



Dennis May all set for the run at Brooklands

## Grazie, Campione!

DENNIS MAY TRIES THE ITALIAN IDEA OF A SPORTS CAR—FRANCO CORTESE'S 2.3 ALFA-ROMEO

**L**OOMING large in regulations governing most British sports car races is a thing called the *eligibility clause*. Some entrants, pursuing the twisty and wide path on which Narkover set their feet, burn many a midnight amp in thinking up ways and means of circumventing this piece of nonsense.

In Continental countries, as most readers will be aware, organisers prefer to make the clause loom quite small, on the tempt-them-not-and-they-will-not-sin principle.

It may not be generally known, however, to what extremes of elasticity the rules sometimes go. Franco Cortese, Italian sports car champion for 1938, certainly gave the writer an eye-opener when *SPEED* was privileged recently to try out the 2.3-litre unblown Alfa that won Cortese his title.

### Standard, But—

Lurani's Squadra Ambrosiana, to which he is semi-attached (Cortese drives a works' Maserati in voiturette events), bought the Alfa as standard. Next move was to call in Commendatore Jano, late of Alfas, and now with Lancias, in a consulting capacity.

Jano produced an armful of blue prints and put in some extremely thorough home-work. When Ambrosiana had finished acting on his consultations, the Alfa emerged with ventilated brakes; aluminium-alloy wheels; overall weight (including body

by "Touring") exactly equal to the original weight of the bare chassis; special valves; a new head giving a higher compression ratio; non-standard and much closer gearbox ratios on second, third and top; new position—20 cms. further back—for the engine, seats, steering wheel and everything else to match; a maximum of 180 k.p.h. at 5,000, as compared with the makers' guarantee of 150 at 4,500—and a few other points too trifling to mention.

When asked exactly what modifications one *wasn't* allowed to make in the National Sports category, Cortese gravely insisted that there were several. To over-bore an engine beyond the capacity limit for its class, for example, was asking for trouble. Nor must wheel-bases be tampered with.

Any fuel can be used in Italian sports car races: which explains why "il campione" was chary of allowing us to exceed 4,500 r.p.m. during our test, the tank having accidentally been filled up with some pump stuff of relatively low octane value. Normally, the Alfa burns Cleveland Discol on the road in England, and this makes a very tolerable substitute for the mild species of dope used when racing.

General characteristics of the car, apart from those already mentioned, can be put in a nut as follows:—

Six-cylinder motor with double

o.h.c. gear-driven at the front end, two Solex carburetter, Marelli-Bosch coil ignition, 19-gallon tank with mechanical pump driven from off-side camshaft trailing link independent front suspension, not unlike Auto-Union G.P. car but with vertical coil springs in oil-filled cylinders instead of torsion bars independent rear springing by means of swinging axles and torsion bars hydraulic and friction shock-absorber with ride-control on facia. Total weight, including fuel, oil, water and tyres, 21 cwts. 2 qrs.

### Man Proposes—

Our original plan had been to go to Brooklands from town around mid morning, clock a few flying laps standing quarters, nought-to-sixties etc., by way of appetizer, lunch, the off in all directions for an afternoon of glorious road blinding—Salisbury and back, perhaps.

In actual fact it didn't work out like that. First there was a mist, leading to polylingual and prolonged debate as to whether we should call the whole thing off. Finally decided, to the writer's great relief, to call the whole thing on; it was then or never, Cortese having booked a home-bound passage for the following day. Next the moto wouldn't start, what with unsuitable fuel and a 60-hours stand-by in a coldish garage.

Anyway, finally it *did* start, thanks to a 1 in 9 gradient and the efforts of even picked athletes.

It would be untrue to say that from that moment we never looked back. By mutual agreement, Cortese was to take the wheel from the big city to Brooklands, for unless one happens to be exceptionally un-self-conscious, traffic-clogged streets are not the best places to make the first acquaintance of somebody else's expensive and wickedly high-spirited machinery.

Anyway, it soon became obvious that our well-intentioned shouts of "cinquante kilometre leemeet" were not being taken seriously, so there seemed nothing else to do while the Alfa was spanking through gaping barnes and aghast Roehampton at cool sixties, but to keep a look-out stern for pursuing gendarmerie, if any. (The rear number plate, incidentally, inclined much more nearly to the horizontal than the vertical).

The trip to Brooklands passed uneventfully enough, except for the champion's treatment of a certain roundabout on the Kingston By-pass, which can only be described as unconventional. Our fleeting thought as Cortese entered the double turn a good 10 m.p.h. above tyre-adhesion speed, was: Well, he *ought* to know what he's about.

So it proved. The second of two four-wheel slides carried the car precisely the width of the road, no more, no less. And that, of course, is how races are won.

At the track we got to know the Alfa at first hand. If it's figures you want, disappointment is lurking in the next paragraph or two. Not only was there

this fuel snag, with its threat of burnt pistons if we'd dared to explore peak regions, but also the speedometer needle refused to budge from zero. So nought-to-sixties, as well as flat-out laps, were denied us. Our best standing quarter, however, was 18½ secs., two up.

Considering (a) that the getaway and gear-changes were made with due respect for clutch and gearbox, (b) that all efforts to bring the motor to its proper working temperature had been vain against the prevailing bitter cold, and (c) that plaintive tinklings from under the bonnet told all too plainly their tale of ordeal by detonation—taking these things into account, 18½ must surely be accounted pretty useful.

### Sitting Pretty

Now that an arrangement misleadingly described as "semi-independent" rear suspension has become all the go for road racing, one is perhaps a little inclined to wonder whether true I.R.S. is all it was cracked up to be, two and three years ago. After sampling this Alfa, the writer can say without hesitation that no other car in his ken rides the bumps with such an uncanny absence of hammer action, fore-and-aft pitch, wheel-dither and other disturbing phenomena so often brought to light by Brooklands lappery in the 101 m.p.h. region.

As a rate of travel, 101 m.p.h. is nothing to write to *The Times* about, but the facts remains that at that speed a great many modern sports cars keep both wrists pretty busy, except along the straight, and leave the customer with the feeling that his

intestines have been tied in granny knots. The two-three Alfa, having a low overall weight, would certainly deal out fairly average punishment to the forearms and abdomen if its suspension and steering were not of a high order. Even when steering a course several feet above the proper line for our speed (just to give "Klem" and partner a lensful over the Bump, bless their little Leicas), no juggling on the wheel was needed.

The mist, alas, was showing signs of thickening to mulligatawny when we finished playing out circuits, and accordingly the proposed session of road motoring had to be drastically curtailed. The swarthy campione, his complexion now chilled to hang-over green, huddled himself resignedly into the passenger seat and gave the signal to proceed.

We proceeded.

It is scarcely necessary to record, perhaps, that everything about this car, so far as it concerns the driver's comfort, visibility and nicety of control, is arranged 100 per cent to the queen's taste. The seat, to which Cortese drew particular attention with proud pointings and thumb-jabbings, is of a type used in military aircraft—luxuriously spongy to sit upon, deeper than most in the backrest and adjustable for curvature by means of cunning straps. An admirable piece of furniture.

The wheel rim just clears this morning's breakfast by a couple of inches or so, and the gear lever, although not of the remote variety, nuzzles into your palm at a moment's acquaintance. Even the writer, who stands half a head shorter than Cortese, found the whole



On the banking, despite the fog

## Speed

works apparently made to measure with the exception of one point: beyond half throttle the leg had to be stretched somewhat in order to bring the rest of the 125 b.h.p. into play. Just as well, perhaps, on a misty afternoon.

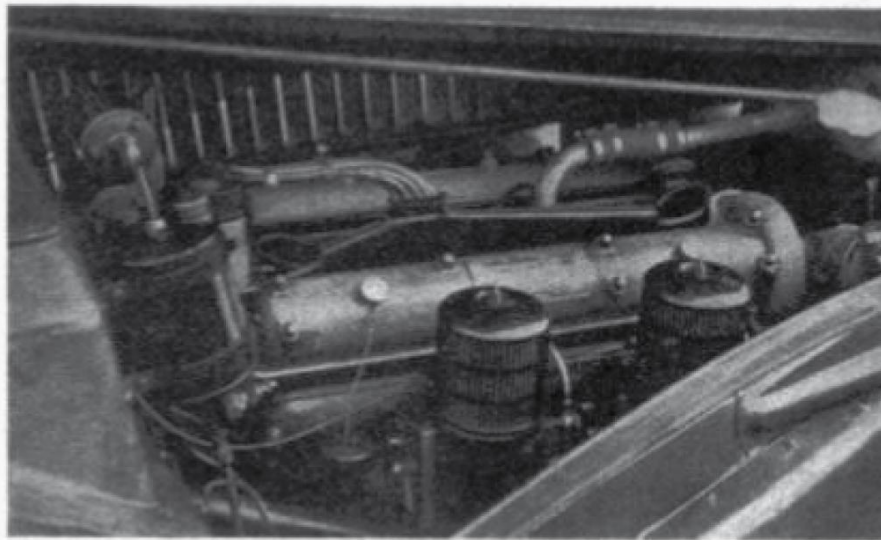
### Impressions

During a comparatively short spell of driving on the highways and byways of Surrey, we made no attempt to emulate Cortese's dry-slide cornering methods. Yet such was the Centaur-like feeling of control imparted by this glorious machine that more than once our self-discipline came perilously near the end of its tether.

No tendency to over-steering (a vice sometimes attributed to all-independently-sprung cars), was evident in any degree, and the feather-lightness of the guidance made it hard to believe that lock-to-lock was only  $1\frac{1}{2}$  turns.

The exhaust note—jovial, to say the least of it—effectively cleared the road in the absence of an operative horn; and when an occasional J-driver turned deaf ears to the Alfa's snarling approach, thereby creating the makings of a crisis, Mr. Lockheed rallied to the rescue as Mr. Lockheed will.

Here it may be added that under



A glance at the "works"

emergency braking conditions, the car kept its course in a truly extraordinary manner, quite without cajolery or assistance from the boob who had permitted an emergency to arise. This marked preference for staying straight where many a motor would explore the kerbs can surely be attributed to correctly-applied I.R.S.

Sad to reflect, is it not, that performance in the nth degree, as the

engineers of Milan underest apparently has no appeal the for the monied young men of Savage acceleration, breathless racing-car cornering qualification enough if your school plexion can stand the lash honest wind—these are the you must import from abroad

Thanks, Franco Cortese, for that won't be forgotten yet a

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