

Sportiva



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There have been some stunning Alfa Romeos, but few quite as stunning - or as mysterious- as the 1900-based Sportiva, dating from the mid-fifties. Mick Walsh drove and photographed the only example of this ultra rare machine to escape the confines of the factory, and unravels its history as far as possible.

Lionel Jones, in my book, is a very lucky man. Imagine that you own a sedate vintage tourer, in fact an Alfa Romeo 20/30ES in its day, a high-quality car with, by Alfa standards, a rather mundane 4-litre sidevalve four-cylinder engine.

Now, you live in Sydney in the late sixties and are a keen Alfisti. Naturally you order a copy of Peter Hull's new Alfa Romeo history, and while browsing through this authoritative tome, you keenly scout the vintage chapters for any reference to your cherished model. Co-author Roy Slater, another doyen of the marque, clearly states at the end of one section 'unfortunately, of the 300 20/30s produced, none has survived.'

There's nothing more satisfying than proving an expert wrong, as many readers will agree, and it isn't long before you're corresponding with Slater, and subsequently Luigi Fusi, the authority on Alfas who, after a long service with the company (since 1920), had been charged with the establishment of Museo Alfa Romeo. It turns out that your vintage tourer is rather more significant than you imagined.

It is the first model, or rather the earliest surviving example, to bear the full company title, marking the control of industrialist Nicola Romeo.

Naturally the illustrious Milanese concern is very keen to acquire your car for its new museum. Of course you're not interested in selling until one morning a letter with a Milan postmark falls through the door. Casually you open it, fully expecting an increased offer for the 20/30. But no, here is a list of selected cars from the museum they are prepared to swap.

I'm not sure how Lionel Jones reacted, or which other cars were on the list, but he certainly made the right choice. The prospect of a straight exchange of one vintage tourer for one of the most dramatic and mysterious coupes in Alfa Romeo history would get me very excited. But maybe Mr Jones hadn't - on numerous visits to the Alfa factory museum - stood in awe of this fantastic car (on midweek visits as a trusted member of the English press), I have been left alone in the museum except for a dispassionate cleaner, and just once dared to sit in the Sportiva, desperate to experience what this curvy silver coupe would be like to drive. Would this seductive, slippery shape, sculpted by the brilliant Franco Scaglione, disappoint out on the road or track?

Was that the reason this exciting competition project had been aborted in 1956? Here was yet another example of a project, like many others interwoven in the company's history, that had been dropped suddenly at a final stage of development. Mr Jones agreed to the swap (he morally believed his car belonged in the museum anyway), and in 1971 the vintage tourer was crated up and shipped to Italy. Mr Jones and his wife flew to a reception in Milan once the car had arrived, and after the ceremonial opening of the crate to reveal the pristine 20/30, he spent the rest of the evening giving demonstration runs around the factory for the company's directors.

It was a good many months before the spare, red Sportiva arrived in Sydney harbour, and it too received quite a reception - from the New South Wales Alfa Romeo Club. Even a local paper hailed it as 'the rarest car in the world'. Of course that is something of an exaggeration, but this Alfa Romeo prototype, chassis number 00004, is unique in that it's the only such car outside the factory museum.

The Sportiva represents the final chapter in the rather frustrating history of Alfa's competition aspirations for the 1900 range. This four-cylinder model was the company's post-war salvation, and its introduction to the disciplines of mass-production. The range, beginning with the rather spartan yet innately sporty Berlina, which just made the 1950 Turin Show, had blossomed into more glamorous variants, like the short-wheelbase coupes from Touring and Zagato, or the TI cabriolets by Pininfarina, not to mention a four-wheel-drive jeep, the 1900M. Alfa's first monocoque design was powered by Orazio Satta Pulgia's new-generation shortstroke, four-cylinder 1884cc engine - still large by Italian standards (over 60 per cent of Italian-owned cars were under 600cc) but it marked a new direction for the Milanese firm.

Thankfully the management broke the disciplines of mass-production and such fits of creativity



produced some fascinating prototypes. As well as the numerous coachbuilt 1900s, they instructed Gioacchino Columbo to create the C52 Disco Volantes. With super-smooth bodywork, 2-litre engines with racing cams and twin carbs producing 158bhp, these tubular chassis prototypes never fulfilled their dramatic promise. The red 'flying saucers' were fraught with rear-end lift, and the whole project was overshadowed by the competition 6C3000 team cars.

The track record of the bigger coupes was pretty disastrous save for Fangio's brilliant, albeit lucky, second in the 1953 Mille Miglia. As it turned out, the competition pedigree of Alfa Romeo was very much upheld by the redoubtable 1900 Berlina Super TI. which was wiping the board in the Turismo category in such events as the Carrera PanAmericana, the Mille Miglia, and Tour de France.

Beautiful sculptured lines were penned by Franco Scaglione and built in Bertone's coachworks

Although the 1900 series would soldier on to 1959, its peak in popularity was 1953, when 5411 cars were produced. At this point, Alfa still felt there was an opportunity for a true sporting variant, despite the desperate disappointment of the Disco Volante project. With a view to limited production, the brief was simple - 'a car with high-performance potential for fast driving on long stretches or for the participation in races of the sports car category' according to Alfa historian Fusi.

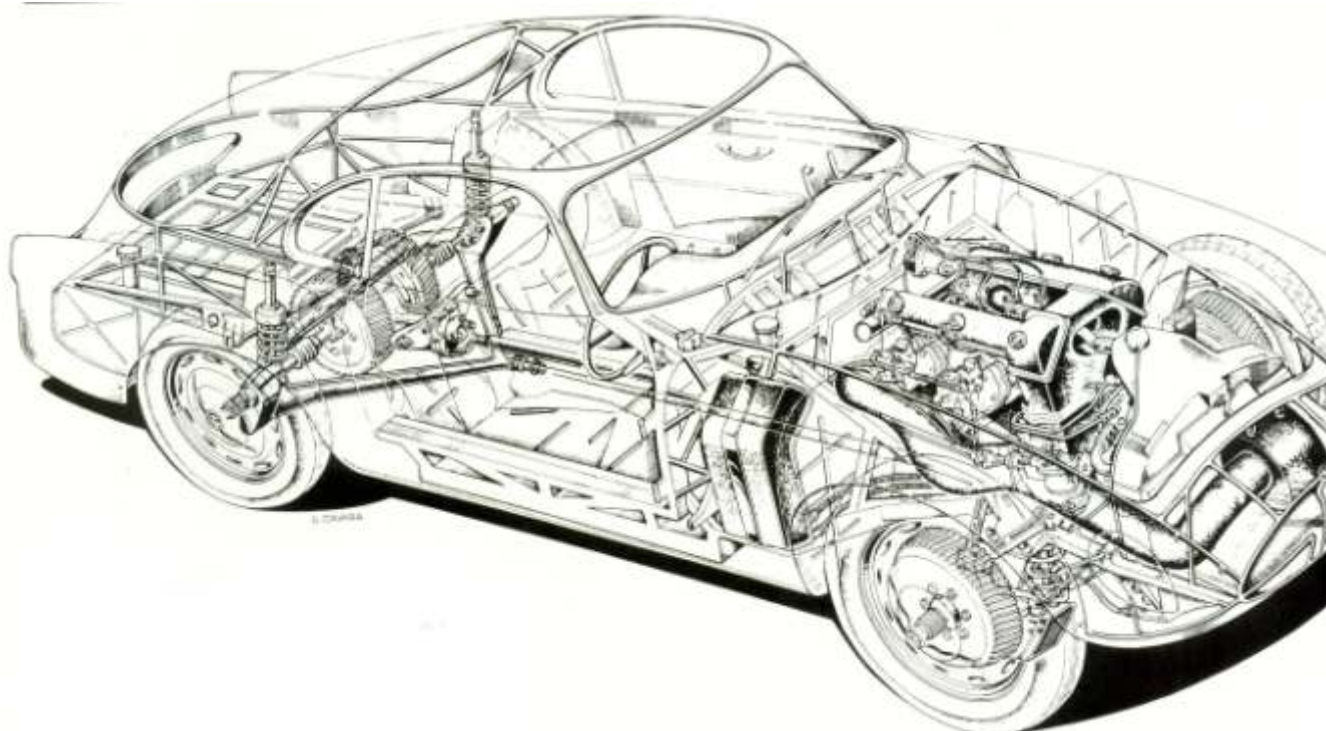
How the Sportiva project got as far as it did is quite a mystery. It was fast becoming clear to the management that the 1900 range was not a bold enough move downmarket if Alfa Romeo was to have any future. The new Giulietta model was well beyond conception before the Sportiva had begun.

For once we must be thankful for poor interdepartmental communications, otherwise the fabulous Bertone coupe could have been little more than a prototype drawing in Alfa history books.

The heart of the Sportiva is the basic 1900 unit, retaining the iron block, unlike the other competition variants, combined with a light alloy head, sharper camshaft timing and two twin-choke horizontal Weber 50DC03 carburettors. The stroke was a standard 88mm but strangely the bore had been fractionally increased by 0.5mm, producing a total capacity of 1997.4cc. Lubrication was a dry-sump system with twin oil pumps and an oil cooler, while ignition was coil, not magneto, like the 'Discos'. The big Webers utilised a ram-effect air intake from the centre of the nose.

The chassis specification of the Sportiva is very closely related to the Disco Volantes and 3000CM, in particular the back axle which is almost identical to the latter. This De Dion design was beautifully engineered with magnificent finned inboard brake drums mounted as close as possible to the differential

The front suspension is convention 1900 using unequal-length wishbones with coil springs and telescopic dampers. The space frame chassis of square section tubes, with larger diameter longerons relatively low in the sills, supports the mass of the body. These members are asymmetric to create more room for the driver.



A Giovanni Cavara cutaway drawing of the Sportiva, showing its tubular frame and De Dion rear axle.

A strong relationship had developed between Rudolfo Hruska (the Austrian exile in Italy who had joined Alfa after the Cisitalia project had folded and had worked his way up to Technical Manager of Design and Production for the 1900) and Nuccio Bertone. It was therefore natural that avant garde Torinese carrozzeria should get the contract for the Sportiva. The brilliant Franco Scaglione was Bertone's styling star, previously responsible for the BAT car (Berlina Aerodynamica Technica) - three wild experimental aerodynamic studies. It is generally believed that four cars were completed - two with spider coachwork and two with coupe bodies. The two closed cars survived, later becoming the property of the museum, but little is known of the history of the open Sportivas, probably because none of the cars really emerged from the experimental phase. The second coupe, later owned by Lionel Jones, was premiered at the 1956 Turin Motor Show, while the first coupe (now permanently on view at the Alfa Romeo museum and finished in a metallic silver grey), saw a great more development testing, running up a high mileage.



At one point it was fitted with centre-locking disc wheels, but has subsequently reverted to Borrani wires. The red coupe had just 400km on the clock when Lionel Jones acquired it and was "Like new" when it arrived in Sydney. There are a few minor differences in the design of the two coupes which help differentiate them in contemporary pictures. The red coupe has round air vents under the front bumper, as opposed to the vertical louvres of the silver coupe, while the boot lids of the two cars are quite different. The former has a straight boot shut line, while the museum car has a curved boot with a lower bumper that runs along the base of the number plate.

The evolution of the Sportiva, through coupes and spiders - where is the mystery car shown second from bottom?

There is some mystery surrounding the two spiders, as several period photographs illustrate another Bertone coupe which clearly has inboard rear brakes and quite different body features. Much closer aesthetically to the spider shape, this car first had swept, open wheelarches, and later a more conventional filled-in style. The tail-line of these two coupe styles is identical to the finned spider, and it is believed that this car was possibly decapitated, to become the mystery spider which has vanished completely.

The second, round-tail Sportiva spider is now on view at the museum, and has a low Perspex windshield indicating a planned competition programme. It is possible that all four variations could be the same car, gradually evolving from the open wheelarch competition coupe to the surviving spider. Historic photographs illustrate the finned-tail spider testing its aerodynamics with a covering of taped strings. The higher tail treatment may have proved ineffective and thus modified to the simpler, smooth tail. But the serial number of the Lionel Jones coupe is 00004, which clearly indicates four cars and not three.

Bertone holds no records of the Sportiva project, so the mystery still remains unsolved, despite the exhaustive research of Dutch enthusiast Ben Hendricks for the excellent Dutch Alfa Romeo Club magazine *Het Klaverblaadje*.

There is no confusion surrounding the red coupe which Lionel Jones in Australia acquired. Not one to cosset his cars, Mr Jones enjoyed the newly obtained Sportiva in the way it was designed to be, keen to discover the validity of the famed 138bhp at 6500rpm and a potential 137mph. Unfortunately he was putting the car through its paces on a race-track during a time trial and the precious coupe got a little too sideways, not helped by the limited grip of the original Stelvio tyres. The car tripped on the kerb and rolled over, ending up on its roof.

Fortunately the car wasn't too badly damaged, merely crushing the roof line and fracturing the Perspex windscreen. Poor Lionel Jones broke his neck, but thankfully both car and driver recovered from the unlucky incident. A new windscreen had to be custom-made - as Jones was informed by the Turin company in a reply letter 'Mr Bertone was never one to build a car around a standard windscreen.' Earlier this year, the fabulous car came up for auction and was snapped up by Rudy Pas of Classic Car Associates in Holland. A phone call to Breda made contact with Rudy and his enthusiastic partner Marcel Roks, who agreed to let me drive their prized acquisition. This entertaining duo teased me with a night-time viewing of the car before the arranged drive the next day. In the dark showroom the red coupe looked magical, highlighted by the street lamps. Certain cars have true presence, a unique stance which exudes a precious charm. Could it be the Sportiva's rarity? I think not. The sculpted form, the rhythmic flow of the wing lines and the Daliesque chrome detail of the grille and cowled lights all delight the eye. It's a style of design for which you constantly find new angles of appreciation.

It proudly stands out in Alfa Romeo's glorious heritage of fantastic coupes, along with Touring's 2.9 Le Mans coupe and Bertone's sensational Canguro. I couldn't wait until the morning, amazed that some cars still effect me that way. Marcel Roks and Rudy Pas seemed as excited about the car as me when we convoyed to the Dutch flat lands in search of a photographic location. The quadrofolgio and Italian tri-color stickers on the tail of Marcel's Mercedes gave away his biased motoring taste. The sun shone for the pictures and the red coupe screamed brilliantly against the lush green landscape.

And then came my chance to drive the Sportiva. I eagerly climbed into the intimate cockpit. The roof sharpens in profile and consequently the front pillars are close to your forehead, much like the GTZs and the Montreal. To compensate, the driving position is slightly stretched in a classic racing position with the torso angled back, your arms and legs just a little bent. It is quite clear the car was intended for competition. The classic, three-spoke Nardi wheel was well back from the dash cluster of five dials. The distinctive red canvas seats with black leather piping and plaid sides supported well, and looked brand new. The kilometre reading proudly stated the genuine 6538km, the last 6000 covered by its lucky Australian owner.

The short-stroke engine started easily and rumbled away shaking everything. The thin gauge aluminium, and all the Perspex windows reverberated from the rough idle, while the vision in the rear mirror was a constant blurred image, and impossible to use even at higher revs. Once on the move the car felt very taut, as if just run in. The gearchange synchromesh worked perfectly up and down, and even allowed a down-change to first without protest. The engine feels like a rotary, and has an intense quality like a GTA 1300 Junior. The big Webers naturally cause it to fluff a little at low revs, but once over 4000rpm the power floods in and the car really strides forward, with that lovely rorty sound only tuned Alfa fours give. Marcel likened it to a little 275 GTB.

He'd recently taken the Sportiva to Zandvoort for a filming session with Dutch TV, using a Ferrari 250MM Barchetta as a camera car just for effect, and was very impressed by the Alfa's handling. Through the wide-open bends en route back to Breda, the handling of the chassis felt very neutral, and the narrow tyres would clearly find the limit long before the chassis. The suspension was a shade soft and could have benefited from stiffer shock absorbers for serious competition, not to mention some good racing tyres. The steering is high-g geared and heavy at low speeds, but in action the load lightens, with plenty of feel. The brakes performed perfectly, as my unfamiliarity with the Dutch highway code proved, pulling up strongly with no hint of fade.



The unprepossessing Alfa Romeo 1900 saloon on which the Sportiva was based. Bottom: The sister (silver) car, pictured when new in 1954

Like all great competition coupes the sensations of the Sportiva are vivid, lively and intense. It's very noisy, particularly with a single silencer running in the passenger-side sill. But the faster your pace, the lighter and smoother the car becomes. It gets very hot in the cabin even after a short run, not helped by the centrally heated sill, and the large areas of Perspex. I can't imagine what it must have been like for a full race distance at Le Mans or the Mille Miglia, so maybe that was the reason they chopped the top off the mystery third coupe.

How competitive the Sportiva would have been in international competition is impossible to guess. It's a relatively simple car with well-tried mechanical designs, particularly the 1900 engine which had already proved its durability in long-distance events. At Le Mans in 1955 the Bristol-engined cars would have been its most direct competition - the ugly 450s and the Frazer Nash Sebring. But the Teutonic dominance of the Porsche 550RS in '55 and '56 would probably have proved impossible for Alfa to beat, although the new coupe would have given the Ferrari 196 a tough time.

What remains is a brilliant testament to the artistry of Nuccio Bertone's brilliant stylist Franco Scaglione. The Sportiva is just one example of this company's masterful work with Alfa which gave us such sculptured gems as the Giulietta SS, the restrained but proudly stylish GTV and the supersmooth Testudo. For me the Sportiva is the most exciting-looking coupe of the mid-fifties and I am grateful to Rudy Pas and Marcel Roks of the Ruttchen Group for letting me fulfil a long-held ambition.



*Clockwise :
rare Sportiva badge
alongside more common
Bertone Plaque; driving
position is obviously aimed
at competition work, with
laid-back seat;
perpendicular Dutchman
and bike contrast with sleek
Sportiva; lovely and lusty
Alfa four cylinder twin
overhead cam 2 -litre
engine*

