Porsche at the 1954 Mille Miglia

Taking on the Italian 1,000-mile race in the 550 Spyder, Hans Herrmann and Herbert Linge added a unique chapter to the history of motorsport.

At the 1954 Mille Miglia, Hans Herrmann and Herbert Linge took the Porsche 550 Spyder to an impressive sixth place overall and won the class up to 1,500 cc. Shortly before reaching the finish line on 2 May 1954, however, they were involved in an incident that nearly rendered this thoroughly respectable result something of a footnote.

During the 1,000-mile circuit from Brescia to Rome and back, the Swabian pairing arrived at a level crossing soon after passing the second checkpoint in Pescara. With the express train to Rome approaching, the gates began to close at the last moment. 'I was looking at a map of the circuit when Hans knocked me on the back of the helmet. I knew what that meant and ducked down in my seat,' recalled Herbert Linge.

The native of Weissach had spent the training sessions noting down every single level crossing on the circuit in minute detail – but this was of little help at that moment. 'I had only made additional notes on where the car might sustain damage and where we could make up time,' noted Linge afterwards. He could not have known back then that his painstaking notes would go on to serve as the perfect template for the road book, of which he would come to be seen as the pioneer. Linge was paid the greatest possible compliment the following year, when the Mercedes works drivers Denis Jenkinson and Stirling Moss adopted his note-taking method on their way to victory in the Mille Miglia.

The Spyder bearing the start number 351 just barely made it under the red and white barriers as it shot through the level crossing before continuing on its way at almost the same roaring pace. Herbert Linge looked back on the manoeuvre in calm and measured terms: 'At 160 kilometres per hour, even the Porsche brakes wouldn't have brought us to a stop in time – and the small windscreen meant that the Spyder was sleek enough to take it on.'