

Maserati 450S - The Prisoner

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Classic Driver



The following is an edited extract from Auto Italia magazine, March 2004. For access to the full feature, plus articles on the Italdesign Alfa Romeo Brera, Ferrari Dino 196S Recreation, Pegaso Z102 and much more, see www.auto-italia.co.uk

1957 was not an easy year for Maserati. It needed a win in Caracas to clinch the World Sports Car Championship and having fielded four 450S, and a back up 300S, the team sat back and watched all of its cars destroyed in accidents. Tony Parravano's car was not one of the factory team's entries, and was not involved in the Caracas debacle. After being tested at Willow Springs in January 1957, it spent the next two years detained at the pleasure of the US Inland Revenue.

Parravano, it seemed, had never quite got round to filing his tax return and the IRS seized and then auctioned off his car collection to settle his liabilities. Successful bidders at the IRS auction in January 1959 were a Dr Ray Martinez and a Jack Brumby who hoped to race the car themselves. After a single test run, they agreed to seek the services of a professional. So 4502 began its race career as an old car in the hands of Billy Krause, who campaigned it throughout the 1959 season in American races. Brumby then relinquished his half share to John Rich and the car lay idle for 18 months. Its last race in period was in March 1962 at Riverside, finishing fourth in the hands of Chuck Kessenger, a friend of Martinez.



Surfacing briefly as a disassembled pile of parts for sale in Los Angeles in 1967, it came to England in the early '70s, where it was prepared and raced by Cameron Millar. Following his retirement from racing, Millar sold the car to Count Doenhoff in Munich, who had the car restored by Tony Merrick - then selling it in 1996 to current owner Hartmut Ibing.

The 450S story



Building on the success of the six-cylinder 300S, second place overall car in the 1956 World Sportscar Championship, the new V8-engined 450S seemed a logical progression for 1957. Having wrung every last horsepower from the six, Maserati obliged its drivers by fitting a new V8, conservatively rated at 400bhp. With hindsight, it may have been a couple of horses too far, as 450S drivers will tell you that they have the opposite characteristics of the 300S; plenty of grunt, but only at the expense of handling finesse.

Though it was new for the 450S, plans for a large-capacity V8 with which to do battle against Ferrari had been around at Maserati for a few years. Successful in racing terms, in the '50s, financially it was hanging on by a thread. Running the 250F in Formula 1, plus a multitude of varying-capacity sportscars, was draining the company finances. A barter with the Italian Government (Maserati had supplied machine tools to Argentina, the Government had received wheat which, when sold, would recompense the Modenese concern) was taking long to come through. Maserati's patience, and that of its bank managers, was being seriously tested. Any new development could have remained on hold indefinitely due to lack of funds, were it not for Maserati's growing relationship with one of its American clients. Hence Tony Parravano's importance as a customer for two 4.2-litre V8 engines (as powerplants for his Kurtis Indianapolis car) and a complete 450S - chassis 4502, the first one finished - which was delivered to the USA in October 1956.



Passenger ride at Spa

Here, right now, I can feel the engine and each explosion taking place inside, as it juggles my kidneys up the pit lane. This is the upper pit and so our exit will be onto La Source hairpin before descending into Eau Rouge. Gingerly edging round La Source, Bernd Hahne waits until the steering wheel is almost straight before snapping the throttles open.

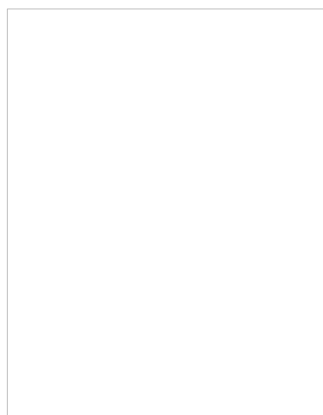
Gearchanges are clearly hard work as there is a pregnant pause in the proceedings during every determined cog-swap, but as we home in on two other cars in the distance, both of them between us and the correct line for Eau Rouge, there is no change in the continuing onslaught of brutal acceleration. The gap I naively felt was too small for us to squeeze through proves entirely significant to the 450S. Clear of the traffic and ejected out onto the straight in fifth gear, tyres now fully hooked up with the tarmac, the engine has smoothed out and is singing hysterically ahead of us.

As a passenger it's easy to underestimate the speed at which we are now travelling. I know, however, that as soon as I see the driver's foot lift I must brace myself for the braking that is hopefully to come. When it does come, it is violent – heel-and-toeing being far too dainty for any meaningful retardation. Push and push hard. At the last moment, we drop a couple of gears and Hahne tenses in the seat as he prepares to turn in for the corner. Steering alone is not going to get us through, as the effort required to get the wheel off-centre is enormous. So we are soon back on what is clearly Hahne's favourite pedal, to bring the back end round. As the acrid smell of fried brake-linings wafts over us, I relax. He made it look so easy.

As Bernd Hahne and I complete our lap of Spa, I start to romanticise about the car. For this very car is Parravano's 450S. Preserved when new by its first owner's unscrupulous accounting and protected from the carnage in Caracas, it has certainly led a less challenging life than most of its siblings, yet that means it has been subjected to less of the muddy history so many old racing cars inevitably acquire. It must look and feel much as it did on that first test day at Willow Springs – beautiful and dangerous, ominously potent and staggeringly loud.

When we cut the engine and roll squealing to a standstill back in the pit lane, Bernd Hahne deflates my daydream. After removing his helmet, he looks over with eyes wired from exertion and says quite simply, "It's a pig".

Auto Italia would like to thank Hartmut Ibing, for whom Bernd Hahne drives 4502 on a regular basis, and to Walter Baeumer of the Deutsche Maserati Club, who made it all possible.



Words by Andy Heywood. Pictures courtesy of Phil Ward and Auto Italia magazine.

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