

CLASSIC DRIVER

The peerless Delage D8-120 S by De Villars conquered the concours world

Lead
The Pearl Collection recently stole the show and won Peninsula Classics' Best of the Best award with their fabulous Delage D8-120 S De Villars. We sat down with Fritz Burkard to understand what separates the best from the rest in the Concours world.



Fritz, firstly congratulations on winning Peninsula Classics' Best of the Best Award, for which you can only qualify by winning 'Best of Show' at the big concours events like Pebble Beach, Villa d'Este and Hampton Court. What's it like having one of your cars win arguably the most prestigious award in the concours world?

First of all, the car won it, not me. It's a huge honour, it's fantastic, especially when you see which cars were competing for the Best of the Best. The Hispano-Suiza H6B Dubonnet Xenia and Ferrari 250 GTZ also competing are both fantastic cars, so we were super proud and happy, especially for the car and my team. It means a lot to us.



What makes this Delage stand out from all the beautiful classics shown at Pebble Beach, Villa d'Este etc?

It has a breathtaking presence. It looks good from every angle, it's spectacular in design, and it's unique. It has features from the period, like those riveted fins, which incorporate a bit of the Bugatti Atlantic. It has a bit of Saoutchik, a bit of Figoni et Falaschi, there's everything in there, but it stands out and becomes something unique, it's not a mix match.



Your Delage is truly a remarkable machine, but your collection isn't short on remarkable machinery. What drew you to this car in particular?

There's a book called 'From Passion to Perfection' by Richard Adatto - it's the bible for pre-war swooping lines and aerodynamics, it covers all the teardrops. It reaches out towards the Atlantic, to other streamlined cars, and it also has a chapter about the Delage. It's not only my bible, but it also seems to be my shopping catalogue. There's also the Delahaye 165, Merle Mullin has one and I have the other, there are only two made. She just drove hers to Pebble Beach and finished in the top four. Anyway, the the Delage got offered to me, and it took me maybe 15 seconds to say yes!



To say your D8 is in concours condition would be an understatement, what was the process behind this car's restoration?

This is a huge compliment to the previous custodian, Sam Mann, I didn't do anything. Sam Mann is not only a great person, but he did a really great job with the Delage. We got it running, checked that it worked, and maybe a touch up here and there, but I don't think we even had to do that.

My mechanic Simon is a specialist on pre-war cars, especially concours cars, and he looks after all our cars really well. At the beginning there was some adjustment and set-up because we really drove it, it's not a trailer queen, so of course there needed to be a little tweaks here and there, but it was in great condition.



You’ve spoken in the past about your love of patina. If you had to choose, would you pick a car in perfect condition like your Delage D8, or something with beautiful patina, such as your Bugatti Type 59?

That’s really a question! You picked probably the patina miracle with the Type 59, but it totally depends which car. I have a Citroen Ami 6, a car that costs maybe 20,000 euros. It has a fantastic design, it’s unique, but is it important that it’s original? Not so much. However, for me, if you find an original car, you have to keep it that way.

The car that we really worked on was the Fiat ‘La Principessa’ Abarth world record car. Corrado Lopresto took it and preserved it, he didn’t restore it. His team consists of artists that also restore important paintings, and it was like putting a car into a time capsule. You see all the cracks, you see all the history, but it will not continue, it’s also a very interesting approach.



Unlike Pininfarina or Zagato, De Villars isn’t a well known coach building company in the 21st century. Could you tell us a bit about the company and the hallmarks of their coachwork?

I think they made about 20 cars, very few. The background is actually a bit funny, Frank Jay Gould, a billionaire from from the US, had a daughter who was flirting with Mr. De

Villars. In order to keep him busy, Mr. Gould bought the workshop and De Villars tried to make something out of it, but it didn't really work. In the end, they went bankrupt, and only the name De Villars survived.

That's incredible, considering how few cars they built, the Delage is really an impressive achievement.

It's amazing, it's right there on the level of Saoutchik. For me, Saoutchik was known for his extreme designs, whereas Figoni was way more elegant and focused on proportions, so this Delage is much closer to a crazy Saoutchik than a Figoni for me.



You're the custodian of many of Bugatti's greatest creations, how does this car from a rival French marque compare to its contemporaries?

If you compare it to a Bugatti or a Talbot Teardrop, it has the smoothest and most comfortable ride, the Bugatti and the Talbot are much sportier. What makes a huge difference in the Delage is the Cotal gearbox, it's so marvellous, so beautiful, so effortless and easygoing. If you drive a Bugatti Type 57SC, sometimes you have to search for gears like "Where is it?". So the gearbox is amazing. The torque is sufficient, I drove it 500 kilometres down to Newport and it was great fun, what a relaxed beautiful ride. That's the big surprise, usually you expect that kind of show car to be awful to drive.

Your D8 is capable of exceeding 100mph. Have you ever put that to the test, and what is it like to drive?

Let's just say I always kept it within the speed limit, but I reached the speed limit.





As a serial concours-winner, what's the secret behind your success? Is it down to the car, its provenance, the quality of the restoration, or a combination of all those factors?

From a personal perspective, I think it's just about having a lot of fun, and it is a lot of fun. Some people say "The judges at Pebble Beach are so harsh, they check every screw!" and I say yes, thank god! It's so much fun with those judges, at Pebble Beach there will be four or five experts for any given car. Every time I go to Pebble Beach and a car of mine gets judged, I learn something about that car, because at least one judge will know more than I do. I like that they maintain this high standard, because otherwise you end up with replicas that aren't 100% original winning concours, which isn't acceptable.

It just so happens that my taste matches with the taste of some of the concours judges. I think about it when I attend with a car, because I don't want to be unfair to the car by expecting too much. Last year, I showed the Talbot Teardrop at Pebble Beach, and many people came to me and said "Your car will win best of show" and I said no no, there's a Duesenberg that has a remarkable presence. The Duesenberg won and that was totally ok with me, it deserved it. These shows are about sparking the passion in young people, including them, and letting them get in touch with the cars. It's about celebrating these cultural artefacts; cars have a huge impact on society, they are important and they have nothing to do with today's mass transportation.



As you may know, Delage has been resurrected and they now produce a wild hypercar called the D12. As the owner of an original Delage, what's your opinion on the brand's revival?

I saw the car, but it's not my thing. I think it's very difficult to bring an old brand back, especially one like Delage which went bankrupt in the 1930s. It had a great name in the period, but it doesn't have the reach of a Bugatti, Alfa, or Mercedes, even back then these brands had much higher production volumes.

You know I'm a huge Bugatti enthusiast, but what Ferdinand Piëch did was a masterpiece on how to bring back a brand. The fact that he bought the original grounds in Molsheim, that he incorporated the classic section with Julius Kruta really meant a lot. You can't just bring back a brand and say "Here it is, buy our product!" Over the past few years, there have been many attempts to revive old brands, and the only two that have been successfully revived was Mini — a fantastic product at the time, and they had the marketing back of BMW — and Bugatti.

Photos by Rémi Dargegen

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