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ALFA'S FINEST

From 1937 Paris Motor Show debut to victory at this year's Pebble Beach Concours: full story of a stunning 8C 2900B



Inside

BEST-EVER LOTUS

How the Elise totally reinvented the sports car

RUBICON TRAIL

Tackling the world's toughest terrain in a Land Rover

VW'S TOP BUG

EMPI GTV Beetle brought back from the dead



AND THE WINNER IS...

After much speculation, this Alfa Romeo 8C was judged Best in Show at the 2018 Pebble Beach Concours. This is its story

Words David Burgess-Wise **Photography** Dirk de Jager



PEBBLE BEACH WINNER





TOM O'NEAL

Clockwise from above
The Alfa takes the honours
at Pebble Beach; proud
owner David Sydorick;
on the stand at the 1937
Milan motor show.

There was an air of déjà vu about the result of this year's Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. An Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Touring Superleggera Berlinetta carried off the 'Best of Show' award, just as a sister car – the winner of the first Watkins Glen Grand Prix in 1948 – had done in 2008. It was a verdict that surprised many of the pundits, who had confidently forecast that the result would be a shoo-in for the spectacular 1937 V16 Cadillac Series 90 Hartmann Cabriolet built for Swiss playboy Phillippe Barraud; an impressive 22ft in length, this Art Deco extravagance had been an easy winner of the Gwenn Graham prize for the most elegant convertible.

In fact, the one-of-a-kind Caddy didn't even make the final cut, which was at first announced as a tie between four cars instead of the customary three. The four were this 1937 Alfa Romeo, plus an OSCA MT4 1500 Morelli Spider, a 1929 Duesenberg J Murphy Town Limousine (originally owned by the flamboyant Captain George Whittell, who used to take his pet lion Bill for drives in another of his seven Duesies), and a 1948 Talbot-Lago T26 Grand Sport with coachwork by Figoni & Falaschi. This last is a fastback coupé originally commissioned by a manufacturer of zip fasteners; somewhat suggestively, the symbolic chrome zip motif on its bonnet appeared to be coming undone. However, as the cars lined up to await the final verdict, it was announced that the OSCA wasn't going to be among them. Just why wasn't vouchsafed.

Incidentally, the presence of a post-war car among the Best of Show nominees caused a few frissons, as it's usually a Pebble Beach given that post-1945 cars are unlikely to take the top honour – they still haven't got over the shock of 2014, when Jon Shirley's 1954 Ferrari 375 MM Scaglietti Coupé won. Personally, I was surprised that the Talbot-Lago was a finalist because, though definitely interesting and unusual with its quirky triple-headlight frontage and blind rear quarters, it was – in my opinion as a sometime concours judge – *jolie laide* rather than truly elegant.

A caption in a 1949 French magazine agreed with that assessment: 'Embedded headlights, rear wheels entirely covered, bumpers swollen into purely decorative forms. The streamlining is not without its disadvantages when the time comes to change a wheel.' Nevertheless, the sizeable slew of judges who have the final say in a sealed ballot had raised a few hackles by finding it worthy of selection.

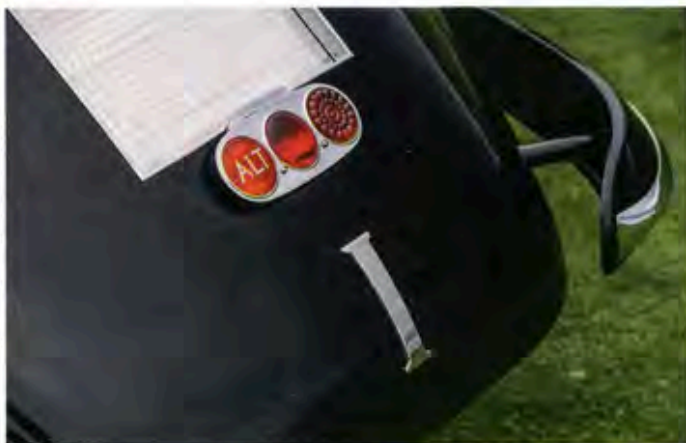
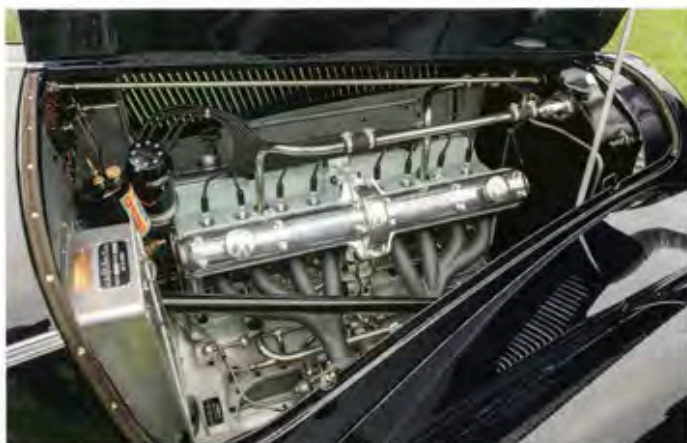


So it must have come as a relief for traditionalists when the master of ceremonies Derek Hill – son of Formula 1 World Champion and 1954 Pebble Beach concours winner Phil Hill – announced that the Alfa had clinched it. While the pundits had begged to differ, the Alfa had been a favourite of the commentators before the final results were unveiled – but the Carrozzeria Touring-bodied car was an unusual choice for its owner, retired Beverly Hills businessman David Sydorick, who is a dedicated collector of cars with Zagato coachwork.

'I broke the rules and bought a Touring-bodied car,' he admits, 'because this Alfa Romeo is very special. It is a piece of automotive architecture mounted on a Grand Prix chassis that has technology that was top-of-the-line for pre-war cars. It's a wonderful combination. It's beautiful from top to bottom.'

One of the last masterpieces designed by Vittorio Jano for Alfa Romeo, the 8C 2900B had its roots in the P3 Grand Prix car of 1934, which had given birth to the 8C 2900A sports racer, itself in essence a detuned open-wheel sports racing version of the GP car with the same all-round independent suspension and a four-speed transaxle. Its twin-supercharged, twin-carburettor, twin-cam 2.9-litre engine produced 220bhp rather than the GP car's 255. It made its debut in 1936 and took the first three places in the Mille Miglia, the first of four Mille Miglia victories for 8C Alfas. Only ten 8C 2900As were built.





'IT WAS A CAR BUILT FOR FAST TOURING ON ITALY'S BURGEONING AUTOSTRADA NETWORK'

It was followed in 1937 by the 8C 2900B, further detuned for road use to 180bhp and fitted with gorgeous coachwork by either Pinin Farina or – mostly – Touring. Only 30 were built in total, 20 of them on the short – *corto* – chassis, ten on the long – *lungo* – chassis. The late Griffith Borgeson described the 8C 2900B as 'an ultimate among ultimate cars'.

The birth of the 8C 2900B coincided with the introduction of Carrozzeria Touring's revolutionary 'Superleggera' system of body construction. Touring's founder Felice Bianchi Anderloni had long experience in the usage of light alloys, thanks to his links with Isotta Fraschini, which had its own foundry and could produce specialised alloys in-house. This was an aspect of metallurgy encouraged by Italy's Fascist regime, beset by economic sanctions that had led it to declare aluminium 'Fascist metal' and encourage its use.

The Superleggera system saw the traditional wooden frame of coachbuilt bodywork replaced by a framework of drawn small-diameter steel tubing shaped on a jig and gas-welded together before being welded to the chassis to make an incredibly strong structure over which a hand-hammered skin of sheet aluminium was fastened to the frame at strategic points. Other points were isolated from the external skin by felt pads; thus the external panels were free of flexional stresses.

The two concepts were brilliantly united on the Alfa Romeo stand at the 1937 Milan *Autarchy* ('self-sufficiency') motor show, which opened, said *The Autocar*, 'without fuss or ceremony'. The future Pebble Beach-winning 8C 2900B 'Lungo' chassis 412020 was displayed with a placard claiming a top speed of 170km/h (104 mph) – shattering for a 1930s production car, albeit an exclusive one.

It duly featured in the company's catalogue as the 'Coupé Leggero', and was a car built for fast touring on Italy's burgeoning autostrada network. Testing an 8C 2300 with similar streamlined Touring Superleggera bodywork, *The Autocar* commented on the lack of wind noise at speed.

Believed to be the first Touring Superleggera Berlinetta of five built on the 8C 2900B chassis, 412020 was also displayed at the 1937 Paris Salon de l'Auto. It differs from the later 8C 2900B Superleggera Berlinettas in a number of details, including the more steeply raked radiator cowl, forward-hinged doors, and horns built into the front wings.

Above and right

Twin-supercharged straight-eight was developed for screaming racers, then detuned for this rather more refined roadgoing application; exquisite Touring lines complemented by understated interior.







It was again shown at the February 1938 Berlin Motor Show in the Deutschlandhalle, where Hitler had hoped to launch his pet project, the Volkswagen KdF Wagen (it wasn't ready), but unveiled the Mercedes-Benz W154 Grand Prix car instead, while the Führer's favourite aviatrix Hanna Reitsch flew the Focke-Achgelis FA-61 – arguably the first practical helicopter – inside the Deutschlandhalle every evening for the two-week duration of the show.

The 8C 2900B is believed to have remained in Germany after the show, for it next came to light in September 1945 when a Captain G Wilson serving with the British Army of Occupation on the Rhine wrote to *The Autocar* about the 'super-streamlined two-seater saloon' he had found.

'The car is a type 2900B, engine No 422001 and chassis No 412020, which will probably interest Alfa enthusiasts at home. The chassis weight is given as 750kg. The coachwork has a crest with "Superleggera" inscribed on it... Behind the seats is sufficient room for a valise. All the windows are plastic. I shall be able to give more details when I have had a check-up on its performance with a stop-watch. So far I have seen 150km/h on the speedometer before the next hump on the autobahn loomed up. In any case, servicing of tyre pressures and other adjustments will have to be first class before one can really indulge in the loud pedal.'


Presumably Captain Wilson was unable to 'repatriate' the Alfa, as it seems to have remained in Germany until 1956, when it was acquired by an

American sergeant and exported to the United States. After subsequent spells in Italian and British hands, it was completely restored by Tony Merrick during the 1990s, when it was owned by a German collector. The car won its class at Pebble Beach in 2001 and was voted most elegant closed car. It also won best of show at the 2003 European Concours d'Elegance, where three 8C Alfas vied for top spot.

In 2012, while in the ownership of Lancashire collector William Ainscough, it took part in the Cartier Style et Luxe at the Goodwood Festival of Speed.

Following its acquisition by David Sydorick, the car was again restored, to its 1938 Berlin Show specification. 'It required knowledge and commitment,' says Sydorick. 'Once you decide to do it, it has to be done – every detail, everything from top to bottom. The restoration took a huge amount of effort and dedication from all those involved.'

That effort paid off: not only did his Alfa win Best of Show, it also carried off two other awards. It won the Charles A Chayne Trophy for the car with the most advanced engineering of its era and was named the 'JB & Dorothy Nethercutt Most Elegant Closed Car'.

Supremely fit for purpose, the Superleggera Berlinetta exemplifies elegance. Few cars have combined form and function to such a degree. 'This Alfa Romeo 8C 2.9 has all that one would wish for in a car – speed, style and, frankly, sex appeal,' commented concours chairman Sandra Button. 'The Touring styling is simply magical – and to top it off it makes all the right noises!' And who could argue? 

1937 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Touring Superleggera Berlinetta

Engine 2906cc straight-eight, DOHC, two carburettors, twin Roots-type superchargers
Power 180bhp @ 5200rpm
Transmission Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
Steering Worm and nut
Suspension Front: double trailing arms, enclosed coil springs, hydraulic and friction dampers. Rear: swing axles, radius arms, transverse semi-elliptic leaf spring, hydraulic and friction dampers
Brakes Drums
Weight 1310kg
Top speed 104mph