

ON CLOUD *Two Nine*



King of the Mille Miglia, Alfa Romeo's 8C-2900 spider was the fastest, most beautiful pre-war supercar. An elated **Mick Walsh** climbs aboard

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



Today, as the twilight picks out its sensuous curves, this famous car becomes ever more alluring. From all angles it's as voluptuous as Lollabrigida, its Touring-built bodywork moulding sweater-girl-style around Vittorio Jano's magnificent chassis and Grand Prix-derived engine. It looks unbelievably beautiful. And that's on the back roads of Massachusetts. Just imagine the reaction to *four* brand-new, super-exotic Alfa Romeo 8C-2900 spiders lining up in the Brescia dark awaiting the 1938 Mille Miglia's 5am start.

Our photographer's shutter-happiness is understandable, but after hours of waiting I'm as pent up as a certain works driver as I clamber into the snug cockpit. Curvy cowls, long bonnet, red headlamp covers casting a warm glow over the wings and radiator shroud – all serve to heighten expectation. Then comes the drama of that fabled engine. Push the ignition key – any Fiat 500 item will suffice – press the starter and the straight-eight fires, then 'settles' into a rough idle, spitting and coughing like a race-tuned V8. But dab the centre throttle and the response is instantaneous: the wonderful *whoop-whoop* only a supercharged Alfa can produce, its whirring gear tower and whistling blowers intensifying as the light dips, air cools and engine warms.

The big, black, three-spoke Bakelite steering wheel and large Veglia gauges are reminiscent of the grand Alfa and Lancia tourers of the 1930s, but the rest looks and feels like a fighter plane. The gear gate is strange – first and second closest to the driver's left leg – and the clutch is fiercely sharp when setting off. The change, though, is faster, more precise, than most 1950s Ferraris.

Once on the move the transaxle whine matches the engine noise as momentum builds. There's

no chance of exploring performance or handling here, but you can marvel at the physical way it operates: the direct steering, the meaty torque and the measured, rewarding mechanical snick of the gearchange. The drum brakes feel dead and demand respect, the chassis understeers mildly under power, and you can feel the Herald-style swing-axle rear's rhythmic variation in grip as the inside wheel starts to tuck under on tight turns. Pushed to the limit, I'm sure that Carlo Pintacuda and his team-mates had some lurid moments on the *pavé* in Italian towns. Marque expert Paul Grist claims the only way is to bolt the rear up tight and flatten the transverse leaf spring so the slides are more progressive. But here in the dark the car immediately feels fast and fluent, with a GTO's purity of purpose.

It's over too quickly – but it's enough. I'm seduced and, as it clicks cool, imagine that pristine form covered in dust, streaked with hot oil.

Alfa's Two Nine had already scored a brace of Mille Miglia wins in 1936 and '37, but these ungainly Scuderia Ferrari cars looked like thinly disguised GP machines with their *botticella* bodies and cycle wings, following a trend set by Pintacuda's 1935 victory in a Tipo B with a two-seater body. German domination of GP racing had strained relations between team manager Enzo Ferrari and the state-backed factory and, early in 1938, the outfit was reformed as Alfa Corse and (eventually) moved from Modena back to Milan.

The first major event of the new season was the Mille Miglia, for which the overstretched competition department built and prepared five new sports-racers. Bespoke bodywork, revised rear chassis to allow for quick-lift jacks for faster pitstops, improved fuel system, Bosch ignition



ALFA ROMEO 8C-2900B MM

Sold/number built 1938/5
(36 total 8C-2900s)

Construction pressed-steel, box-section ladder-type frame with aluminium bodywork

Engine front-mounted all-alloy 2905cc straight-eight, dual overhead camshafts driven by central gear tower from crank, twin Roots-type superchargers with Weber carburetors

Max power 225bhp @ 5400rpm

Max torque 230lb ft @ 4200rpm

Transmission four-speed transaxle

Suspension: **front** independent, double trailing arms, coil springs, lever-arm dampers **rear** swing axle, radius arms, transverse leaf spring,

two friction and two lever-arm shock absorbers

Steering worm-and-segment steering box

Brakes hydraulic, alloy drums

Length 13ft 8in (4166mm) **Width** 5ft 2in (1575mm) **Height** 4ft 8in (1422mm)

Wheelbase 9ft (2743mm) **Weight** 2800lb (1270kg) **Wheels & tyres** wire, 19 x 5.50in

Top speed 132mph

Price new £1950 (production spider)

Price now £5-6million





plus a dynamo relocated under the driver's seat and running off the prop further refined an already highly competitive machine.

Delahaye had entered three of the 4.5-litre V12 T145s it was also intending to use in that year's GPs, and in response Alfa created a special 'hot' car, its Tipo 308 motor fitted with bigger blowers to give a claimed 300bhp. Surprisingly, this was handed to Clemente Biondetti, yet to score the first of his four Mille Miglia victories, while twice winner Pintacuda – he had also prevailed in 1937 – had to make do with a softer-spec chassis 412030. Thus he waited in the Brescia evening a frustrated man.

The first Fiat 500s buzzed off at 2am on the new, faster, figure-of-eight route, designed to be completed by the quickest cars in 12 hours. The magnificent Alfa spiders blasted away at 5.30am on the overcast dawn of April 3. Pintacuda was on a mission, averaging 110mph on the first stage to beat Biondetti to Bologna by 2 mins 20 secs; Giuseppe Farina had already spun his 'Two Nine into retirement trying to keep up.

Pintacuda continued his remarkable pace by storming over the Raticosa and Futa passes to Florence, gaining another 5 mins over Biondetti, while René Dreyfus' Delahaye began to worry Alfa with second-quickest time.

Motivated by his dominant start, Pintacuda charged along a new, 53-mile section of *autostrada* at 132mph – but it was here that Biondetti's extra power started to play its part and he edged back into contention, cutting his team-mate's lead to 4 mins by Rome.

'He who leads at Rome never wins' is an old Mille Miglia jinx and Pintacuda's luck certainly seemed to be running out: as they headed to the east coast, his brake pedal lost pressure. By Terni

he'd lost 6 mins because of a service halt to bleed the brakes, and Biondetti was then leading on the road *and* on overall time. Pintacuda strove manfully to catch up, setting fastest time on all but one of the remaining sections, but after 12 hours of flat-out road racing, Biondetti claimed the victory by 2 mins 2 secs.

Alfa Romeo's celebrations were dampened by news of an accident in Bologna. A Lancia Aprilia had ploughed into the crowd: 10 were dead, including seven children. The tragedy was too serious for the Fascist authorities to suppress and the race, in its around-Italy form, was banned until 1947. Biondetti's remarkable 84.6mph average wasn't beaten until 1953.

The Mille Miglia team cars competed through the 1938 season, winning the Spa 24 Hours – where Pintacuda shared the driving duties with Francesco Severi – as well as several Italian hill-climbs. Biondetti's Mille Miglia winner, 412031, was shown at the London Motor Show where wealthy English enthusiast Hugh Hunter made an offer for it that Alfa couldn't refuse.

When John Dugdale of the *The Autocar* started a challenge for 'The Fastest Sports Car?' the inexperienced Hunter agreed to enter a two-part competition at Brooklands in May 1939. He beat main rival Arthur Dobson's Le Mans Delahaye around the Campbell Circuit, but gearbox problems on the Mountain Circuit forced him to retire to the Alfa.

The ex-Pintacuda car featured here stayed at the factory and was occasionally used for testing. During the late 1940s Luigi Chinetti imported it into America and it eventually turned up in California amid the collection of millionaire Tommy Lee, who entered it for the 1949 Pikes Peak. Then painted two-tone cream and

Clockwise, from top left:
Jano-designed engine
with twin blowers;
original Milan plate;
Fascist tricolour; Veglia
dials and three-spoke
wheel; voluptuous lines





metallic brown and christened the Don Lee Mobil Special, with Pegasus logos adorning its flanks, it was gunned up the famous mountain dirt course by oval racer Mack Hellings, who was prematurely awarded fastest time before a timing error was discovered. More terminal was a broken oil line that caused major engine failure as Hellings, foot down, crossed the line.

After Lee's mysterious suicide, the Alfa was acquired by International Motors in Los Angeles where an earnest young racer called Phil Hill,

who'd already competed in a Jaguar XK120, scraped together \$3650 to buy the 12-year-old exotic. The clean-cut Hill towed the repainted-red car to the Pebble Beach races behind a spectacular Darrin-bodied Packard, and caused a sensation around this treacherous wooded course. After winning the Del Monte Handicap, he led the feature event ahead of a pair of Cadillac-powered Allard J2s, a Ferrari 166 and an XK120; he ended up fifth after overheating and oil loss forced him to pit. Trailing a blue smoke-screen, the big Alfa scythed back through the pack on the tight course.

"The Alfa was a superb piece of machinery," recalls Hill. "I had to use first and 6000rpm in Turn Four. There was little room to pass but the slower cars usually got out of the way. Once I had to take the escape road at Turn Five and nearly hit a policeman. It was one of the most fantastic, romantic machines I've owned."

At the end of the season the car was sold for \$4000 to James Magin, who painted it blue and raced it locally around Milwaukee. In 1955 an advert in *Road & Track* attracted product designer

and Excalibur founder Brooks Stevens, a man who really appreciated great form, and the Two Nine became part of his collection. He had it restored to its former glory and allowed Hill to race it at the 1975 Monterey historic meeting.

In 1982 the car moved to the east coast to Bill Serri, who never achieved his ambition of driving it on the Mille Miglia Retro. Premier American restorer Paul Russell had got to know both Serri and Hill over the years and, although his team hadn't yet restored an Alfa Two Nine, he was very aware of the Mille Miglia spider: "When Bill died, his wife Maureen asked us to look after the car; she was very worried about its security in the old wood-frame garage where Bill had always stored his cars."

"We'd done several exciting projects with Ralph Lauren and felt the Alfa would be right for his collection. He wasn't sure, so we took the car to his home in Bedford, unloaded it and drove it up to his French manor-style house. All the family came out, including his wife Ricky, and that sealed it. The unspoken part was that we would get to restore it."

The first step was to fully research the car: marque guru Simon Moore scoured archives for fresh reference pictures; Maria Terresa at the Corrado Millante Collection found an amazing set of 1938 Mille Miglia pictures taken at scrutineering; Julian Majzub agreed to sell his spare magneto; and Fred Simeone allowed the team access to his sister car.

Some enthusiasts claimed it was a travesty that such an original car was being totally restored, but its tatty condition was the way Serri liked to present it. During Stevens' ownership in the 1970s, it'd had a bare-metal restoration when a

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Main: frantic stop on '38 Mille Miglia – note rear jacking points. Above: brake lights and Touring badge; Pintacuda roaring to second



new scuttle was made. The subsequent dents were not Mille Miglia or Pebble scars, as Serri liked to relate, but his careless driving.

With the layers of paint and filler stripped from the *superleggera* panels, Russell's bodywork specialist, Brit Richard Docking, set to: "It was a great opportunity to work on an amazing car, and I have huge respect for the way those old boys hammered it out. Touring wasn't the hammer-and-tree stump firm of folklore, it was already using pneumatic planetary hammers. No new aluminium went into the body."

As well as sorting the beautiful shape, Docking also produced some of the detail work, including the exquisite HT lead tubes with their Dali-esque rolled-edge eyelets.

The trimming was tackled by another brilliant English specialist, Derrick Dunbar, who did his apprenticeship at Rolls-Royce on Corniche convertibles. He found a tuft of original leather inside the seat padding: it was bright red.

A turning point in getting the cockpit and original windscreen exactly right was the discovery of a superb close-up, found by Moore in the Biscaretti Museum in Turin, of Emilio Villoresi sitting in the car.

The body's dazzling red was based on old paint beneath the blue on a panel behind the seats. "Lee's mechanics and Phil Hill wouldn't have bothered to strip the paint because you have to take the fuel filler cap off the tank. It all pointed to the original Alfa red," says Moore. "You can argue long and hard about the red these cars were. I've seen colour film and photographs and think these cars were *very* red. The photographs that Corrado Millante took at scrutineering in Brescia show that Touring's paintshop really



polished the nitro-cellulose. They wanted a wow reaction when these cars arrived at the start."

The engine was long overdue a rebuild and was handed over to Chris Leydon.

The final stages of restoration prior to its debut in the Alfa display at Pebble Beach in 2005 proved more pressurised than planned, as the painted car (without engine) was taken to the *Speed, Style and Beauty* exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. As a consequence, the fitting of engine, electrics, hydraulics and plumbing for fuel and coolant, as well as the shakedown trials, had to be done in six weeks.

The finishing touch was the red plastic headlamp covers, just as it ran on the Mille Miglia. "Nobody seemed to know why they were red," Russell recalls, "until an elderly Italian claimed it was a safety feature: the team had discovered that white lights caused animals to freeze in the road; red didn't affect them."

"We wanted to paint numbers on to complete the Mille Miglia look, but Ralph preferred it without. We'd also had discussions about painting it black. That would have looked sensational,



but Ralph was very aware of the car's history."

This was underlined last September when he flew it to Goodwood at his own expense for the tribute parade in honour of America's first F1 champion. The now-frail Hill rose to the occasion and ousted son Derek from the driver's seat. This amazing car gets you that way. ■

Thanks to Paul Russell (001 978 768 6919, www.paulrussell.com) and Simon Moore

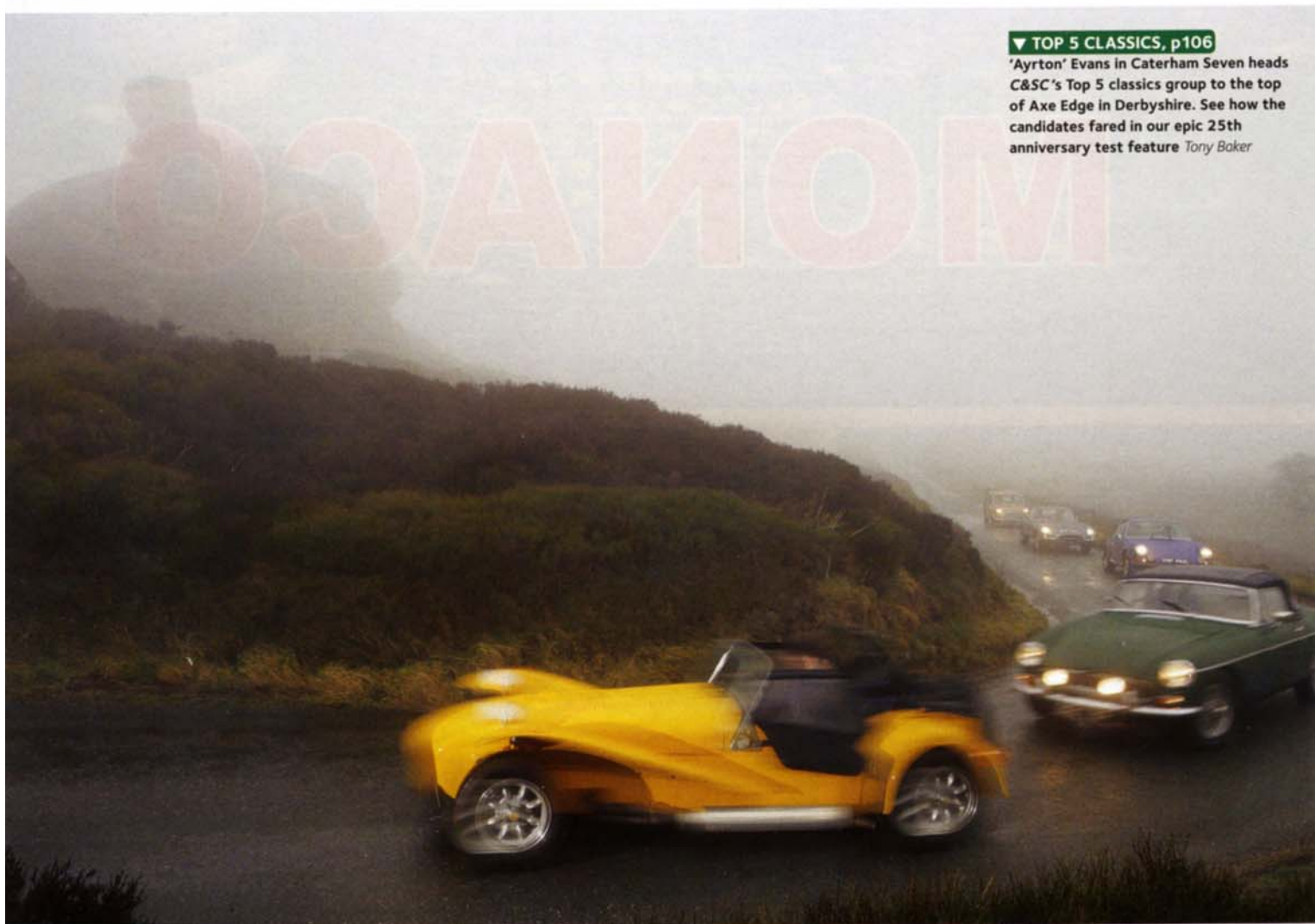
'Touring really polished the nitro-cellulose. They wanted to create a wow factor when they arrived at the start'

Anti-clockwise, from main: glorious from every angle; remade red lamp covers; restored body, metal maestro Richard Docking (r); rebuilding trailing-arm front set-up



▼ TOP 5 CLASSICS, p106

'Ayrton' Evans in Caterham Seven heads C&SC's Top 5 classics group to the top of Axe Edge in Derbyshire. See how the candidates fared in our epic 25th anniversary test feature *Tony Baker*



▲ BOOKS, p47

BRM mechanic Dick Salmon took a camera on his travels with the team, and his shots wonderfully capture the era. Here Vanguard tows Vanwall at the 'Ring *Veloce Publishing*



► COLLECTOR, p52

LSR enthusiast David Watson living his dream at Bonneville Speed Week in his Vega-powered Model T. After retiring from competition, Watson started collecting rare tin-plate toys *NHRA*



▲ ALFA 8C, p192

A young Phil Hill guns his newly acquired Alfa Romeo 8C-2900B Mille Miglia around the Pebble Beach road course in 1949. The future F1 champion paid \$3650 for the worn-out, 12-year-old exotic *Simon Moore Archives*