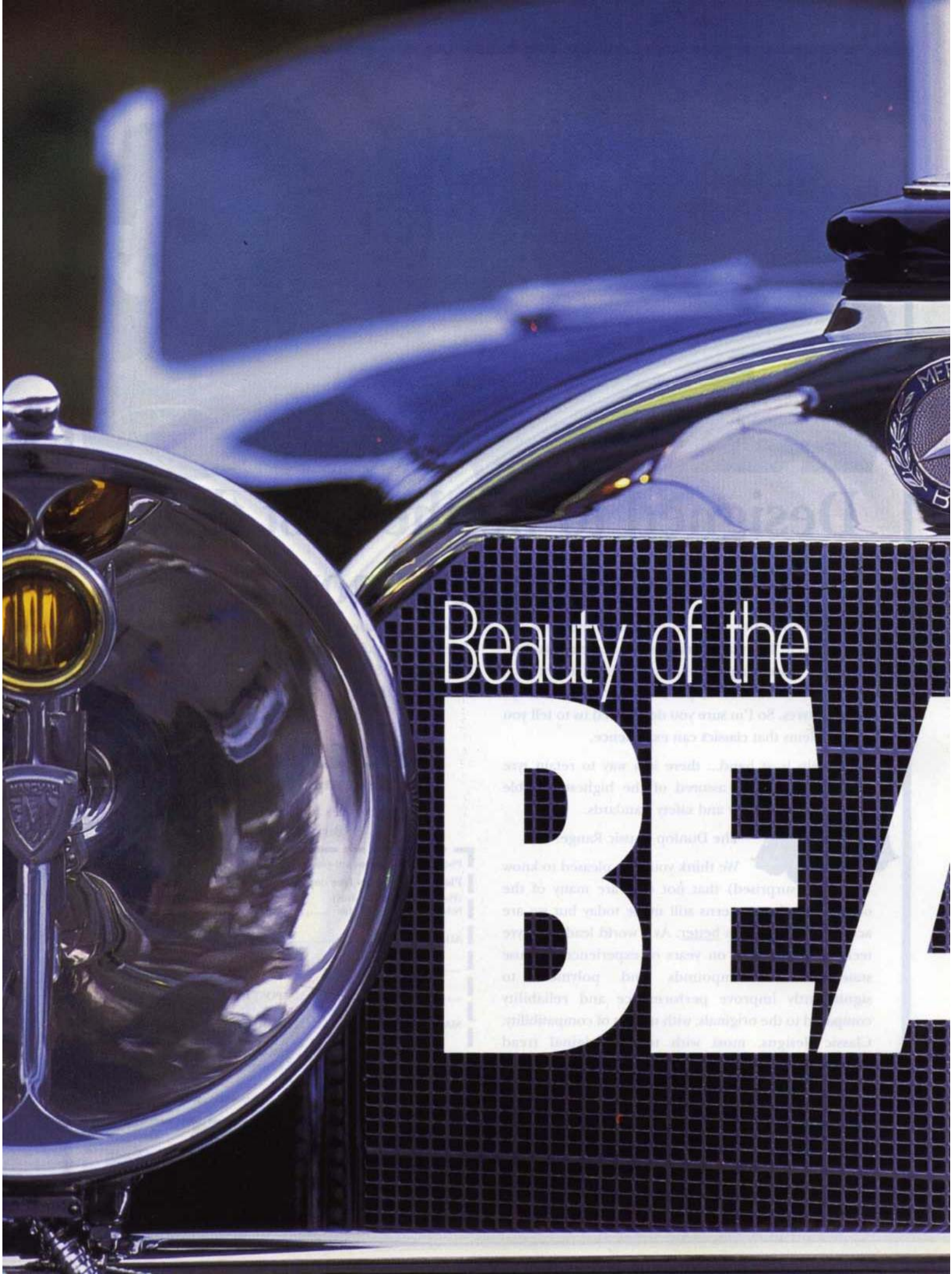
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Awesome in action, breathtaking to behold – **Mark Gillies** bags a drive in a truly historic Mercedes SSK

'THE SOUNDTRACK IS WAGNERIAN

Ever seen a Mercedes S, SS or SSK in action?

YOU'LL HAVE BEEN CAPTIVATED BY THE screech of their superchargers and the bellow of their exhausts, by their sheer physical presence and their wonderfully rakish lines. Big and brutish, they're the German equivalent of Vintage Bentleys, their most serious rival in sports-car racing in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

But how good are they to drive? I'm about to find out. Sitting in front of me is the most spectacular-looking and probably the best-preserved example of Germany's finest sports car of the late 1920s. Mercedes-Benz SSK chassis 36038 is not only forever linked with the great Italian racing driver Count Felice Trossi, but the car has been restored so beautifully – by Paul Russell and Co of Essex, Massachusetts, USA – that it won Best of Show at the 1993 Pebble Beach concours, the most glittering old-car event in the world.

What a wonderful sight. Most SSK Mercedes came out of the factory wearing skimpy two-seater bodywork, with cycle-type wings and their spare tyres perched on the body's rear deck. But this one has a flowing tail and wings, and the aggressively raked lines of a masterpiece from Touring or Zagato. The shape reduces the car's massive size and has a compelling beauty, despite the slightly odd juxtaposition of voluminous front wings and tall, proud V-radiator.

This remarkable car's shape had nothing to do with some exalted styling house, though. Instead it was the combined effort of Trossi and an unknown British coachbuilder, Willie White, whose panel-bending skills made Trossi's vision into metal. Cleverly, he extended the bonnet sides to align with the racey V-windshield, and lowered the line of bonnet and radiator to give a more elegant look. The steel wings are glorious pontoon affairs that look as spectacular in plan view as in profile. Some of White's detailing was gorgeous, too: the way that the rear wings and tail have matching spines; the rear wing spats bearing Mercedes three-pointed star motifs; and the sculpted panelling over the dumb irons.

The car's condition is outstanding. The black paintwork is lustrous, the charcoal leather trim is unmarked, and the chrome gleams with flawless perfection. Burnished copper brake drums, better to aid heat dissipation, gleam behind the black-painted wheels shod with 6.00/6.50 Michelin tyres on 18in diameter rims, smaller than standard SSK fare. This Mercedes looks almost too good to drive, but that's why I'm here.

Though it occupies almost as much road space as a modern S-class Mercedes, there's space for just two in the SSK's cramped cabin. There are no doors, so it takes athleticism to get in. Once ensconced, you sit high relative to the bodywork and view the world over a bonnet that could pass for the foredeck of a reasonably sized boat.

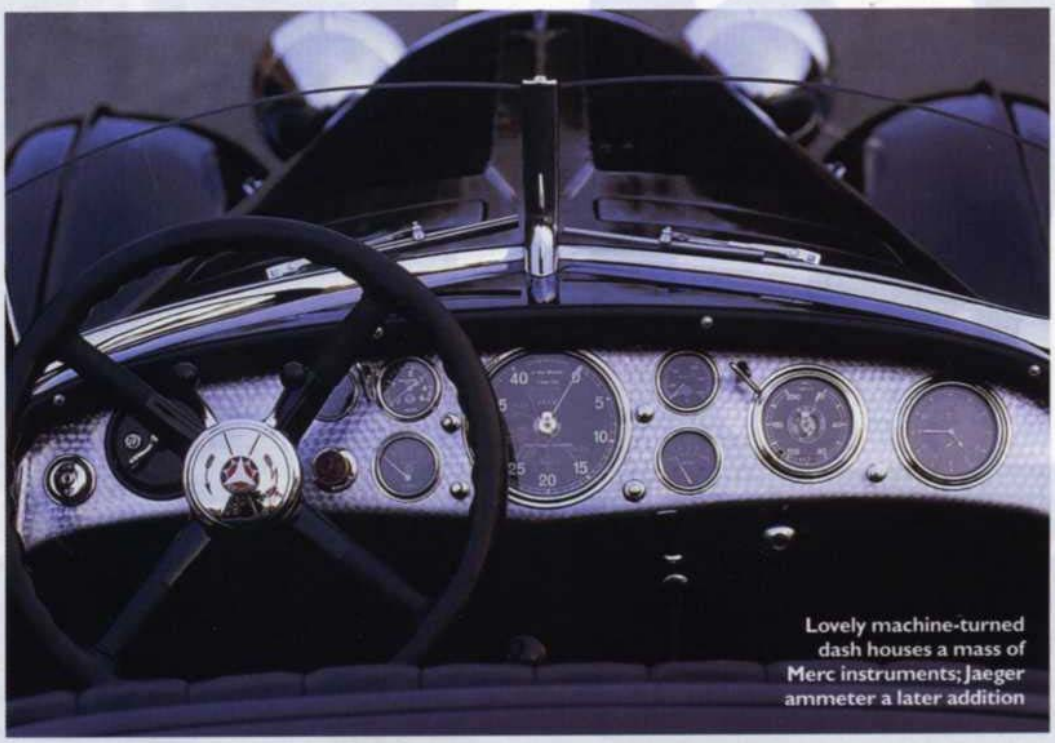
The machine-turned instrument panel houses a mass of dials: most are Mercedes white-on-black items, but the Jaeger ammeter is almost certainly a Willie White addition. Most gauges are self-explanatory, but an extra one for fuel pressure is for starting by a hand pump. A little knob labelled 'ATHMOS' next to the steering column primes the fuel system for cold starting. The huge tachometer has hand-written markings all over it, courtesy of Trossi, who conveniently worked out the speeds in the gears: at 4000rpm in top, beyond the normal safe rev limit of 3500rpm, the car is theoretically geared for 154mph.

The driving position is slightly odd. You sit straight-backed and close to that outsized wheel, with your legs bent in order to operate the pedals. The gearlever, large enough to be a medieval knight's sword, sprouts alongside the chromed handbrake. The gate is laid out on a conventional 'H' with first up and towards you; reverse is engaged by lifting the lever up and over to your left. To the right of the shift is a little chromed knob that operates the exhaust cut-out, and a

Plate recalls Italian GP driver ownership

Glittering prize: car a winner, Pebble Beach

Merc the size of a modern S-class, yet space for two only


Lovely machine-turned dash houses a mass of Merc instruments; Jaeger ammeter a later addition

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTYN GODDARD

IN ITS DRAMA BUT IT'S NOT SOUND WITHOUT FURY'

little button hidden away to your left, by the dash's extremity, works the high/low beam.

Even by Vintage-car standards the starting drill is complicated. Flick the switch on the chromed panel to the left of the steering wheel to 'BM' (Battery/Magneto), turn the ignition key 'on', then play around with the levers on either side of the steering-wheel boss. Check that the right-hand one for the ignition advance and retard is fully retarded, that the hand-throttle on the left side is closed, stroke the hand pump under the dash a few times to ensure that some fuel pressure is registering on the gauge, caress the throttle pedal and press the starter button. If you've got everything right, the mighty engine fires up with a rumbustious bellow, a screech from the supercharger and a coating of fuel-rich black smoke from the exhaust.

It's one hell of an engine. Monstrous in size, it fully occupies the space under that huge bonnet. This 7069cc unit has six cylinders of 100mm bore and 150mm stroke. The lengthy crankshaft runs in four main bearings, and the two valves per cylinder are operated by a single overhead camshaft which is driven off the rear of the crank via a vertical shaft and gears. A Roots-type supercharger is driven off the nose of the crank, and blows through the twin carburettors – most superchargers suck air/fuel mixture from the carbs. There are twin plugs per cylinder, fired by a magneto and a coil and distributor.

This particular car is fitted with one of the rare 'elephant' blowers – mainly used on the firm's racing cars – which is 317mm tall rather than the standard car's 283mm, with an inlet port of 70mm x 111mm instead of 64 x 107. It also blows at around 12psi, against the normal SSK's 10psi. Output is 300bhp at 3400rpm, with a colossal 507lb ft of torque at 2000rpm. The blower isn't permanently engaged, its use being activated by extreme depression of the throttle pedal.

It provides a lot of performance, too, accompanied by a soundtrack that's Wagnerian in its drama and cacophony. At idle there's this wonderful bassy exhaust note overlain by the whining of the blower, but as you rev the engine there's immense exhaust boom and a deep roar, as well as a shriek of meshing metal as the blower's extra power arrives after heavy provocation from your right foot. You can easily select fourth gear early and let that massive torque lug you from well under 1000rpm, but a great deal more aural satisfaction is gained by giving the motor its head. There are also some wonderful noises off, the engine sounding like a demented Gatling gun as I lift off the throttle at speed.

It's not sound without fury. Despite a severe weight penalty of close to two tons, at the top end the SSK shifts in a way that few other pre-war sports cars can match. Acceleration from rest is blunted by the bulk, but it doesn't take long to get it up to more than 90mph in third gear, and occasionally I'm pulling more than 100mph. Once rolling it's very fast, and it's easy to believe that this car would exceed the 120mph that less-powerful SSKs managed in tests in the 1920s. Prod the throttle hard at speed – and it takes some effort, for the first part of the right pedal's travel is spongy by comparison – and ⇨

This beautiful bearer of the three-pointed star – note rear wheel spats – will forever be linked with great Italian racing ace Count Felice Trossi

'A MARVELLOUS COMPETITION HISTORY: ONE OF THE

the supercharger comes in with a banshee wail that signifies the arrival of even more motive force. At full tilt, with supercharger engaged, the wind rasping over the screen and into your eyes, and with the maelstrom of engine and exhaust noise, the SSK is an utterly stirring machine.

Apart from the sheer speed, another surprising aspect is the gearchange: it's far more pleasant than a comparable Bentley's, even though it requires good timing in order to achieve sweet shifts. The throws are long and wide, and you need to be deliberate with the huge lever. Downshifting needs double-declutch footwork and a healthy dose of revs, while upchanges can be effected with a conventional technique. The clutch is heavy but progressive and doesn't – judging by the ensuing smell – seem to enjoy either hill-starts or standing-starts.

None of the controls are light. The brakes need a monumental shove, and it's best to remember that these drums are slowing down a very fast, very heavy car: they're easily the worst feature of the SSK, and on a par (for awfulness) with the anchors fitted to Vintage Bentleys. The gearshift demands positive movements, and is in no way delicate; and the steering needs iron-pumping inputs at low speed. The worm-and-nut arrangement is very high-geared and very accurate, but is never less than meaty in its weighting.

The SSK chassis is conventional enough for its day, with deep channel-section sidemembers for its ladder-type frame, which has a 116-inch wheelbase. Semi-elliptic springs and beam axles are fitted at both ends, and this car has Houdaille hydraulic dampers at the front with cockpit-adjustable Siata units at the back. Fitted to the front axle are late-model torque reaction arms.

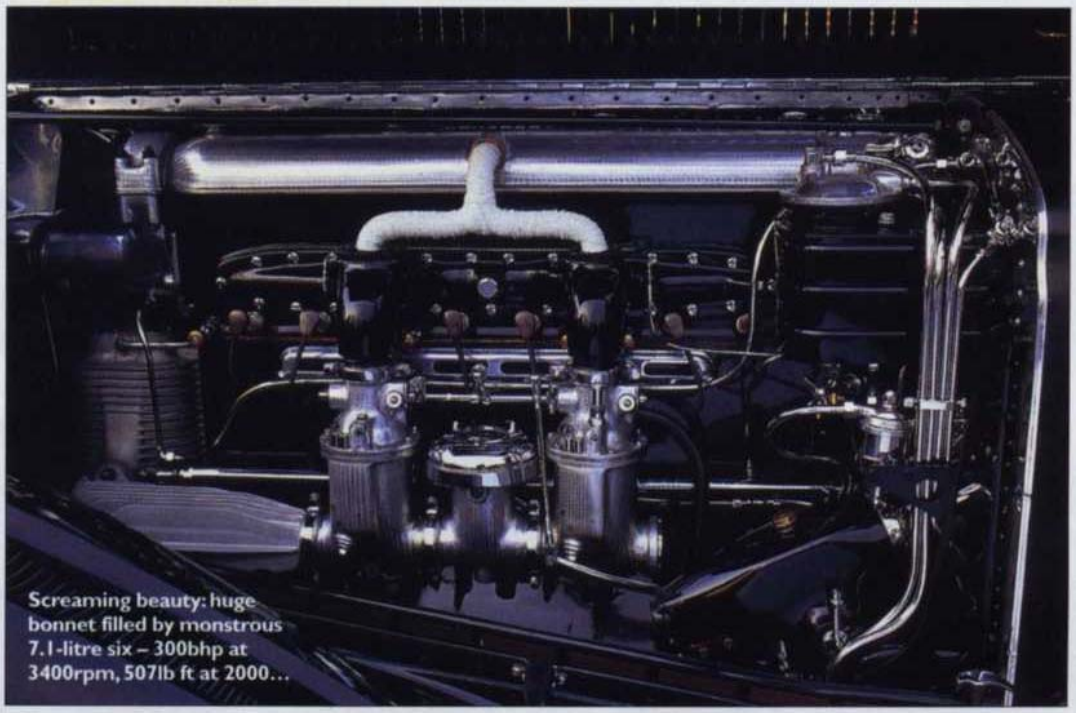
The chassis works – again – surprisingly well. I'm not normally much of a fan of larger pre-war cars because they substitute brute force for handling delicacy, but the SSK excels. You have to manhandle it into slower corners, overcoming initial understeer by judicious use of your right boot, but around the faster stuff its grip is tenacious for a Vintage car and the balance is remarkably neutral.

It's remarkably deft in fast corners and rides bumps exceptionally well for a car of this age: ridges cause the rear end to hop, and there's some scuttle shake over poor surfaces, but it pummels most irregularities into submission. If you're daring the tail will hang loose, but in a nicely controllable way. Driving this car is a real treat, an assault on the senses of the most exhilarating kind. The pleasure is enhanced by the fact that this is one of the most historic examples of one of the most glamorous of sports cars.

The SSK was the ultimate roadgoing example of a line of cars whose development was started by Ferdinand Porsche – later to design the Auto Union GP car, the Volkswagen Beetle and his eponymous 356 – in 1923. Called the 15/70/100, Porsche's design for Mercedes was a 4.0-litre six-cylinder supercharged touring car that appeared in 1924 and then evolved into the 6.2-litre 24/100/140; the more sporting 24/100/140K (later renamed Model K); and the magnificent 6.8-litre 36/220 S (Sports) of 1927. By fitting the car with a 7.1-litre engine and a taller radiator, this was transformed in 1928 into the 38/250 SS (Super Sports), and by shortening the chassis from a 134-inch wheelbase to 116 inches into the SSK (Super Sports *Kurz*). The nominal power rating quoted in contemporary catalogues and magazines was 200bhp for the SS and 225bhp for the SSK. The rarest and most desirable 38/250 was the lightweight – relatively, that is – SSKL (L for *Leicht*) racer, which had the elephant blower engine from the racing SSK and around 300bhp on tap.

As well as being one of the outstanding sports cars of the late 1920s the S, SS, SSK and SSKL had a great competition career, being able to take on both sports cars – such as Bentleys and Alfas at places like Le Mans – and racers like Bugatti and Alfa in Grands Prix. In 1928, for instance, S cars with SS engines were first, second and third in the German (sports car) GP, and Caracciola won both the Semmering and Freiburg hillclimbs in SSK racers. In 1929, Momberger was third in the German and Italian GPs in an SSK, and Caracciola won the sports car TT in an SS and took third

Roots-type supercharger driven off nose of crank; blows through twin carbs



Screaming beauty: huge bonnet filled by monstrous 7.1-litre six – 300bhp at 3400rpm, 507lb ft at 2000...

REASONS THE SSK IS SO REVERED

place against a horde of more nimble Bugatti Type 35s in the inaugural Monaco GP in an SSK.

In 1930 Caracciola won the European hillclimb championship, the Irish sports car GP and was sixth in the Mille Miglia. He bettered that result in 1931, winning the 1000-mile Italian road race in an SSKL against a horde of more agile Alfas: it was one of *the* great drives. He backed it up with another hillclimb title, a win at Avus in the German GP and in the Eifelrennen. Also in 1931 a blown Mercedes finally finished at Le Mans: second in the hands of Stoffel and Ivanowsky.

Real cool: burnished copper brake drums

Easy on the chrome; detailing is exquisite

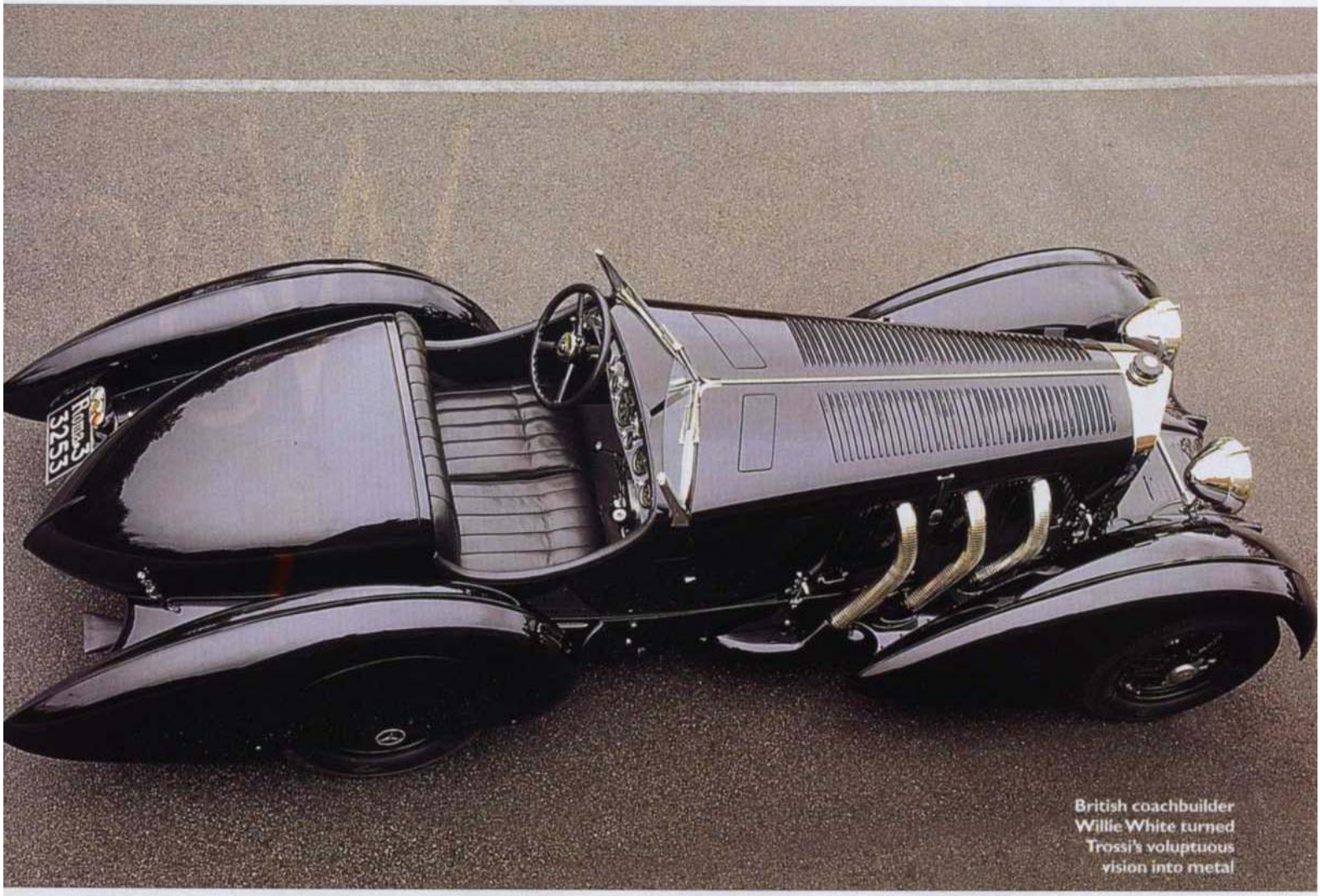
By 1932 the SSKL was running out of steam – or, rather, the competition was even more fierce – but Manfred von Brauchitsch still won at Avus in a bizarre streamliner that hit 143mph and averaged 120.7mph for 183 miles. Moreover, Hans Stuck still managed to dominate the Continental hillclimbs, finishing the year as Alpine Champion.

This marvellous competition history is one of the reasons why the SSK is so revered. This 1929 model was sent to Tokyo in chassis form in 1930 before going out to Italy at the end of the same year. Milanese dealer Carlo Saporiti held on to it for almost two years before selling it to Italian sportsman Count Felice Trossi, who was later to drive for the works Alfa and Maserati GP teams. For some unknown reason, Trossi sent the car to England to have its bodywork fitted. Between its date of first registration in 1932 and 1949, when he died of cancer, Trossi owned the car three times, with two other custodians in between.

After Ricardo Polledo unsuccessfully tried to import the car into his native Argentina in 1954, he sold it to New York dealer Charlie Stitch, who then passed it on to collector Carter Schaub. He sold it in 1962, it ending up in the hands of Ray Jones, who was undoubtedly planning to produce two Trossi SSKs because he built some body parts for a replica but fortunately never got any further. From Jones it went to English collector Anthony Bamford, then back across the Atlantic to Tom Perkins and, in 1988, to Ralph Lauren.

Paul Russell, who restored the car for Lauren, says that all the numbers match on this car so there's no evidence of Jones tampering with it: and certain features, such as damage to the tail when a roof collapsed on top of it during Stitch's ownership, bore out the authenticity when the car was stripped for a 5000-hour, two-year rebuild. The engine was refurbished using new liners, some new gears were made for the transmission, and the rear inner wing panels had to be replaced, but mostly Russell and crew just rebuilt and repaired existing components.

It's a very sympathetic restoration, untouched by the chromed excesses of some US restorers. And it's been put back into fine working fettle, too. I've seldom driven a more invigorating old car than this Mercedes, nor a more surprising one: the SSK really is a sports car. Even if it is a very big, very powerful and very manly one. ●



British coachbuilder Willie White turned Trossi's voluptuous vision into metal