

CLASSIC DRIVER

This Ferrari 166 Spyder Corsa put Maranello on track for racing success

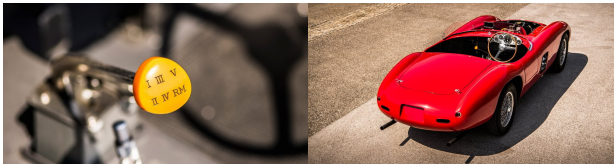
Lead

After a DNF in its first race, this Ferrari 166 Spyder Corsa became an instrumental development prototype that helped the brand find its feet during its fledgling years as a car manufacturer.



If it's really true that 'with ownership comes responsibility', whoever becomes the next custodian of this spectacular Ferrari 166 Spyder Corsa currently parked (appropriately enough) in a former stable at the premises of [Austrian dealer/restorer Egon Zweimueller](#) needs to be prepared to shoulder some serious weight.[]

Why? For a first clue, look at the date of manufacture: 1948. That marks-out this car as having been built just one year after the first ever Ferrari-badged automobile turned a wheel. But that by no means explains this 166's true significance, because it also served as an important element in the development and success of subsequent Ferrari racers of the 1950s and beyond.[]



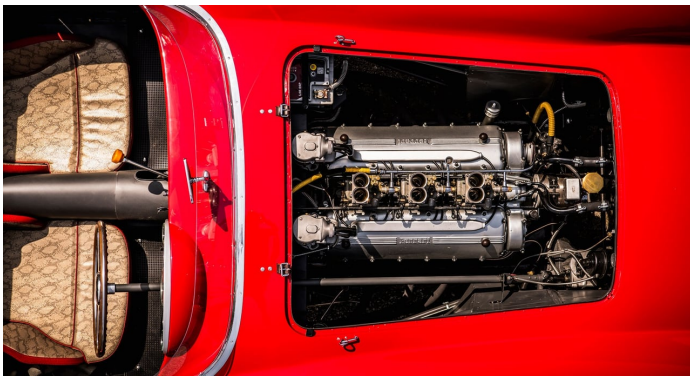
It left Maranello with what must have been one of the first bodies crafted by fledgling Modena coachbuilder Carrozzeria Ansaloni - which gave it Spyder Corsa coachwork with pre-war style cycle wings front and rear.[]

It was in that guise that it first took to the track at the Bari F2 Grand Prix on May 30, 1948, with works driver Fernando Righetti at the wheel - a less than auspicious occasion that ended in a 'dnf' due to front-end damage.[]



Subsequently drivers including Giuseppe Farina, Raymond Sommer and Giampero Bianchetti competed in it throughout Italy in a range of events that culminated in a final outing with the factory team at the Formula Libre race beside Lake Garda - after which things started to get interesting, because it was then that this truly historic car began to evolve into a development prototype for Ferrari's racing future. []

According to factory work books, this initially involved an overhaul of the then two-litre Colombo engine that gave the car its '166' designation (166cc multiplied by 12 = 1,992). With the capacity upped to the current 2.3 litres, Bianchetti - clearly enamoured with its performance - bought it for his own use and competed as a privateer in the Targa Florio, the Grand Prix de Lausanne and the San Bernado hill climb (in which he took second place).[]



By the end of '49, however, the car was back at Maranello where it received its first significant modification in the form of having its chassis strengthened and reduced from 2,420mm to 2,254mm in order to sharpen the handling. Bianchetti campaigned it in just one event during the 1950 season, the Gran Premio del Autodromo at Monza, where it finished third in the first round and fifth in the last - impressive results for a design that, in looks at least, was decidedly out of date.[]

That aesthetic challenge was addressed the following year when a Tipo 125 grand prix style front end was added at the factory, followed by suspension and steering upgrades that Ferrari would use in future competition cars. []

But perhaps the most significant improvement was yet to come. Ferrari took the car back in 1953 and placed it in storage for two years, before Il Commendatore decided that it should be sent to Modenese coachbuilder Scaglietti for the creation of sleek, aerodynamic bodywork that would serve as a template for the marque for years, if not decades to come.[]



"This really was an important point in Ferrari history," explains Zweimueller. "Like many of his peers, Enzo liked to involve his son in the business and would have asked Dino for help in developing the new look Ferrari. They probably chose Scaglietti because it took a more modern approach than, for example, Touring - and so was born the iconic Ferrari image that, in many ways, still survives today."[]

Although the instruments, pedals, gear lever and steering wheel (along with the entire, factory upgraded drive train) were carried-over from the Ansaloni body, the seats were upholstered in the same, spectacular python-like 'faux' leather that they wear today - apart from which, the new look almost mirrored that of the still-to-come 500 Testa Rossa.[]



"It's interesting to note that Ferrari sold the car almost immediately after doing all the development work and having the new body fitted," notes Zweimueller.

[]"Enzo would have seen that as a way of re-financing the company, using the money from the sale to put back into the building of new cars that used some of the features developed on the 166."[]

The new owner was Milan dealer Michele Vernola who, by 1957, had moved the car on to local mechanic and enthusiast driver Nico Gianella - whose ownership was to result in an important new chapter in the life of chassis 0141, because Gianella emigrated to Santa Barbara, California, where he opened a small repair shop.[]



Once the business was up and running, he imported his beloved Ferrari from Italy and used it to make the most of the Spyder-friendly SoCal climate for around five years, as shown by various period photographs retained in the history file.

Local man Michael Peake took over ownership next, using the car as a general runaround (cool, or what?) after which it was bought by Pasadena Ferrari enthusiasts Norman and Jacqueline Blank with whom it remained for 35 years, becoming a familiar sight at Ferrari Club America meets and other high-profile classic car events.

Since leaving the Blank family in 2005, the car has been expertly and sympathetically restored with particular attention being paid to retaining all of its important development parts - as well as that groovy, python-like upholstery.



Zweimueller, who has cared for the car since 2017, believes it to be a key component of Ferrari history. "Not only was it one of the first Ferrari team cars, it was gradually modified by the factory over the course of several years with many technical innovations that proved crucial to the marque's later success - and they remain on the car today."

But what is perhaps most surprising is that, although it is essentially a race car, it is absolutely superb to drive on regular roads. Everything works in harmony and the aerodynamics of the Scaglietti body make it relaxing on Mille Miglia type roads where you can enjoy the sound of the V12 without getting an exhausting battering from the wind or being thrown about in the driving seat.

"It is a truly special car with an incredible history - and certainly one that still loves to be let out of the stable."

Photos: Stefan Bogner © 2022

Gallery

