

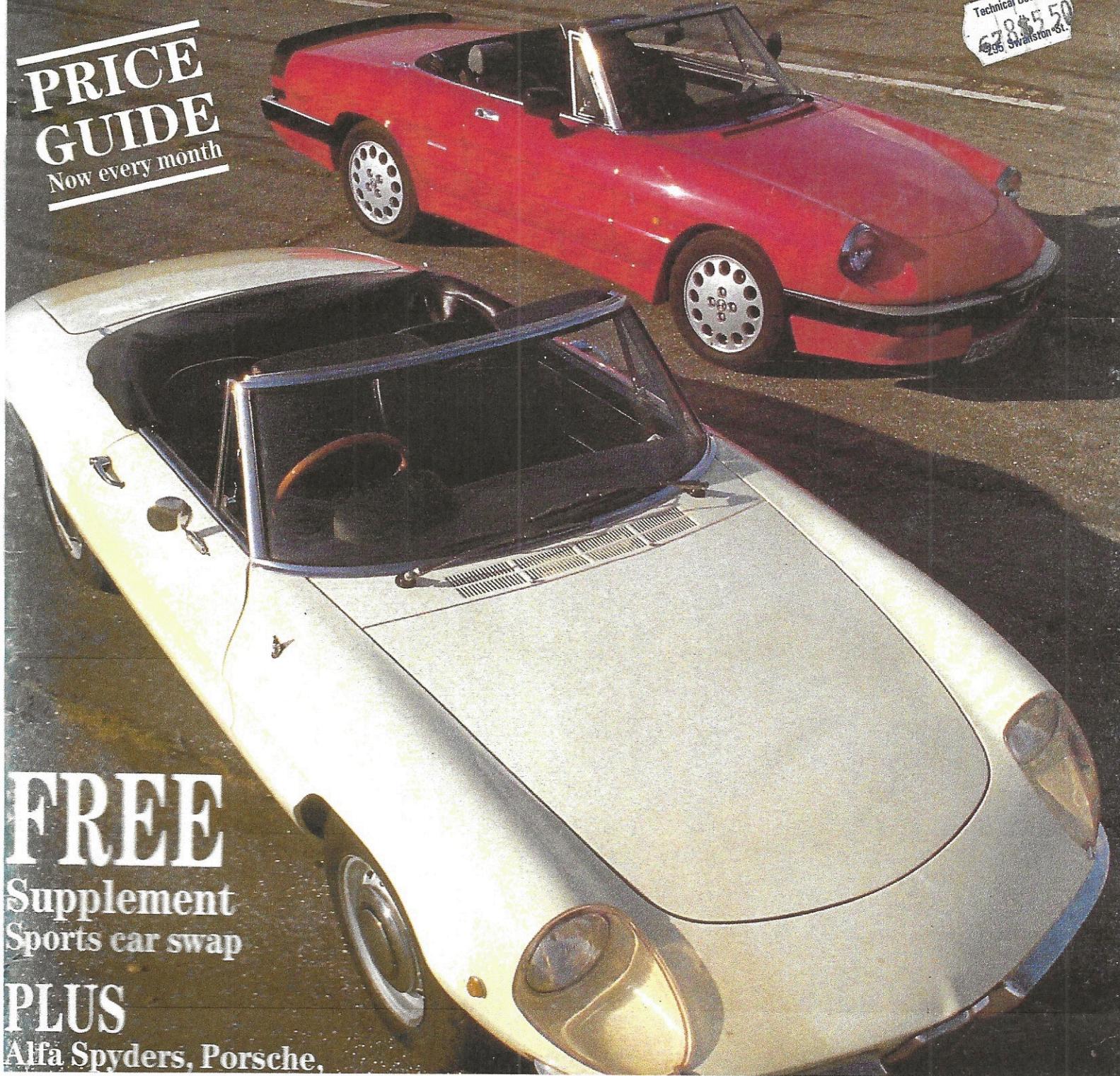
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# MISSING ALFA

*Whatever happened to the 1939 Le Mans Alfa Romeo coupé?  
Simon Moore brings us the background to a mystery*

**R**EADING Doug Nye's super story on Mike Sparken's fabulous 1938 8C2900B Le Mans coupé, (*Classic Cars* December 1986), reminded me of some photographs that Geoff Goddard had found for me a few months ago. These show the works Alfa coupé that ran in the 1939 race, a car that has since disappeared.

At the beginning of 1939, Alfa introduced a new model, the 6C2500, to replace the earlier Jano-designed 6C2300B. The fairly advanced features of the earlier model's chassis were retained like all-independent suspension (trailing links and coil springs at the front and swing axles and torsion bars at the rear) while a new gearbox and an enlarged engine were the main revisions. The 72mmx100mm twin ohc (driven by chain) six-cylinder 2443cc motor was fitted with three sidedraft Weber carburettors and gave about 125bhp at 4800rpm in racing trim. Several sports-racing spiders were built both for private entrants and for the works racing team 'Alfa Corse'.

These cars were driven extensively in Italian events in 1939 as supercharged cars were banned from local racing, presumably to lower the cost and open up the competition as the works 8C2900 Alfas had dominated the local scene for the three previous seasons. Nothing has really changed in the motor racing world! In international races Alfa Corse used the fabulous V12 4½-litre Tipo 412 (see *Classic Cars* November 1981) for races where supercharging was banned and the 2.9 competed only once, at the Luxembourg GP.

However, Alfa Corse decided to give the unblown six-cylinder car an outing at Le Mans in June. They commissioned Anderloni at Carrozzeria Touring to build another coupé especially for the famous 24-hour event. I suppose that this car tends to be forgotten as it didn't perform very well and it disappeared during the war but I believe that it was an important landmark in body styling. As can be seen from these pictures, Anderloni seemed to have got the design of the tail more organised, if a little heavy, compared with the 1938 car. I think that this car is really the link between Mike Sparken's eight-cylinder car and the early post-war 166 and 212 Ferrari coupés and, as such, an important design.

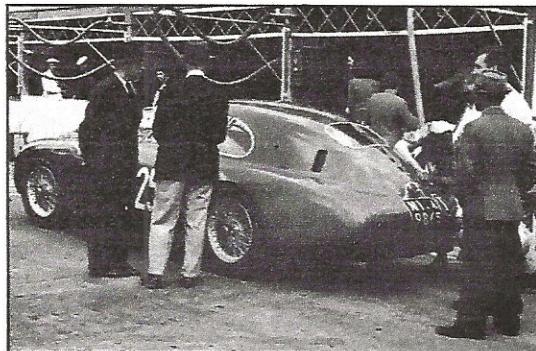
Raymond Sommer was Scheduled to drive the car and Bira, the Thai prince, was asked along to share the driving chores. However, there was a small breakdown in communication as Bira and his manager Chula thought that they were going to be driving the eight-cylinder 2.9

winning outright, rather than the unblown six which really had no chance of an overall win! I must say that, since blown cars were allowed under the regulations, it was a somewhat surprising decision by Alfa Corse, especially after the reasonable showing of the spider in 1937, when Sommer/Guidotti led for a while, and the domination of the coupé in 1938. I suppose that they could have been trying to promote sales of their current range of sixes but I would have thought that a win with a 2.9 would have been better advertising copy than a middle placing with a 2.5.

Both Bira in his book *Bits and Pieces* and Chula in his *Blue and Yellow* (a reference to the Thai racing colours) describe their disappointment when they got to Le Mans so just maybe Alfa changed their minds at the last minute. Sommer took Bira out for a few laps of practice which seems to have been a bit of an un-nerving experience as Bira has never

never been a passenger in a car at racing speeds before; however, he survived and then went out and equalled Sommer's time. Sommer took the first spell and actually had the coupé moving before any other car at the classic Le Mans 'run and jump in start'. Lap one and the car came round 11th but after only a few laps (the two books differ on the number) Sommer came trickling in with a blown head gasket on the new engine that had only been put in after practice. He set to with the help of one mechanic and changed the gasket in just over the hour which, at one stage, involved him standing on the Chassis rail inside the bonnet to get the leverage to lift the head.

The coupé then ran reliably all through the night and into Sunday with the two drivers taking three hour spells, until Bira sustained a blown rear tyre. The engine then started to overheat and it was finally withdrawn at about 11.30am when lying 10th having covered 1450 miles (the



The car was returned to Milan and we had to wait until the following year before a 6C2500 coupé appeared again for the Corse — in the 1940 running of the Mille Miglia, which was a rather circumscribed event on a closed circuit rather than the classic run down from Brescia to Rome and back. Ercole

picture of him with the car in the race programme. In addition, Count Trossi was entered in a coupé, race number 76 (Boratto was number 78). Boratto never made it to the start but Trossi, with co-driver Lucchi, lapped faster than the works open cars but could not catch the nimble BMW 328s, finishing 8th after

spiders (2nd, 4th and 7th). The car has never been seen since.

Now we get to the mystery bit! Was there more than one car? The car at Le Mans was registered for the road with the same number MI (for Milano) 49865 and the Trossi MM car had the same number. Incidentally, this number has been traced by Lorenzo Boscarelli through the Italian records and it corresponds to chassis number 91507. However, numbers get changed around a bit in the racing world as we know so it could have been a different car at Brescia than the one at Le Mans. The differences include: additional air intakes under the nose on the 1940 car; an additional filter (for a second fuel tank or had they fitted a dry sump engine?) in 1940; vents on either side of the tail close to the rear window on the Le Mans car; three rectangular holes cut into the tail between the rear window and the Touring badge at Le Mans; the Le Mans car had a very permanent looking 'T' for Italy on the tail next to the registration number plate.

I don't suppose that we will ever find out for sure whether there were two or not but it is an interesting little piece of unexplained history. The last piece in the jigsaw puzzle is that the same registration number appeared on a road-going Pinin Farina 6C2500 spider built up during the war so maybe the coupé was scrapped? □



Above, Raymond Sommer with the Alfa coupé before the 1939 Le Mans race. Below and left, shots of the car during the race. Photos: Geoff Goddard archives

