

A \$17m Mercedes Six-Pack

Rumor has it that Bernie Ecclestone—"Mr. E," as he's known—sent back all of RM's contracts with the dollar signs replaced by pounds

by Simon Kidston



1937 Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster, lot 225—\$8,235,112

“Here are the ‘Mercs’ of motoring mythology... Here the three great exhaust pipes emerge from the bonnet side to be copied by all and sundry who wanted to make a Mercedes-like impression. Here the great three-pointed star rides so big and large before the driver that it becomes almost a fighter pilot’s sight. And nowhere else but in a fighter plane could one sit behind so much engine.”—Michael Frostick, *The Mighty Mercedes*, 1971.

To me, Frostick’s words sum up the unique appeal of the pre-war supercharged Mercedes. To the generation of motoring enthusiasts who witnessed the Third Reich-funded Silver Arrows storming to victory on Europe’s famed Grand Prix circuits, driven by seemingly fearless young men sometimes referred to as “The Titans” for their mastery of these brutal 500-horsepower-plus machines, the supercharged road cars basked in the same glow of invincibility.

In collector car terms, their status is well established. There has never been a time when their passage caused indifference, nor have they ever been worthless; their styling has been imitated frequently but arguably never improved upon; and of course, they have always been fast, powerful, and rare. In short, a pre-war “Blown Merc” ticks just about every box in the collector car stakes.

Unlike most other classic cars, their market isn’t really subject to fashion, nor, dare I say, much speculation. These are big boys’ toys: You won’t find a relative newcomer or a lottery winner chasing them, like certain Latin exotica. The major players tend to be serious collectors in the U.S. and Germany, with a sprinkling of owners in Great Britain and Holland.

They don’t often appear for public sale, so six in the same auction caused a stir. Then again, the seller, Bernie Ecclestone, is a man of bold statements. In recent years, he had built a large and eclectic collection, which was being pruned back to its Grand Prix car element to better reflect its owner’s F1 interests.

For RM Auctions, which had recently announced its first European multi-marque sale in the heart of opposition territory, it must have seemed too good to be true. The consignment negotiations between RM’s Rob Myers and F1’s own ringmaster would have made a master class in dealmaking (rumor has it that “Mr. E,” as he’s known, sent back all of RM’s contracts with the dollar signs replaced by pounds) but whatever the terms, it was probably worth the extra gray hairs.

Highlight of the “surplus stock” was of course the Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster, the feature lot of RM’s heavily promoted auc-

tion. Combined with its five cousins, it contributed a whopping \$17 million to the London sale total. Let's find out why.

1937 Mercedes-Benz 540K Cabriolet A, lot 216

The factory offered its own coachwork on the 500/540K series of 8-cylinder touring cars, of which 354 and 406 chassis were built respectively (plus an additional 38 short-chassis 540Ks). The more common bodystyles were the Cabriolet A (two doors and two front seats, plus one sideways behind or just a shelf for luggage—116 made), the Cabriolet B (two doors and four seats with four side windows—the least desirable variant—296 made), and the Cabriolet C (similar to the B but with two side windows and worth a little more than the B—122 made). There were also open tourers (28), some pretty coupes (9), the streamlined *Autobahnkurier* (6), the sporting Roadster (flat screen), and the positively rakish Special Roadster (split screen), but more on that later.

Even amongst Cabriolet As, there are variations, as the early examples tended to have lower, prettier windshields, and the later cars were generally less attractive. Spare wheels were either in the front fenders or on the tail, with collectors favoring the latter. The Ecclestone Collection's Cabriolet A, acquired at Poulain's Monaco auction back in May 2000 from the Michel Roquet Collection, looked very shiny but had side-mounted spares and the matching red paintwork and interior would have suited a fire engine.

Lots of pre-sale interest did not translate into lots of bidders, and a German buyer edged out competition from the U.K. and France to snatch it at \$1,391,850—today's market level, although good value compared to cars typically offered by German restorers.

1937 Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster, lot 225

This car sold for \$8,235,112 to a German dealer (probably bidding on behalf of a well-known German collector), with underbidders from Germany and the U.S. I first admired a Special Roadster when touring the Mercedes-Benz Museum as a university student in Germany; I'd never seen such a striking pre-war car, complete with 1930s Berlin nightclub backdrop.

Opinions vary strongly about these cars among "insiders." Years later, while I admired one at Pebble Beach, a well-known dealer acquaintance commented, "Wearing her Sunday best, but still the cleaning lady underneath." Granted, the driving experience of the heavy 8-cylinder chassis does not match the promise of the Special Roadster coachwork, but has there ever been a standard catalog body more arrogant or evocative?

There are subtle differences between the 58 500/540K Normal and Special Roadsters made (short or long tail, low or high door, upright or flush-mounted spare wheel), but this 540K Special Roadster, delivered to U.K. lock maker Sir John Chubb in July 1937, had it all—long tail,



1937 Mercedes-Benz 540K Cabriolet A, lot 216—\$1,391,850

high door, flush-mounted spare. There wasn't much to criticize. The steering had been converted from the original RHD during a sojourn in the U.S., and the restoration was no longer fresh after over a decade in storage, but the car presented well overall.

Compared to the last true Special Roadster seen at auction (the "dazzlingly restored" ex-Jack Warner car sold for \$3,630,000 at RM Phoenix in 2002, SCM# 27037) this slightly lesser example might seem generously valued, but the dollar exchange has a lot to do with it, and any Special Roadster is, well... special. I believe the price was spot on, and the car will still stop traffic in 100 years.

1935 Mercedes-Benz 500K Special Cabriolet, lot 233

Sellers are often tempted to add the word "Special" (or the more exotic sounding "Spezial") to any Mercedes-Benz bodystyle that doesn't match the factory catalog, but RM claimed the build sheet of this 500K—the superficially similar 5-liter predecessor to the 5.4-liter 540K—indicated it had originally been described as a "Spez. Cabr. A."

The car offered by RM was similar to a regular Cabriolet A, but with arguably prettier front fenders and a longer tail, both reminiscent of the Special Roadster, including the flush spare. Not so great were the coffee-brown wheels and interior, the generally average condition, a typically high soft top when lowered, and a slight gap in its history—from 1936 until 1995.

Bidders were hesitant on this car, and it was knocked down at \$1,449,844 to a German buyer, well below estimate. Mr. E was sitting in the front row, giving the nod to the auctioneer as his cars approached their reserves, rather like the omnipotent emperor deciding a Roman gladiatorial contest. I understand that a fellow bidder's hesitation made the buyer a \$200,000 profit the next morning, when the underbidder decided he simply had to have the car.

Considering that a standard Cabriolet A is worth about this much, even after the overnight mark-up, I'd still call this handsome car well bought. Once properly restored, it could look stunning.

1929 Mercedes-Benz SSK Roadster, lot 238

And now for something completely different. Yes, it's still a supercharged Mercedes, and it still has those hallmark side exhausts and vee radiator topped by the three-pointed star, but it's really from a different generation and has a completely different character, which should be no surprise, as the factory's chief designer at the time was Ferdinand Porsche. The big 6-cylinder, supercharged Mercedes rivaled W.O. Bentley's cars on the track and in the sales stakes, and both were fast, loud, and expensive, intended for the wealthy sporting motorist.

Starting with the racy 6.8-liter S (Sport) type in 1927 (180 hp and up), the model evolved through the slightly less Spartan 225-hp SS (Super Sport) and finally the two-seat, 225-hp SSK with shorter chassis (hence



1935 Mercedes-Benz 500K Special Cabriolet, lot 233—\$1,449,844