

Alfa Romeo By Ned Reich



ALFA was founded in 1910 by a group of Milanese businessmen who wanted to be a part of the automobile trend. The name of the company stands for Lombardic Automobile Factory Corporation and its first venture into the field was a license to produce Darracq cars from France. The cars were nothing special and the effort was not a success.

The decision was then made to produce cars with sporting qualities for the middle and upper price market and the results were better. Some models did reasonably well in important road races and the company expanded its line to include trucks and agricultural equipment, but during World War I the investors sold out to Nicola Romeo who added his name to the company.

In the early 1920's Fiat was winning important grand prix races, something that Romeo wanted for his company, but his efforts at achieving victories came to nothing. He needed someone who could design a winner with the Alfa Romeo name on it. Romeo's solution was to hire talent from Fiat, an engineer called Vittorio Jano, whose first assignment was to design and build a winning grand prix racer. The P 2 Alfa's debut was the Lyon grand prix in France in 1924. It won beating Bugatti among others, and in 1925 the car was so successful that it won the first championship for manufacturers and the laurel wreath surrounding the Alfa Romeo emblem was added.

Jano's next assignment was for a relatively small, efficient, high quality sporting car which was probably a response to the coming change in the grand prix formula that called for engines of only 1500cc displacement. This became the 6-cylinder model starting with engine displacements ranging from 1500cc to 1750cc and ultimately to 1900cc and with one or two overhead camshafts. The most renowned of these was the 6C 1750 with two overhead camshafts and a roots supercharger. These cars reached their greatest successes in Italy's premier sports car event, the Mille Miglia race that they won in 1929 and 1930.

Realizing the limitations of such a small engine and probably under some pressure from the Fascist government work was begun on a new car in 1929 that finally appeared in 1931 as the 8C 2300. This was a limited production of fewer than 200 cars. The engine was a straight eight cylinder with two overhead camshafts, dry sump lubrication and a roots supercharger. It came in two chassis lengths, and was powerful and fast. The model won the Mille Miglia three times and owned France's premier event for sports cars, Le Mans, by winning there four times. Also included in this group was the Monza model, which was an open wheel grand prix car, derived directly from the short chassis sports car. Jano's next triumph was a single

seat racing car powered by a twin cam straight eight with twin superchargers. It was called the Tipo B or P 3 and was hard to beat for about three years from 1932.

In 1934 a new, if fairly conventional, chassis appeared that was powered by a 2.3-liter 6-cylinder twin cam engine that was intended as a sporting passenger car, the 6C2300. As the '30s progressed this engine was enlarged to 2.5 liters and was installed in an entirely new chassis that was independently suspended on all four wheels, the 6C2500. Up to World War II many of these chassis were fitted with custom bodies from the best Italian coachbuilders and some were highly tuned and competed successfully in important sports car events.

From the mid 1930's the state of the art in racing car design was centered in Germany with Mercedes-Benz and later with Auto Union. In Italy the only company capable of seriously meeting this technological challenge was Alfa Romeo. Their response was to put the 8-cylinder Tipo B engine in a modern four wheel independently sprung chassis that resulted in a series of state-of-the-art single seat racers. Sadly for Alfa, they could never quite defeat the Germans who managed to keep just a step ahead. Even with a sophisticated four cam V 12 engine Alfa still could not beat the Germans in grand prix races, but with the exception of a flash from BMW in 1940 Alfa sports cars were a different story especially at the Mille Miglia.

At the time that Alfa moved to all independently sprung grand prix cars they built a similar chassis that could accommodate a two-seater body with fenders and lights and that had an enlarged version of the Tipo B engine. This marriage became the 8C 2900 that was advertised for sale in a modest single sheet brochure to anyone with the large amount of money needed to buy it. Production for series A cars from 1935 to 1936 inclusive amounted to 10 chassis, most of which had ugly two seat bodies intended for factory-sponsored racing. Series B from 1937 to 1939 or 1940 consisted of 40 chassis in two lengths, 30 short and 10 long. Most were equipped with open two seat bodies primarily by Italian coachbuilders. At least 6 of the long chassis cars had closed grand touring coupe bodies. Some of these cars in the streamlined tradition of the late 1930s are stunningly beautiful.

Another facet of Alfa history includes Enzo Ferrari who joined the company as a test driver just after World War I after Romeo appeared. From the beginning he was involved in racing occasionally competing himself. Some accounts have him being responsible for bringing Jano from Fiat, but some historians question that notion. Perhaps a more important part of Ferrari's career was the founding of the Scuderia Ferrari (Ferrari Stable) in 1929. A small group of motor sport enthusiasts set up Ferrari in Modena where he sold and serviced Alfa cars, and that included an arrangement with the company to prepare their cars for racing and hire and manage drivers to race them.

Automobile production was a part of company activity that also included aircraft engines. This increasingly became a significant part of Alfa's contribution to arming for war, but like many businesses the company could not sustain itself in the depression so in 1931 the government took it over.

Through the 1930's both the factory and Scuderia Ferrari fielded racing teams that were often contests between two brilliant drivers, but by 1938 the factory decided not to support Scuderia Ferrari any longer and they parted with the understanding that should Ferrari wish to market a car under his own name that he would have to wait five years. Meanwhile management tired of losing races to the Germans and let Jano go who then went to Lancia and produced some brilliant designs for them.

After 1945 Alfa continued with the prewar 6C2500 chassis for about four years, but since they were receiving Marshall Plan help the company was strongly encouraged to design something for a mass market at a lower price. What followed was a brilliant but affordable 4-cylinder twin cam sports car that was a staple at amateur racing events for years. It could be argued that the classic era at Alfa Romeo ended with the departure of Jano and Ferrari in 1938 and the production of the last of the 8C 2900 cars. The emergence of Ferrari as a manufacturer in 1946 carried on the Alfa tradition and in 1951 his cars ultimately defeated Alfa in grand prix racing. As a final irony, in the last 20 years the brands Alfa Romeo, Ferrari and Lancia have come under the Fiat umbrella.