



Common sight in Switzerland: winner's lap in major sports car race being taken by the Two-Nine with Alfa V-12 en-

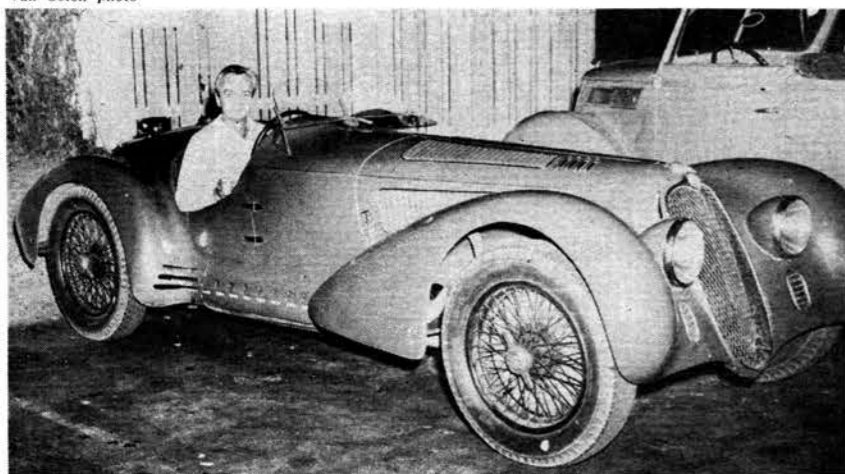
gine. Car's lap times have been amazingly close to those of full grand prix machines. Willy Daetwyler is at wheel here.

## A CLASSIC ALFA ROMEO

BY GRIFF BORGESON

*The Two-Nine Alfa was a unique blend of classic, sports car, and racing car qualities...it was in a class by itself*

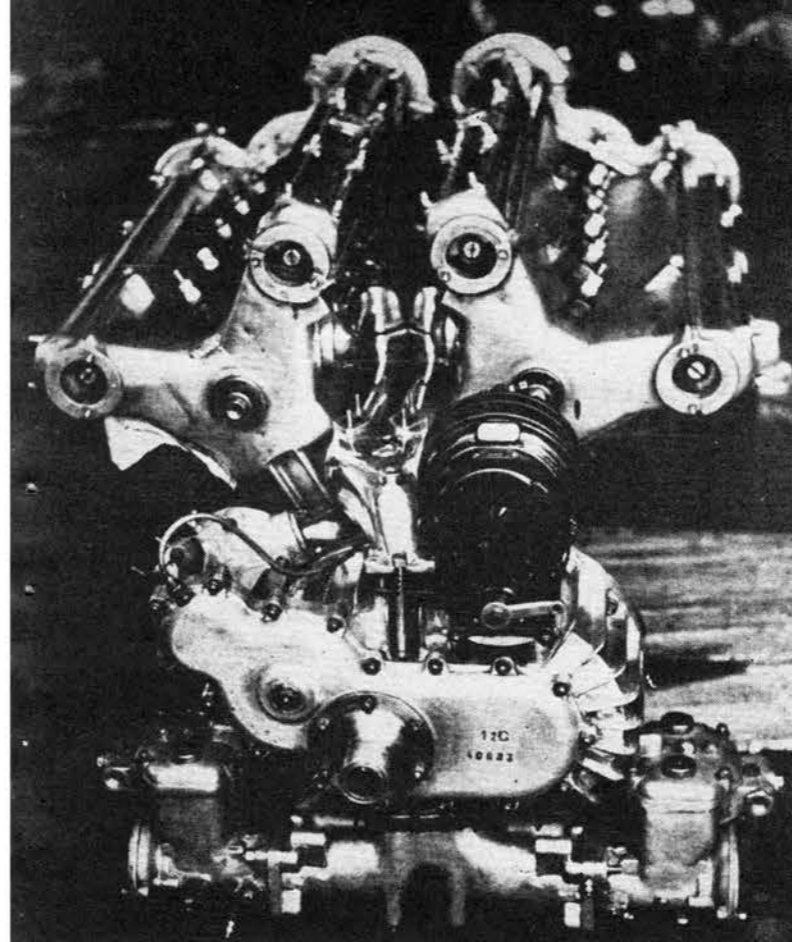
Van Osten photo



The late Tommy Lee at the wheel of his Two-Nine roadster with Superleggera Touring body. Note adequate brake drums. Steering wheels were always located on the righthand side of these cars, since it was considered better for cornering on clockwise road race courses where there are more righthand turns than left.

ALFA ROMEO of Milan, Italy, is seldom thought of as a builder of classic cars. Since the 'twenties, most of the firm's fame has rested on its tiny, wiry sports cars and its superbly successful road racing machines. However, Alfa has always catered to the carriage trade too. But Alfa could get more out of 2000 pounds of metal than most other manufacturers could get out of twice that bulk, and the fact that its classics were imposing in everything but size ruined their chances abroad.

In 1937 Alfa produced a car that compressed all of its classic, sports car and racing background into one wonderful package, the Tipco 8C-2900/B, commonly called the Two-Nine. The incomparable Two-Nine would do anything. You could take Grandma on a Sunday drive in it, and then without so much as changing the spark plugs, use it to win



Daetwyler car's 12 cylinders, four overhead cams, two blowers, two Weber sidedraft carbs and Bosch magneto. It has integrated heads.

the Mille Miglia. Its 125-mph top speed was attainable with startling suddenness. The tachometer needle swung so swiftly around its dial that unless you knew better you might think the clutch was slipping. Actually this was the effect of a shattering pounds per horsepower ratio of around 13 to one! Even with all this power, wheelspin during heavy acceleration was practically non-existent, largely because the Two-Nine had beautifully engineered independent rear suspension

and a frame-mounted bevel box. The limits of the chassis' cornering ability could be determined only under desperately all-out racing conditions. There was not another machine in the Two-Nine's class in the world.

The story of these matchless machines begins in 1932, when Alfa engineer Iano, now chief designer for Lancia, built a slender single-place competition machine to meet the increasingly bothersome Bugatti and Maserati challenge. Because

Alfa had raced *monoposto* cars in the 'twenties that were called P.1 and P.2, this latter-day *monoposto* was unofficially known as the P.3. In '32 and '33 the P.3 won seven grand prix races and then proved its remarkable versatility by being easy winner of the twisty, sea-to-sky Targa Florio and the 1000-mile Mille Miglia. Then in 1934 the Germans marched into the arena of international racing with their magnificent government-sponsored, damn-the-cost Mercedes and Auto-Union cars. The P.3 managed to outrun and outlast 11 of the new German machines in the Grand Prix of France and scored a 1-2-3 victory. But the Alfa factory saw the impossibility of pitting itself against the combined resources of German industry and government and faced the fact that the P.3 had become outclassed overnight.

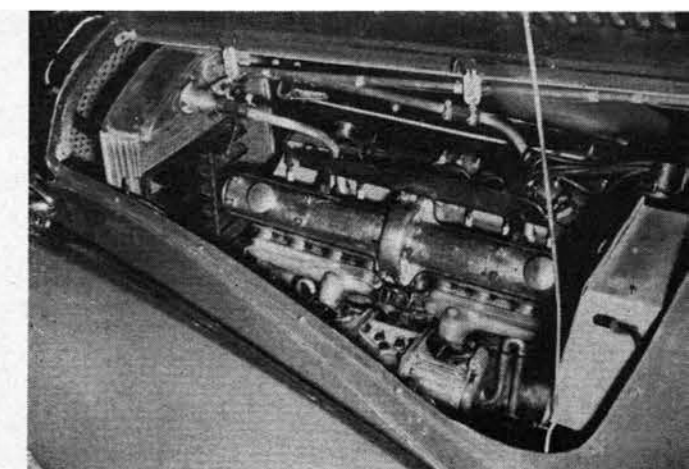
During this era it was the practice of many manufacturers of high-performance cars to make small numbers of replicas of their successful grand prix machines for sale to racing drivers and car owners all over the world. The P.3, because of its unquestioned superiority during the first two years of its life, sold well to the international racing fraternity and until the German blitzkrieg struck, promised to go right on selling. But as soon as the bugs were out of the new German designs the market for P.3 Alfas shrank to nothing.

Parts for 36 P.3 engines lay in bins at the Alfa factory. They represented a big investment that seemed to be beyond all hope of recovery. Iano pondered and came up with the solution: design a passenger car around the P.3 engine!

He had a terrific power plant to start with, a light, potent straight eight with a displacement of just 161.7 cubic inches, or 2,650 cc. The crankshaft ran in ten main bearings and was made in two pieces. Each half was bolted to a big  
(Continued on page 60)



Two-Nine convertible coupe, formerly of the Tommy Lee stable. Body is by Stablimenti Farina, not to be confused with Pinin Farina. Car is now in San Francisco area, was capable of speeds up to 125 mph when in tune.



Same car as left, but showing intake side of engine. No fan was fitted, nor was any space provided. The Roots-type blowers are mounted low.

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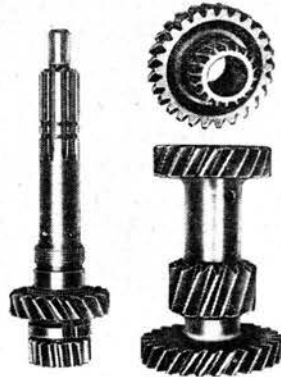
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10 GALA DAYS

## CLASSIC ALFA ROMEO

(Continued from page 23)

spur gear which drove a train of other gears that ran right up to the center of the engine and drove dual overhead camshafts and two Roots-type superchargers, one for each block of four cylinders. There were two vee-inclined valves in each hemispherical combustion chamber. The crankcase, cylinder blocks and cam covers were of light alloy, and the cylinder liners were of steel.

The P.3 engine developed 255 bhp at 5,400 rpm and it was famous for a total lack of the sort of temperament associated with racing engines. It was also famous for its sound. The whistling scream of the tower of spur gears, the whine of the camshafts and blowers, the ripping-canvas exhaust made an unforgettable music. This engine, bored out to 177 cubic inches (2904 cc) and very slightly detuned by means of milder cam contours and a lower compression ratio, became the power plant of the Two-Nine. It developed from 180 to 200 bhp, depending on compression ratio, at 5000 rpm.

Around this nucleus Iano designed long and short chassis with wheelbase of 106 and 110 inches. They used Alfa's racing four-speed gearbox, than which there was nothing sweeter, and unlike the P.3, had four-wheel independent suspension and hydraulic brakes. Many of the car's components could be adjusted from the instrument panel, the brakes and shock absorbers, for example. There was even a warning light for excessive brake lining wear. Although Italian cars traditionally have left-hand steering, the Two-Nines had it on the right side, the reasoning being that this was the best position for the driver who is overtaking other cars.

Two-Nine bodies were in perfect keeping with their high-performance innards. The coachbuilding firms of Farina and Superlaggera Touring outdid themselves producing beautiful envelopes of advanced design for the Two-Nine chassis.

The new Alfa was introduced to the public at the major Continental salons of '37. Critics and connoisseurs greeted it with torrents of praise. One called it "an engineering rhapsody." However, few of the Two-Nine's admirers could actually afford to buy one; its \$9,500 to \$13,000 price (in the middle of a world-wide depression) excluded all but those in the most rarefied income bracket. King Michael of Romania bought one. Bernhardt of the Netherlands bought another. A few of the top racing drivers in Italy had both the means and the taste for a Two-Nine, and drove the cars both professionally and for pleasure.

Quite a few of these treasures survive today. One is in Germany, originally a gift from Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Ciano, to a top man in Hitler's SS Corps. When Russian bombs began falling on

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Berlin the car was abandoned by its owner and rescued by Helmut Polensky, who today makes the Monopol race cars. He completely dismantled the Two-Nine, greased and wrapped the parts and buried them. To make the Superleggera Touring body as unappealing as possible to looters, he plastered it with a hideous mixture of lime and red lead. This Two-Nine was one of the few cars of quality that survived the war in Germany, and today, completely restored, it performs like a Ferrari.

Another great Alfa enthusiast was the late Tommy Lee of the U.S. He owned a number of them, including one P.3 and two Two-Nines. Sports car racing driver Phil Hill acquired Lee's Superleggera roadster and eventually disposed of it, and the Lee Farina-bodied convertible coupe went to an Oakland, Calif., enthusiast. And reports have trickled to us here on the West Coast of at least a couple of other Two-Nines in the New England area.

Two of the Two-Nine chassis still extant are powered by a very special engine built by Alfa in 1937, a 274 cubic inch (4,500 cc) V-12 with dual overhead camshafts for each bank of cylinders and with gear towers at the rear of each bank. This engine powered the Alfa in which Nuvolari won the Vanderbilt Cup Race at Long Island in 1939.

One of the V-12 Two-Nines was owned by Italian racing driver Felice Bonetto until his death in the Carrera Panamericana in '53. Bonetto won the Oporto Grand Prix with this roadster in 1950, and year after year Bonetto and his Alfa were top contenders in the Mille Miglia. In this car the engine was unsupercharged and developed 230 bhp at 6,000 rpm. In '51 the chassis was fitted with a modern Vignale roadster body.

The other V-12 in a Two-Nine chassis is owned by a Swiss businessman and sportsman, Willy Daetwyler. His is Roots-blown, and he tells me that it pulls about 355 bhp and gives a top speed of about 164 mph. Daetwyler and his car have dominated the major sports car races in Switzerland for years. One of his experiences indicates just how good the car really is. In 1951 he ran it in the Swiss National Sports Car Race, which is held on the Bremgarten Circuit at Berne the day before the Swiss Grand Prix. He won the race, as usual, with an average speed over the twisty road course of 86.6 mph. The next day Fangio won the Grand Prix in the latest Type 159 Alfa—at an average speed a scant 2.3 mph faster than that of the venerable V-12.

Obviously, the Two-Nine Alfa's only really successful classic—and, granted it was more than merely a classic—is not obsolete even when it's stacked up against the finest sports cars of this decade. It's not surprising that in its own day, many experts considered it to be the very best car in the world. •

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by Joe Hunt

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