



What Makes a Sports Car?

by Alan Beck

“WHAT do you want that thing for? It's not practical!”

Maybe if you are smarter than I am you can give him an answer.

A sports car is a fast-moving, slow-drifting, road-loving heap of mechanistic perfection that will go faster, stop quicker, last longer, out gun, out run, and out fun any other pile of iron ever bolted together in this, or any other, grand old country. It is like a smooth, well-built, brown-eyed blonde who moves in the society of Hollywood, Manhattan, London, Paris, or Rome, but prefers stupid old you from Keokuk, Iowa.

O.K., so we guessed wrong somewhere along the line, but here in this J2X, SSK, DB-2, 300-SL, 100, TC, 1500S or TR-2, we did not guess wrong. It is the best we can do to make up with Destiny.

A sports car is a flash in the rainy night, a creature with a mind and will of its own. (“Let's go boss—you say where and when, but hurry up!”) Tomorrow it may turn into a rugged, roaring powerhouse in the mud or sand, or a meek thing at the edge of the highway, trying to keep its exhaust quiet and hoping that the Law appreciates the finer things of life.

A sports car is the twin jabs of the downshift at 50 miles an hour as the 90 degree corner comes up without any tire-screaming, gravel-throwing slide into the shoulder. It is the rock-steady whine of 5000 rpm on the long straight-away, the big needle touching the magic 100 figure on the circular black dial. It is that whoosh that went by you on the lonely back road. It is what gives

that heart-in-the-mouth sensation as you sail down the long hill into Watkins Glen for race week and sense the magic ahead.

A sports car is what makes you like the greasy-handed, back-breaking chore of replacing the cam followers at 5 above zero in the unheated garage, just because some joker down at the office said the old bucket sounded like a mowing machine. It is the red-hot excitement of watching the big champs battle it out at Torrey Pines, Sebring, Thompson, Le Mans, Aintree, or the Nurburgring, where success is reckoned in seconds instead of dollars.

In the polite society of the boulevard on a pleasant summer afternoon the sports car is an aristocratic, blue-blooded lady who will not bow, even distantly, to her fat cousins. She speaks only to members of the family and to Auburns, who speak only to Cords, who speak only to Duesenbergs, who speak only to Bentleys, who speak only to Bugattis, who will not even speak to each other.

A sports car expects and deserves the pampering of a spoiled and expensive wife. (Keep an eye on the books. Time to check the point gap again) but she will forgive you many an oversight, just as a good wife should. It is the true-blue friend who won't desert you even on the turnpike when you have crystalized and snapped a rocker doing your own road test. (A wrench and a pair of pliers and you were on your way in half an hour.)

It is a barky exhaust, the long sweep of clean fender, an honesty of line, a functional hunk of power dictated by engineers

instead of housewives. It talks in terms of rpm, bhp, power to weight, zero to a hundred, and steering ratio in contrast to the huckster's tasteful decor, tomorrow's styling, automatic pushbutton pushers, Jaccard fabrics, and “Egad, my dear, how snooty can we get in this business of keeping up with the Jones, who are only halfway-uppers you know, making far less than you are, and we simply CAHN'T be seen in this old car any longer! Besides that chartreuse and puce combination is simply devine!”

A sports car is a worn-out, old bucket-of-bolts like the pre-war SS-100 Jag who still commands her heavy share of pound notes on the market even though she was the belle of the London ball some 16 years ago. It is the cocky, never-say-die little Singer which you can out-jump, out-run, and out-class, but never out-try! It is the deep-throated roar of the Monza type Alfa bewailing the old days, the whine of the tiny German Porsches in their Mexican finish—one, two, three ahead of the mighty American stock sedans—the haughty pride of the Mercedes-Benz teams, King of the Hill in '55. It is the carmine Jordan of the 20's, piloted by the man in the coon-skin coat with the red-headed girl with the rolled stockings, putting it over the road to Cheyenne in the Prohibition era. (Today he is fat, sixty, and has his order in for an XK140MC in British Racing Green.)

A sports car is so many things for so many people. For some it is the Ferrari at Florida in '55, slugging it out to the split second with the D Jaguar—or the kid with the back-yard fiberglass job pinning the ears back on the '39 chopped and channeled V-8 on the back roads of Sioux City, Iowa. It is the flying, feather-weight Healey 100 knocking the world records galley-west at Bonneville for less than \$3000. It is the memory of Stirling Moss at Monthéry clocking 100 plus for a week for the big Jag. Or a determined, freezing, enthusiastic sports car wife watching for check points on the club's mid-winter rally.

Sports cars are a happy and proud breed—like the Scotch tartans, French fleur-de-lis, and British crests, but when you acquire one, don't expect understanding, credit, appreciation, or admiration. To the world, a sports car will always evoke: “What do you want that thing for? It's not practical.” And you can't answer—because the answer is out there in the sunset of a winter's day on the wide open road, the wind stinging past your upturned mackinaw, the contented purr of the big engine turning into a whine, and the needle of the rev counter creeping up into the red. ●



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