

1948 CISITALIA 202 SMM NUVOLARI

The greatest 1100 ever built?

BY ROBERT T. DEVLIN & MICHAEL T. LYNCH
PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM

AT THE END of World War II, Italy was a defeated country whose everyday life was decided by occupying forces. Despite the grinding hardship of postwar readjustment, the Italian character still craved motorsports. That passion, combined with the inventiveness of the Italian people, was obvious in the first postwar Mille Miglia, in 1947, with no fewer than 254 entries. (But only 151 starters—it may be mentioned that a set of five tires was made available to each entrant, even if not a starter, at the stated ration price rather than the prevailing black-market price.)

The Italian motoring press devoted much space to two new marques, both founded by strong personalities whose wartime machine-tool businesses now provided substantial industrial capacity. Enzo Ferrari needs no introduction here; the other man was Piero Dusio.

Dusio was a well-to-do promoter who owned the Juventus soccer club and various industrial enterprises. He was heavily involved in motorsports and had backed an independent Grand Prix team before the war. As an amateur driver, his greatest achievement was a 3rd place in the 1938 Mille Miglia, driving an Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B.

In 1944 Dusio had employed Dante Giacosa, a high-ranking Fiat engineer who had designed the Topolino, to moonlight on the design of a production-based racing *voiturette* to be used after the war. His offer to Giacosa included living quarters and studio in the Dusio villa in Turin; this was very appealing to the engineer, who had



NUVOLARI BRONZE BY LAWRENCE BRAUN; PHOTO BY BRIAN BLADES

been bombed out of his home in 1942.

Giacosa began drawings of a car based on easily obtainable Fiat 500 and 1100 parts. His inspiration came from American midjet racers. Dusio's several companies, operating under the name Cisitalia (Compagnia Industriale Sportiva Italia), included an assembly area in Turin where the company built bicycles under the Beltrame trademark. Because of the availability of the bicycle tubing and the artisans who knew how to weld it, Giacosa's aeronautical background led him to design one of the first spaceframes.

As the drawings neared completion, Giacosa brought in another Fiat engineer, Giovanni Savonuzzi, who had worked with him at Fiat's aero engine division, to supervise the testing and set up the assembly shop. The shop was completed while the Germans were still passing through.

When the first postwar Italian race was held in Valentino Park, Turin, in August 1946, seven of the Cisitalia single-seaters were ready. They were

called project 201 or D46 (Dusio, 1946). The cars were driven by Tazio Nuvolari, Raymond Sommer, Franco Cortese, Louis Chiron, Clemente Biondetti, Cisitalia's competitions director Piero Taruffi and the patron himself. The Cisitalias dominated the race and Dusio won.

Giacosa returned to Fiat but not before he had done concept drawings for a 2-seat version of the 201, the 202. Significantly, Savonuzzi remained. As he had with the D46, Savonuzzi refined the concept and did the working drawings. The first two 202s were competition berlinettas and the third was the first Spyder Mille Miglia, or SMM. →

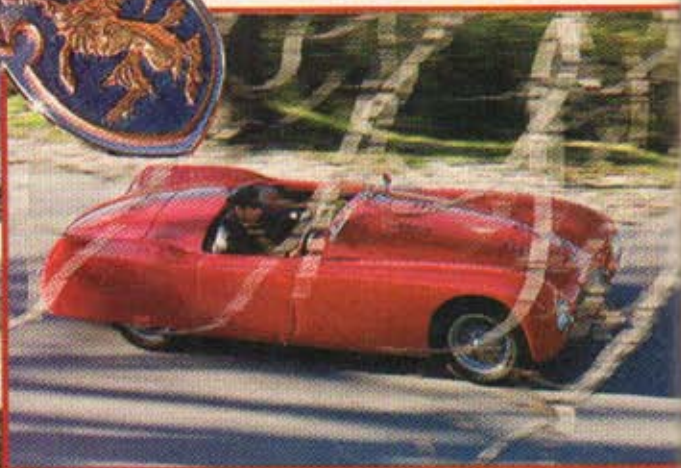


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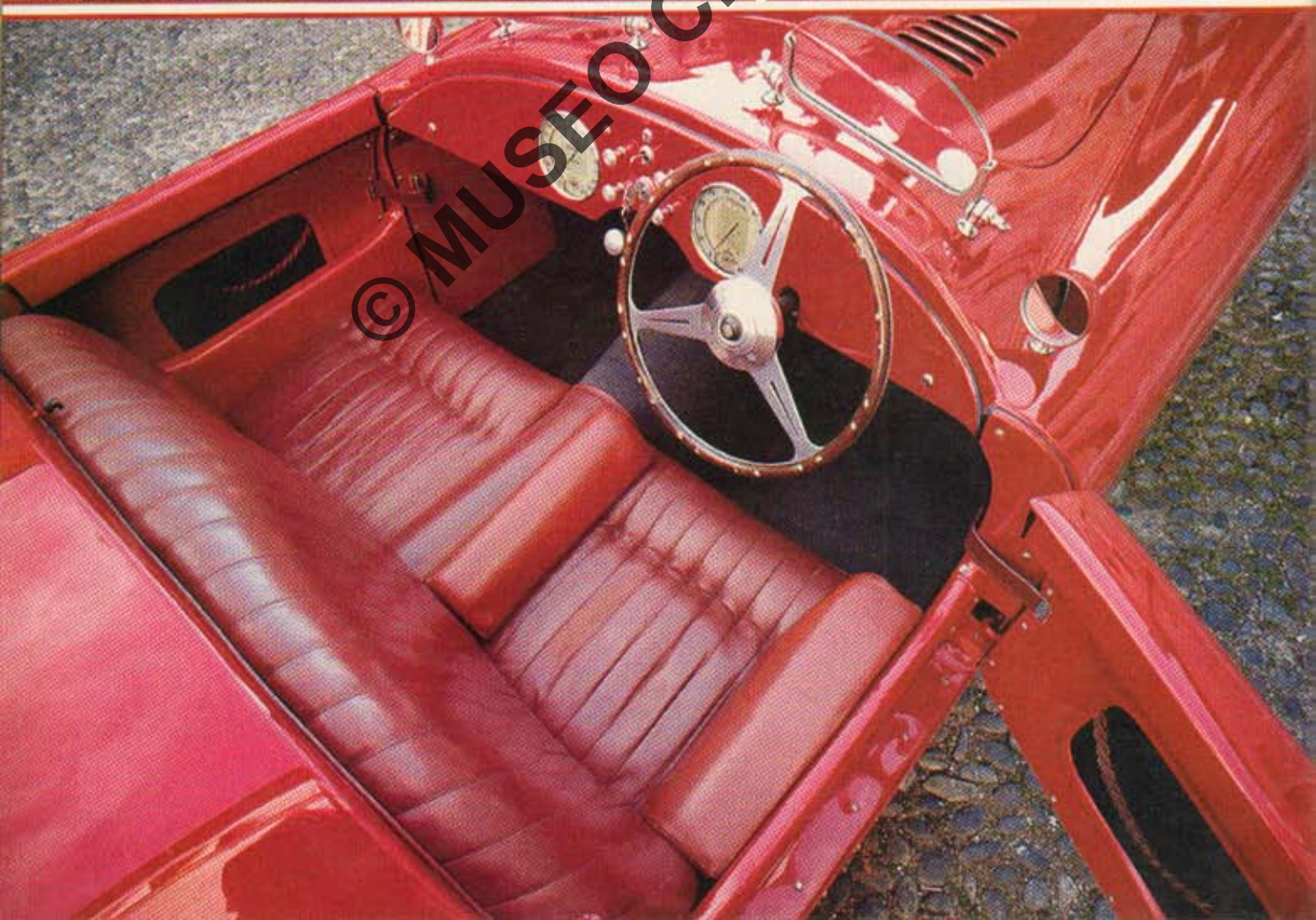
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Cisitalia



Savonuzzi combined an aeronautical engineer's concern for the passage of air over the car with an artist's appreciation of form.



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Like the D46, it had a tubular frame and Topolino-based transverse-leaf front suspension. The original three or four roadsters were completed with bodies by Garelli and the later series by Stabilimenti Farina.

Today the only Cisitalia most enthusiasts are familiar with is the production 202 coupe, the car generally cited as the progenitor of all Italian design for the 25 years after WWII. Credit for this design is given almost completely to Battista Pinin Farina. A review of Savonuzzi's original drawings for a spyder and a coupe reveal that Pinin Farina's work was essentially a revision and detailing of the theme created by Savonuzzi. Certainly the front of the production car was directly inspired by the second and third of his competition berlinettas (001 CMM and 002 CMM). Savonuzzi was exceptional in that he combined an aeronautical engineer's concern for the passage of air over the car with an artist's appreciation of form. How he faded into the mists of history while Farina devoted major portions of his autobiography to the creation of the 202 emphasizes the necessity of self-promotion in contemporary art.

The engine of the Cisitalia was a Fiat 508C MM-1100S, extensively modified to bring the horsepower from 32 to 60. Being in the machine tool business, with Fiat engineers on staff, Cisitalia put a great deal of effort into the motors. Working from the standard block, the engineers left practically no major part untouched. A billet crank with bearings of increased width and diameter was installed, carrying machined and polished rods. A modified gear-driven camshaft with dual valve springs was used as was a dry-sump system that allowed the engine to be mounted lower. The Marelli magneto, water pump and generator were all gear-driven to avoid troublesome belts. The mechanical detailing was nothing short of exquisite. As an example, there was a device that ratcheted the oil-filter screen in the sump each time the clutch was engaged, to keep the screen free of debris.

The Mille Miglia (One Thousand Miles) was the last of the great city-to-city races to survive into the modern era. It was run 24 times between 1927 and 1957. The course began and ended on the Viale Venezia (Rebuffone) in Brescia and covered public roads to Rome and back. It was said then that one remembers only the car that won Le Mans, but one always remembers the driver who won the Mille Miglia.

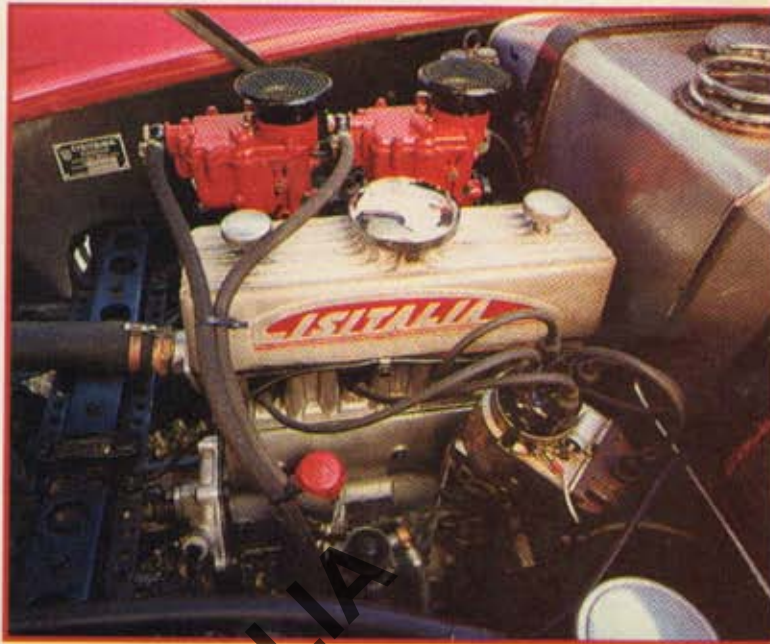
In 1947 the great Nuvolari was 54 and ill with respiratory problems. He began his mental preparation for the first post-war Mille Miglia by going to a *pensione* run by monks in Barbarano di Salò on Lake Garda. It was there that Ing Savonuzzi personally delivered the Cisitalia SMM (001) that Nuvolari was to race. After having driven cars with over 400 bhp, Nuvolari was not impressed. His laconic comment to Savonuzzi was, "Well, it's nothing to write home about. I'll win anyway."

It seemed that all of Italy lined the roads for the 1947 race. Cisitalia entered two coupes and three roadsters. Dusio drove one of the roadsters himself; it was called the *Razzo* (Rocket) because it had been shortened, lightened and had a more powerful engine. But that day it was Nuvolari who made the reputation of the fledgling Cisitalia company.

Nuvolari left Brescia at 1 hour and 56 minutes after midnight. When he arrived in Rome at 8:30, he was leading the race by 7 minutes. At that checkpoint, the crowds engulfed his car. Because he kept an apartment in Rome, Nuvolari was not only Italy's greatest driver but also a Roman.

Those not at roadside stayed by their radios to hear whether Nuvolari could beat the superstition: "He who leads at Rome never leads at Brescia." The 2nd-place car at Rome was Biondetti's 8C 2900B coupe, running without a supercharger to comply with that year's regulations but still producing twice the Cisitalia's power. Even more important, the closed bodywork kept the driver out of the elements.

Near Turin, there was a deluge and Nuvolari's engine →





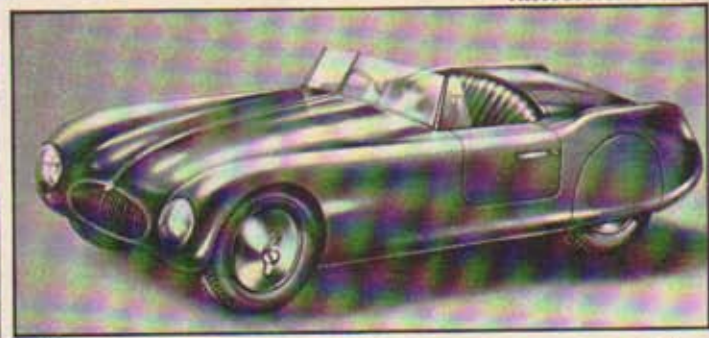
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Above, Savonuzzi's flamboyant CMM berlinetta (from a Cisitalia brochure); upper right, his initial rendering for the Nuvolari Spyder; below that, il Razzo, the lightweight version, with photographer Corrado Millanta on the other side of the lens for a change; bottom, some examples of the ecstatic Mille Miglia press.

drowned. His riding mechanic, Francesco Carena, misdiagnosed a simple electrical fault, but they got going again, braving the weather in the open car. The mythology of Nuvolari will always make the time they lost at roadside more than Biondetti's margin of victory, which was just under 16 minutes. Nuvolari was 2nd, two other Cisitalias 3rd and 4th. But *Il Maestro's* effort was one of his greatest and Cisitalia entered the pantheon of Italian motorsports. For the second, Stabilimenti Farina-built series of spyders, Dusio obtained permission to use the name Spyder Nuvolari.

John de Boer, compiler of a delightful précis called *The Registry of Italian Oddities*, says his best figures indicate that 21 SMM roadsters were built. An additional six roadsters, although similar in all respects, were designated by chassis plate as standard 202s with MM motors. The Salon car chassis 106,

is one of the latter group.

Built in January 1948, it was raced in local Italian events by its first owner through 1949. Apparently it languished for a number of years until discovered on a farm near Bologna in 1976, complete but not running. Nino Balestra, president of the International Cisitalia Club and at one time or another the owner of every significant Cisitalia model, bought it and began a 2-year restoration. The mechanical work was done by Granzoso and the renewed carrozzeria by Sartore, both shops in the Vicenza area.

The Mille Miglia survives today, in spirit, as a rally for cars that were built during the era of the original race. In the 60th-anniversary event in 1987, eight of the 294 entries were Cisitalias. The Salon car was entered officially by Piero Dusio's son Carlo, and Balestra was his co-pilot. 