

VIEWS & REVIEWS

A Field Guide To the Sports Cars

TOM ARMSTRONG

OUR HARBOR cities, hosts and havens to the argosies of the world, are more exposed than inland towns to alien wares and foreign ideas. Venturesome traders shuttle the seas to bring us amphorae of myrrh, coffers of jewels, and caddies of tea from exotic quays, as well as strange tales of customs in faraway places. This accounts for our having a Phoenician alphabet, and explains why Tyre and Sidon and Westport are what they are.

Along our teeming seacoasts in the last decade a little band of motorists, enlightened by familiarity with cargoes of sports cars, have become dissenters, apostates to the gospel according to General Motors.

We all know people who would welcome a Buick to their stables, but one cannot expect to find a sports-car man among them. The aficionado cannot be enticed into such a circus float without feeling soiled. He resents the wanton use of chromium as much as he shudders at the tail fins, the grotesquely convoluted bumpers, and other "dishonest" lines. He blanches at the enormous bustle that adds weight and useless space, drags on ramps and curbstones, and complicates the process of parking even in the car's own garage. The attitude of the owner of a Detroit product is reflected in the efforts of manufacturers to "take the drive out of driving." The sports-car addict regards

this stand as outrageous. His interest in a car, he is forever telling himself and other captive listeners, lies in the fun of driving it, in "sensing its alertness on the road," and in "pampering it as a thoroughbred."

A prospective buyer is urged not to spend the extra pennies per pound for a sports car unless he is just plain crazy about driving. A sports car is a high-strung instrument sufficiently endowed to obey its master's slightest indication of a whim. Sports cars are classified as "competition," "dual-purpose," and "touring." In races and rallies, competition and dual-purpose cars are graded into as many as ten classes according to the combined swept volume (displacement) of all the cylinders. In other words, according to the size of the tin cans where the gas blows up. In European cars displacement is measured in liters—a liter is a little more than a quart—or in cubic centimeters, a thousand cubic centimeters to a liter. The displacement of American cars is described, unfortunately, in cubic inches. To speak of a 2.5-liter Maserati presents a familiar picture of two quarts and a pint, but to say "a 368-cubic-inch Mercury" doesn't present a picture of anything. No wonder we don't know what goes on under the hood.

SINCE their market is limited, sports cars are not advertised in the Madison Avenue tradition of media

saturation, but rely on the cars and their drivers to create demand. Many an aspiring young man who feels his importance inadequately recognized makes the interesting discovery that for the price of a Ford he can acquire the exalted status symbol of an M.G. A, which will convey him into the fellowship of princes and sybarites, the worldly-wise and successful—people like himself. Of course this society is somewhat admixed with gate crashers whose motivation is obviously insecurity, but what party isn't nowadays?

How to Tell an Owner

Distinguished by a tight little cap over an unwrinkled brow, the owner of a sports car is usually a debonair gentleman in his thirties or forties—as a rule one can't afford such a car earlier. Urbane and convivial, he is happiest thumbing through copies of *Motor Sport* (British, of course) while hobnobbing with his friends at R. Gordon's bookshop on New York's East Fifty-ninth Street, a meeting place cunningly laid out in the dimensions of an M.G. He may often be found dining at Le Chantclair, another midtown rendezvous for sports-car buffs, making pejorative remarks about a Pontiac he knows, discussing the suspension of a D-type Jaguar ("rather more than adequate"), and referring to the late Alfonso Cabeza de Vaca, seventeenth Marqués de Portago, as "Fons." It's not often one finds such appreciation for Togetherness outside the offices of *McCall's*. When alone, he often likes to tinker with the throttle linkage and other intimate parts of his machine. Although his mount is almost always too lethal for his amateur driving skill, he is constantly seeking to increase its power-weight ratio and augment its acceleration, even if it means a new engine, or a new job.

His sports car appears to have been designed to run under a cow. It is so low the driver on a gravel road risks cutaneous abrasion if his tires lose any air. Once he has climbed into the cockpit, a fascinating process to watch, he may find it somewhat cramped. Over the hood he gets a hippo's-eye view of the road. To atone for this he can reach out and strike a match on it.

Properly installed, he becomes

part of the machine, eager to challenge its heady dynamics, "go through the gears," and test his skill in downshifting. Like the car, he expresses the tempo and aesthetics of our time, and considers himself a concise understatement of disciplined sophistication, a sleek symbol of movement entitled to look down on people from below. No matter what his mount, he is in the orbit of the great marques (makes and types), Lancia Dilambda, Mercedes-Benz, and Bugatti; he shares the world of Juan Manuel Fangio, Sterling Moss, and the immortal Tazio Nuvolari, who have raced in such classics as the Mille Miglia, Le Mans, and latterly Sebring. American family-sedan drivers may regard him with the suspicion reserved for the faintly subversive and those out of touch with the *Saturday Evening Post*, but he rests happy in the conviction that his car was built to the exacting specifications of an engineer working without reference to the taste of middle-class housewives.

Where Germany Has Beaten Us

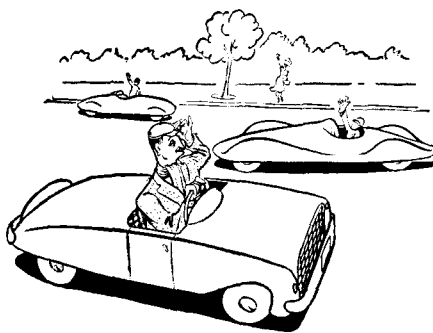
The national characteristics of a people are reflected in the sports cars they make. American attempts to make an acceptable sports car since the Great Depression have largely foundered on the shoals of comfort and convenience. Earlier we produced such distinguished makes as Mercer, Stutz, Duesenberg, and, as late as the middle 1930's, the front-drive Cord. The postwar Cunningham was a sports car of the purest line, but it was strictly "competition" and priced beyond the purse of those without a tax loophole. The Nash-Healey used American mechanical parts, but the chassis was English, the body of Italian design. The Ford Thunderbird is a fine car that has borrowed many sports-car features, but it is not a sports car. Only since the twelve-hour race at Sebring, Florida, this March has the Chevrolet Corvette been recognized as a true sports car, though it makes some concessions to comfort which the *cognoscenti* deplore. Priced at a little over \$3,000 in standard form, it promises to bring new directions to the conservative American production line.

Mature and careful, the German

driver is the best on the Continent, and German cars are among the most carefully built. Fifteen out of every hundred workmen at the Daimler-Benz factory at Stuttgart are inspectors. Their product is the great Mercedes-Benz, whose parentage dates from the smoky dawn of the automotive age.

The two rear-engine phenomena of German motors are the Porsche and the Volkswagen. Three-fourths of all Porsches are sold in America, and Volkswagen outsells any other foreign import in any country to which it is introduced. It may be used competitively in rallies, but its enormous popularity reveals a strong demand even in America for an inexpensive car, long on gas mileage, that doesn't need 125 or so square feet of parking space on Main Street, plus room for maneuvering.

Other German sports cars are the DKW, with front-wheel drive, and the BMW, which has recently foaled a Something in the form of a pumpkin on tiny wheels driven by a motorcycle engine. The two rear wheels are very close together, and the entire front of the car opens for entrance and exit. This is the BMW Isetta 300, and it can hardly be



called a sports car. It is more likely a biological sport, a deviation from the norm. Still, it is beginning to be seen on respectable streets, to the bristling astonishment of Cadillacs and Imperials.

The Racing Latins

The French they are a racy race, but they produce remarkably few sports cars. Simca, backed by Ford, is popular in California. The Renault Dauphine, which is beginning to sell well in this country, is more properly a passenger car. Talbot produces only about a hundred cars a year,

and Bugatti, whose prewar achievements gave it a towering reputation in sports-car circles, makes hardly any at all.

French drivers are abandoned and volatile, with little respect for rules or red lights. When Paris outlawed honking in the interest of national sanity in 1954, drivers were outraged. Now that gasoline has gone up to ninety cents a continental gallon, the government has fallen.

EVEN more so than the French Italians are wild and dangerous drivers. Ordinary Italian drivers—those who survive—handle their little cars nimbly, but are the most immature showoffs, the most reckless and happy-go-lucky motorists still on earth. Not only the cars but likewise the pedestrians and the myriads of scooterers dodging about like mosquitoes in a hailstorm all assume that the middle of the road is theirs.

In Italy comparatively few people own cars, but everyone is fascinated by them. The Mille Miglia, a thousand-mile circuit from Brescia to Rome and back, is run in places at 170 miles an hour down roads lined with millions of screaming addicts, all expecting to see something happen. They are more frequently killed than disappointed. The recent slaughter involving the Marqués de Portago, his co-driver, and fifteen spectators put an end to Italian road racing for a while. But don't be surprised to see the Mille Miglia run again next year. In the twenty-four-hour race at Le Mans, France, in 1955 an errant Mercedes killed eighty-three people, and the race was canceled for the following year. But the track was improved and certain requirements were made to separate Le Mans from le boys, and the race was held on schedule in 1956, and will probably attract more people than ever this month. Maybe it's the wine.

Italian cars are built for show, for speed, and for lightning handling. They are the most beautiful cars made in the aerodynamic tradition. The great coachwork on the Maserati, the Alfa Romeo, the Lancia, Ferrari, Osca, and Siata is built by craftsmen like Pinin Farina, Alfredo Vignale, Felice Boano, Viotti, Zagato, Alemanno, Ghia, Bertone, Scaglietti, and Abarth, who are

the Leonardos and Michelangelos of a special and limited Renaissance in northern Italy. The sale of such marques as the Ferrari and Maserati depends directly on their winning races, and they win a great many. On the whole, however, Italian cars do not hold up as well as English or German sports cars of the same class.

The Ambassadorial Jaguar

The English, even when not oppressed by sustained periods of austerity, are accustomed to dreary weather, cold houses, unpalatable food, narrow and shoulderless roads, and slow, congested traffic. It is their national pride to counter these irritants not by correcting them wherever possible but by building in each English breast a capacity to endure them. The British driver, patient and polite, constantly meets temptations and frustrations that would corrupt a saint of any other nationality. In *Bucking the Odds*, *Playing the Game*, and *Muddling Through*, an Englishman follows the constant stars of *Hardiness*, *Fortitude*, and *Pluck*.

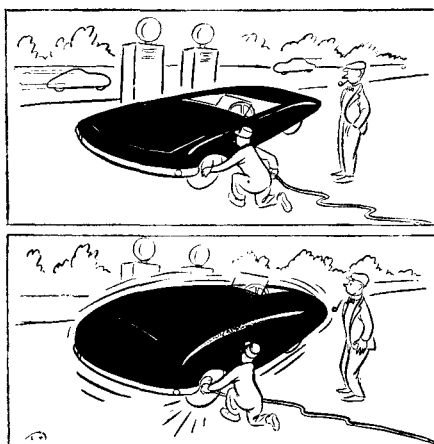
The British sports car demands these qualities in its driver. Although some of the newer marques have made compromises to attract the decadent American market, the open competitive models provide such a "feel of the road" and a taste of the weather that after a long drive on a country road in a blizzard, such as one undertakes in various rallies, the exhilarated driver may best be extricated by a block and tackle.

The leading British exports in the field of sports cars are the M.G. (for Morris Garages), the Jaguar, and the Austin-Healey. The M.G. TC of the late 1940's is credited with making postwar America conscious of the sports-car world by virtue of its famous "classic" lines as well as its easy handling qualities. A "classic" car is one articulated like a cricket. Headlamps, fenders, bumpers, radiator, and often horns and exhaust manifolds express their functional integrity, distinct from other parts; yet each unit contributes to the over-all character of the car, a wiry, masculine machine. In contrast, the aerodynamic car has the lines of a "classic" model that has been left out all night in a snow-

storm. Every effort has been made to make the aerodynamic body appear to be molded from one piece of material.

The most recent M.G., the A, very much resembles its sibling, the Austin-Healey—both are now made by the British Motors Corporation—although it sells for some \$800 less.

We can gauge the Jaguar's importance in the British economy by the aftermath of the fire which



on February 12 destroyed the final-assembly section of the Jaguar plant in Coventry. Although the output of cars is tiny by Detroit standards, three out of four Jaguars are exported and bring in more dollars than any other English automobile. The loss provoked a small national crisis, which must have overstuffed the Prime Minister's portfolio of national crises and slowed the upgrading of the pound sterling.

The American owner of a Jaguar not only bolsters England's economy but is blithely conscious of paying homage to the British way of life. He becomes a mobile part of what is forever England. As such, no matter what his previous national prejudices, he is likely to side with Macmillan in controversies regarding the Middle East, and is more conversant than usual with doings at Whitehall and Mayfair. In addition, he takes pride in moving about the world in no more comfort than Drake or Raleigh or even Sir Launcelot enjoyed. As in most competition and dual-purpose cars, he sits with his legs straight out in front of him, as though he were sliding down a chute. This attitude is not uncomfortable for the first fifteen minutes, but soon, just as he

becomes acutely aware that he cannot possibly shift his position, his knees begin to lock and he must ride out the rest of his journey fascinated by the progressive calcification of his joints. He has compensation for this torture in the lightning response of his engine, brakes, and steering mechanism, and the knowledge that he is master of a solid product of British craftsmanship.

In the best sports-car tradition, the Jaguar XK-140 is a dual-purpose car, and one of its unwritten requirements for its proper ownership is that the driver and his wife have both sensible dimensions and irrational enthusiasm. Not more than two children, small, quiet, and hardy, are indicated.

The completely "competition" member of the clan is the D-Jaguar. It looks like hot cheese poured over a roller skate. No children.

BRITAIN produces several other marques designed to distinguish themselves from the iron-and-chrome ruck. Some six thousand Americans own Austin-Healeys, and the Triumph, which has been in production less than four years as a sports car, is widely distributed. The A.C., the Aston Martin DB2-4, the Arnolt-Bristol, and the Morgan are admired imports. Morgan, founded in 1910, built a three-wheeled sports car till 1951, supplementing it with a four-wheeler in the mid-1930's. The modestly priced and powered current model, the Morgan Plus Four, retains the rakish lines of vintage sports cars. Among strictly competition models are the Allard, fitted with American or Jaguar engines, and the hand-built Frazer-Nash.

For the price of a house one can get a Bentley, which carries many sports-car refinements, and at the additional cost of a powder room one may have a Rolls-Royce, venerated for half a century as "the best car in the world." This phrase is always intoned, hat in hand, as though it were a verse in the Book of Common Prayer, and no one would think of challenging it for fear of starting a third world war. There is something awesome and creepy about it. An everyday Ford owner is left with the distinct impression that the Rolls-Royce is indeed created by Hand, but that the Hand is not mortal.

Little Theaters Become Big Business

GERALD WEALES

"I WILL talk to you. I really will talk to you." The speaker was Irwin Stahl, one of the landlords of the Theatre Marquee, a new off-Broadway playhouse fashioned out of a walk-up apartment-studio on Fifty-ninth Street near Lexington Avenue. The time was a day or two before the opening of the new theater's first tenant, a trilogy of Greek plays that has since come and gone.

The emphasis and the implied doubt of Stahl's repeated protestation arose from the fact that he was bustlingly preoccupied with laying strips of carpeting in the lobby of what he hoped would look like the "New Luxurious Off-Broadway Theatre" that advertisements in the *Times* had been hailing for days. He darted from his carpet to me, giving it consoling tugs and me tidbits of information—for instance, that the place was redolent with tradition. Either Isadora Duncan or Ruth St. Denis had had her home and salon there, but he was never certain which. In either case, the tradition was there. "We want to do classical theater and European," he said, looking up for a second from his rug. "Of course, a brilliant American." Another tug at the carpet. "No realism." There was realism of a sort, as it turned out, for the new management, like so many off-Broadway theater owners these days, was simply renting the space to the Greek venture. I left the nervous landlord deciding to take up the carpet strips and put them down the other way around.

Down in the Village

The Theatre Marquee is an example of the mushrooming growth of off-Broadway activity that has been in evidence for the last five years. It is not typical, however. A movement that is so scattered, so ingenious in seeking out empty halls, abandoned night clubs, forgotten auditoriums,

and unrented stores and converting them into little theaters, cannot be typified by a single case. Although for the most part the off-Broadway theaters are bunched into two clusters—one in Greenwich Village, the other off lower Second Avenue—new ventures are likely to spring into life in any part of Manhattan.

The heart of the Village group is the Circle in the Square, a revamped night club that has been playing Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* to full houses for more than a year. The seats which line three sides of the stage—once the dance floor—are uncomfortable and too close together and the visibility in the inexpensive ones is poor, but the quality of the performances is such that the customers keep coming. The theater, as its name implies, is right at Sheridan Square and its presence has been felt there. A drugstore across the street that caters to the Circle's audiences during intermissions has built a tremendous stock of the more intellectual of the paperback books



which it bills enthusiastically if inaccurately (see Brentano's) as "The most ambitious collection anywhere."

The other star of the Village theaters is the Theatre de Lys on Christopher Street, where Brecht and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* is well into its third year. The de Lys is the happy residue of a noble experiment that foundered a few years

ago. A young impresario came out of the West—William de Lys of Denver—and organized a group of small investors to convert the old Hudson movie theater into a suitable home for a projected repertory group. The project collapsed after the first few productions, but the pleasant little theater passed into other hands and has been busy ever since.

Among the many other theaters in the neighborhood are three that have been active for years. The renowned Provincetown Playhouse has sat quietly and relatively unchanged for years, while most of the stores along Macdougall have become fashionable coffeehouses and the New York University Law School has taken over across the street. The Cherry Lane, at the center of the arc of Commerce Street that runs from the Edna St. Vincent Millay house to the Blue Mill Tavern, which within living memory was known for its dollar steaks, underwent a face lifting recently. Before the successful production of Sean O'Casey's *The Purple Dust* moved in, the floor was canted to improve visibility (in all except the last few rows) and the theater acquired a smart yellow curtain and a bright exterior. In its new prosperity it is offering limousine service to its patrons—to and from the nearest subway stop. The Greenwich Mews is still busy in the basement of the Village Presbyterian Church and the Brotherhood Synagogue (the same building; different hours) on West Thirteenth Street.

Of the recently opened theaters in the Village, the most impressive is the Renata on Bleecker Street, a lush playhouse in the building that was Old Mori's Restaurant in the 1920's and has been a Moose Hall in recent years. The handsome bar in the lounge and the huge unused ice-box near the dressing rooms in the basement testify to the Renata's ancestry.

THE PHOENIX THEATRE at Second Avenue and Twelfth Street is not legally off Broadway, since Actors Equity demands uptown contracts of any theater that seats more than three hundred people. It is, however, responsible for the upsurge of English-language playhouses in the old Yiddish-theater