

unstoppable

1968 LONDON-SYDNEY MARATHON

The first and the greatest of the carathons has been, and remains, the great overland run in 1968 from London to Sydney. Won by Andrew Cowan, Brian Coyle and Colin Malkin driving a Hillman Hunter, it yet continues to evoke an unstoppable fascination for a "straight race from here to there" to this day as it did in 1968



Through the great Nullarbor Desert in Australia plugs on the strong and reliable Hillman Hunter driven by Andrew Cowan, Brian Coyle and Colin Malkin to victory in the most famous and competitive marathon of them all



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1968 WAS A VERY DIFFERENT world compared to the present. It was a time when something needed to happen, in the Europe of that age. Nations were trying to fight for their respective identities in various walks of life and life was more humdrum than at any time prior to that.

Enter two newspaper barons into the picture. Sir Max Aitken of the Daily Express published out of London and Sir Frank Packer of the Sydney Daily Telegraph decided that an overland race from London to Sydney would be a catalyst for adventure and also a clutter breaker of an idea. Events then had complex rules. Add to that the petty squabbles and over-familiarity (exposure fatigue is the term for this nowadays) were reducing public interest in major international sporting circles.

The London - Sydney Marathon, conceptualised by the two media barons as essentially a straight race from "here to there" was seen as the right approach to get public interest hooked to in the right manner.

The marathon plus its route through France, Italy, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria into Asia via the Bosphorus into Istanbul and then on to Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India seemed to strike a strong chord with many in the motoring world. The cars, once into Bombay (as Mumbai was known then) would then be shipped to Fremantle in Australia aboard the P&O cruise liner Chusan. Action would resume from Fremantle over tough terrain in the Nullarbor Desert, turning into what many said would be the toughest ever "time versus conditions" test for the cars and their crews.

Not unnaturally, the idea caught on and we had factory teams from Ford UK and Ford Australia involved with the Cortinas and the Falcons, the competition departments of BMW and Rootes were out in force with their 1800s and Hunters, while Citroen was determined to plug on with its team of specially prepared DS21s. Privateer Porsche 911s with factory preparation were entered, including one for the famous Polish driver Sobieslav Zasada, as were diehard privateers from distant lands. This included an Indian team from Bombay in a spanking new Ford



John Sprinzel ran this MG Midget in the 1968 London-Sydney and he is planning a rerun in 2008 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of this great race from "here to there"



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Lotus-Cortina crewed by gynaecologist Dr Bomsji Wadia and tuner cum race car constructor Suresh Naik.

The big money seemed to rest on the British driver Roger Clark with none other than Ove Andersson alongside him in the works Ford Cortina as they roared into Bombay in the lead. The Indian pairing met their Waterloo in the Iranian desert but that didn't deter the masses of Indian humanity to welcome the Marathoners from the Pakistan border down to Bombay.

The event had captured the imagination of the entire world and once into Australia, the harsh terrain began to tell on the front runners who began to drop off at an alarming rate. Clark fell off the leader board while Zasada faltered a wee bit. The

mighty Aussie Fords began to self destruct and as the rally went into its closing stages, the Citroen of Lucien Bianchi (ace sports car and one time F1 driver) and Jean Claude Ogier was leading quite comfortably. It was to be no respite though for the Citroen because the superbly driven Hillman Hunter of Andrew Cowan, Brian Coyle and Colin Malkin was right there to take the spoils after a solid reliable run as was the works BMC 1800 of Paddy Hopkirk, Poole and Nash.

And then the unthinkable happened. On the narrow country road, on the final non-competitive stage just 100 miles from the finish, the Citroen crashed head-on into a Mini Cooper driven by two local enthusiasts who had come out to see the marathoners. It was a crushing

blow in more ways than one and Bianchi and Citroen were deprived of a most deserving win.

All of a sudden, the easy does it approach of Andrew Cowan and his crew had paid off handsomely. His Hillman Hunter swept into the lead and into motor racing folklore. Hopkirk was second and the Ford Falcon of Ian Vaughan, Bob Forsythe and Jack Ellis was third. Zasada salvaged some pride for Porsche with fourth overall while Rauno Aaltonen, Henry Liddon and Peter Easter were fifth in the second works BMC 1800s.

The Hillman Hunter never achieved any more international rally successes but it formed the basis for the Sunbeam Talbot rally department later on. Cowan though went on to win the London-Sydney once again in 1975 with Mercedes-Benz and also carved a name for himself with the Mitsubishi Rally Raid Pajeros.

Today, rally raids may be the big thing for motoring adventure but credit all of that to the 1968 London-Sydney Marathon which has made events of this nature virtually unstoppable in the minds and gameplans of the motoring teams. And just to underline the popularity of the original event, a rerun is planned for the next year to mark the 40th anniversary of the event.

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