

Alfa Romeo



# ALFA ROMEO

## 100 YEARS OF CARS FOR ENTHUSIASTS

By Malcolm Harris

**A**lfa Romeo celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance is honored to have a glorious display of Alfa's most significant cars on the lawn today, including cars from almost every decade of Alfa's history.

Alfa Romeo has a reputation for building cars that appeal to automotive enthusiasts, and that is not accidental. A.L.F.A. (Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili, or Lombardy Car Manufacturing Company) was founded in 1910 by a group of Milanese enthusiasts who were disappointed with the poor quality of the cars then being imported into Italy. They wanted to produce a roadworthy sporting automobile that the people of Milano could be proud of. Indeed, for ALFA's logo they adopted the cross-and-serpent design from the seal of that city. Considering that their goal was to build a high-quality all-Italian sporting automobile, their first move was a curious one: they purchased the factory and other assets of the ailing Italian subsidiary of the French Darracq company. Although they briefly continued to manufacture the rather spindly little Darracqs, within a year they had liquidated that operation and were producing cars of their own design—big, sturdy, roadworthy cars with engine capacities ranging from 2.5 to 6 liters.

The founders of ALFA wasted no time in demonstrating their enthusiasm for sporting automobiles and events. They immediately commenced a modest racing program, entering the Targa Florio in 1911 and then participating in all the major Italian road races, with moderate success, until the beginning of the First World War in 1914. Just before the war brought auto racing to a halt in Europe, ALFA developed a "Grand Prix" model, with a double overhead cam (dohc) engine.

ALFA did not initially enjoy great financial success, but during the war the company was taken over by a young engineer, Nicola Romeo, who succeeded in getting many war-related government contracts for aero engines, air compressors and other products. This left the company in good financial standing at the end of the war and automobile production was immediately resumed. Romeo not only brought prosperity to the company, he also gave it his name: ALFA became Alfa-Romeo in November of 1918.

Left: This 1948 Alfa Romeo 6C 2500 SS Competizione (number 002) is the only Alfa Romeo to compete in four Mille Miglia races, from 1948 through 1951. It was raced extensively, competing in seventeen races and winning three.



Left: The first Alfa to wear the famous Green Cloverleaf symbol was the 1923 Alfa Romeo RL Targa Florio, seen here driven by Ugo Sivocci, winner of the 1923 Targa Florio.

Alfa's reputation as a manufacturer of great racing and sports cars really began in earnest in the early 1920s. While producing a line of conventional touring cars, Alfa also embarked on a serious racing program. Success was immediate: Giuseppe Campari won the 230-mile Circuit of Mugello in a 6.1-liter Alfa on June 13, 1920. This was Alfa's first win in a major race. Throughout the early 1920s, Alfa not only advanced the capabilities of its cars but also consolidated a loyal racing team whose surviving members would continue to design, develop and race Alfas for decades. Giuseppe Campari, Giuseppe Merosi, Giulio Ramponi, Ugo Sivocci, Antonio

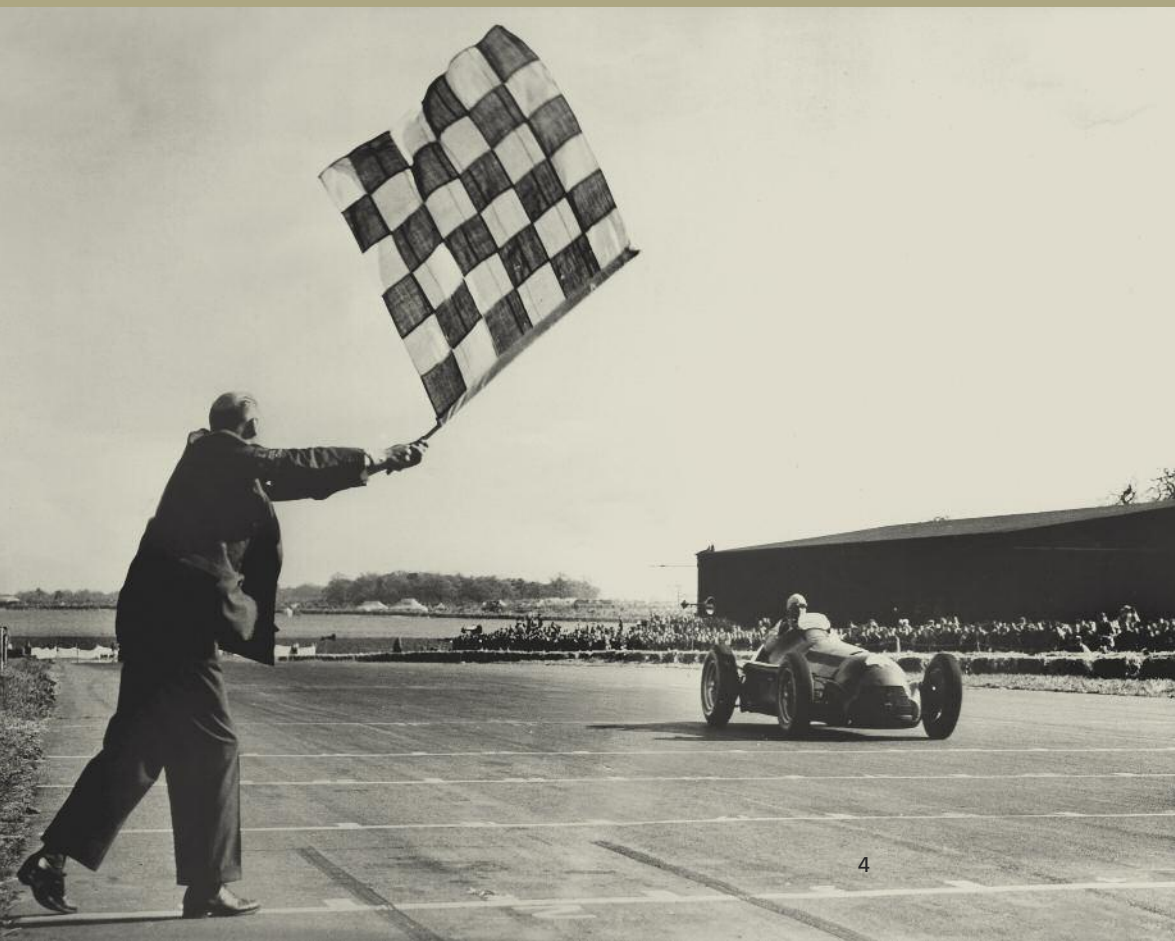
Below: At the 1950 Grand Prix of Europe, held at the Silverstone circuit in England, Giuseppe "Nino" Farina drove the Tipo 158 Alfetta to victory. Farina went on to win the 1950 World Championship. Racing that year was really dominated by the Alfettas, driven by Farina, Luigi Fagioli and Juan Manuel Fangio.

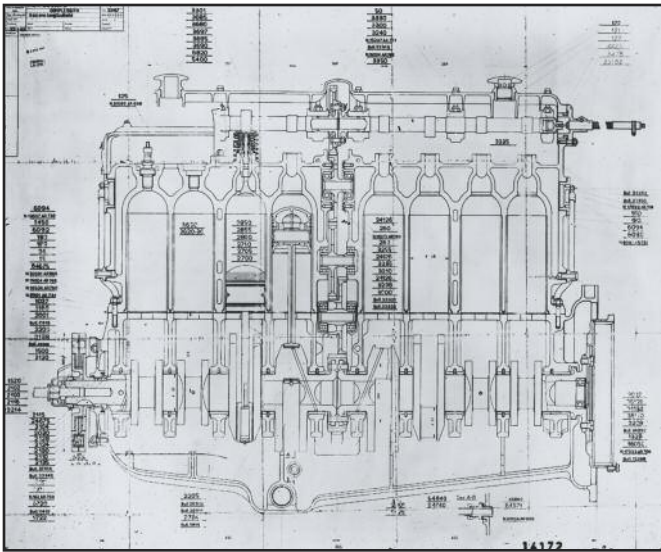
Ascari, Enzo Ferrari and Luigi Bazzi soon became household names in a country where motor racing was rapidly growing into a national passion. By 1923, Alfa's racing program was so well developed that the company entered five of its new 3.1-liter RL cars in the Targa Florio and finished first and second. One of these famed RL Targa Florio cars will be on display at the Concours today.

Perhaps the most significant event in Alfa's entire history occurred in 1923. It was not a racing victory, nor the release of a new model. It was a successful recruiting effort: Enzo Ferrari convinced the gifted mechanical engineer Vittorio Jano to leave Fiat and join Alfa-Romeo. Jano's arrival at Alfa was a seminal event that shaped the company's future; he was, without question, one of the greatest automotive engine designers of all time. And Alfa wasted no time in putting

Jano's brilliance to good use. More than any other person, Jano was responsible for Alfa's glorious domination of sports and Grand Prix racing from 1924 to 1951.

In late 1923, a prototype Grand Prix car, the G.P.R. or P1, powered by a two-liter, six-cylinder dohc engine, was being tested at Monza. Three cars were prepared for the first running of the Grand Prix of Europe. But Ugo Sivocci's death while testing the car caused Alfa to withhold this model from actual competition.





The Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 engine, designed by Vittorio Jano.

Alfa's first true Grand Prix car, the P2, with a straight-8 dohc supercharged engine, was developed in early 1924. Four of these cars were entered in the European Grand Prix at Lyon that August. This was Alfa's first entry in a major race outside Italy, and it stunned the European motor-ing community by placing first (Campari)—the only time a manufacturer has won a Grand Prix race on its first attempt—and fourth (Wagner). P2s also swept the first four places at Monza in 1924 and went on to win the World Championship in 1925, the first year that title was awarded. The model continued winning races until 1930.

In the late 1920s, Alfa began what was to become a standard production scheme, always following the same successful formula: build a solid, technically advanced chassis and engine for a berlina model and then modify that chassis and engine to produce a smaller number of special sports models with spider and coupe bodies—and make the chassis available to Italian coach-builders for their own special creations. This formula began with the introduction of the 6C 1500 (6 cylinders, 1500 cc) model in 1925, Alfa's first effort at producing a large number of passenger cars. The practice continued with the 6C 1750 in 1929, the 6C 2300 and 6C 2500 models of the 1930s and 1940s, the 1900 and Giulietta models of the 1950s, the 2000 and 2600 as well as the Giulia models of the 1960s, the 1750 and 2000 models of the 1970s, the six-cylinder cars introduced in 1980, and beyond.

The 6C 1500 and 6C 1750 Alfas produced between 1927 and 1933 were significant milestones in the development of the automobile because the special sports models built on those chassis can be viewed as prototypes for the modern sports car. The spider versions of the 1500 and the 1750 were supercharged and well-balanced—most people say they feel “just right”—and they had



A 1940 Alfa Romeo 6C 2500 with berlinetta coachwork, designed by Touring but built under license by Castagna.



Left: The 1910 A.L.F.A. 24 HP, designed by Giuseppe Merosi of Piacenza.

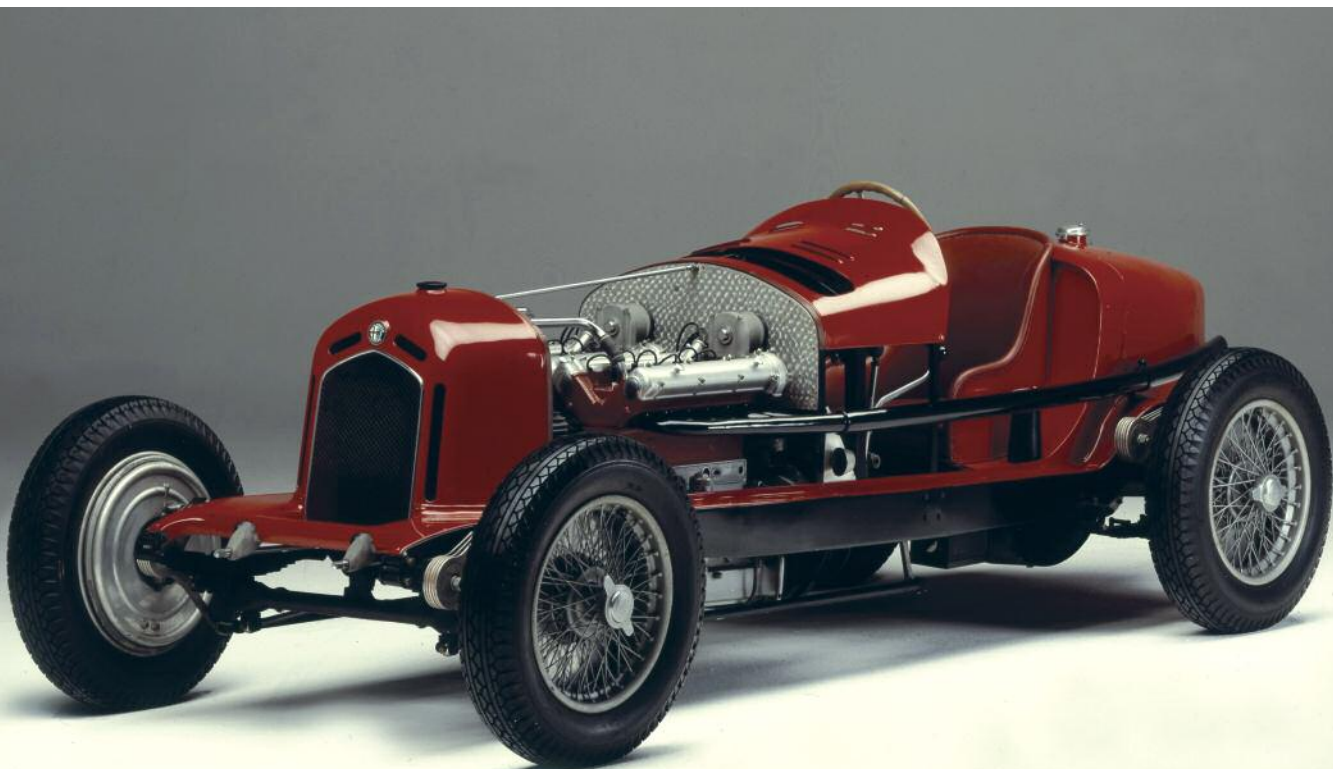
Below: The Gran Premio Tipo A was the first single-seater racing car engineered by Alfa Romeo. This 3504 cc, 12-cylinder model was equipped with two 6C 1750 engines with two gearboxes, two driving shafts and two rear housings for the final drives. A delicate balancing act was needed to drive these machines at high speed.

excellent brakes. They also were clothed in lightweight aluminum bodies by Zagato, Touring and other Italian coachbuilders.

As great as the six-cylinder Alfas were, something even better was in the works—Jano’s ultimate masterpieces, the eight-cylinder supercharged sports and racing cars of the 1930s. Throughout 1930, Jano was busy designing the first of these masterpieces, the 8C 2300. Only 188 of these cars were produced from 1931 to 1934, all with custom coachwork from Italy’s most prestigious coachbuilders. The 8C 2300 had the same lightweight bodywork as the 6C 1750, but with two extra cylinders the cars developed between 142 and 178 horsepower, depending on the state of tune. With this added power and much bigger brakes, the “2.3” achieved a quantum leap in the development of the sports car. Many of the 2.3s were developed by the Scuderia Ferrari racing team into frontline race cars, and they dominated all of the major sports racing

events of the early 1930s, including the Mille Miglia, Le Mans, the Targa Florio and numerous hill climbs. The “Monza” version even competed successfully in Grand Prix events, winning two premier races: the Italian Grand Prix in 1931 and the Monaco Grand Prix in 1932. Most of the 2.3s were sold to wealthy sportsmen who raced them independently. Others were sold to customers who simply wanted to own and drive the world’s finest sports car.

A year after release of the 8C 2300, Alfa began producing one of the greatest Grand Prix cars of all time: the Tipo B or P3, which dominated Grand Prix racing from 1932 to 1935. First produced in 2.6-liter form and later as a 2.9, with twin superchargers, the car was successfully campaigned first by Alfa and later by the Scuderia Ferrari racing team. The P3 won almost every race it entered until the German Auto Union and Mercedes teams began fielding competitive cars in 1935.



Right: This 1933 Touring-bodied Alfa Romeo 8C 2300 Spider of William "Chip" Connor received the FIVA Award at Pebble Beach in 2005.

Bottom: The 1934 Alfa Romeo 8C 2300 Touring Spider exhibited by John Travis at Pebble Beach in 2005.

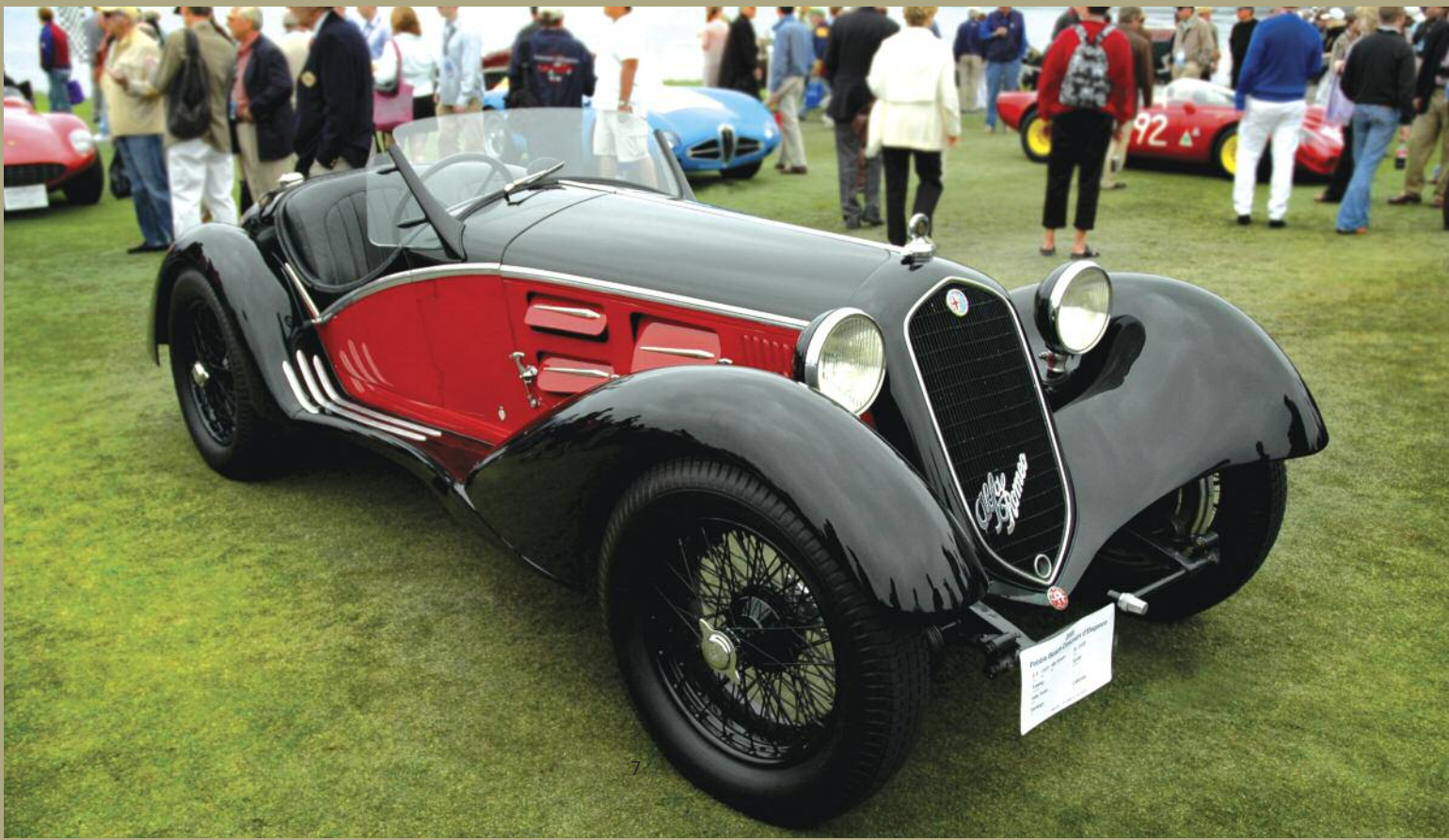


The final 8C of the 1930s—the 8C 2900 or “2.9”—is unquestionably the Holy Grail of all Alfas. Indeed, many automotive enthusiasts feel the 2.9 is not just the greatest Alfa, but the greatest automobile of all time. Alfa built a limited series of approximately 40 of these sports cars from 1936 to 1941. We say “approximately 40” because, believe it or not, no one knows for certain how many were made.

It is difficult to imagine how stunned the motoring community must have been when this revolutionary car first appeared in 1936. Jano had pulled out all the stops in designing a mechanical masterpiece, employing every state-of-the-art feature one could imagine for an automobile in that time. The car was powered by the thinly disguised racing engine from the P3—a 2900 cc all-alloy straight-eight, with fixed head, twin superchargers, main bearings between every cylinder, gear-driven accessories and a magneto ignition system adapted from aero engines. The chassis was also revolutionary. Unlike the

8C 2300 created just five years earlier, which had a traditional flexible chassis with solid axles and leaf spring suspension, the 2.9 had a rigid frame with independent suspension on each wheel. The front wheels were located by double trailing arms and sprung by a cylinder containing both a coil spring and a hydraulic damping system. In the rear, swing axles were located by twin trailing arms, sprung by a transverse leaf spring and damped by both a modern telescopic hydraulic damping unit and a traditional friction system, which was adjustable from the cockpit. Excellent weight distribution was achieved by moving the transmission to the rear—this was one of the first cars ever to have a rear transaxle.

The 2.9 was not only a mechanical jewel, it was fitted with some of the most stunning coachwork ever to grace an automobile chassis. A few of the early 2.9s were bodied by Alfa’s own bodyworks, Carrozzeria Alfa, and one of these rare Alfa-bodied cars will be on the show field today. Two bodies came





Left: This 1932 Alfa Romeo Tipo B was first raced at Monza in 1934 before coming to the United States. It then raced at Indianapolis in 1946 and 1947 as the Don Lee Special. Don Lee owned several radio stations in Los Angeles, and his son Tommy, who owned this car, was one of the first race team owners to use radio to communicate with his driver. The car is now owned by Hugh Taylor.

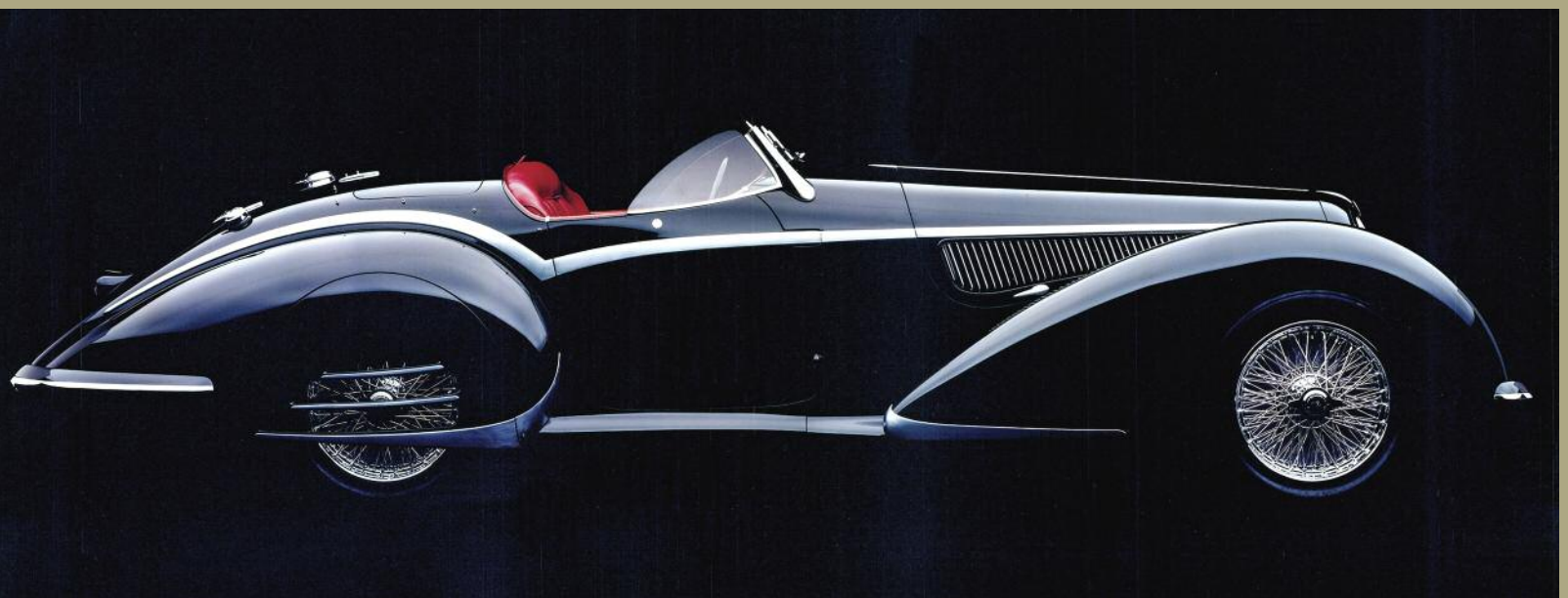
Bottom: Our 1988 Best of Show winner, John Mozart's 1937 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Touring Spider, also won the Strother MacMinn Most Elegant Sports Car Trophy in 2005.

Prix at Watkins Glen the same year. Phil Hill drove a 2.9 MM spider to claim the Pebble Beach Cup in 1951 — when the car was 13 years old! Phil later said that was the car he most regretted selling.

from Pinin Farina, another from Stabilimenti Farina. But all the rest of the original bodies came from the legendary Milanese coachbuilder, Carrozzeria Touring, the leading Italian coachbuilder of the day, which was then at the zenith of its artistic excellence. As you can see by looking at the cars on the field today, the Touring bodies are streamlined and more than a little bit erotic! The brightwork, trim and adornments are “snazzy” but never vulgar. Touring’s *Superleggera* (“superlight”) construction technique (aluminum skin over tubular steel frames) was revolutionary for its time and achieved a significant reduction in weight. Even today, automobile designers are relearning the wisdom of Touring’s motto from the 1930s: “Weight is the enemy and air resistance is the obstacle.” Naturally, the 2.9s were raced. The most significant of the 2.9 racing cars were the fabled spiders, which debuted at the 1938 Mille Miglia, placing first and second. The 2.9 was so far ahead of its time that the cars continued to win prestigious races long after the Second World War. Even the luxurious berlinetta models were successfully raced, winning the first postwar Mille Miglia in 1947 and the first U.S. Grand

Commencing in 1934, Alfa also produced a new line of six-cylinder cars, the 6C 2300 and 6C 2500 series. They soon displayed the rich variety of the artwork performed by Italy’s numerous coachbuilders. Although not as exciting mechanically as their 8C sisters, the 6C cars were still built to the same high standards and provided Italy’s elite with chic sporting transportation.

Alfa’s ability to survive during the years of the Great Depression while building nothing but sports, racing and luxury automobiles deserves an explanation. In 1933, the Italian Fascist government formed IRI (Istituto Ricostruzione Industriale), a government-owned holding company that took control of several enterprises, including Alfa Romeo, whose survival were deemed vital for Italy’s economy. Alfa thus existed to serve the needs of the Italian State. The company built aircraft engines for the Italian Air Force, trucks and buses for the government, limousines for government officials, luxurious automobiles for the elite who controlled the government, and race cars that would promote Italian industry and generate favorable propaganda by “winning for Italy” throughout Europe. The scenario of a government-owned company



**Right: This Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 Mille Miglia was driven by Phil Hill in the Del Monte Handicap race at the Pebble Beach Road Races in 1951. Over 50 years later it was shown at Pebble Beach by its owner Ralph Lauren and won its class.**



building race cars and sports cars for the wealthy is unfathomable today, but in Fascist Italy it was perfectly understandable. As war came to Europe in 1939, Alfa's production waned; only a handful of the 6C 2500 cars were produced during the war, and most of these were delivered to Italian and German military officers and government officials. Because Alfa was manufacturing aero engines and other military machinery, Alfa's factory at Portello became the target of Allied bombing raids and was seriously damaged late in the conflict.

As Alfa emerged from the war, the company slowly resumed production of the 6C 2500 models. Pinin Farina produced several series of cabriolets on the 6C 2500 Sport and Super Sport chassis, while Touring concentrated on coupe and berlinetta bodies. Almost all the minor Italian coachbuilders got into the act, producing a huge variety of body styles—some beautiful, some bizarre, all of them interesting—reflecting the transitional nature of automobile body design in the late 1940s. I think it is safe to say that no automobile chassis has had a greater variety of coachwork than the 6C 2500.

Alfa returned to racing in 1946, fielding the Tipo 158 cars, which had been developed just before the war. The 158 and its final derivative, the 159 Alfetta, completely dominated postwar Grand Prix racing, winning the World Championship in 1950 and 1951. Never in the history of automotive engines has so much horsepower been coaxed from such a small engine. The straight-eight Alfetta engine in its final form had two-stage supercharging, which produced an astonishing 450 hp from only 1500 cc displacement.

As the 1950s arrived, Alfa's role as a small manufacturer of racing cars and coachbuilt luxury cars for the wealthy was destined to change. During its first 40 years, Alfa had manufactured only 13,806 cars, an average of about 345 per year. Democratic postwar politics and financial assistance from the Marshall Plan dictated that the government-owned company cater to the broader public. The year 1951 thus became a watershed year for Alfa; it withdrew from Grand Prix racing but it also launched its first mass-produced model, the 1900, a car that was within the economic means of the middle class.

Within three years Alfa had made more units of the 1900 than all the cars previously produced since 1910. The Giulietta series followed in 1954, and by 1960 Alfa was producing 35,000 cars per year. Alfa returned to offering an upscale product line in 1958, introducing the 2000 series, which became the 2600 in 1962. The Giulia chassis also debuted in 1962, and its underpinnings served Alfa throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The famous Duetto spider was introduced in 1966 and went through continuous refinement, remaining in production until 1995.



Remaining faithful to the intentions of its founders in 1910, Alfa has continually produced exciting sporting automobiles throughout its 100-year history. Although the company withdrew from the American market in 1995, Alfa returned in 2009 with the exciting *8C Competizione*. Although only 85 of the new 8Cs were sold here, this limited return to the U.S. market has rekindled hope among American enthusiasts that Alfa will soon return to the USA with a wide range of sporting models, fostering a new generation of American *Alfisti*.

*Forza Alfa!*

*Malcolm Harris is a longtime Alfa Romeo enthusiast, having owned and restored more than fifteen Alfas since 1970. He practices law in Seattle and is the President and Editor of Parkside Publications, Inc., a publisher of automotive books, including Simon Moore's definitive Alfa Romeo histories, The Legendary 2.3 and The Immortal 2.9.*