

# RARE & UNIQUE VEHICLES

THEME: **WOMEN**

*From Ambulances To Racing  
Life and Records of*

## GWENDA GLUBB



## LUCY O'REILLY SCHELL

*Forgotten Leader  
of French Motorsport*

*"Made For Ladies  
By Others of Their Sex"*

**GALLOWAY AND  
DOROTHÉE PULLINGER**

*Dreams  
of Grandeur*

**MONICA  
560**

*Designing  
Women*

**GM'S DAMSELS  
OF DESIGN**



M<sup>lle</sup> HELLÉ-NICÈ

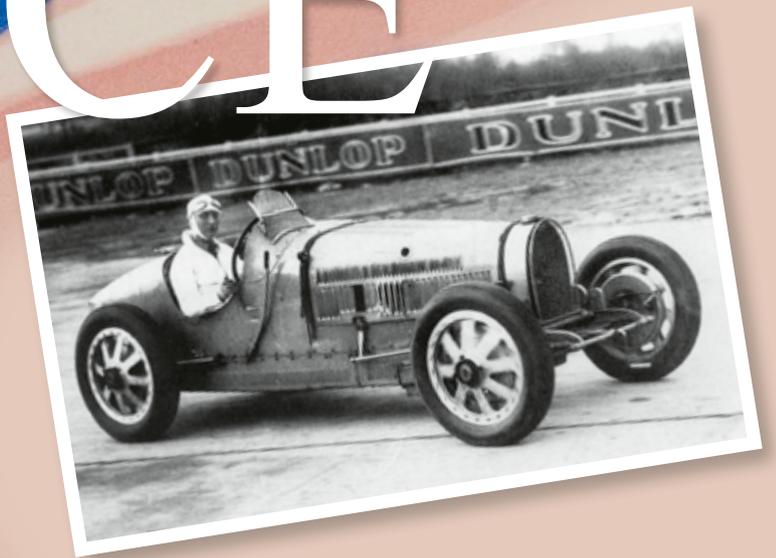
*Matford promotional  
document, portrait by Schall  
and Draager, 1937*

Vivacious, flamboyant,  
talented, and willing  
to challenge norms, Hellé Nice  
worked to become  
“the Queen of Speed” from  
the late 1920s through the early  
postwar years.

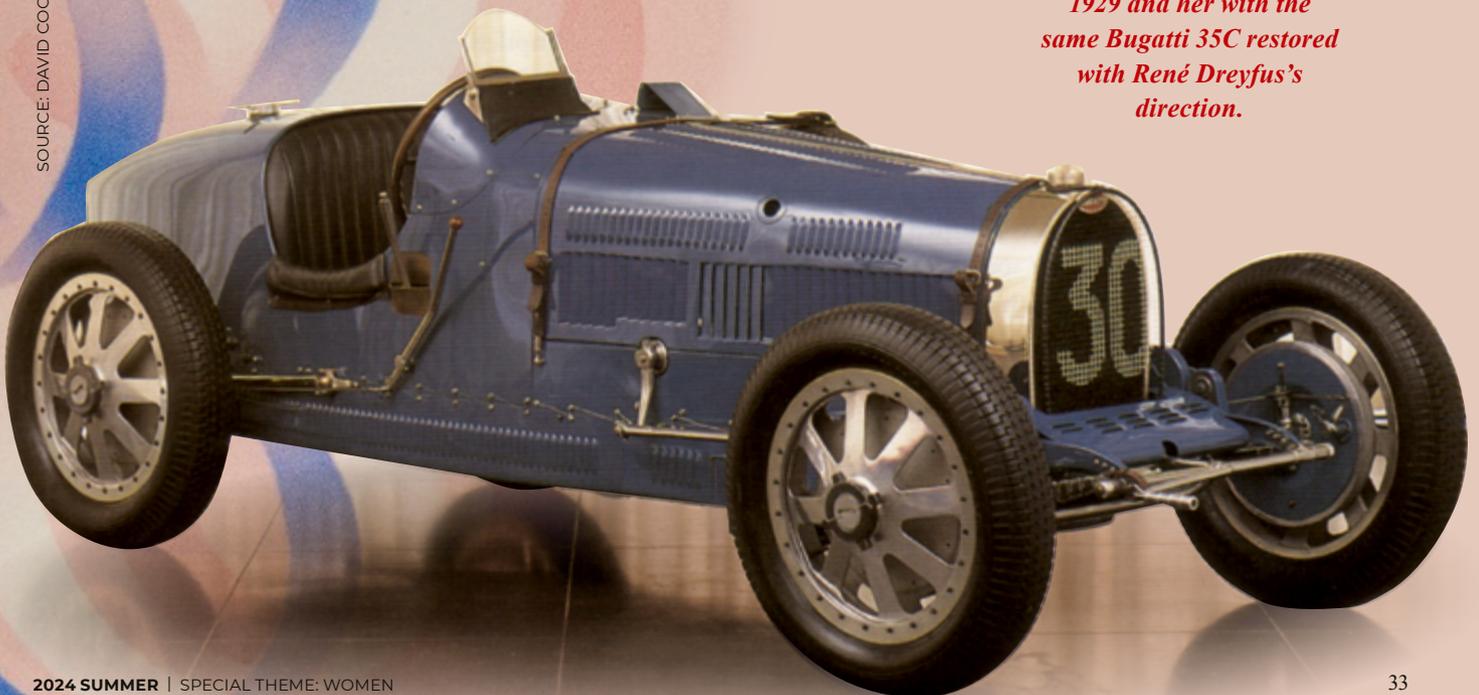
Her extraordinary story  
is recounted by **Lionel Lucas**  
and **David Cooper**.

LA REINE  
DE LA VITESSE

# HELLÉ NICE



*Hellé Nice  
speed trials, Monthéry,  
1929 and her with the  
same Bugatti 35C restored  
with René Dreyfus's  
direction.*



SOURCE: DAVID COOPER (2)



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SOURCES: LIONEL LUCAS (2); CHIP E. CONNOR (2)



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*1 Hellé Nice trapeze artist, fake mustache.*

*2 At Monthéry speed trials, 1929.*

*3 With her Alfa Romeo 8C 2300 Monza, Comminges GP, 1935.*

*4 Hellé Nice with fellow racers, Casablanca GP, 1933.*

**W**hat were the necessary ingredients for a great woman racer in the 1930s? Certainly, training and experience in race driving, a high level of physical skills, flamboyance and willingness to

challenge norms in a world mostly composed of men, and an insouciance towards death. In that era, not so many racers lived to die in their beds.

Two great women race drivers having these ingredients became well known for racing Bugattis in the 1920s and 1930s, both born in 1900: Eliska Junkova, better known by her westernized name of Elizabeth Junek, and Hellé Nice. The Czech racer shared her passion with her husband, who was a banker, while racing Bugattis all over Europe. She was known for her meticulous preparation before races.



SOURCE: LIONEL LUCAS

*Winning first prize in a Rosengart at the Concours in Touquet, Hellé Nice poses in a bathing suit due to the extreme heat.*

During the Targa Florio in 1928, for example, she finished fifth after a fierce battle with the better drivers of that era: Dreyfus, Fagioli, and even Nuvolari. Unfortunately, her husband died at the Nürburgring later that year while sharing the race driving with Elizabeth. She was devastated, stopped racing, and sold her cars ... Still, her story is fascinating and inspiring, especially at a time when women in racing, let alone driving, were quite rare.

Hellé Nice was a different kind of racer. Born into a middle-class family in the Beauce region in France, she escaped the boundaries of a traditional life; instead, she left for Paris just after World War I, where almost everything was possible. She wanted to emancipate herself. Her looks, her open flirtatious manner, her physical skills, and her voracious hunger to devour the social ladder opened many doors. But first she had to make a name for herself and pay her way.

She posed for nude postcards, built a career as a talented dancer, gymnast, and trapeze artist, and did whatever else she could to fulfil her ambitions. While she was willing to make many compromises to get ahead in her early dancing career, when it came to her racing, she took it very seriously and held to a standard of integrity. A ski injury ended Hellé Nice's dancing career but started her on her racing career.

As an artist, she had had the chance to participate at some races and exhibitions made especially for them: La Coupe des Artistes. The adrenaline, excitement, and physical commitment needed to race suited her perfectly. So as soon as Hellé Nice gained experience driving race cars, she got hooked. After demonstrating success in an Omega Six, she met Jean Bugatti. He offered her a supercharged Type 35C to set a speed record at Montlhéry in 1929. Her reaction after reaching almost 200 km/h says it all: "I could have gone faster if the track wasn't so dirty and with less wind." Not a normal person's reaction, not at Montlhéry in December, I guarantee.

Why a Type 35? The Type 35, one of Bugatti's most popular race cars, was produced from 1924 in different versions and engine sizes. It featured a straight-eight-cylinder engine, large cable brakes, excellent handling on a stiff chassis, and a lightweight aluminum body and was a great choice for a race driver in that era, especially if sponsored by the factory. Hellé Nice had two Type 35s in her career, an unsupercharged 35C (2.0 liters) and a supercharged 35C (chassis no. 4863) that she used for her record runs at Montlhéry and later purchased from the factory. The supercharged Type 35 can be identified in photos because it has a hole on the right side of the bonnet for the pop-off valve, though the hood louvers are also different than the unblown example.

At that time, racing cars were painted according to the country of the racers. French cars were blue, British were green, and Italian were red, for example. Hellé Nice's Bugatti would typically have been painted a light blue, but, according to fellow racer René Dreyfus, she wanted hers to be dark blue to

be noticed among the other blue cars on the course. In 1992, René Dreyfus spent a weekend with David Cooper advising on the restoration of Hellé Nice's Type 35C to the way it had looked when she competed against him: confirming the color, the upholstery color and design, and all the little details that would only have been known to another Bugatti racer at that time. Dreyfus summed up his impressions, "Hellé Nice was a very talented driver, but because she owned her own car, she was generally careful and did not take as many risks as she might have. She usually finished, though in mid-pack." And she managed, again by herself, to negotiate a contract to make several exhibitions on even more dangerous board and other oval tracks in the United States later that year. There, she had several near-death experiences, but it looked like it didn't matter. When you lose so many friends in racing, your perspectives seem to differ a bit. Death is just another step of life. Back in France, Hellé continued to establish herself as a very good racer. To remain competitive, as Bugatti did not have the funds to continue development, she switched to Alfa Romeo. At the wheel of her Monza 8C 2300C, she challenged herself by accepting an invitation to race in the Brazilian Grand Prix. She and her lover traveled to São Paulo. The crowd went crazy: 'Who was this French woman who dared to race against the boys on these South American tracks?' In 1936 in São Paulo, she was competing for second place with her nimble Alfa when she lost control of her car in the final meters of the race. A hay bale was in front of her on the road, forcing her to swerve abruptly, and she flipped the car, careening into the crowd lining the track. It is still unclear exactly what happened to this day. A photo caught the moment she hit the hay bale. Six people were killed and 34 injured. Hellé Nice was in a coma, carried to the hospital. She was unconscious for several days and nearly died. When she woke up, she asked the nurse if the race had already happened.

Still, this crazy race shows how good Hellé Nice was. She did not have the most powerful Alfa, but she was one of the best drivers of that race, managing to clock consistent and quick lap times. Despite the high pressure and intensity of the races, she always managed to keep her head cool. Her past gave her physical resistance, a constant lucidity, but also a very strong mental awareness. She shares this with some modern racers, such as Sebastien Loeb.

After this accident, her life changed, as she suffered very significant and long-lasting injuries. But did she let these problems stop her? Of course not. She had to fight to regain her reputation and to be back on track. Just one year later, she was back at Montlhéry to set new world speed records with three other women racers, Odette Siko, Claire Descollas, and Simone des Forest, driving an impressive Matford V8. When the war began it affected the lives of all the racers.

Like many people in France, she struggled in occupied Paris. In 1943 she took the settlement money from her crash in São Paulo, and she and her lover went to Nice, moving into a villa. We will never know the details as there is no record of her life or actions beyond these bare facts. We do know that her health issues from her injuries continued to cause extra difficulties and her resources continued to diminish.

After the war, she continued to race in challenging events, such as the Monte Carlo Rally, which started in ... Tallinn, Estonia. There, she again won the Coupe des Dames with her co-driver, Ms. Marinovitch. Two years later, she paired with another incredible French racer, Anne Itier. But at a party in Monaco the night before they left on the rally, she suffered a dramatic accusation from another well-known racer.

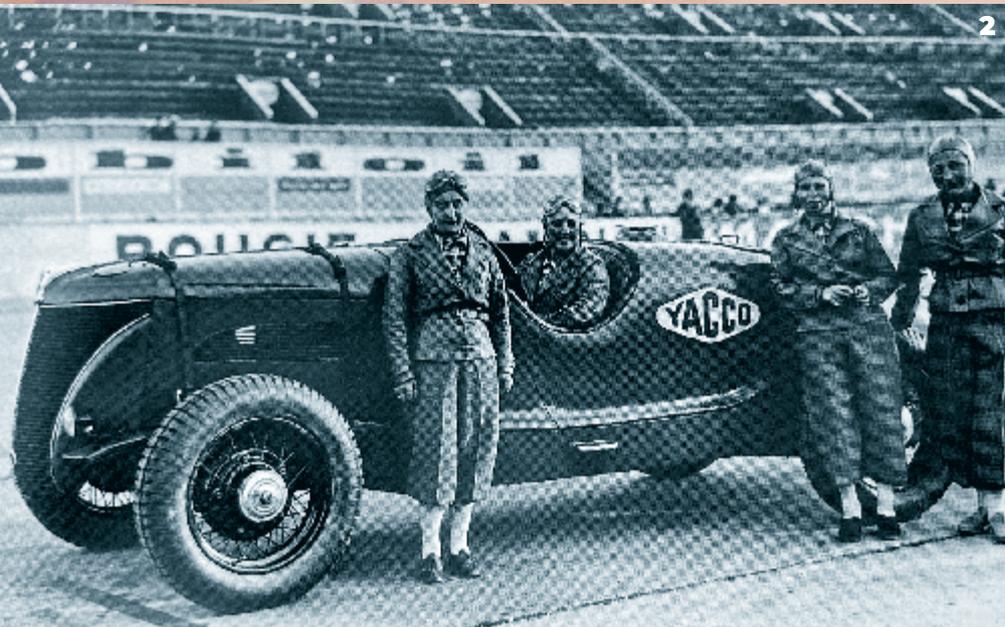
Louis Chiron was a very handsome racer who came from a poor family, had started as a dancer, and was known for his many affairs. For unknown reasons, Hellé Nice had a decades-long animosity with Chiron. It continued to play out after World War II when at the party for the racers Chiron, the hometown king of motorsport, raised his voice and publicly accused Hellé Nice of collaboration during the war, acting as an agent for the Gestapo, and, he added, it was a disgrace to Monaco to allow her to participate. Conversation completely stopped and all the other drivers turned to Hellé. She was so startled by the public accusation, she was speechless. But the words hung over all the racers and caused her postwar life to become far more difficult, damaging her participation going forward in racing or rally driving.

Was it true? Miranda Seymour, Hellé Nice's biographer, concluded that Chiron backed down from this charge when she challenged him with legal action, though no formal apology was ever issued. She flatly denied the accusation in writing later, in a letter to the President of the Automobile Club of Monaco. The charge was never picked up afterward in the press, so it comes across as more likely it was one of many such charges in the heated moments just after the war, when accusations without substance were thrown along with legitimate ones. No documents survive to prove anything one way or the other.

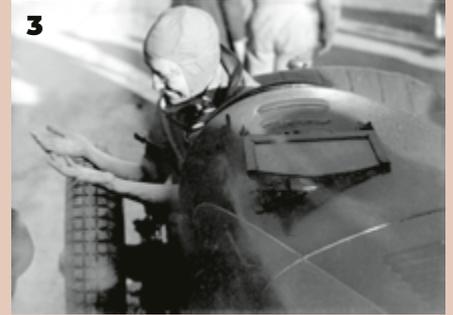
In her last years, Hellé Nice held, as much as she could, to her hard-earned social rank. She was difficult, bitter, and destitute. She had been swindled out of all the money she had left by an unscrupulous lover. In the end, she paid the highest price possible for her independence and almost everyone forgot about her, even a large part of her family. It took decades before a monument could be placed at her formerly unmarked grave. For different reasons, Elizabeth Junek suffered a similar fate, with people forgetting about her achievements for many decades before she was finally recognized. We want to similarly recognize Hellé Nice's successes and pay her the tribute she richly deserves. ♦



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*1 Hellé Nice with fellow racers, Biella, 1935.*

*2 Hellé Nice racing a Matford with three other women racers, Monthéry, 1937.*

*3 Hellé Nice at a pitstop during a race, Bugatti 35C, early 1930s.*

**SOURCES:**

- Hellé Nice's racing scrapbooks that she personally compiled
- The Bugatti Queen: In Search of a Motor Racing Legend by Miranda Seymour, Simon & Schuster UK, 2004
- Recollections by David Cooper regarding the restoration of Hellé Nice's Bugatti Type 35C under René Dreyfus's direction
- Rugissante: La Folle Trajectoire d'Hellé Nice by Lionel Lucas

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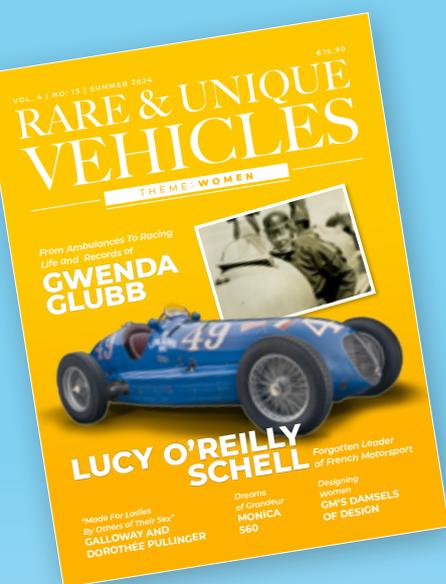
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