Argentina had lost its ties to the local in the rise of sports academies for talented children run by wealthy professional soccer teams and in the decline of the archetypical player, the kid from an impoverished neighbourhood schooled in the game not in an expensive (and inaccessible) academy, but in unplanned games on local potreros (empty urban spaces where a

pick-up game might form).⁵² At the same time, boxing declined in Argentina and other South American countries as the sport lost contact with the local. By the early 1980s, fans had stopped going to local fights and were tuning in on new cable television networks to boxing from New York and Las Vegas.⁵³

Like boxing and soccer, and in the context of previously unavailable live televised competitions from the United States and Europe, the business of TC became less sustainable as the media switched focus to international racing and to racing in Argentina that more closely approximated GT racing in the United States and Grand Prix in Europe. By the early 1960s, as they followed their TC heroes, Argentine fans also followed auto sector developments in the United States and elsewhere more closely than they had in the past. In 1964, they marvelled at the new Ford GT-40, designed in the United States and built in the United Kingdom, with a 350-horse power motor that clocked more than 320km/hour.⁵⁴ The GT-40 program, taken over by Carroll Shelby in 1965, produced a car designed explicitly for racing and a far cry from most TC cars that still remained both in theory and in practice based at least in part on consumer car designs.⁵⁵

The racing culture the Emiliozzis and other mechanic-drivers had made popular began to vanish slowly, as the TC circuit professionalized. During the first six months of 1968, for example, there was an unprecedented and shocking drought of victories for Ford vehicles. The mechanic Aldo Bellavigna chalked it up to newer Ford vehicles and their lack of adequate brakes, poor aerodynamics, and power around curves. The General Motors Argentina engineer Ricardo Joseph had no answer, nor did Horacio Steven, the designer of the Steven-Ford prototype race vehicle built in 1967 by Ford Motor Argentina. But Bernardo Pérez, the famed local garage owner with experience rebuilding TC engines argued that the problem had nothing to do with the power of the Ford motors, aerodynamics, or other possible Ford design flaws. Recalling the Emiliozzis' overhead valve system and Froilán González's innovative garage modifications, he told an interviewer impatiently to go ask each of those mechanical whizzes what the problem was. For Pérez and for older fans looking back on the 1950s and earlier, the Fords now running in TC -- and losing -- were increasingly professionally designed prototypes, like the Steven-Ford, rather than the ingeniously crafted work of local garages.⁵⁶ Like the Steven-Ford, the Martos-Chevrolet prototype vehicle (1968) had an extremely light, newly designed engine. The more rigid frame signalled the shift of TC racing from rough country roads to closed asphalt circuits. A new multi-tubular design, the chassis was built from high-strength, low alloy steel, a metal that local garages had never incorporated into their work until then. While Bernardo Pérez supervised the preparation of the motor, in contrast to the perennially open access all and sundry had to the Emiliozzis' garage, during much of the construction of the Martos-Chevrolet, the car was under lock and key at General Motors Argentina's San Martín factory, accessible only to a small number of GM employees

– but closed to Pérez and to eager fans.⁵⁷

The business of racing and selling cars in Argentina changed. In 1968, Ford created its first TC racing team of ten drivers, quickly followed by General Motors and Chrysler. Sponsorship of the make of car, rather than the small amount of money a local firm might have given a driver in the 1950s, raised the profile of speedy, factory-made prototypes, and lowered that of drivers. In the 1968 Argentine Gran Premio, Ford handed out its first winner's prizes – an unprecedented \$40,000 plus a new Ford car. In what the economist Jorge Katz describes as the internally driven phase of Argentine productive and technological development (1950-1980), American firms advanced uniquely Argentine car designs. The most iconic of these was the Torino 380 coupé, built from 1966 to 1975 by IKA. The launch of the Ford Taunus in 1974 drew on 300,000 hours of work in Argentina by a team of 120 in the Ford Motor engineering department. Each of the Torino, the Taunus, and IKA's Bergantín had some success on the TC circuit. However, their marketing was antithetical to the message of toughness and power that had previously tied the sale of cars to an ideal of TC muscle.⁵⁸

The year the Taunus was introduced, Ford ran a two-page advertisement in the widely read gossip magazine *Gente*. "Ford tough" was gone. In keeping with equivalent shifts in U.S. car advertising in the 1970s, the Taunus was "Ford's little one," with 2000 cubic centimetres "neatly outfitted." The new car had the "quality and reliability" of the larger Falcon and Fairlane, in "exceptionally narrow and low" proportions that assured security and maximum stability.⁵⁹ A 1972 advertisement for the Ford Fairlane featured the photograph of a smiling, conservatively dressed middle-aged woman behind the wheel: "When we bought it, it seemed so big that I wouldn't drive it for anything in the world.... I'd have preferred to be captain of the Queen Mary." But she quickly changed her mind in response to how easy the car was to drive, the smooth brakes, and the quiet ride. "Alicia, my friend, says that the Fairlane is my serenity capsule. Every time I drive to her house I arrive at peace with the world."⁶⁰ A 1972 ad for the Dodge Polara emphasized that it was not a race car and that one attractive factor differentiated it from the more powerful Dodge GTX -- the price. "We've learned to understand one another," the ad noted, suggesting that Chrysler "understood" Argentines, "so we've offered comfort at a fair price."⁶¹

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Argentine media covered less of TC and much more of car racing abroad. A 1971 report on the Brazilian driver Emerson Fittipaldi was one of many examples of a shift in the Argentine media – and in fan interest – away from TC and toward Formula One. The connections to Argentina in the article were limited to captioned photos of Fittipaldi with Juan Manuel Fangio and with Formula One driver Carlos Reutemann. The caption under the Fangio photograph underlined the passing of a torch from one generation to the next, with "the Brazilian following decidedly in the footsteps of the five-time [Formula One] champion."⁶² A handful of international

racing circuit categories with pit stops in Argentina became more popular. Of the top seven finishers at the 1964 Formula Three race in Mar del Plata, only two were Argentine. There were two top drivers from England, one from France, one from Belgium, and one from Italy.⁶³

Where in earlier decades the danger of the automobile had seemed exciting and romantic to TC fans, by the late 1960s print and other media reflected the growing concern of average Argentine drivers with what seemed to many the untenable number of cars on roads, and their attendant dangers. At the 1966 Turismo Mejorando race in Villa María (Córdoba province) Rosmaldo Visintini lost the use of his brakes rounding a turn and smashed into a building narrowly missing spectators.⁶⁴ While the media reported that death much as they had those of dozens of other drivers, when Pablo Birger died tragically that same year, the media were more wistful. Reports cast Birger as the ideal Argentine racing driver. He was remembered nostalgically as cordial, affable, dynamic, restless, and hard working. A famous Ford TC racer, Birger died not in a race, but in a highway pile-up when he tried to pass a truck, underlining the exponential increase in car accidents in Argentina during the 1960s. However fans might have felt about death and danger on the TC circuit, there was nothing romantic about highway traffic deaths.⁶⁵

One Sunday afternoon in October 1972, the magazine *Gente* sent a helicopter to survey the atrocious road conditions that confronted Buenos Aires residents as they returned to the city from a weekend in the country. "Can you imagine what it will be like this summer?" the article title screamed. In addition to traffic at a standstill for kilometres along the route, at 1:50 PM the reporter came across "a car sliced in half, a body on the ground, another car on its side." The article alerted readers that the death was not inevitable. "The route demands minimal speeds. It has clearly indicated dangerous intersections and curves. But from the air it's clear that few drivers respect the rules."⁶⁶ By the mid-1970s, Argentines had begun to consider the dangers of drinking and driving. By 1978, 5 per cent of the population were alcoholics and drunk drivers caused as many as one in four car accidents. In October 1977, the Argentine Biochemistry Association undertook a study in the city of Paraná. Twenty-five hundred blood tests showed that 12.4% of car drivers, 24.4% of truckers, and 11.4% of bus drivers were on the road drunk. Growing numbers of Argentines began calling for tougher laws on road safety.⁶⁷

If the work of Emiliozzi brothers represented the apogee of the first TC era, Oreste Berta (nicknamed "The Magician") marked its end. After briefly following the model of the Emiliozzis by opening his own garage to ready a Renault Dauphine for the TC circuit, Berta was named director of design for IKA. As an in-house IKA mechanic, Berta led the team that produced winning seasons for the Torino on the TC circuit in 1967, 1969, 1970, and 1971. In 1969, he led a team to run three Torinos at the Nürburgring 84-hours race in Germany. One of the Torinos completed 334 laps of the circuit and but for penalties, would have won. Despite the disqualification, the race made Berta famous. While he continued to work for IKA, Berta also opened his own company to produce prototype cars.

In 1970, he launched the Berta LR at a 1000 km race in the Buenos Aires Speedway. The car engine was a modified Ford Cosworth V-8, often used in the Formula One category. Over the next decade, Berta produced new prototypes for international races in the Formula Two, Formula One, and other categories. By the time Renault Argentina (which had purchased IKA in 1970) contracted with Berta in 1980 to take charge of preparing its vehicles for TC, that circuit was no longer what it had been in 1960. Rebranded "TC 2000" in 1979, the circuit was now almost entirely contested on closed, paved circuits. In the past, the business of the sport was almost non-existent in small individual car sponsorship deals and in ticket sales for speedway events. Now, it had become big business with each of the big American car companies sponsoring racing teams and paying for dozens of mechanics at events that had begun to approximate open-wheel and stock car circuits in the United States.⁶⁸

In July 1989, when sports journalist César Litvak alluded to the fans in attendance at a TC event in San Lorenzo, he described them as "the 12,000 faithful devotees of the Virgin of TC." When he wrote of the "absolute dominance" of Chevrolet over Ford in the race he was no longer talking about the pedigree mechanics of cars that had been built and rebuilt dozens of times. Litvak was describing powerful prototype versions of cars unavailable to consumers, designed and built by the car makers themselves.⁶⁹ Even so, memories of the first TC era lived on. Drag racing circuits allowed much larger engines than had the TC circuit in the 1970s. Now, rebuilt cars from the 1930s forward competed in intense, 300-metre drag races. Driving a "Chevy," Walter Brancaloni won the twelfth race on the 300-Free light class 2006 circuit in just over twelve seconds. He was followed in sequence by another Chevy and four Falcons. Marcelo Delmagnò bought his 1975 Dodge Polara R/T in 1998 from someone he knew as Fernando. He fixed some electrical wiring that went "nowhere" and replaced the Saginaw gearbox that had been installed at some point, a component as ridiculous in a Dodge "as a man having a baby." In 2000, he regularly took the car to shows where fans wandered through rows of refurbished 1970s vehicles. In 2006, the owner of a 1979 Ford Falcon that he had rebuilt told a reporter that, "this car is the love of my life. My mom says I'm crazy but my dad is happy because I was able to accomplish with this car everything he couldn't when it belonged to him. When I was three years old, I was already wearing my Ford cap. [When I was a kid], my dad and I were always at the speedway for TC."⁷⁰

Endnotes

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