

**T**he red sticker on the tacho is the telltale. Don't take it above 5500rpm. It's only just been rebuilt and we don't want it going pop now, do we? Be conservative. About 4500 ought to do it. Which is a pity as you *need* to rev this OSCA, not only because it thrives in the upper reaches, more because you're constantly incited to do so. It sounds positively glorious, all pop and fizz and noisy as hell on the downshifts, crisp, eager and resonant when you're being ruled by Y chromosomes. Just a bit faster. A few more revs. Nobody'll mind. The induction roar from the triple-Webered straight-six unit – not your expected four-banger with this super-rare 2000S – overlaid with omnipresent transmission whine really does need to be heard. It's heady stuff, this.

Maybe it's just about possible to envision Essex back roads – in January murk – as a backdrop to the Mille Miglia as you play Luigi Piotti on the '54 running in this, his old car. But suspending the necessary amount of disbelief requires more effort than is possible to muster once hypothermia kicks in. If you could only redirect some of the heat

### 'Villoresi drove his cigaro to win the F2 GP at Naples'

swell from the footwell to your rigor-struck physiognomy.

Few OSCAs were independently tested in period, but the fortunate few that managed seat time generally arrived at the same conclusion: these weren't your usual amateur hour 'etceterinis'. No, these were cars designed for a purpose with real engineering integrity, as opposed to the many shonky parts-bin specials that emerged in Italy during the immediate post-war years. Which is to be expected considering the marque's lineage.

The big giveaway is the name. This being Italy, OSCA is an acronym. Truth is, it should be OSCAFM, but the last two consonants were wisely dropped for the simple reason that not even locals could pronounce such a mouthful. Yet it's the FM part that added distinction – *Fratelli Maserati*. For much of the '50s, *real* Maseratis were OSCAs.

The *fratelli* in question were Ernesto, Bindo and Ettore Maserati, survivors of the original 'gang of four' who founded the firm

that bore their name in 1926. Alfieri, who had by all accounts been the guiding force behind the marque, had died in '32 after a racing accident. Five years later the by now financially straitened brothers sold out to Omar Orsi, who retained them under contract for a further 10 years – a spell that was reputedly less than amicable. Orsi wanted to move progressively into road-car manufacture; the Maseratis did not and left Modena the second the agreement expired.

Setting up shop in a disused part of the original Maserati factory in their home town of Bologna, the siblings set about building a run of small-series racing cars, with Ernesto acting as designer while Ettore looked after construction and Bindo kept the operation afloat. All that was lacking was a name. With the Orsi family retaining rights to the Maserati name, they instead contrived the grandiose appellation of *Officina Specializzata per la Costruzione di Automobili – Fratelli Maserati SpA*. Predictably the last bit was initially writ large on all badging, much to the annoyance of the Orsis, who required that it became a mite smaller in future.

The first model appeared in 1948, confusingly dubbed the MT4 (Maserati Type 4, prompting many to wonder what happened to 1, 2 and 3). Aimed at the up-to-1100cc sportscar class that was popular in Italy at the time, the initial run featured a Fiat block topped off with an OSCA-made SOHC alloy head, mounted in a tubular chassis with independent front suspension by unequal-length wishbones and coils. The model's first race appearance was at Pescara on August 15 that year, driven by Franco Cornacchia. Less than a month later Gigi Villoresi removed the cycle wings and drove his 'cigaro'-shaped open-wheeler to victory in the F2 Grand Prix of Naples. Shortly thereafter Dorino Serafini came out on top at the Circuit of Garda. OSCA had arrived.

And the *fratelli* were not lacking in ambition. The MT4's hefty iron block was swiftly replaced with an all-alloy one devised by Ernesto, but of more significance was his new cylinder head that featured twin overhead camshafts, chain and gear-driven with the valves sited in the hemi' combustion chamber. The crank was honed from solid billet, the machining work on the entire engine showing real artistry.

Yet while OSCA principally stuck to 'fours', it nearly came unstuck with the 4.5-litre V12 grand prix »

# Sibling rivalry

OSCA was formed by the Maserati brothers to fight the company they gave their name to. Richard Heseltine tells the tale, and drives one

photography by Peter Spinney/LAT





OSCA 2000S.  
one of only  
three made: not  
on the Mille  
Miglia this time

challenger. Essentially an engine upgrade for the by now uncompetitive 1½-litre Maserati 4CLT/48 which owed its ancestry to a Gordini project, there was only one taker: Prince Bira. A new car with a more up-to-date chassis and suspension arrangement was completed later in '51, Franco Rol's best lap during the Italian GP being 14 secs slower than Farina's fastest. It never appeared again in F1 trim and was subsequently converted into a sports car.

Not that OSCA was altogether finished with open-wheelers, building a brace of 2-litre cars to contest the F2 class that had become the World Championship category. Marque regular Elie Bayol won some secondary French races the following year in 1953, the same season he was joined by veteran Louis Chiron, but as independents they proved also-rans against works teams. The Maseratis soon called it quits, only to return to single-seaters in '57 with an F2 car (complete with desmodromic valves) that was sold to Alejandro de Tomaso, and Formula Junior a year on: Colin Davis won the 1960 Italian title for the marque (although the Brit also drove a Taraschi that year).

In sports car racing OSCA was altogether more successful, variations of the MT4 theme proving consistent winners in lower capacity classes, at least until Porsche came on strong with the 550 Spyder. Against Stanguellini and Cisitalia's, the diminutive sports-racers were triumphant in local long-distance events, with Luigi Fagioli winning his class in the 1950 Mille Miglia (while finishing an amazing seventh overall), repeating the victory a year later. OSCA first appeared at Le Mans in 1952, Turinese chemist Dottore Mario Damonte entering a gorgeous coupé with bodywork by Vignale. Co-driver 'Martial' retired while leading the up-to-1500cc category, pushing his car from Arnage to the pits in a bid to get it mobile again. A year later Damonte returned with the same car to win his class, sharing it with 'Helde' (Pierre Louis Dreyfus).

Yet OSCA's finest moment was undoubtedly its overall victory in the 1954 Sebring 12 Hours. Against an admittedly depleted field, Stirling Moss and Bill Lloyd drove Briggs Cunningham's 1½-litre MT4 to a deserved, if unlikely, win at the bumpy airfield track.

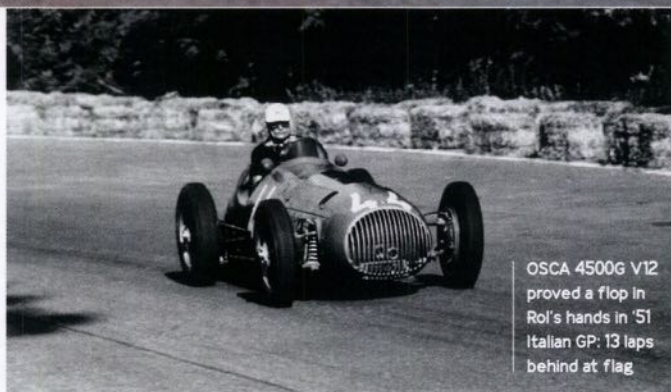
But OSCA's days were numbered. Even during a good year, it's doubtful that the Maseratis made more than 30 cars. With umpteen engine



Ludovico Scarfiotti / Odoardo Govoni's OSCA S2000 failed to finish the 1962 Targa Florio road race

capacity variations from 750 to 1453cc, there were always places to be picked up but, by the end of the 1950s, the might of German opposition, not to mention the arrival of ambitious English constructors, was taking its toll. Habitually under-financed, and by now advanced in years, the Maserati brothers were no longer at the forefront of racing advancement. Even so, their fine twin-cam unit had attracted the attention of Fiat, which was looking to build a rival to the Alfa Romeo Giulietta. A deal was struck with the industrial giant using the engine in its own sports car, the 1500/1600. Except each engine was hand made, laboriously fettled and formed in-house. Fiat took over production, agreeing to supply engines back to OSCA. But it never really worked out like that.

Although it did, in a slightly skewed manner, lead to OSCA building what passed for a volume product after a favoured customer requested a racy *Gran Turismo*. The



OSCA 4500G V12 proved a flop in Rol's hands in '51 Italian GP; 13 laps behind at flag

Tipo 1600GT was announced at the 1960 Turin Salon and, in full-house 140bhp trim with lightweight Zagato bodywork, proved a useful competition tool. A 710kg version with new bodywork was announced in '63, but the heinously ugly 1600SP remained a one-off, the embattled Maserati brothers selling out to the Agusta motorcycle and helicopter combine that same year. The marque was on borrowed time.

The new régime ushered in a raft of new models including the 1600TC (*trave centrale*), with a backbone chassis and glassfibre body, but nobody liked it. Same response, too, for the Fiat 850-based 1050 Spider and Coupé. Final ignominy was the frankly rubbish 1.7-litre Ford Taunus-based MV. OSCA was put out of its suffering in '67, with much of the tooling being reputedly fed into a furnace.



Above, from left: OSCA was Maserati if not in name; handsome wheel has pathetic horn as concession to road use; elegant vent; 2.5-litre F2 derived OSCA six



Except that's not quite the end of the story. With Japanese backing the marque was revived in 1999. GMP Automobili had already bought the rights to the Touring name but realised that a dormant coach-builder wouldn't have quite the desired resonance, so acquired the rights to OSCA. With Luca Zagato and designer Ercole Spada among its number, great things were promised. But not delivered upon. The bizarre Subaru flat-four-powered OSCA 2500GT (or Dromos) disappeared from view almost as quickly as it appeared. That's the problem with marque revivals – attempting to leach off the accomplishments of forbears will only get you so far.

For all its accomplishments in Europe and the US, this most sonorous of acronyms was always a minor player. Not that this should detract from appreciating its output. This particular example is just gorgeous, from that near-oval corporate grille to its gracefully tapered waistline. And this is no

ordinary OSCA, should such a thing exist.

Sold new to Luigi Piotti in 1954, it was one of three sports cars made with an F2-derived 1986cc straight-six. This useful Milanese amateur entered the car in that year's Mille Miglia, where he finished 20th. In 1955 it headed Stateside to John Mecom Jnr, before being moved on in rapid succession to Allard racer Roy Cherryhomes and (*the*) Jim Hall. By the early '60s the original engine had been replaced with a Chevy bent eight and the car was raced by Ron Hunter. In the late '70s, and another change of ownership, a 2.5-litre OSCA six was installed, the same unit it now runs following an extensive restoration.

Though marginally a road car (well, there's a horn), it's downright belligerent at low speeds. Just getting off the line is an effort as the clutch is either in or out. Dial in about 2000rpm and let off and it angrily stumbles away from the line. God, it's noisy. With the steering

## 'This is no ordinary OSCA, should such a thing exist'

column handily placed between the brake and clutch, the tightly spaced throttle is angled away, which makes double-declutching on the crash 'box a chore, a situation that isn't helped by the random gearshift. About half an inch of travel separates first and second with an oceanic gap to third, discovery of which is met with much joy as without any spring bias it isn't easy to find. The current custodian is considering fitting a gate, which seems a wise idea as even those with greater familiarity of this car seem to struggle.

Gearbox woes aside, though, the OSCA is skilfully realised. The steering is glorious with no kick-back over zitty topography. Delicate and never twitchy, this isn't a car that you need to brace yourself in: cornering is relatively neutral,

whether with throttle or backing out of it. This despite a relatively small wheelbase and around 216bhp (Italian marques often seasonally adjust their power outputs: OSCA downplayed them). Quite how it would handle with a Yankee boat anchor up front is a different matter. Chances are it wouldn't. And the structure feels resolute, with no scuttle shake or crashing over undulating surfaces. There's a real sense of thought here. Everything is considered and very, very beautiful.

Which is to be expected, this being a Maserati in all but name. Sort of. It might not be the most famous of small-scale Italian racing cars, but the 2000S is among the most captivating, and infinitely more enjoyable to drive than many 2-litre Ferraris of the day.

Cool. Got to the end without making any OSCA puns. Marvellous. **M**

Our thanks to Incarnation  
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