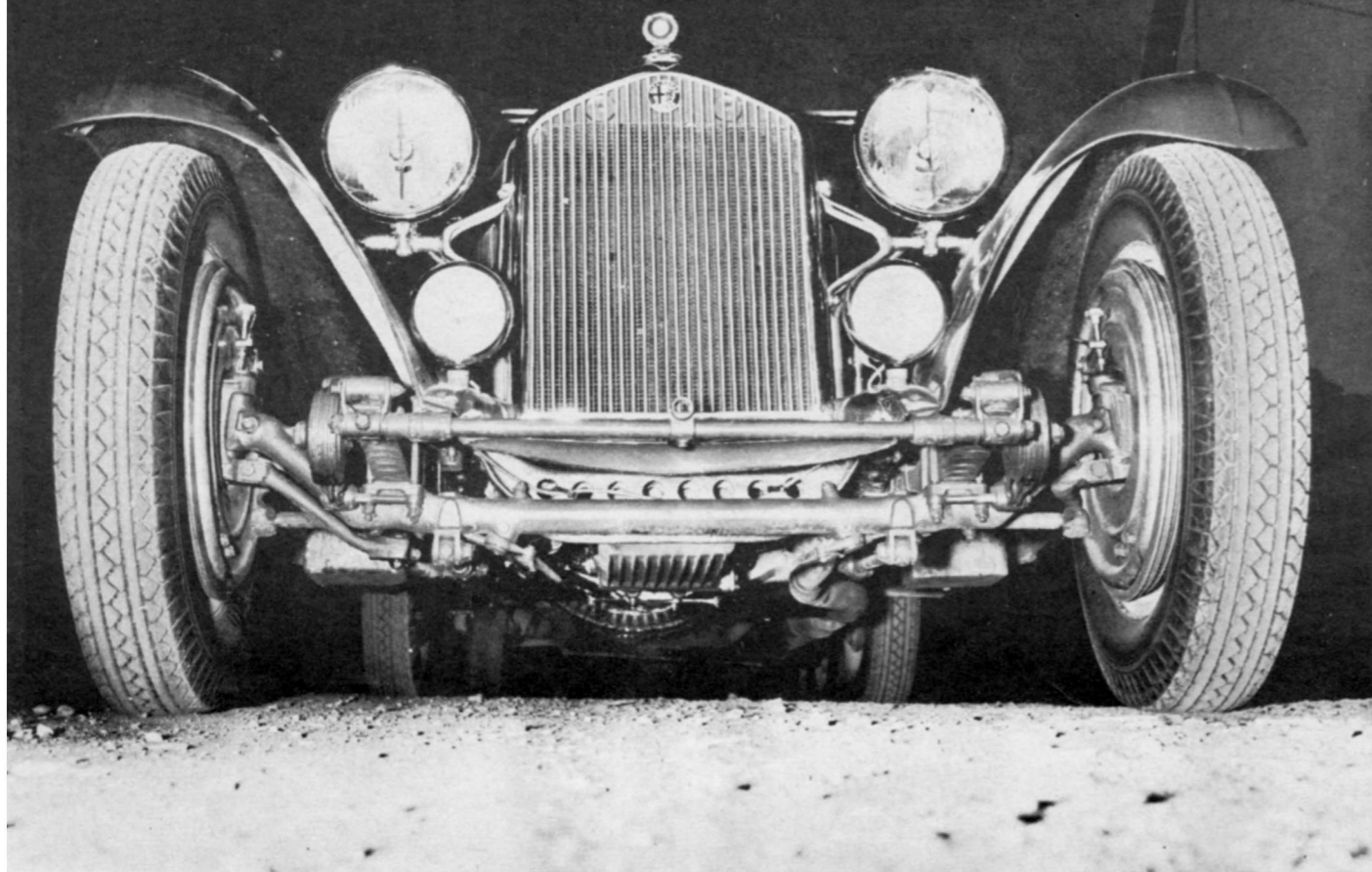


# Tread Lightly On Me



2.3's frontal area is small and impressively efficient. Huge brakes are rod-operated, and look a lot better than they really are. Shocks are friction-type by Siata; semi-elliptic springs are practically flat.

**The 2.3 Alfa was one of the great high-performance cars of all time. Cut from the Alfa GP car of the same vintage, it was an engineering masterpiece. Come for a ride!**

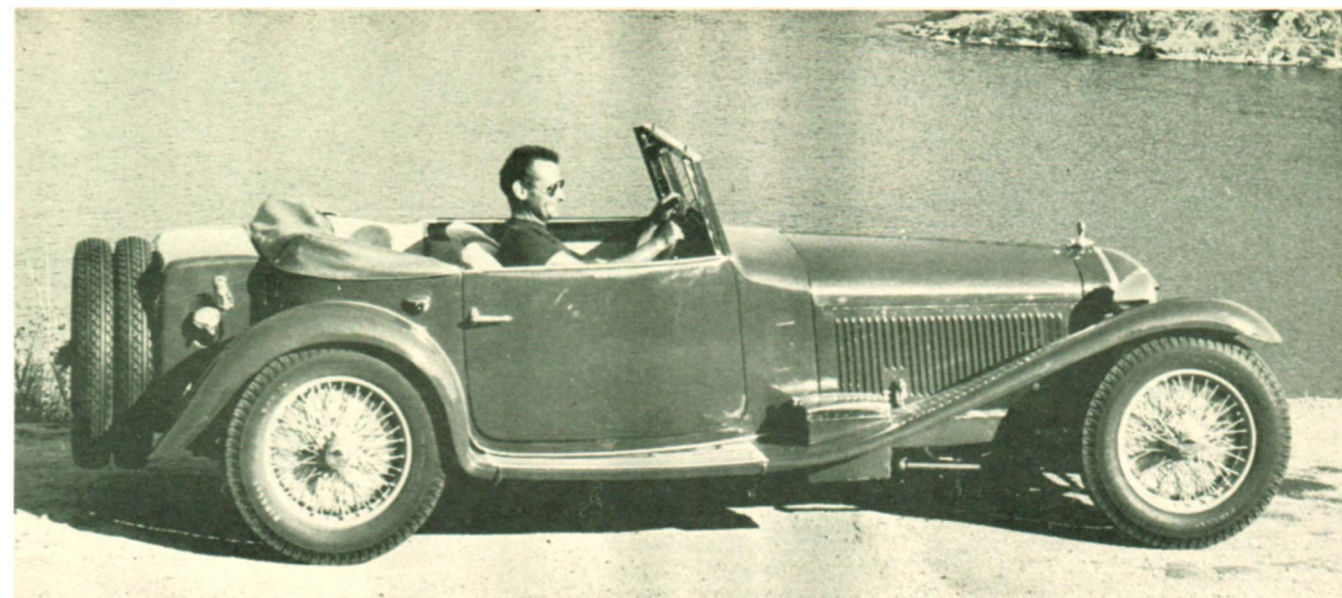
OTTO Zipper, a Beverly Hills Porsche-VW dealer who on the side collects Bugattis like postage stamps, spoke excitedly on the other end of the phone. "You won't believe it, I just brought it over from France and it's like new. What? Why, it's what I've been looking for all these years—a 2.3 Alfa, and it's *mint*." There was a sort of worship in his voice as he intoned "Ahhhhla," rolling the L as Latins roll their R's. Then he said, "Listen, let's road-test this beast. She's wonderful. Let's get her on the dirt; that's my meat."

Zipper drove Alfas and Bugattis in Austrian competition in the late '20's and '30's, then maintained them in the '40's for the late Tommy Lee. I had watched him in operation before at the controls of good machines, and I was not indifferent to the opportunity of sharing the new-old Alfa with him.

Early the next morning I found Zipper bustling about the car, barely able to contain his excitement. This was to be

the Alfa's first letting-out since she had landed in the U. S. Zipper was preparing as though for a race, topping off the 29-gallon fuel tank and the huge oil tank under the front floorboards that feeds the dry sump lube system. He checked the ignition deftly and thoroughly, calibrated the tach and snugged up the wing hub caps. Before we were done he opened up the Memini carburetor and replaced its main jets with an oversize pair he just happened to have saved from his old days with the marque.

Hearing one of the good vintage Alfas fired up for the first time always is a thrill, whether you're a machinery lover or not. Zipper slid behind the wheel, retarded the steering-column spark control, pulled out the fuel pump switch, pressed in the Bosch ignition key and then the starter button. The engine was cold and the 12-volt starter gave it three fast, futile spins. On the fourth she caught, and what had been merely a beautiful thing to look upon before she was roused from her lethargy suddenly became almost frighten-



Zipper's Figoni 2.3 is unusually tail-heavy, due to twin spare wheels and tires mounted on rear, and the 29 gallon fuel tank, which occupies much of the trunk's usable space.

## BY GRIFF BORGESON

ingly alive and worthy of any driver's cautious respect. A 1000-rpm idle is nothing in itself; but when you couple that with a complex tower of spur gears from crankshaft to twin overhead cams, gear drive to water pump, oil pump and supercharger, plus the noise of overhead tappets, you have something—a very loud, nervous, urgent, sizzling buzz backed up by the irritable hum of a Roots blower. Even at idle, it's unmistakable that here is an all-out racing engine that sings "tread lightly on me."

During our 350-mile test the 2.3 engine—so close to the 2.3 race-car power unit that it doesn't even have a fan—proved to be totally without temperament. It was smooth throughout its speed range and we wound it to 4500 rpm constantly. The noises that were loud at idle became a maniacal scream at speed. But the most exciting sound of all I got standing on the road, listening to the 2.3 go by. As it approached, the rising buzz-saw whistle of the blower was dominant,

with the exhaust playing a muted counterpoint. But when the car passed, the balance was instantaneously reversed. I got the full impact of the mellow but hard-hammering exhaust, with the supercharger's note a receding wail.

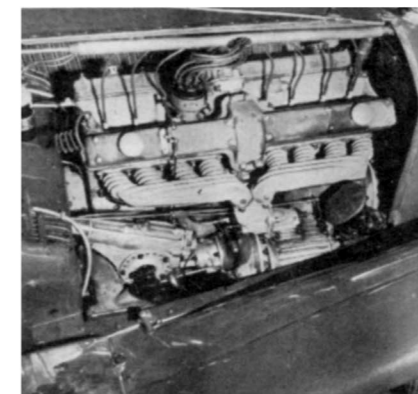
Zipper stayed at the controls as we headed out through Beverly Hills to open country, demonstrating the correct technique for handling the Alfa's four-speed crash box. The ratios are fairly close, and the way to make silent changes is to throw the shift lever fast, while double-clutching even faster. This is how to do it going up through the gears. Going down, speed is immaterial. What's important is the accuracy with which you speed up the engine while the clutch pedal is out. Every shift is a three-cushion shot with lots of English, and just one such shift demands more driving skill than it takes to put a thousand highway miles on a Cadillac.

Now we were out of the city, on our way to the hills and

(Continued on page 58)



Interior is simple, with accelerator pedal located between clutch and brake. The four speed crash box has fairly close ratios.



Engine is functional, yet symmetrical. Roots blower is located between the Memini carburetor and manifold. There is no fan.



In fast turn, front wheels follow any curve on rails; rear wheels slide out until they align with front, then sliding always stops.

## Le Mans

continued from preceding page

and quite possibly on top speed, despite the Jag's superior aerodynamics. Phil Hill had nothing but good things to say about the car and apparently it will supersede the Testa Rossa as Ferrari's "production" sports car in 1957-58. Prancing horse retirements were due to engine seizure and failure of oil supply on the two 4 liters, while the 3.1 went out with a blown piston. The Severi-Lewis-Evans car finished in fifth position. General opinion was that bad fuel caused most of the trouble, for the von Frankenberg-Herrmann Porsche also went out with a blown piston. More than likely these cars were "pinked" or "knocking" all the way down Mulsanne straight and the drivers, unable to hear it, did not lift their feet.

After only six hours the Ecosse D types had it all their own way, running steadily but conservatively. The 4.5 Maser coupe had long ago folded up with a seized rear end, as had the open 4.5 that Behra had driven so nobly for such a short time. The rubber boot over the joint from the half-shaft at the rear wheel came off, all the oil came out, and pieces letting go from the half shaft flew into the fuel tank. Simone was at the wheel when it happened, and he managed to stop the car at Mulsanne before any fire could start. The Scarlatti-Bonnier 3 liter Maserati went out with clutch trouble before twelve hours were up. Thus, to all intents and purposes, the race was over early on the morning of Sunday the 23rd when the D Jags took the lead, holding it till 4PM Sunday afternoon, 24 hours after they started.

The Italian "challenge" just never materialized. Possibly it *could* have, particularly among the Ferraris, if Collins and Hawthorn had lifted their feet occasionally to make it a 24 hour race instead of a two hour sprint. For the English, Le Mans once more became an automobile showroom. What a pity that neither Chevrolet nor Ford had the courage to bring a team to France for this internationally famous event. Even if they didn't even finish, the fact that they were *there and entered* would have been a step in the right direction. And Le Mans is not that difficult a race to win, according to Jaguar.

Jesse L. Alexander

## RESULTS—1957 LE MANS 24 HOUR RACE

1. Flockhart-Bueb; Jaguar "D"; 3781 cc; averaged 113.85 mph for the 2732.36 miles covered in the 24 hours.
2. Sanderson-Lawrence; Jaguar "D"; 3781 cc; averaged 111.16 mph for 2665.51 miles.
3. Lucas—"Jean Marie"; Jaguar "D"; 3442 cc; averaged 110.17 mph for the 2644.15 miles.
4. Frere-Rousselle; Jaguar "D"; entered by the "Ecurie Nationale Belge"; averaged 107.95 mph for 2590.76 miles.
5. Lewis-Evans-Severi; Ferrari; 3117 cc.
6. Hamilton-Gregory; Jaguar "D".
7. Bianchi-Harris; Ferrari "Testa Rossa".
8. Hugus-de Beaufort; Porsche RS; 1498 cc.
9. Mackay-Fraser-Chamberlin; Lotus; 1098 cc.
10. Rudd-Bolton; AC Bristol; 1971 cc.

## INDEX OF PERFORMANCE WINNER

1. Lotus 750 cc; Allison-Hall.
2. Lotus 1098 cc; Mackay-Fraser-Chamberlin.
3. DB 745 cc; Cornet-Perrier.

## Fastest lap (record)

Ferrari; 4023 cc; Hawthorn;  
3 min 59.6 seconds; 125.67 mph

## Alfa

(Continued from page 31)

straights of the high desert country. I took the wheel. The seating position felt fine: high, with plenty of room for everything but my feet, which tended to get tangled in the tight-packed cluster of pedals. The throttle pedal was tucked between the two big pedals in typical old-continental style—good for heel-and-toe work but easy to make mistakes with at first.

I found it surprising that this car was very reluctant to get off the line in spite of its close power to weight ratio and fast idle. But with higher revs it would shudder, charge and peak out all within four seconds. First speed was at the far left of the H-shaped gate, second was straight back. In this cog, the 2.3 delivered a solid whack-in-the-back and hurried powerfully up to 60 mph. Here I popped the lever across to third, and began to get some idea of the passions this purebred carries locked under its long hood. There are plenty of road machines that will do 75 in third, but not many will do it with such fierce eagerness.

It was also surprising to discover that the 2.3 handles heavily, like an old truck, at low speeds. But at 40 mph there's an easy, fluid quality to everything it does; and from about 60 mph onward the heavy, pedestrian side of its character vanishes completely. It becomes supple as a whip and its road behavior is far above average, even by modern sports car standards.

Alfas of this period were celebrated for their "sentient steering," which, in the words of a road-tester of the '30's, "seems to anticipate turns before you reach them." This description has the ring of superstitious folklore, but it's well-grounded. It's possible, more or less to *will* a motorcycle around a bend by body or muscle movements that are practically imperceptible. The Alfa, thanks largely to its full ball-bearing almost frictionless steering, can be guided the same way. Too tight a grip on the wheel at speed can produce symptoms of wander; but these are caused by the driver's own minor body movements being telegraphed to the front wheels through its super-sensitive steering.

The 2.3's cornering behavior is no less uncanny. It has been called an oversteering car; but, judging by the Zipper specimen, this is not exactly the case. The effect of common oversteer is that the car pulls to the inside of a curve and has to be steered away from the inside for it to follow the radius of the curve accurately. The Alfa is not like this; it's weird. The front wheels follow any curve as though on rails, and need none of the correction required by over- or under-steer. But the rear wheels don't follow the same invisible track. They slide outward, following a trajectory of their own until their alignment puts them parallel again with the front wheels. It feels as though the rear wheels need a moment to catch up with the front wheels, and the sensation is a little disquieting until you learn that this outward swing of the rear end *always* stops as soon as the rear wheels point in the same direction as the front wheels.

The rear-end slide sets in at fairly low cornering speeds, but no matter how fast we cornered there was *no* trace of tire squeal. The slide isn't sudden, and has no slippery broken-loose feel. Like the slide of the modern Porsche, it probably helps the 2.3 get through turns a shade faster than it otherwise could. This effect probably was an important factor in the 2.3's racing successes.

Otto and I spent the first few hours of our test day taking care of the basic road-testing preliminaries: weighing the car, calibrating its speedometer, taking pulling power and drag readings, and just getting the feel of the machine. It was a ball. And then the clutch went out.

At the very outset Zipper had announced that he wasn't happy with the clutch; he'd hoped to rebuild it before this but the needed springs had not arrived. So we nursed the clutch carefully. During high-speed gear changes it would slip momentarily and we learned to avoid this by not applying throttle until the multiple disc unit had established a good bite. But the time came when depressing the clutch pedal suddenly had no effect.

Worse things can happen than being 50 miles from civilization in a '34 Alfa without a clutch. Zipper assured me cheerfully. Then, with great gusto, he proceeded to pick his way through the spur-cut gears. His first few changes were just a bit noisy, but by the fifth change he had established such control over engine speed and gear

continued on next page

## Jordan

(Continued from page 37)

Special stainless-steel studs (having a low coefficient of expansion) are screwed into the crankcase with a very long thread. These studs extend through the cylinder muff and through the cylinder head. Special nuts at the upper end of these studs hold the cylinder head against the barrel which in turn is held firmly on the crankcase.

A special copper washer serves as a gasket between the cast iron portion of the cylinder barrel and the head. This is annealed each time the head is removed. The muff does not extend quite to the upper end of the barrel to avoid interference which might otherwise occur due to the difference in expansion between the cast iron and the aluminum.

Norton Manx hairpin valve springs are used. These give 180 pounds pressure when the valve is on its seat.

One of the most outstanding features of this engine and one that evokes much comment is the special double overhead camshaft setup. These camshafts are supported by ball bearings held in special

(Continued on page 62)

continued from preceding page

speed that he was shifting smoothly, if not quickly, in both directions. "Why not?", he asked, when I complimented him on this. "Didn't Nuvolari win races this way? Of course I have to be more careful than Tazio—the factory won't be giving me a new gearbox tomorrow."

Without a clutch we obviously couldn't run off a standard set of acceleration figures. Zero to 30 in low gear was no problem; but the zero to 60 run required one shift, and our time would have been a lot better with an operating clutch. We were able to record a perfectly representative 20 to 80 mph time in top gear, pointing up the great low-speed torque and flexibility of this apparently high-strung but nonetheless docile engine. An important factor in this car's performance is its combined wind and rolling resistance—low, for a vintage machine.

The 2.3's ride is about what you'd expect in a prewar sports car based on a racing chassis. It's very hard but well-snubbed by original-equipment Siata friction shocks, and unlike some of the harsher present-day sports cars, there is nothing acutely jolting about the ride. Jouncing over rough dirt roads put the Ficoni body to a severe test. Many Italian and French coachbuilt aluminum bodies of this period were flimsily built and deteriorated fast. But the body on this 2.3 was without a squeak or rattle, the body panels never squirmed and the long, graceful fenders never vibrated. It was as solid as an iron casting.

The brakes of the race-bred 2.3 look magnificent. With their finned aluminum mufflers, they fill the 19-in. wheels right out to the rims, and have an inside diameter of 15.75 ins. They are rod-operated; but this should not be held against them. Some of the best brakes in the world have been of this type. Still, the Alfa's brakes aren't as good as they look. The linings are narrow and the mechanism feels devoid of servo action. It takes immense pedal pressures to produce anything approaching reasonable stopping power. The fact that the great drivers of the 2.3's heyday—from spectacular Nuvolari to cool Carracciola—made little use of their brakes is significant. But not only the Alfas of the time were under-braked; so were Bugattis and Mercedes.

In every other way the 2.3 was and is an engineering masterpiece—one of the great high-performance cars of all time. The 165-bhp racing version, among its many racing victories, won at Le Mans three times, in the Targa Florio three times, in the Mille Miglia twice. It was designed to whip the competition Bugattis, Maseratis and Mercedes; and it did.

It was in 1932 that Alfa, a make that has consistently cut its competition and its touring cars from the same patterns, introduced the sports-touring version of the 2.3. Except for tune and wheelbase, it was identical to the race car; it pulled 150 bhp at 4900 rpm. The bare chassis sold for \$8000 and a 2.3 in *concours* condition today still may bring \$5000. But such a car should not be kept as a mere showpiece. It cries out to be driven hard and, so driven, its immortal excellence is as freshly thrilling today as it was a quarter-century ago.

Griff Borgeson

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