



Image Courtesy Alexis Callier Collection

Olivier Gendebien at the Tour de France Automobile, here at Montlhéry on September 18, 1958. The Ferrari was s/n 1033 GT. He was first!

## THE GREAT GENDEBIEN

AN APPRECIATION OF ONE OF THE BEST OF HIS GENERATION

BY AN ADMIRER, MICHAEL DI GIACOMO

RACE RESULTS FROM HISTORIAN ALEXIS CALLIER  
 HISTORICAL IMAGES FROM THE ALEXIS CALLIER COLLECTION

*The 24 Hours of Le Mans is a particularly peculiar form of mechanized masochism.*

*One commentator described it tongue-in-cheek:*

*"Like hay fever, every summer the 24 Hours of Le Mans rolls around... Nothing can be taken for granted, least of all the driver, who... can destroy six months' preparation by a dose of he-can't-do-that-to-me. A momentary pique is to be excused by the conductors, though, as Le Mans must be simultaneously one of the most boring and dangerous races in the world... Overcome with either sleep or doubtful noises from underneath, the driver may at any moment run across rain, mist, three cars abreast, or an almost invisible tiddler doing something like 75 mph slower." – Henry Manney III in Road & Track.*

*This is about one of the greatest of those drivers.*

Five years ago in Italy, a car sold at auction for nearly ten million dollars. Obviously, it was a very special car – the Ferrari 330 TRI/LM, the last front-engined Ferrari to win the 24 Hours of Le Mans, in 1962, and the last of the fabled Ferrari V-12 Testa Rossa series that had dominated international sports car racing for many years.

Its driver provenance was also special. There were two drivers for the 1962 Le Mans race in that car. The first, and the better known, was Phil Hill, the Southern Californian who the year before became the first American to win the Grand Prix Drivers' Championship (and only one of two Americans ever to do so, the other being Mario Andretti seventeen years later). It was Hill's third and last Le Mans victory. He passed away, aged 81, a year and a half ago.

The other driver is generally known only to motorsport *cognoscenti*, although he was among the top echelon during his brief driving career. Among other things, he went Hill one better and won Le Mans four times, over five consecutive years, all in Ferraris – and in

the fifth year his car (also shared with Hill) broke down while leading at the twentieth hour. He was far and away the best endurance race driver of his day: He also won the Targa Florio three times; the Twelve Hours of Sebring three times; the 1,000 kilometers of the old, tough Nürburgring Nordschleife in Germany once; the Reims 12 Hour race twice; and the Tour de France Automobile three times. He also had a short but distinguished Formula One career, competing in only fifteen races but coming second in the French Grand Prix and third in his native Belgian Grand Prix (his teammate was killed in that race, along with another driver), as well as two fourth places, one fifth place and two sixth place finishes. And all this over a scant seven years. He was Olivier Gendebien, and quite apart from his racing exploits, his life was the stuff of fiction.

He was among the last of the great gentleman drivers. Described by a contemporary as "almost regal," he was well-born, rich, always impeccably turned out (in a sport not known for sartorial

