

The rise and fall of PIERO DUSIO

*From football star to failed Grand
Prix car constructor, Piero Dusio
almost achieved his lifelong
ambitions with Cisitalia*



A frost-bitten, bleak Dutch landscape seemed a most unlikely place to recall the amazing career of Piero Dusio, the founder of one of Italy's most remarkable sportscars. But at a crossroads close to the Belgian border, Marcel Roks, of Classic Car Associates, and I shivered as we stood and admired two unique jewels from this remarkable man's post-war vision.

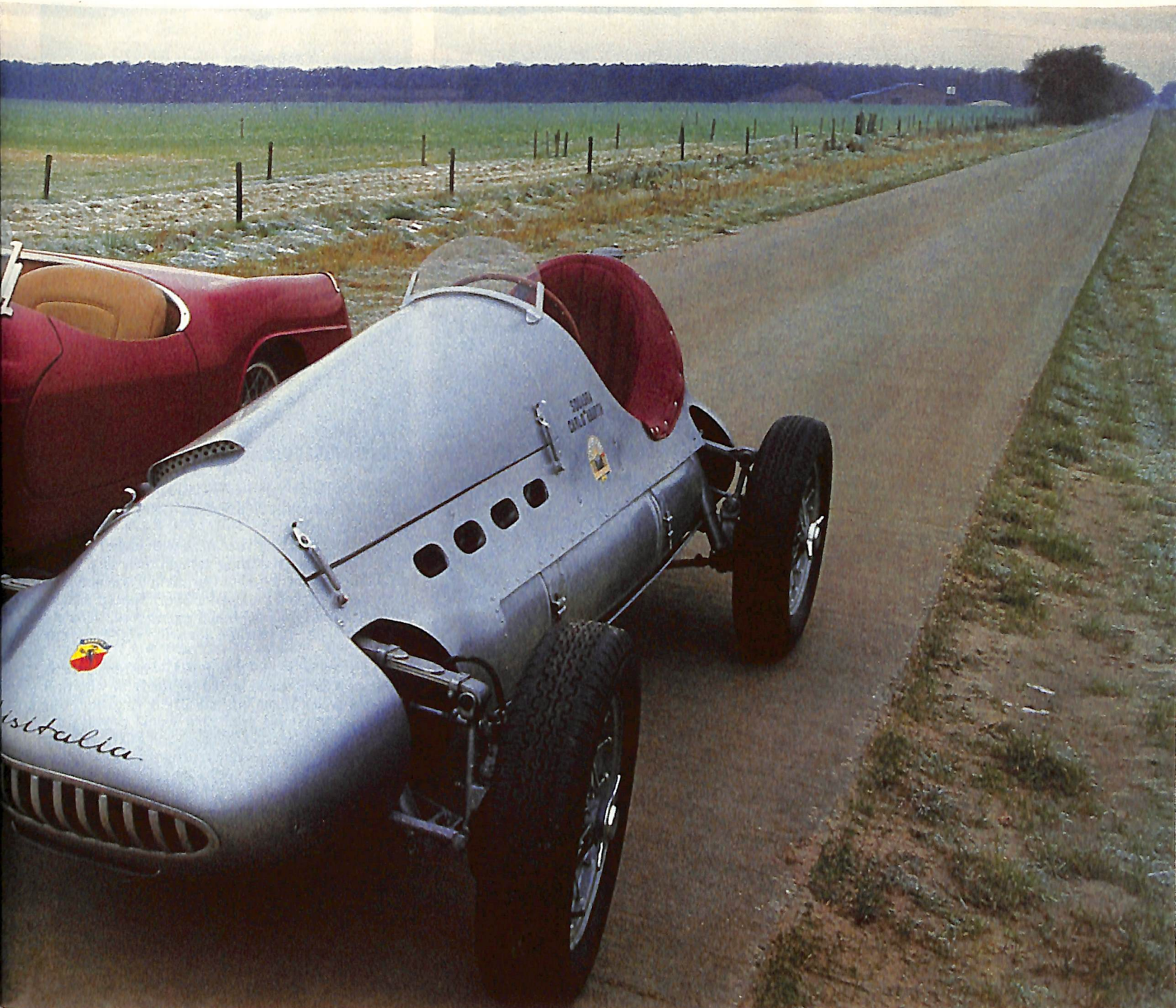
The D47 single-seater and a one-off Castagna 202B spider were united for our photo session just before the two cars were shipped to Cisitalia collectors in Japan and California. Countries with completely different national characteristics but yet a great deal in common with the incredible enterprise of this Italian businessman. Somehow a career spanning first division football star to playboy, millionaire business magnate to Formula 1 racing driver and sportscar constructor just didn't sound credible in Britain. But in Italy, America or Japan certainly.

In his youth Dusio was a natural athlete, and soon gained a place playing for Turin, one of Italy's top national teams in the thirties. But at the height of his football career he badly injured his left knee and was

forced to retire from the sport. The Turin team's patrons, the super-rich Mirsan brothers, offered the popular Dusio a job with a Swiss-backed textile company. He greatly impressed his new bosses during his first assignment in Genoa, and was soon placed in charge of Italian sales, demanding a fantastic salary.

His ever rising fortunes gave him the means to pursue his two great passions, fast cars and fast women. Unlike a great many playboy racing drivers, he soon proved himself one of the quickest Italian amateurs, as demonstrated by his third placing in the '38 Mille Miglia, and a sixth in the '36 Italian Grand Prix, but his burning ambition was to achieve major successes in these events in his own car.

In 1939 his business empire expanded when he formed a conglomerate of his textile company, a bank, several hotels and a sporting goods manufacturing company. He christened the new organisation Cisitalia, for Consozio Industriale Sportivo Italia. Cisitalia began marketing racing bicycles, tennis rackets and sports fashions until shortly before the outbreak of World War Two when Dusio secured an exclusive contract to supply uniforms for Mussolini's



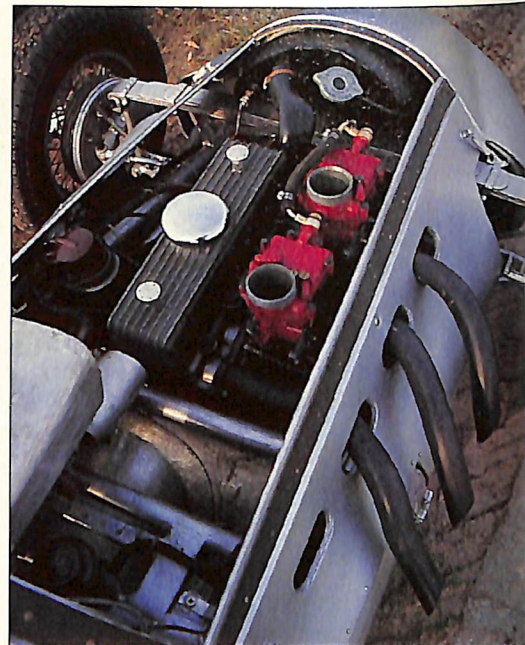
Above: Modified D46 single-seater is stamped Chassis 001 and is claimed to be Carlo Abarth's first car. Left is the last ever Castagna body on 202B chassis. Left: Cisitalia script badge was derived from Piero Dusio's handwriting. Far left: Father and son, Piero and Carlo Dusio

Black Shirts and textiles to the Germans.

Even the devastation of Northern Italy by allied bombers didn't disrupt his motor racing vision. He persuaded the brilliant young Fiat engineer Dante Giacosa to join him on the project, and when Giacosa's home was destroyed, Dusio installed him in his own villa and they began work on a low budget monoposto racing car designed for fast production and planned for its own formula championship.

It was soon decided that standard Fiat components were an essential requirement. Giacosa utilised front and rear suspension from the 500 Topolino and employed the Fiat 1100 engine and gearbox as the basis of the drive train. A plentiful supply of chrome-molybdenum tubing from the stocks for Dusio's racing bicycle production, and Giacosa's familiarity with aircraft airframe construction, led to the Cisitalia being blessed with one of the first tubular space frames of any competition car.

As the war progressed and the Germans withdrew into Northern Italy, Giacosa's progress suddenly was interrupted by a German police shock raid during which one officer smashed the styling models. But by the end of the conflict in the summer of 1945



construction of the prototype was well under way. However, Giacosa's commitment was now to rebuild Fiat, so Dusio had to search for a new full-time engineer. With the help of Sig. Ferretti of Fiat, he discovered Giovanni Savonuzzi, previously manager of Fiat's experimental aircraft engine department, and tempted him to the Cisitalia project with the offer of ten times his present Fiat salary. By the Spring of 1946 the prototype was running and Piero Taruffi was employed as racing manager and test driver.

Above: Cisitalia D46s dominate at Coppa Brezzi debut. Above right and below: Modified D46 with bored out 1200cc engine for Formula 2. Note open exhausts

Details of both cars were cribbed by American stylists, in particular Ned Nickles' Buicks and the GM dream car, Le Sabre.

Plans included four roadsters with higher chassis side tubes, also featuring toned-down fins. Construction was entrusted to Garella in Turin and they were initially called the Spyder Sport Special. One of the first series was lightened even more, adding a cutaway door. It became known as the 'Razzo' (rocket).

All this hectic work early in 1947 was to ensure as many cars as possible would be ready for the first post-war Mille Miglia on June 21. A victory in this famous international road race would provide the most effective publicity. Dusio himself elected to drive a spyder with a particularly hot engine developing 62hp, while Inico Bernabei drove the 'box saloon' prototype, Taruffi the high-finned MM coupé, and Minetti and Nuvolari both in spyders. The courageous Mantuan was by now a very sick man, and Dusio, so the story goes, allotted him the slowest car in the team, not really expecting him to even reach Rome.

The outcome was one of the greatest drives in the Mille Miglia, with Tazio arriving in Rome eight minutes in front. A hasty repair to a swamped distributor in the pouring rain on the Asti-Turin autostrada sadly lost the race to Biondetti's unsupercharged Alfa Romeo 2.9 saloon. From then on to Brescia the 1100cc motor was losing power with Nuvolari slipping down the placings on the timed sections. The exhausted ace had to be lifted out of his car at the finish only to wait 41 minutes before

"I want a car that is wide like my Buick, low like a Grand Prix car and comfortable like a Rolls-Royce"

After minor adjustments to the over-hard rear suspension, production was soon in full swing and by the end of August seven cars were ready for the Coppa Brezzi, a closed-circuit race around Turin's scenic Valentino park. The D46 team looked like a who's who of Italian motor racing history with Nuvolari, Cortese, Taruffi, Biondetti and Dusio, plus French aces Chiron and Sommer listed as drivers. The 'Flying Mantuan' set the pace but his amazing display of sideways driving came to an end on the second lap when he raised the steering wheel aloft on the main straight. Amazingly he struggled through another lap by turning the column with his fist.

It was left to Dusio to head the dreamlike introduction of his new racer with Cortese and Chiron close behind. The French Gordini team from Paris were clearly outclassed, and overnight the new Cisitalia marque was on the map. Orders for the new car started to pour in while Hans Stuck hillclimbed one successfully in Germany and the order book filled with such names as Harry Schell, Raymond DeSauge and Robert Manzon. A world tour all-Cisitalia championship was planned, to be sponsored by Dusio. The grand scheme however was cancelled after the first race at Gezira Island, Cairo in March 1947. Although the racing was dramatic with Cortese battling it out with a brilliant new star Alberto Ascari, only 6000 Egyptians turned up to watch and the tour was aborted as a financial disaster.

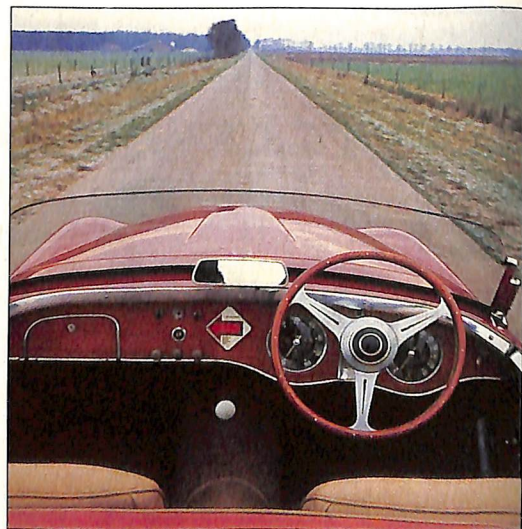
Dusio managed to sell 42 single-seaters before the CSI increased the Formula 2 limit to 2000cc from January 1948, by which time the enterprising Italian was far more committed to sportscar production.

Before Giacosa left to salvage Fiat, he had sketched plans to lengthen and widen the D46 chassis to accommodate two seats and create the



sports version. Savonuzzi continued the development and by the Autumn of 1946 the first chassis was undergoing tests, and soon after entrusted to Rocco Motto for bodywork. Although not as dramatic as the later finned coupés, it employed the streamlining features of the Fiat 508CS and Alfa 2.9 Le Mans coupé with its long V-shaped cabin. This historic car (chassis 001 - later known as the 'Box saloon') was recently discovered in South Africa as Simon Moore reports on page 90.

The second chassis was the dramatic 'Savonuzzi Streamliner', the result of his aircraft engineering and a great deal of time spent in the Turin Polytechnic wind tunnel. The low-drag co-efficient was achieved by the high front wings, dramatic tail fins, a small spoiler on the rear window and a completely streamlined floor. Alfredo Vignali was entrusted to build the body and the 1100cc car was tested on the Turin-Milan autostrada at 210kph. A third chassis was constructed as a similar coupé, this time with port holes for the engine bay and a thinner front grille.



being told he'd lost to the Alfa by 16 minutes 4 secs.

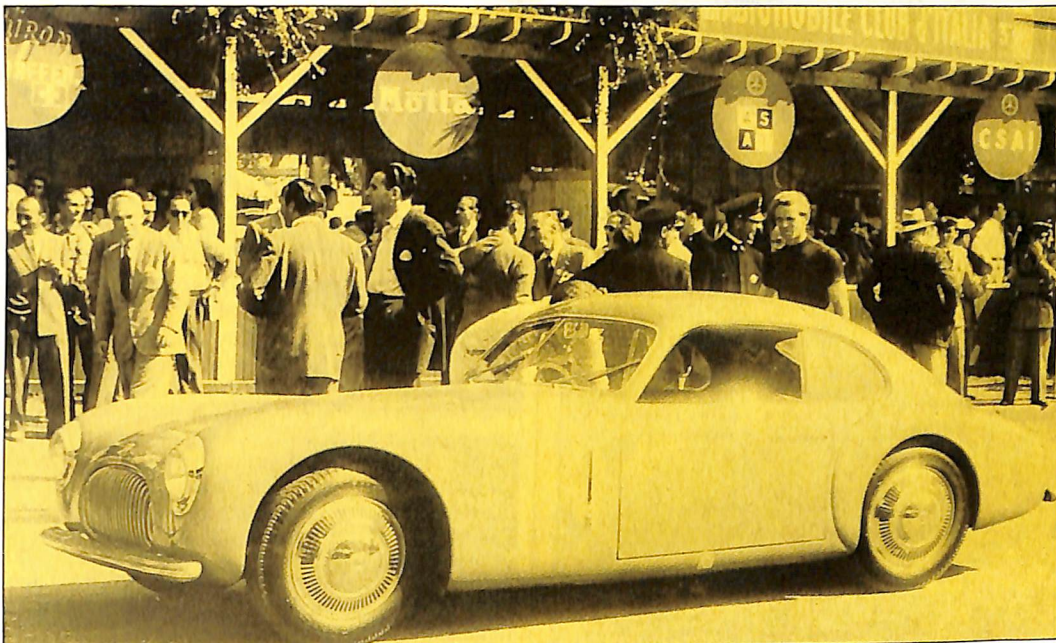
Nevertheless, it was a great day for Cisitalia with Nuvolari second, Bernabei third in the 'Box saloon' and Minetti's spyder fourth. As well as total class domination, Bernabei had set fastest time on the final autostrada section, averaging 96mph for 1 hour 25 minutes.

During all this drama Dusio was planning a luxury class coupé to incorporate all the advances of his brilliant competition models. His instructions to Savonuzzi were thus. "I want a car that is wide like my Buick, low like a Grand Prix car, comfortable like a Rolls-Royce and light like our single-seater D46." The brilliant engineer and stylist's sketches met with Dusio's approval and were presented to Pininfarina to develop and refine. The little coupé that was destined to become an international design cult object made its first appearance on the eve of the Italian Grand Prix along the avenues of the Fiera di Milano, and later starred at the glamorous Villa d'Este Concours d'Elegance at Villa Olma near Lake Como. At the Salon della Carrozzeria in Milan a pale pearl grey Cisitalia 200 coupé was presented, featuring for the first time the Cisitalia script badge on the tail, derived from Dusio's own handwriting.

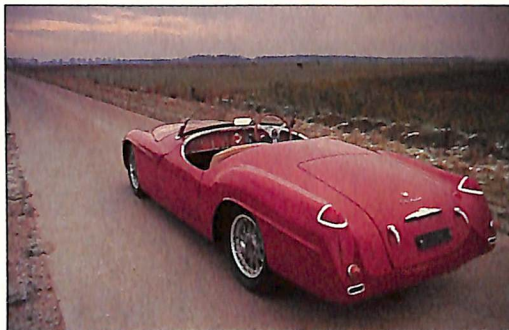
The world's motoring press were universal in their reaction to the brilliant new model, already heralding it 'one of the most beautiful cars of all time', and Dusio's order book rapidly filled. The supreme accolade came in 1951 when the New York Museum of Modern Art's director Arthur Drexler selected it for an automobile display and later for permanent exhibition alongside the works of such individuals as Rothko and Jackson Pollock.

Cisitalia production never attained Dusio's ambitious forecasts and the final total is believed to be about 100 coupés, 60 convertibles, a few dozen spyder Nuvolaris and a selection of chassis for Italian coachbuilders such as Frua and Castagna.

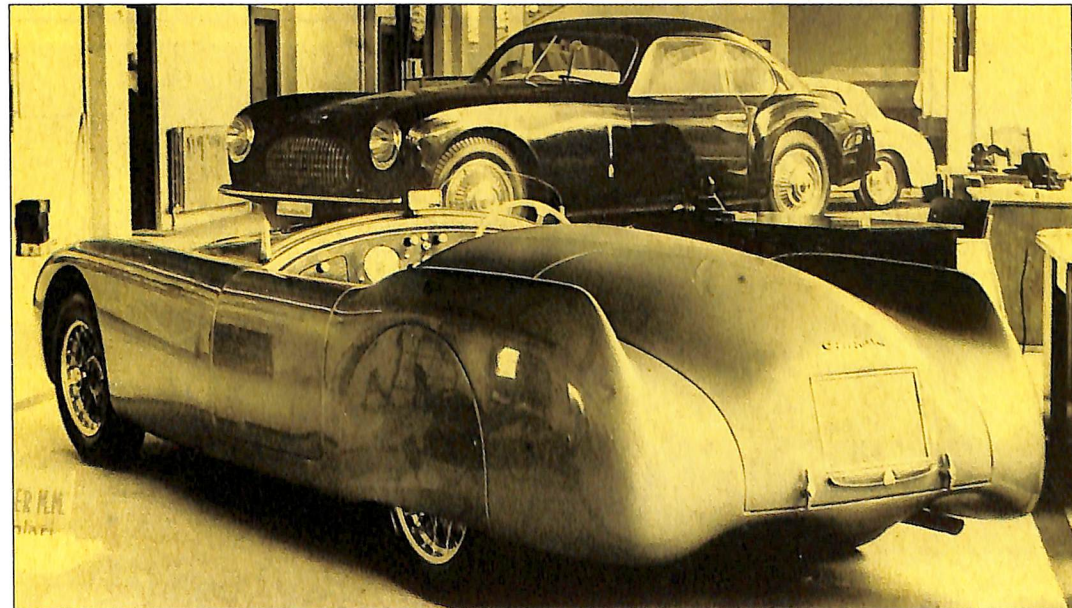
Almost unbelievably, the Cisitalia story has a



Above: Debut of Cisitalia 200 coupé at Italian Grand Prix and (below) survivor cherished by Pininfarina museum



Above: Modified Fiat cylinder head and unique Castagna spyder. Below: Perfect pair with Nuvolari roadster and 202 coupé in contemporary Milan showroom



tragic ending. Flushed by his phenomenal run of successes, Dusio raised his sights and at Taruffi's suggestion began to examine the possibilities of a Formula 1 Grand Prix car. The Italian ace recommended the services of Italian engineer Ing. Giannini, but Savonuzzi planted the idea of tracking down the German engineers who had dominated GP racing in the thirties. Dusio paid a cool million francs to the French government to ransom the legendary Ferdinand Porsche from his Nazi war crimes cell.

He set up Dr Porsche, his son Ferry, Carlo Abarth and Eberan von Eberhorst as the design team to complete Porsche plans for a rear-engined 1½-litre supercharged 12-cylinder Grand Prix car. But against an ample budget of 20 million lire, the experienced German team spent over 100 million without getting a single car to the test track. Dusio even cleared out his lucrative accessory department to make room for the expected racing car production, but in the summer of 1949 Cisitalia went bankrupt.

Savonuzzi had resigned two years previously, fully anticipating the financial disaster, while Ferry Porsche returned to Gmund intrigued by Dusio's concept of creating a sportscar based on production car components.

Cisitalia's new racing manager, Carlo Abarth, had little to do while the Germans wasted Dusio's fortunes, and began to develop special cycle-fendered sports racing cars as a side line. These, plus modified D46 single-seaters with bored out 1200cc Formula 2 engines, became the nucleus of Squadra Carlo Abarth under the patronage of his wealthy friend Guido Scagliarini.

The single-seater featured in our colour pictures is one of Abarth's team cars and is stamped Chassis 001 and could be claimed the first Abarth, complete with high performance cylinder head options and a twin Weber set up. It was very successful in the hands of Taruffi who became Italian Formula 2 champion. The car then found its way to South America where it remained remarkably free of

Numero UNO

Simon Moore explains how he witnessed the discovery of the first Cisitalia sportscar in South Africa, and unfolds its history.

Finding a 'lost' car is always exciting but one with chassis No.001 even more so. Not that a car is ever totally lost as *someone* knows where it is even if most enthusiasts don't! In 1984, my employer sent me to work in South Africa for a couple of years. Soon after arriving there, an old friend and Alfa Romeo and Maserati historian, Ken Stewart, of Port Elizabeth, was staying with me in Johannesburg and a dinner party was put on for him.

Over coffee, the conversation turned to exotic cars that had disappeared in South Africa. Hugh Gearing and Rob van Zyl recalled a coupé that had been imported to Johannesburg in the late fifties. It seems to have raced only once, in the sportscar scratch race at the Rand Autumn meeting in 1961, held at the now defunct Grand Central Airport circuit. In Italy, it had gained a nose from, or at least patterned on, a Barchetta Ferrari. The air intakes above the windshield had been filled in, the fuel filler stuck out of the perspex cover in the tail and there was a scoop in the bonnet. Despite the new nose, it still had an original Cisitalia badge.

Exactly who had the car next is not clear but it seems it was never raced again. Around 1960 it was bought by someone called Brian Green who left it lying outside with the engine and gearbox removed. His brother finally acquired it and, in 1965, he passed it on to 'Rocky' Rockas of Benoni, east of Johannesburg. Rocky towed the engineless car back to his

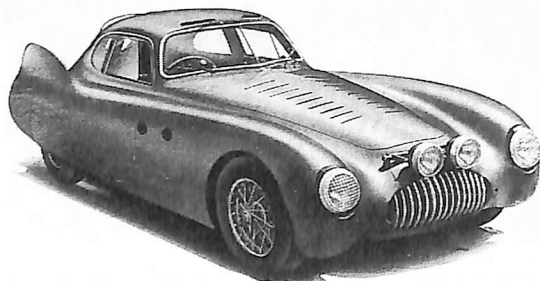
father-in-law's property in Bocksburg but for some reason never went back for all the mechanical bits. Apart from the original engine and gearbox, these included engines spares, two quick-change differentials (one a hillclimb-type low ratio) and at least one more gearbox. (The two gearboxes were a four-speed plus reverse and a five-speed - with no reverse!). All these parts were in storage with Brian Green, not his brother, and were eventually thrown away in a municipal dump/landfill when he moved house. They are gone forever.

The rest of the car sat where it was for 20 years - in a lean-to shed at Rocky's father-in-law's property. Hugh had traced it and contacted Rocky seven or eight years before, but failed to persuade him to part with it. With a bit of help from the telephone book - and some very perplexed people who also have the surname Rockas - we tracked Rocky down again despite the fact that he had moved more than once in the intervening period. He still didn't want to sell but agreed to let me see the car on January 13, 1985. It was filthy dirty and the tyres were flat. We pushed it out and he washed it down with a hose. My notes on the condition ran as follows:

'Original Cisitalia badge missing; an oval badge saying CISITALIA/SPECIAL MM still fitted as it was when the car arrived in South Africa; Mocco body-builder's badge original; amazingly shaped fuel tank intact, with space for spare wheel to fit in the



Cisitalia Savonuzzi and Taruffi



Dramatic streamliner designed by Savonuzzi



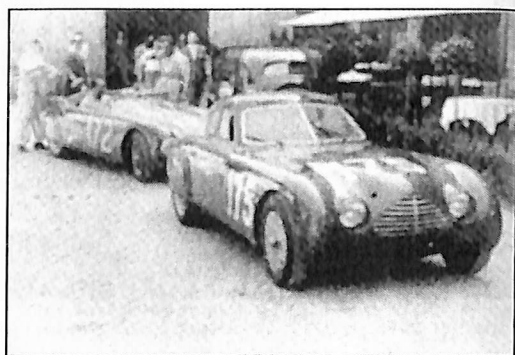
D46 of Kennington at Goodwood in 1949

modifications apart from a set of VW wheels. It was discovered by Violati, and returned to Italy where it was sensitively restored by Roberto Vesco in Brescia three years ago. The bodywork is completely original.

When Cisitalia went bankrupt, Dusio salvaged what he could by selling most of the assets and a completed Formula 1 car to Autocar in Argentina. Although essentially a truck manufacturer, they struggled with the Tipo 360 GP project but were beset with mechanical problems.

Back in Italy, Cisitalia was reconstructed under the direction of Dusio's son Carlo and several prototype models were built using Ford engines due to the enthusiasm of Henry Ford II, himself a Cisitalia owner. A projected order from the American company never materialised. In 1958 Michelotti produced drawings for a daring new coupé but a prototype was never built. The last car to feature the famed Cisitalia badge was a special-bodied Fiat 600. How the mighty fall...
Mick Walsh

Our thanks to Rudy Pass and Marcel Rokos of Classic Car Associates for their help.



Evolution of the 'Box' from prototype, Mille Miglia team car and South African club racer



top of it, and no filler cap. Also evidence of the air scoops over the windshield, but now closed up.

Obviously, I tried to buy the car over the next few months but without success as Rocky always claimed that he was going to start a rebuild soon. I saw it again on February 22, 1986 and I took David Cohen along with me. He subsequently managed to prise the car out of Rocky's grasp. When we got the car back to David's workshop, he took a wire brush to the dirt on the front cross member and there it was, the magical 001 number appeared! With such an historic car that had first appeared in the 1947 Mille Miglia, David set himself the almost impossible task of rebuilding it in time for the 1987 running of the Retrospective. David found a later engine (supercharged) and gearbox and these were rebuilt by his ace mechanic, Ginger. The body was completely stripped and the original nose recreated.

One of the many memorable moments at the 1987 Mille Miglia was seeing 001 sitting gleaming in the Piazza della Vittoria. Inizio Bernabei, 001's first owner, would have been proud of the car in the Mille Miglia as it completed the course, although not without a few teething troubles.

Construction of 001 started in the Autumn of 1946 with the intention of completing it, along with at least four others, in time for the 1947 Mille Miglia. 001 was selected to have a coupé body created by Cisitalia designer, Dante Giacosa, and progressed by his successor, Giovanni Savonuzzi. The body was built by Rocco Motto in Turin and was first shown to the press in early 1947.

Although this car had the first chassis number (001) it probably had the body built on it without an engine in it as the original engine number was 005. The car appeared at Brescia for the 1947 Mille Miglia on June 22 with slots cut above the windshield to improve ventilation, driven by Bernabei, with co-driver Pacini (Race No. 175). Bernabei had not really featured in any race results before 1947 although he did drive the 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C2900B Le Mans coupé in at least one event for the Rome-based Ventura brothers and also had one or two outings in D46 single-seaters. Whether he bought 001 at this time or later is not clear but the car was virtually his only mount for three whole seasons. It was nick-named 'Cassone' which can be translated as 'box'. Certainly it must have been awfully hot inside and, both before and after its first appearance, it's gained a number of additional air intakes around the cockpit area.

The 1947 running of the Mille Miglia stipulated that no superchargers could be used and also that all entrants would receive a new set of tyres at an attractive price. In post-war Italy, tyres were scarce so it is no surprise that over 230 cars entered but only about 150 actually started – and some of those were 'starting money specials'! The supercharger

ban should have excluded the 2.9 Alfa Romeo model which had won the last three full Mille Miglia events (1936/7/8) but Brescia Alfa dealer, Emilio Romano, entered a coupé (412036) for himself and 1938 winner, Clemente Biondetti, with the blowers removed and replaced by carburettors. Five Cisitalias appeared, including 001, but the star entry was Tazio Nuvolari in his open car. Bernabei was in fact the fastest on the wet leg from Turin to Brescia at an average of 153kph (96mph). Overall, 001 completed

the 1000 miles in 16 hours 38 mins for an average of 109.8kph (68.6mph), only 12 mins behind the winning Alfa and less than 6 mins behind Nuvolari's Cisitalia.


Bernabei brought the car out for the 1948 Targa Florio/Giro di Sicilia on April 4 but retired, reaching as high as third. He also failed to finish after making it to Rome well placed in the Mille Miglia (Race No. 86) on May 2 where the car (co-driven by Sari) featured additional lights either side of the radiator grille. This running of the Mille Miglia saw the first of many wins by a Ferrari.

More successes came later in the season with a first overall in the Giro dell'Umbria, followed by several 1100cc class high placings, including victory in the Rome-Ostia 20km sprint recording a speed of 171.43kph over a measured kilometre. That's 107mph, which is pretty impressive for 1100cc in 1948. Bernabei rounded off the season with a class victory in the Coppa Gallenga hillclimb near Rome.

His third season with 001 proved the little coupé was getting a little fragile but was still competitive. He finished seventh overall in the Targa Florio but failed to finish the Mille Miglia again. The car's final appearance in Italy was the Vermicino-Rocca di Papa hillclimb in October where Bernabei took fourth in the 1100cc class. The car seems to have languished in Italy for some time, perhaps being used as a road car, until the late 1950s when an Italian took it to Johannesburg.

I was back in Johannesburg on holiday in August 1988 and finally had the chance of a ride in the Cisitalia that I had first discovered four years before. I say 'ride' as it is virtually impossible for me to fit my 6 feet 4in (1.94m) frame into this tiny coupé. The passenger side forces me to be a bit of a contortionist but to try and drive it at any sort of speed in traffic is totally out of the question.

Two environmental factors strike you very soon after you set off – the heat and the noise! Even in winter, Johannesburg is pleasantly warm (16-20°C) and the temperature starts rising inside the 'Cassone' as soon as you start. No wonder they cut extra ventilation holes into the original body. There is absolutely no sound insulation either under the bonnet or in the cockpit so the willing little engine and the rasping exhaust, coupled in this case with a supercharger, make quite a racket as you drive up the road. Performance is quite good, due in part to the later engine and to the low weight of the car and it stops and steers well for the immediate post-war era. Driving around the city, it certainly draws some interested looks although most people who ask have never heard of a Cisitalia. It is low even by modern saloon car standards and looks – and indeed sounds with its open exhaust – very much the part of early post-war Italian sportscar.

Special thanks for help in preparing this story must go to Ken Stewart and David Cohen. 



Day of discovery of the first Cisitalia



Instruments, engine, gearbox were missing



001 restored to full glory in South Africa

