

ALFA ROMEO 1900 SUPER SPRINT ZAGATO

# UNBURSTABLE BUBBLE

*Coachbuilder Zagato clothed just a handful of Alfa 1900 Super Sprints in this lithe bodywork complete with its signature double-bubble roof. We explore the exciting story of the gentleman's racer*

WORDS BEN FIELD PHOTOGRAPHY LYNDON MCNEIL





**A**lfa Romeo's 1900 saloon of the Fifties was powered by one of the great engines of the era: a 1975cc twin-cam readily tuneable to well beyond 100bhp. Independent front suspension and a coil-sprung rear made for a car that could handle the power – but it was saddled with a dowdy-looking high-waisted body redolent of a Rover P4.

Competitive drivers were prepared to overlook the 1900's stodgy exterior, choosing instead to cover it in numbers and win races. But they weren't the only ones to glimpse the 1900's saucy underwear and see potential: Ghia, Touring and Pininfarina all created pretty production coupés on the 1900 platform, Bertone based its wild-looking BAT concept cars on it, and Touring teamed up with Alfa Romeo to create the curvy Disco Volante prototypes using the same starting point.

Beautiful and bold as these shapes were, only one coachbuilder created a body that truly captured and capitalised on the inherent sportiness of the 1900: Zagato.

Elio Zagato, son of company founder Ugo, had campaigned a 1900 saloon since the model was launched, competing in local events and international races including the Mille Miglia. He knew the 1900's potential, so when Vladimiro Galluzzi, a new member of his Sant Ambroeus racing team, failed to get results Zagato offered to build him something more suitable using the 1900 as a base. Contemporary reports suggest Elio's own racing 1900 was stripped down to create the new car.

The 1900 was Alfa Romeo's first attempt at an integrated chassis and body structure, so it wasn't just a case of getting down to a bare chassis and building a body to suit, but its construction made it possible to strip the car of the bulk of its external metalwork, leaving key structures including the bulkhead, floors, sills and front and rear inner wings without losing any strength.

Engineer Fabio Luigi Rapi probably sketched the initial shape. Rapi's name is closely linked with Fiat, but he and Ugo Zagato often collaborated on projects even if the vehicle was from a rival manufacturer. The elder Zagato's coachbuilding skills were so finely honed that he created the lightweight, aerodynamic aluminium body working solely from Rapi's sketch. The height of the engine challenged the aerodynamics, preventing a low, sloping

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bonnet being fitted. Instead the bonnet was effectively moulded around the engine, resulting in a prominent bulge. To keep the body rigid Zagato created a frame of square-section aluminium tubing and welded the panels over it.

The prototype Super Sprint Zagato (SSZ) was developed rapidly. The project began in the spring of 1954 and by September of that year it had won its first race, the Stella Alpina, driven by Galluzzi. The race had four stages, each starting and finishing in Trento, northern Italy, and taking in some of the toughest passes in the Alps.

Alfa's experimental department was actively involved in developing the prototype. Consalvo Sanesi, joint head of the department and an experienced racing driver, took the car for its final shakedown run. At nearly 100kg lighter than standard and with vastly-improved aerodynamics, the SSZ impressed him so much he immediately told his top brass about the project and it wasn't long before the SSZ was available to Alfa Romeo customers by special order.

The SSZ could be used on the road but it was predominantly a racing car, which meant it sold in tiny numbers: just 39 coupés were built from 1954-57. A spider was available from 1957, but only two are thought to have been sold. All but the prototype SSZ were built on 1900C

'chassis' specially prepared by Alfa for coachbuilders. This was a bare-bones rolling structure and gave craftsmen the opportunity to add a beautiful new shape without first having to dispose of a body.

Despite its small numbers, the SSZ made a significant impact on the racing scene. It competed successfully in a wide variety of events from hill climbs and sprints right up to international rallies and circuit and endurance races. It dominated the 1955 Swedish Grand Prix, taking first, third and fourth places in a field packed with Porsches and Fiat 8Vs. Six SSZs competed in the Mille Miglia that year and four completed the race - reassuring when you consider that half the field failed to finish.

A Zagato-bodied Fiat 8V came in ahead of all the SSZs in the Mille Miglia. The two cars, so similar in size, style and power, would constantly come up against each other. In one of the SSZ's first races, the 1954 Coppa Intereuropa, Elio Zagato opted to pilot an 8V Zagato while Sanesi took out the prototype SSZ. Knowing Sanesi was a formidable opponent, Zagato used all his considerable racing talent to keep ahead of the SSZ. In the pits his father waved frantically for him to give the SSZ a racing chance, being well aware that a win could attract buyers to the new car. But Elio, the racer had possessed Elio the businessman and his Fiat won outright.

Most of the 39 SSZ coupés had simple curved roof panels rather than the 'double-bubble' roof so synonymous with the Zagato name. The bubbles allowed a lower roof line for improved wind resistance while keeping cabin headroom comfortable. Zagato expert Paul Schouwenburg says the coachbuilder experimented with the concept early in the SSZ's production run, but the idea didn't really take off until the run-out models (probably the last six) went into production. By this time the double bubble was featuring more and more on other Zagato-bodied cars and some experts believe its late appearance on the SSZ was as much about aesthetic conformity as practicality.

Mark Gessler's red 1957 SSZ is the very last of these double-bubble cars. As well as the rare roofline it shares another feature only seen on the last three production SSZs: the bonnet doesn't follow the shape of the engine so slavishly, giving the car a far less obvious 'nose' that neatly culminates in a chromed Giulietta-style grille. It also has more pronounced rear wing tops, curving gently upwards in the middle, unlike other SSZs whose wings taper off to the tail. Later generations of a shape are rarely improvements on the original, but looking at this SSZ it's fair to argue that it's an exception to that rule.

Gessler has been a fan of Zagato cars in

### 1957 ALFA ROMEO 1900 SUPER SPRINT ZAGATO

**Engine** 1975cc, in-line four-cylinder, dohc, two twin-choke downdraught Solex 40 carburettors **Power and torque** 112bhp @ 5900rpm; 107lb ft @ 2000rpm  
**Transmission** Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Worm-and-roller **Suspension** Front: independent, transverse arms, coil springs, hydraulic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, coil springs, hydraulic dampers **Brakes** Drums front and rear **Weight** 950kg (2094lb) **Performance** Top speed: 118-130mph (depending on axle ratio); 0-60mph: 9.5sec **Fuel consumption** 30mpg **Cost new** 4million lire (£2100 approx) **Value now** £480,000 (est)



Bonnet of this SSZ, the last made, is lower at the front than other examples, arguably making it the most handsome of them all. Below: competition-honed 1975cc twin-cam motor and spartan cabin underline the SSZ's singular purpose





*'THE CAR FEELS  
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general and the SSZ in particular for many years. 'Aside from the BAT cars there's no more exquisite Fifties Alfa than the 1900 Zagato,' he says. But with a car as rare as the SSZ there's a big difference between wanting one and owning one. Gessler came across this car by chance after a friend asked him to look at another Alfa Romeo on the website of Fantasy Junction, a California-based seller of classic exotica. Nipping off to see the car wasn't an option as Gessler lived nearly 3000 miles away in Maryland, but a trusted contact in the motor trade looked at the car for him. Within hours it had been checked over and a price agreed. Gessler had his SSZ at last.

Few of the double-bubble cars raced at national or international level because by the late Fifties they had been usurped by faster machinery, so early history on this car is scarce. We do know it was probably French Blue originally and went to a buyer in France. It next appeared in the collection of writer and enthusiast Rob de la Rive Box, who owned the car until 1977. Fellow Dutchman Paul Schouwenburg owned it briefly before selling it to Peter Kaus around 1980. Kaus, who owned the enormous Rosso Bianco sports car museum in Germany, resprayed the SSZ in the

collection's trademark red. When the collection was broken up the car passed through the hands of two Californian enthusiasts before Gessler bought it in 2007.

He readily admits the Rosso Bianco respray is 'not the best paintjob on the planet'. But unlike many other collectors he's not about to rush the car into a complete stripdown and rebuild. 'I have no burning desire to restore this car,' he says. 'I do plan to unravel its history and only then will the SSZ gradually be bought back to the way it was when it was born.'

Newly restored or not, any SSZ is a desirable car. Fantasy Junction owner Bruce Treney says the model follows the trend for Zagato-bodied cars to be worth significantly more than other coachbuilt offerings based on the same platform. 'The 1900 Zagato is worth around \$550k (about £350k) today,' he says. 'Touring-bodied 1900s are about \$150k-200k (£95k-130k).' But the SSZ's rarity and ability to open doors to high-end events can thrust values well beyond what the market sees as correct for the car. Certainly the last three SSZs with their improved lines are capable of commanding more than \$750k (£480k).

The car's extravagant lines reflect the extravagant prices SSZs can command, but



The featured car at the Alfa factory (top) and still wearing French Blue paint at the Nürburgring in 1980, around the time it was sold to Peter Kraus



Trademark Zagato double-bubble roof aids aerodynamics and cabin headroom but probably only featured on the final six SSZs



inside you're quickly reminded that this is a competition car. The interior consists of two thinly-padded bucket seats, a bench in the back and a huge Nardi steering wheel stuck in a six-dial dash. The underside of the double-bubble roof is covered in pleated black vinyl, which effectively disguises the exterior shapeliness – a bit like putting Angelina Jolie in a donkey jacket.

Once the cabin has put you in the mood for racing, starting the two-litre twin-cam engine adds to the effect. The two Solex carburettors need priming with multiple stabs on the accelerator before the machine fires into a lumpy, almost grudging idle. This recalcitrance wanes as the engine warms, and when the engine is growling evenly through the exhaust it's time to move off.

The racing-spec clutch is an in-or-out affair and avoiding an embarrassing stall calls for a strong left leg. Plenty of revs and a clear road ahead help with the first getaway, and then five close-ratio gears allow you to explore the engine's ability. Few gearboxes so closely match an engine's characteristics as the SSZ's: it's difficult to stay out of the powerband, so the

car feels consistently rapid, almost alive in its responses to the accelerator.

The steering is quick, and needs to be if you want to catch the tall, skinny radials from skipping out on tight corners. In gentler curves the SSZ has a tendency to understeer that's easily corrected by briefly laying off the throttle. Air scoops effectively cool the front drums, so using the brakes a few times doesn't leave them gutless like so many all-drum systems of the era – in fact they feel disc-like in their power and longevity.

The SSZ is an astonishingly competent package and feels like no amount of driving could wilt it – a true GT. Its success in-period is matched today in modern re-runs of the classic events it once dominated. Zagato created this model for competition, to see it in any other context would be missing the point of the SSZ entirely. **EQ**

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## ELIO ZAGATO: RACER AND DESIGNER

**ELIO ZAGATO** trained as an accountant and was drafted in to help run the family firm in 1946. Regardless of his knack for numbers, Elio was no desk jockey and was soon part of the resurgent post-war racing scene. Ugo



Elio wins at Berlin's Avus circuit in 1955

SCHOUWENBURG COLLECTION

Zagato indulged his son and built him a neat two-seater racer based on a Fiat Topolino chassis.

Early outings in this car at Piacenza and San Remo proved unremarkable but Elio developed quickly to become a superb GT driver, particularly in Zagato-bodied Fiats such as the 750MMZ and 8V. In a sparkling racing career he had a class win in 1955's Targa Florio and won several Coppa Intereuropas, the Gold Cup of the Dolomites three times and the Italian GT Championship five times – in all winning an impressive 82 of the 150 races he entered.

Elio's racing exploits helped inform design at Zagato. One of the many competition-inspired design elements he helped to introduce was the double-bubble roof.

In conjunction with Zagato's lead stylist, Ercole Spada, Elio also developed the Alfa Romeo TZ and SZ, the Aston Martin DB4 GT Zagato and the Lancia Flaminia Sport Zagato. Elio's, and his company's, most commercially successful design was the Lancia Fulvia Sport. With more than 7000 produced it was as close to mass production as the Milanese coachbuilder would ever come.