

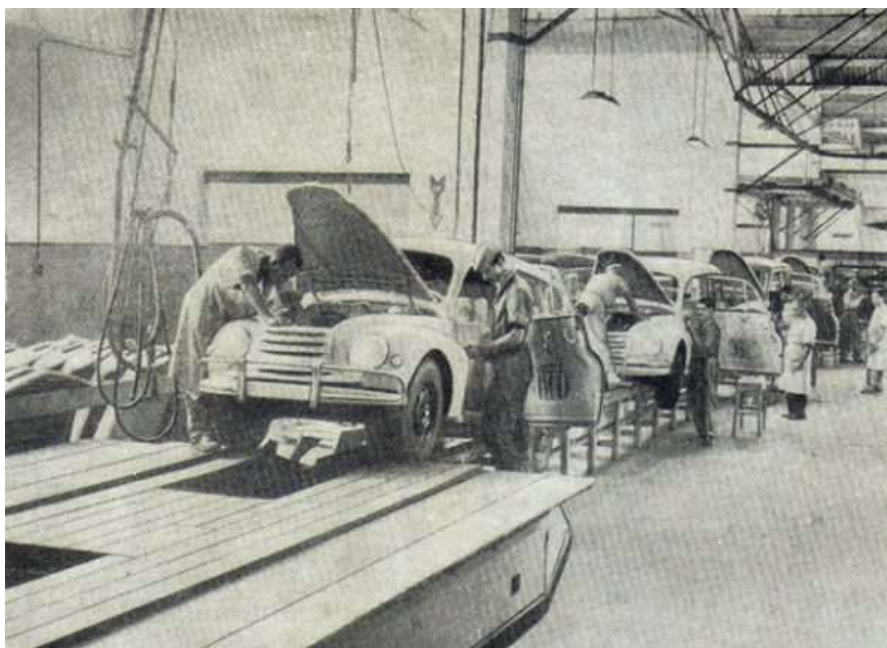


## CC Global: GT Malzoni, Willys Interlagos, The Factory Racing War of The 1960s and the Birth of the Puma

BY  
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– SEPTEMBER 9, 2017



Back in the early 1950s, when the Brazilian government made public its intention to invite automakers to start building cars in Brazil, not everyone was thrilled. At that time, my grandfather had a very busy car repair shop specialized in Ford Flathead V8s, and he remembered the conversations with some of his die hard gearheads costumers: they thought a car made in Brazil could never stand a chance against a good old American car.



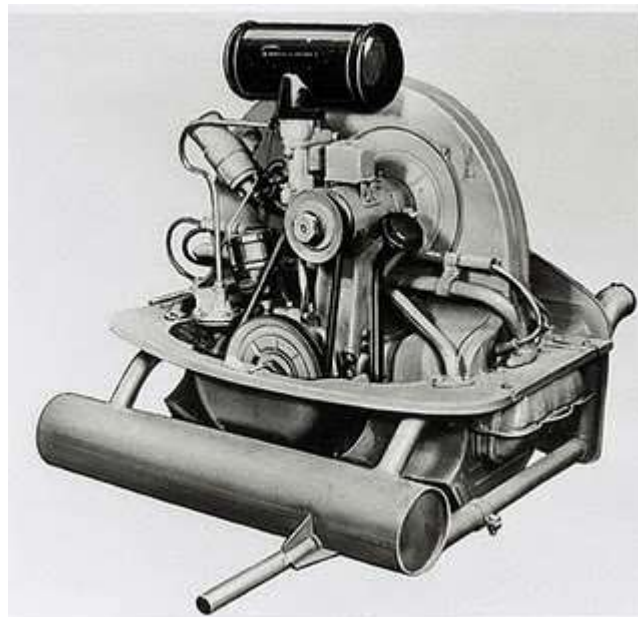


And for quite some time, they were totally right, the imported American cars were way superior to any of our initial products; but eventually, pride and price made the domestic cars a huge success.



Naturally, as soon as we get our hands on something that “moves”, we will try to make it move “faster”. We, the Brazilians, just like any other motorized nation, have the virus of speed running freely in our veins.

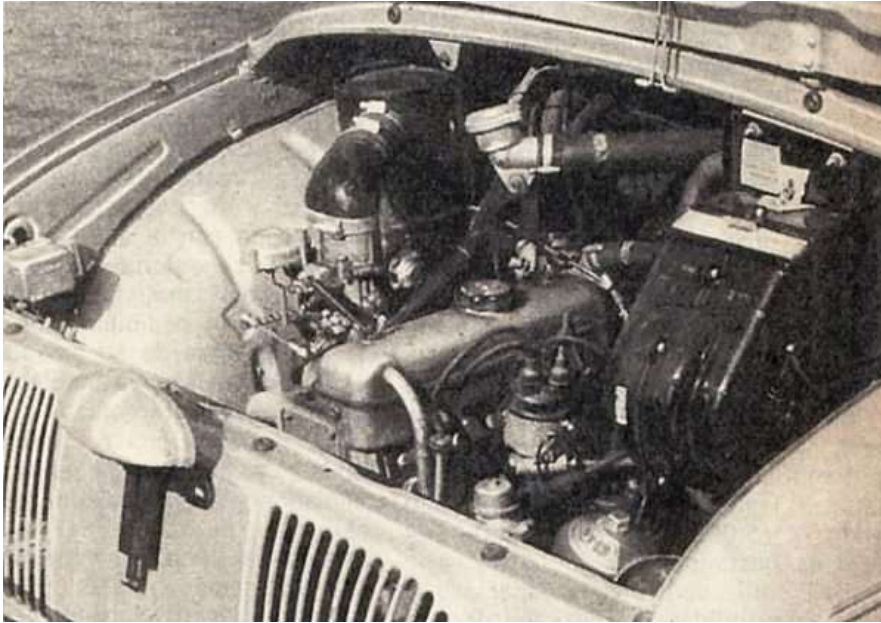
Quickly we learned how to squeeze a few extra horses out of the three most popular small cars of that time.



By early 60s, performance parts for the VW flat four were not so popular in Brazil. It would take a few more years for us to fully embrace the VW mania.

The best option was to adapt a bigger carb and rework the cylinder heads.

More powerful engines became available only in 1967 when the VW Kombi was upgraded to 1500cc mill and the Bug got a 1300cc.



The Renault Dauphine Gordini owners faced the same problem, a total lack of performance parts for the little sedan, which was produced in Brazil by the American Willys under an agreement with Renault.

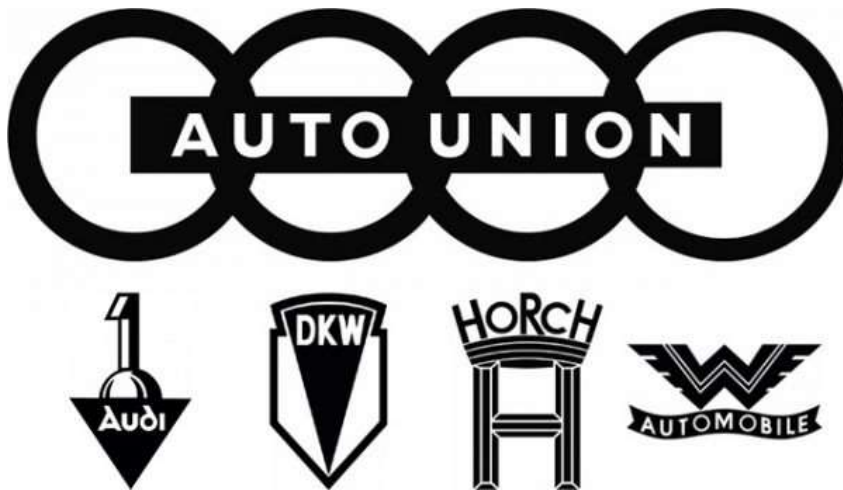
A spicier version of the Renault "Ventoux" engine was used on the Willys Interlagos but they were pretty rare to find. (lets talk about this car a bit latter).



The Beetle and the Gordini were, by no means, what we could call conventional cars. They both have their peculiar design and engineering solutions (and flaws as well).

But they're nothing to compare to our third most popular small car, the DKW. Every single detail on that car was unique, starting with the weird but very aerodynamic design, and to their 2 stroke, 3 cylinder engine.





Before we go on here, lets talk a little bit about the history of the brand in Brazilian territory.



DKW was the the most affordable automaker among the four brands that formed Auto Union. In 1953 the F91 debuted in Europe. The car quickly became very popular, it was roomy, reliable and the performance of the little 900cc, 2 strokes engine was surprisingly good. DKW even named the car "3=6".



Taking full advantage of the financial incentives given by the Brazilian government to any foreign auto maker willing to set foot in Brazil, the Germans didn't waist any time and in 1954 they shook hands with the Brazilian



company “VEMAG” (which stands for “**VE**ículos e **MÁ**quinas **AG**rícolas”) and together they would start the production of the DKW F91 line of cars.

Vemag was a well established company, responsible for the assembling and sales of the Studebaker cars and Scania -Vabis trucks brought to Brazil in CKD system, since 1945.



In November, 1956, 3 years after its debut on Germany, DKW-Vemag rolled out the very first car ever produced in Brazil, the Station Wagon “Universal”. Latter the car was renamed “Vemaguete”.



The four door sedan was the next to be presented. Named here the Belcar.





The off-road 4x4 "Candango" came right after.



And the top of the line "Fissore" was the last addition to the DKW-Vemag line of cars.

The name DKW comes from "Dampf-Kraft-Wagen" which translates to "steam powered vehicle." It carries this name because the very first vehicle built by the company was a light steam car. ([a more detailed DKW history is here](#))

Many years later, when they started to build little 2 strokes engines, it was renamed the DKW as "Das Kleine Wunder", which translates to: "The little wonder".



The little engine is, in fact, some kind of wonder, it has only 7 internal moving parts – 3 pistons, 3 connecting rods and a crankshaft. There are 3 coils and 3 sets of points. The distributor is on the end of the crankshaft. The cooling system is a convection (thermo-syphon) type with the radiator mounted higher than the engine (between the motor and the firewall) so that hot water rises to the return line to the radiator while cooled water returns to the engine from the lower radiator outlet. Amazingly, this arrangement drops the water temperature 40° F.

The fan is mounted on top of the head, facing the rear, and provides not only cooling air to the radiator but also serves as the heater for the car. A damper on the back side of the radiator is controlled by a push rod to enable the driver to block off part of the radiator to make the engine heat up to operating temperature in cold weather.





In a 1000cc version, this engine could produce 50hp. In Brazil, the DKW soon earned a reputation for being reliable, easy to maintain and for offering a decent performance for a small car. The very same reasons the car was a success in Germany.



It didn't take too long before the qualities of the 900cc engine were put to test in races all over the country.

In the same way the engine is pretty easy to maintain, it is easy to get some extra horses out of it as well. The recipe is simple: some rework on the intake and exhaust ports; machine the flywheel to make it lighter; a bigger carb or one carb for each cylinder and perhaps the most complicated part of the process is to build a better exhaust. Since the "muffler" is a vital part of the two stroke engine's scavenging system that impacts key aspects of its operation, you don't want to mess this up.



In a full race configuration, the DKW would not only "toast" any small Brazilian car but also be a pain in the neck to bigger contenders like the Simcas, Flathead Fords and Stovebolt Chevys.

My Grampa would always says: *"You just can't add a lot of power and RPM and not expect something to give up on you"*

Clutch and U-joints were the first victims of the extra dose of power. Some skillful drivers would use the clutch only to put the car in movement and then shifting the gears without touching it.



The DKW became a familiar sight at our only racetrack at the time, "Interlagos", located in São Paulo and at the many race events on the streets of big cities around the country as well, bringing together a faithful legion of "race" drivers/owners.



Just like any other automaker, Vemag knew that what wins on Sunday, sells on Monday and in 1959 they created the very first official Race Department among the Brazilian automakers. The engines supplied by Vemag to race teams was a little bit bigger, 1000cc.





### *The Need for Something Special.*

Car races was quickly becoming the second most popular past time in the country and the automakers were cashing in as much as they could.

In the early 60s, both VW and Willys realized that there were a segment of customers waiting for something new.

### *Karmann Ghia*



In 1962, VW started building the Karmann Ghia in Brazil, aiming to the young buyers who wanted an affordable sportscar. The gorgeous Italian design allied with the bulletproof VW mechanics made the KG an instant hit.



The anemic 36 hp 1200cc was replaced in 1967 by the VW Bus 52hp 1500cc engine and in 1970 the car received some real improvements, a slightly bigger mill with 1600cc and dual carbs and 65hp, wider rear end and front disc brakes.



In 1972 the original KG was replaced by the TC model but it didn't have the same sex appeal and the production ended in 1975. Brazil was the only country outside Germany to produce KGs; all together, VW and Karmann built a total of 41,600 cars.

Amazingly, for a tropical country, less than 200 convertibles were sold during that time.

### ***Interlagos***





Also in 1962, Willys debuted a Brazilian version of the Renault A108 Alpine. The car was first shown to the public one year before, at the “Salão do Automóvel” in São Paulo, the most famous car show in the country. At that time, the little sports car didn’t have an official name and a prestigious auto journalist called it “Interlagos”, the same name of our only racetrack at that time. The Willys bosses liked the name and a year later it became official.

The car was offered in three different models, the “Berlineta” (picture above)



The coupe.







And the convertible, which was an exclusive model for the Brazilian market. The French A 108 didn't have this option.

The Interlagos was ground breaking in Brazil, it was the first fiberglass bodied car produced in the country and it was mostly intended for competition.



While the Karmann Ghia was a charming, elegant sportscar, the Interlagos was a raw, race-ready car.

Willys offered 3 different engine options, all of them based on the little "Ventoux". The first one was the basic 850cc "Gordini" engine with 40hp; the second option was the same mill but a little bigger, with 950cc and 55hp and the last option was the 980cc engine meant for the race track only, equipped with the French Redéle camshaft, double barrel Weber carb and 9,8:1 comp. ratio, this recipe was enough to produce 80hp.



The Ventoux was not the best basis for a high performance engine, with the crankshaft spinning on 3 main bearings only, reliability was not one of its qualities.



Perhaps Willys should have imported the already available 1300cc R8 engine but the company was struggling to keep afloat in face of the mighty VW and they could not afford the luxury of a French engine.



The Interlagos was ridiculously light, only 535 Kg (1180 lbs), and it helped a lot on its performance. It could go from 0 to 60 m/h in 9.3 secs and the top speed was 160 Km/h.





Willys-Renault had in its hands a purebred; everything was right about that car, the name, the gorgeous design, the performance. Finally the DKW met its match on the tracks and on the streets as well.



The Willys competition department was immediately created and yellow with a blue stripe was the official color for the cars.

The only problem was: according to rules, the DKW was racing on the "Tourism" class, for cars with 4 passengers capacity, that means the Interlagos wouldn't fit in that. Quickly the Brazilian Racing Federation changed the rules, creating a new class which cars would be separated by engine size, not by body style.

At first the DKW guys were not so thrilled to know their heavy 4 door, all steel sedan would be competing against a fiberglass bodied GT car, but since the challenge was already thrown on the table, it was too late to run away.



Very soon the Willys Interlagos started to show its superiority and in 1964 the little car won all the main races of the season. It was clear the Vemag – DKW couldn't stand a chance against it.

Something needed to be done.





At this point, DKW was also having hard times to keep itself in business. In 1957 Daimler Benz took over the ownership of the company and in 1964, they sold it to VW. It was just a matter of time before the Brazilian VW operation would take control of the Vemag-DKW operations.

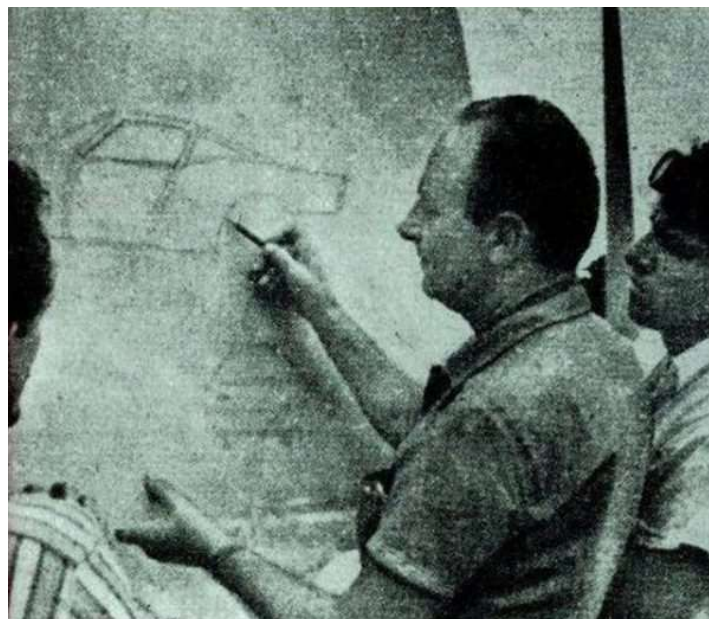


With the inevitability of VW killing its production, the last thing in the minds of the DKW executives was to spend money on some fancy, low production GT car, just to keep a silly rivalry alive.

***If The Maker won't do it... We Will.***



People from the Vemag racing team knew the answer for the Willys Interlagos would take too long to come or more likely, wouldn't come at all. So, one hard-core fan decided to take the matter on his own hands.



Genaro "Rino" Malzoni was an Italian immigrant who became successful as a lawyer and a sugar cane and cattle farmer. Malzoni liked racing and fast cars and was a hard core fan of the DKW. His plan was pretty simple, build a GT fiberglass body and fit it with DKW mechanicals.

Lets see what happens when passion meets an oversized bank account.

He took his sketches to Jorge Lettry who was the head of the Vemag Racing Department and he immediately fell in love with it.



No wonder; after all it was heavily inspired by the Ferrari 275 GTB. What is not to like?

When Letry asked Malzoni who would supply the bodies, he simply said: "*I will*". Malzoni created the company called "Luminari" just to produce the fiberglass body and Letry was the bridge between the two companies.



At first, the idea was only to supply the DKW drivetrain to Luminari, but Malzoni got more than he had bargained for. Vemag would not only put the car together but finish it (paint, upholstery, etc) and task the dealers across the country to sell it.





The little car was named GT Malzoni and was offered in two versions; one spartan for the race track and one for the streets. The GT Malzoni was unveiled to the public in 1964 but it took another year for the car to hit the showrooms.

At this point, DKW was getting almost 100 ponies out of its 1000cc race engines and the performance of the new car was slightly superior of the Willys Interlagos.



In 1965 only the racing version was available. Quickly the Vemag race team replaced the sedans for three brand new Malzonis and the results were astonishing.

DKW won all 5 main races of the season, crushing the rivals once again. Some people at Willys tried to argue that the Malzonis were being produced in extremely low numbers and should be considered as a "sport -prototype" not as a normal production "GT" car, but didn't work. After all, the rules were once stretched in favor of the Willys team and now they should expect the same in favor of DKW.



For 1966, finally the “street” version of the GT Malzoni was available for the buyers.



In August, 1966, VW officially took over Vemag- DKW but the production remained unchanged until October 1967.



Right before the end, Jorge Letry became partner at Luminari and as his first contribution he changed the name of the the car to “Puma”, after it was also redesigned by Anisio Campos.



When the production was finished, no more than 35 (all together, Malzonis and Pumas) were built.

The dream seemed to be over but Letry was a master of deals and he managed to bring VW into a new partnership.







For 1968, the car was totally redesigned and powered by the VW 1500cc flat four engine in the rear.



When the hardship of the 70s hit Brazil, the Puma became the obvious choice for those who couldn't afford a "real" imported sports car.



Puma was more than a kit car in Brazil; the VW dealerships across the country would not only sell them but take care of warranty and maintenance as well.

During its hey days, Puma exported cars to 50 countries around the world and they were also produced under license in South Africa.





There were a number of variations. The last production year for Puma was 1990. Around this time, the air cooled boxer was replaced by the 1.8 liter Golf engine.

There are some talking about bringing the brand back to life but so far nothing more than sketches have surfaced.

### ***Becoming Classics.***

The last Willys Interlagos was also produced in 1966 when Ford started taking over the ownership of the company. A total of 822 cars were built in all three versions.



Amazingly, it took a long while until both cars reached a true status of classics. It wasn't before early 2000s that collectors and dealers started digging deep into all this heritage.

Just a few Interlagos have survived the carnage of the 70s and 80s when many were scrapped or had its drivetrain replaced for a more reliable VW unit. Today an original Interlagos is a highly desirable item in any collection.

Just before I moved to Canada, my ex boss bought a superb one, a 1966 convertible. The only detail that is not original is the car came with 13 inches wheels, from the Ford Corcel.

Now he has an Interlagos, sitting among the 1930s Cords and Lincolns.

You can check the pics clicking on this link:

<https://m.facebook.com/rubens.florentino.9/albums/4463850151658/>



Out of those 822 cars, 4 of them found its way to USA. This wonderfully restored 1966 blue Berlineta belongs to a collector in California.



The GT Malzoni became one of those cars that if the owner wants to sell it, he doesn't need to advertise, just a few words exchanged with the right people will bring the buyer right way to his/her door.

In 2007, Audi Tradition, the department of Audi AG responsible for keeping the heritage of the brand, came to know the history of the GT Malzoni.





They recognized its value to the history of Audi and after some market research, the company found a decent 1965 model; the car was bought and received a complete restoration. In 2014, the car was finally shipped to Audi Museum, in Ingolstadt, Germany.

The picture above shows the car, sitting at its permanent spot in the museum, and the guy next to it is Flavio Gomes, perhaps one of the most knowledgeable DKW expert in Brazil. He was invited to tell the history of the Brazilian Vemag to the guests on the inauguration day.

By the end of the 60s, all small brands were gone, absorbed by the bigger players. Soon the gearheads would start paying attention to some “real” cars on the streets, cars like Chevy Opala, Ford Galaxie and Dodge Dart.

The first generation of Brazilian cars would quickly start littering the junk yards and for most of us they became nothing more than good (sometimes not so good) memories. Thank God for some die hard fans who kept their cars in good condition throughout the years.



Perhaps the most important contribution they left, besides being pioneers in the country, was how they taught us to race cars professionally.

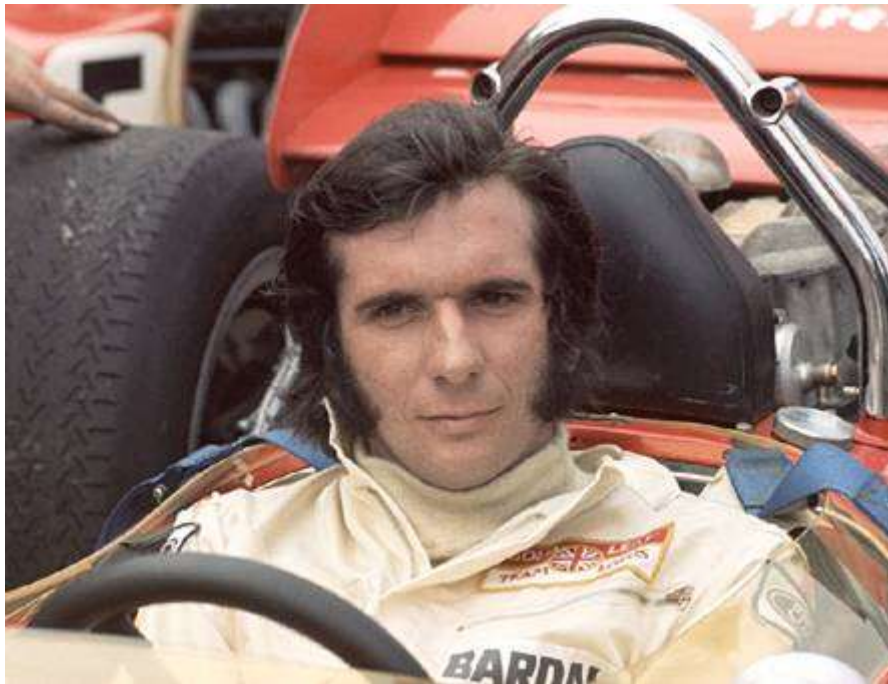


DKW, Willys and Simca had their own official competition department and what was just an amateurish pass time on Sunday afternoons became a serious business. We started dealing with full time professional drivers, race crew and logistics, sponsors, tv coverage and all sort of contracts.

Some of the people involved would spend a lifetime of commitment to the sport, elevating it to a new whole new level.

And for a few of them, the domestic scene would become too small.

### *The Fastest.*



From all the talented people from that time, Emerson Fittipaldi was the most gifted. He became famous in Brazil when he and his team mate, Jan Balder, superbly drove the GT Malzoni # 7 during the 1966 edition of the "Brazilian Mil Milhas" (thousand miles).





The Mil Milhas is a 24 hours race and it is the most prestigious one in Brazil. Fittipaldi and Balder raced among lot of more powerful cars and against all odds, they kept the leading position for the most part of the race. Close to the end, a faulty condenser stole their victory.



On this picture, taken right before the start of the race, shows Fittipaldi (second one from the left) "Master" Crispin, the chief mechanic of DKW (third one from the left) and the notorious # 7 GT Malzoni.

The duo managed to finish in third position, in a race that many people say was the best "Mil Milhas" ever. This race itself deserves a post, maybe one day I will write about it.



Emerson Fittipaldi later became Formula 1 World Champion in 1972 and 1974 and when everybody thought he was getting ready for retirement, he moved to the American CART series





He won the 1989 title and scored two wins at the Indianapolis 500, in 1989 and 1993.

The famous #7 survived the years and it was bought by a Brazilian collector. The car went through a meticulous restoration and in 2014 it was ready.



In the same year, Jan (photo) and Emerson were invited to once again take the car for a "spin". It was a pretty emotional meeting.

Unfortunately, a couple years ago, the owner of the #7 was experiencing some financial problems and was forced to sell the car.

Last time heard about it, #7 was in the hands of a classic car dealer in Netherlands.



On the racetrack, the war between automakers just kept going, with new players off course. At this point, the culture of racing was well established among the Brazilian middle class.

And some other talents walked through the doors Emerson Fittipaldi opened years before.



Names like Nelson Piquet, Ayrton Sena, Raul Boesel would make us jump and shout in front of the TV every Sunday morning.

The auto industry and the races evolved to something we never dreamed of; everything is so big and professional and unreachable for the average Joe now a days.



Perhaps that is why we feel so attracted about the 60s; there is some kind of magic about that time.

I would call it "The Golden Age" of the automobile in Brazil, a simpler time when passion didn't have traction control.