Chariot

Rich **Taylor** *and Jean Constantine tell the story of the* **Mercedes-Benz SSK.** *Additional research by the* **Behring** *Museum.*

of the Gods

No man still living knows how many Type S, SS, SSK and SSKL Mercedes were actually built between 1927 and 1934. There may have been as many as 379 and there may have been as few as 290. No matter; even if but a dozen of these machines had been built, that handful would *still* represent a sizable percentage of the greatest road cars ever made.

Seen from a distance of more than 3-score years, everything about these cars has approached the realm of myth. Yet one very nearly has to admit that the characters of the S-model story really *were* larger than life. Rudolf Caracciola, Hans Stuck, Manfred von Brauchitsch, Otto Merz, Alfred Neubauer, Ferdinand Porsche, Paul Daimler: Has any other car ever been attended by such a court as this one, particularly one in the very flowering of the Automotive Renaissance?

Automotive history-wise, our tale really starts in the Early Romanesque, back in 1902. That was the year in which Wilhelm Maybach—chief designer of Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft—created Daimler's first Six, a massive SOHC, 300-bhp marine engine for the Russian Navy. In 1906 Maybach developed a smaller but architecturally similar automobile powerplant, which went into production as the 9.5-liter 37/65 and the 10.2-liter 39/80. (As was common at the time, the first number represented the taxable horsepower and the second brake horsepower; later a third figure for supercharged horsepower appeared.)

Because of ill health, Wilhelm Maybach was forced to resign from Daimler a year later and Gottlieb Daimler's son Paul took his place. Paul Daimler continued to develop engines of more or less the same configuration until 1913, when he designed a new canted-valve head for the firm's DF80 aero engine. A tremendous breakthrough at the time, the more efficient valve layout allowed better breathing and thus more power from a given displacement. Later used in both airplanes and the 28/95 automobile, this engine continued in production virtually unchanged until 1924.

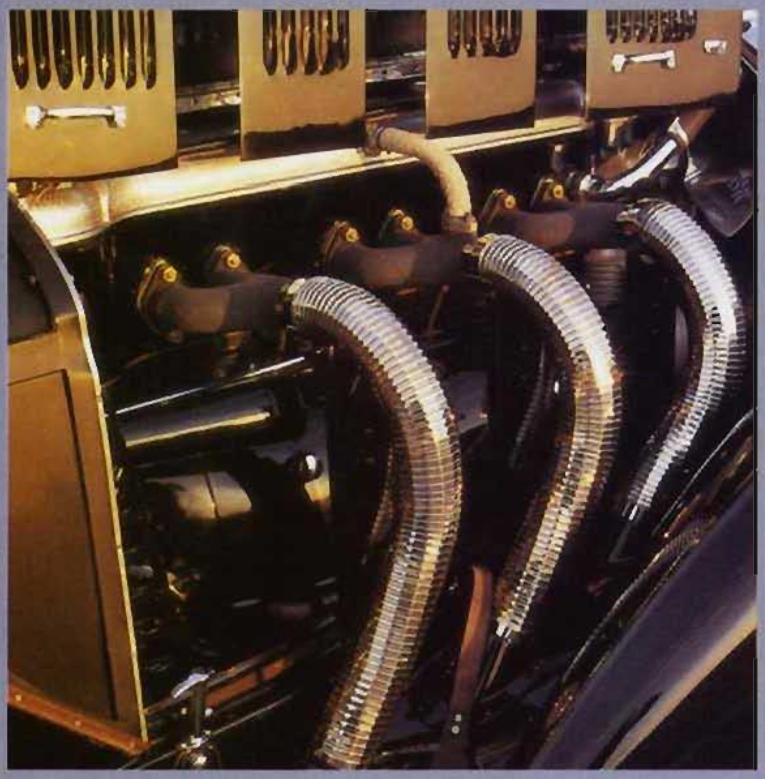
Most of the architecture of the later S-models—which from our vantage point we find so distinctive—was actually already in place on the 28/95. The huge hood measuring some half the length of the car, the mammoth V-shaped radiator and the abbreviated windshield were all recognized Mercedes features by this time, as were the three huge exhaust headers sweeping down outside of the hood. Most enthusiasts identify these external pipes solely with the SSK, but similar routing was actually used by numerous manufacturers as early as 1912 on sporting cars and even limousines! A convenient way to remove a major source of underhood heat, external pipes also visually denoted the power and performance of the engine underneath.

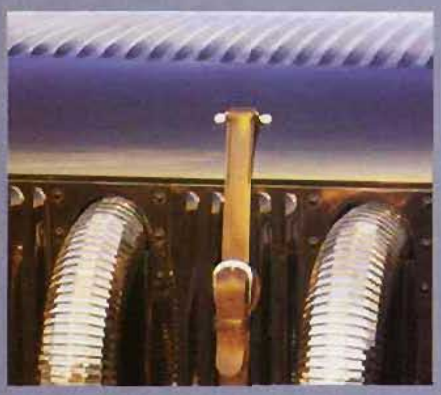
Knockoff wire wheels graced the 28/95 and a straight front axle supported by half-elliptic leaf springs fore and aft. The heavy frame rails curved up and over the axle before tapering gracefully at the very nose; indeed, nearly all the design elements that make the SSK so memorable were already in place by 1913—they just needed to be refined and perfected.

Healthy **Roots**

Part of that perfection would come because Daimler aircraft engines had been using Roots-type superchargers from as

Lacking a reference point, you'd never know the SSK's wheelbase is longer than a new S-class sedan's.





External pipes quickly routed heat away from the block; who knew they'd be a kit-car icon 60 years later?

early as 1915. In 1919 Paul Daimler tested a similar supercharger to pep up his new line of small 4-cylinder cars, and at the Berlin Automobile Show of 1921 Mercedes introduced the supercharged 1.6-liter 6/25/40 and the 2.6-liter 10/40/65.

Rather than running the supercharger at all times—spinning the unit unnecessarily shortened its own life and that of the engine, caused extra noise and robbed power from the crankshaft—Paul Daimler set these cars up with a clutch that permitted manual engagement of the blower at will. Push the throttle all the way to the floor and the supercharger rocketed you forward with a rush and a roar; back off and it disengaged. Even *mit kompressor*, however, the little 6/25/40 and 10/40/65 were still capable of only 60-65 mph when fit with lightweight 2-seater bodywork.

In May of 1921, Max Sailer won the Coppa Florio with a prototype 28/95/120, but by this point the affairs at Daimler were in a serious state of disarray. None of their small supercharged models went into production until 1922, while the 28/95/120 never got beyond the racetrack. Furthermore, the German economy had fallen into chaos and the Weimar Republic was tottering, its currency virtually worthless. Daimler had already taken the unimaginable step of building typewriters and bicycles just to stay in business, and in the midst of it all Paul Daimler had decided to build an 8-cylinder luxury car. When Daimler's board of directors pointed out that the time was not exactly propitious, Paul simply quit. At the end of 1922 he moved to Horch, where they were more receptive to his plans.

Thus, ironically, was immortality born. Desperate for a new chief engineer, Daimler learned that elsewhere in Germany one Ferdinand Porsche had just resigned as the chief engineer of Austro-Daimler—and had emphasized this decision by throwing a decorative conference-room cigarette lighter at a board member's head! Overtures were made, and Ferdinand Porsche replaced Paul Daimler on April 30, 1923. The new man's main task was to engineer a replacement for the outmoded 28/95, and since money was very definitely a factor it was also preferred he design something similar to Daimler's existing products, thus allowing the tooling to be retained.

***Joined** Forces*

But there was even more confusion in the works: On May 1, 1924, the boards of

Il Conte

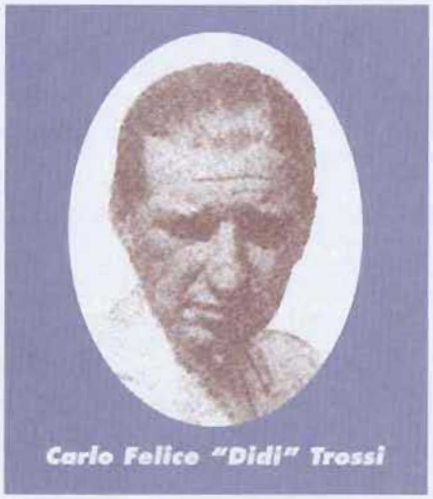
Count Carlo Felice Trossi was the heir to an old Italian banking family. An amateur engineer and inventor, among numerous other projects he electrified the drawbridge to the family home, the 14th-century Castello di Gaglianico near Biella. At the sound of his Mercedes' horn as he neared the park-like grounds, a servant would throw a switch to quickly lower the drawbridge so that Trossi didn't have to wait.

In the early '30s the urbane and witty Trossi—known as Didi to his friends—amused himself by racing boats and airplanes. The vogue among wealthy Italians at the time was to mimic the affectations of the British horsey set, and as a young man Trossi became almost completely Anglicized in dress, speech and manners.

In 1932, Didi also became the president of Scuderia Ferrari, the independent racing team run by Enzo Ferrari for Alfa Romeo. At the beginning Scuderia Ferrari was nothing more than a race shop that maintained Alfas for wealthy amateurs, but in 1932 Enzo Ferrari retired from driving and started to run the team as a serious business. The banker Trossi was obviously a useful connection.

Trossi took advantage of his new position to start racing himself. Happily, he was a natural: His first race was the Mille Miglia, and he and Antonio Brivio were second overall! In 1933, Trossi won some minor Italian events, and by 1934 he was racing in Grands Prix, twice winning and twice finishing second to Tazio Nuvolari. A 3rd-place finish was also secured in the French, Italian and Nice GPs, and by 1936 he resigned from his presidential role at Scuderia Ferrari to leave more time for his own racing career.

In 1935, Trossi bankrolled the Monaco Trossi, a Grand Prix car designed in collaboration with Augusto Monaco that was intended to revolutionize racecar design. The two mavericks built a front-wheel-drive racer powered by a supercharged radial 2-stroke with eight dual-piston cylinders. Little more than an automotive oddity in retrospect, this creation appeared in public only once, at the 1935 Italian Grand Prix, before being withdrawn.



Carlo Felice "Didi" Trossi

Trossi then began racing a small Maserati in *Voiturette* classes and won victories all over Europe in 1936. The next year he returned to Scuderia Ferrari, but this time as a full-fledged team driver. He continued winning minor GPs, but by this point even Ferrari's factory Alfas were outclassed in international events by the awesome Mercedes and Auto Union GP entries.

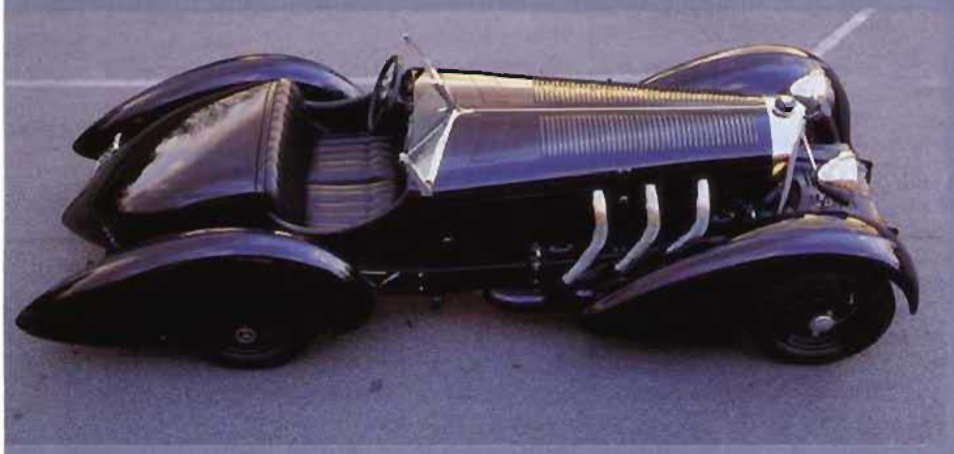
After the war, Trossi was again a Grand Prix driver for Alfa Romeo. He won ahead of Farina and Varzi at the 1946 Milan GP—all were driving factory Alfa 158s—and in 1947 Trossi won the Italian Grand Prix and was third at Spa. In 1948 he won the European GP and was second at Monza despite already being ill with the cancer that would kill him the following year. He finished the year as European Champion, but soon after checked into a Milanese clinic for treatment. He died on May 9, 1949 at the age of 41.

In his 17-year racing career, Didi Trossi finished on the podium in over 40 major races, a remarkable record for a driver who is today almost totally forgotten. Of course, even when he was racing at the very pinnacle of international competition, Count Trossi was still primarily an amateur—automobile racing was just one part of his active and varied life. A quite remarkable man.—*R.T.*

directors of both Daimler and Benz met and signed an "Agreement of Mutual Interest." Daimler's board actually wanted to merge the two companies while Benz wanted to keep its independence and only share sales, marketing and service departments. Events moved quickly, however, and the two companies soon agreed to a complete merger under Benz' managing director Wilhelm Kissel. Thus, the firm of Daimler-Benz was born on June 28, 1926.

Thanks to this merger the new top-of-the-line Mercedes-Benz models would actually be a pair of Porsche-designed Daimlers that debuted in 1924. The new mid-size Mercedes was the 4-liter 15/70/100 (or Type 400, introducing the roughly displacement-based nomenclature Mercedes still uses today). The full-size chassis became the 6.3-liter 24/100/140, or Type 630.

The 400 and 630 turned out to be quite popular and were still in production in 1929,



The day of the roadable GP racing car is marked with the S-series Mercedes at its twilight; a similar transition wouldn't occur in sports-car racing until the Cobras and 250GTs of three decades later.

despite their terrible brakes and decidedly wobbly handling. Still, it was Dr. Porsche's incredible new engine for this line that holds all our interest today.

The 630's powerplant alone was just shy of five feet long and some half-ton in weight. While similar in size, shape and general layout to the 6-cylinder used in the 28/95, this engine was actually all new: Its single overhead camshaft rode in four bearings and was driven by skew gears from the crankshaft. There were two valves for each cylinder in a crossflow head, and the 1-piece cylinder block was built from a huge selenium-alloy casting with cast-iron liners. Compression ran to 4.7:1, the head was cast iron and a gear-driven Roots supercharger mounted vertically at the front of the finished engine blew air into a special Daimler-built updraft carburetor.

In 1926, after the Mercedes-Benz merger, Dr. Porsche introduced a shortened 134-inch wheelbase version of the 630 to create the 24/110/160K (for *Kurz*—"short"). These quickly became known as the Mercedes Type K, though that was not the factory designation, and some 1580 Type Ks and K-engined 630s were built between 1924 and 1932; virtually volume production at the time. Thanks mostly to the short wheelbase and revised gearing, top speed was now around 90 mph.

The compression ratio was soon raised to 5.0:1 and a second sparkplug per cylinder was fit to ensure complete combustion. It would be the next model year, however, that proved the turning point to greatness. In 1927 Dr. Porsche further modified the Type K into the high-performance 26/120/180 Type S (for *Sport*). The engine was bored out to 6789cc and a larger Roots blower geared to run at three times crankshaft speed was installed along with a second carburetor. There was also a new close-ratio transmission, and the final drive ratio was dropped to 2.76:1.

The truly important changes, however, were made to the chassis. The wheelbase remained at 134 inches, but the frame rails were given a kick-up at each end to dramatically lower the ride height; the rear axle became underslung and the engine was set back a full 12 inches for better balance. The K's tall radiator was also shortened until the hood would barely clear the engine, and a complicated power-assist system was devised for the brakes (with limited success). Over a quarter of a ton came out of the chassis, and the resulting running chas-

Racing Lines

Appropriately enough, the Mercedes Type S was introduced to the world at the Nürburgring's inaugural race on June 19, 1927; Rudi Caracciola and Adolf Rosenberger finished 1-2 in the new cars. Exactly one month later, Otto Merz, Christian Werner and Willy Walb were 1-2-3 in similar machines at the German Grand Prix, and Caracciola won a dozen less important races before the racing season ended in September. In 1928, Mercedes S and SS cars raced all over the world.

Perhaps the most dramatic of all S-type races was the German Grand Prix of 1928. Christian Werner's SS came into the pits because the rough Nürburgring course literally wrenched his arm out of its socket, and Caracciola led in a similar car until he collapsed from heat prostration. A mechanic popped Werner's joint back together and wrapped the man's shoulder with electrical tape; he drove that way for half an hour while Caracciola was revived with cold compresses and then put back in the race. When Caracciola collapsed *a second* time the long-suffering Werner was stuffed with a mixture of egg yolks, wine and black coffee and sent out again. On the last lap, Werner passed Otto Merz—who'd by now been racing for over five hours with his feet painfully blistered by engine heat—and Mercedes once again came home 1-2-3.

In 1928, Indy winner Ralph DePalma—decidedly ancient for a racing driver by then—also won two minor sprints at Atlantic City in an SS while Earl Howe claimed literally dozens of hillclimb firsts in Britain. In Argentina, Carlos Zatuszek won dozens of races as late as 1938 with a pair of SSKs delivered in 1928.

In 1929, Caracciola contested the inaugural Monte Carlo Grand Prix with an SSK. The race was for fenderless GP cars—mostly small Bugattis that were ideally suited to the tight, twisting course. Caracciola merely removed the fenders from his oversized sports car and then herded the huge Mercedes into the lead. He eventually finished third after pitting for tires and fuel; Rene Dreyfus' winning Bugatti carried an extra fuel tank and finished without stopping.

The legendary race of 1929 was the Irish TT, where Caracciola and Merz in SSKs raced against Tim Birkin and Glen Kidston in supercharged Bentleys. It was pouring down rain and the race was run on flooded, narrow country roads. Caracciola was hitting over 110 mph and simply drove away from Birkin, who said afterwards, "I felt no envy, but only incredulity." Ever after, Caracciola was known as *der Regenmeister*—"the Rainmaster."

In 1931, Mercedes officially retired from racing due to lack of funds. Caracciola was allowed to buy an SSKL and the factory was persuaded by Alfred Neubauer to pay his expenses, but it was strictly a private, 5-person team: one driver, one riding mechanic, one mechanic, Rudi's wife Charly as timer/scorer and Neubauer himself as the volunteer team manager. Incredibly, they started with the brutal Mille Miglia. Alfa Romeo had nearly 100 mechanics to service its fleet of racecars while Caracciola had just a single riding mechanic and two friends who'd come from Stuttgart to help. No matter: They were second into the midpoint at Rome behind Nuvolari, then wasted 20 minutes repairing the throttle linkage. The duo also had to change a tire just 20 miles from the finish. After 16 hours, however—both Rudi and his mechanic now bleeding from hands and feet thanks to the heat and abuse—Caracciola won the Mille Miglia.

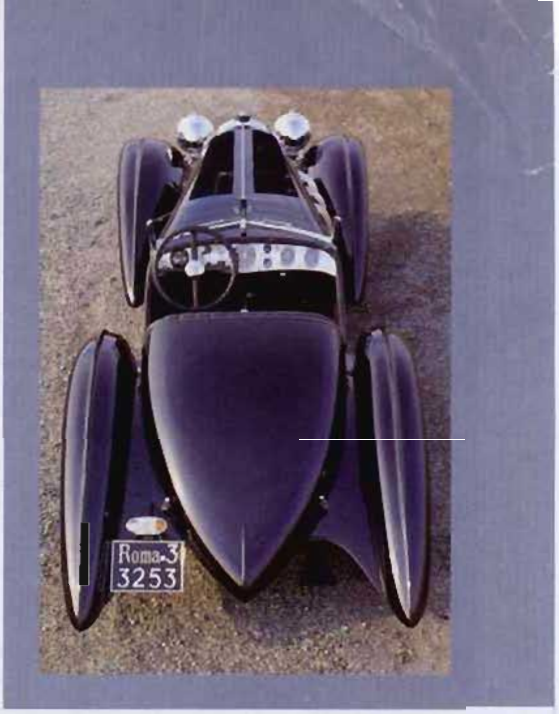
At the Nürburgring, again in the pouring rain, Caracciola and mechanic Wilhelm Sebastian won the German Grand Prix once more with the same SSKL they had raced in the Mille Miglia, this time coming home ahead of the Bugattis of Chiron and Varzi. Rudi also won the European Mountain Championship again. Finally out of funds for real, however, Mercedes *really and truly* retired from competition in 1932 and Caracciola moved to Alfa Romeo.

The only serious Mercedes racers in 1932 were Hans Stuck and Manfred von Brauchitsch, both of them from wealthy German families that could pay for their racing. Stuck won the Mountain Championship and von Brauchitsch won at the new high-speed Avus track, largely thanks to a clever streamlined body on his SSKL that raised the top speed from 130 mph to 140.

In 1933, Neubauer had an SSKL kitted out with a streamlined body similar to von Brauchitsch's. Otto Merz was killed in practice, foolishly going out on the wet track without rain tires after staying up all night to drive the car from Stuttgart to Berlin. The reign of the S-series Mercedes effectively died with him: The next year saw Mercedes presenting the Hitler-backed W25 single-seater, the first of the famed Silver Arrows that dominated European racing in the '30s and brought Caracciola another round of fame—but hey, that's another story.—*R.T.*

Zatuszek and SSK, Argentina 1931

PHOTO © THE BEHRING MUSEUM



sis weighed just 2867 pounds; fit with relatively light 2+2 tourer bodywork a Type S could top 100 mph, a phenomenal figure in its day.

The Type S was a tremendous success, perhaps not by sales figures but unquestionably in prestige. Among the fastest production cars one could buy at the time, it went on to become an immensely successful racing car and an unbelievably durable machine. It was also beautiful: The classic *Sindelfingen Sport Viersitzer* for the Type S has elegant slab sides with a cutaway for the elbows of the driver and front-seat passenger. Usually, there were no doors; the bodywork rose only a foot or so above the running boards, which were even with the frame rails.

Power *Walk*

In 1928, Dr. Porsche developed the 27/140/200SS (for *Super Sport*). The Type SS proved essentially identical to the Type S but for having its engine bored out yet again, this time to 7065cc. For the first time, a Mercedes was also given aluminum (not iron) pistons, and a vibration damper was fit to the crankshaft. Compression rose to a heady 5.2:1.

In one respect, the Type SS went backward—or rather *upward*. The short radiator of the Type S was felt to cause too cramped a passenger compartment, so at the request of some coachbuilders a 3-inch taller Type K radiator was fit to most Type SS chassis to allow taller, more spacious final bodywork. The cars we most remember today are the stripped racing tourers, but the majority of Mercedes' Type SS chassis

Even though the SSKs were originally built for prestige as much as profit, the time and money a modern restorer is allowed to lavish on the car can still produce better-than-new examples.

were finished as limousines or sedans.

For racing, there was now an optional high-compression (6.2:1) engine rated at 27/170/225 bhp and a still stronger option—thanks to a 10-psi supercharger instead of the stock 7-psi unit—rated at an incredible 250 bhp. The most serious competitors, predictably, built their racing cars by combining the most powerful Type SS engine with the shorter Type S radiator to allow lower bodywork.

Also in 1928 came the ultimate Porsche-designed Mercedes-Benz, the legendary 27/140/200 SSK (for *Super Sport Kurz*). This was easily created by cutting another 18 inches from the wheelbase of the short-radiator Type S and fitting the latest Type SS engine. The SSK's "short" 116-inch wheelbase left no room for even a vestigial back seat, so all SSKs were meant to be 2-seaters. Even then, the driver and passenger of a Type SSK sat almost above the rear axle and directly elbow to elbow. With the huge engine placed well back in the frame there was simply no room for anything else.

Indeed, passenger space was at such a premium that many SSKs featured slightly staggered seats; that way the driver had room to swing his elbows and the passenger—undoubtedly hanging on for his own dear life—was in a better position to defend himself. With the standard factory-supplied Sindelfingen bodywork the SSK weighed some 4400 pounds and could hit 115 mph.

Ultimately, in 1929 the Type SSK was given a 6.0:1 compression ratio and 12-psi "elephant" blower to produce 27/240/300 bhp. At the same time, virtually every piece of metal in the chassis was drilled and the body was stripped out completely. This brought the ready-to-race weight down to 3850 pounds—even in lightweight form these were not dainty cars.

The result of all this hotrodding and swiss-cheesing was the now-legendary 27/240/300 SSKL (for *Super Sport Kurz Leicht—"light"*). Top speed with a standard body was 130 mph; a streamlined skin for record breaking could add perhaps ten mph more. The SSKL was the fastest sports-type car of its day and the absolute high point of S-series development. Furthermore, unlike the S, SS and SSK—all of them high-performance passenger cars that could also be raced—the SSKL was built and sold only for competition.

By the time the SSKL appeared, however, Dr. Porsche was long gone. Ironically, Paul Daimler had quit in 1922 because the

board of directors wouldn't let him build an expensive luxury car; Ferdinand Porsche stormed out of a similar board meeting in October of 1928 because Mercedes-Benz wouldn't allow him to build a cheap economy model.

Dr. Porsche seems almost to have been prescient in his desire to build an inexpensive car on the eve of the Great Depression, and he finally got his wish with the machine that would eventually become the Volkswagen Beetle—a car about as different from the Type SSK as is possible for something with four wheels.

Hans **On**

Porsche's successor was Hans Nibel—a much more even-tempered personality and, perhaps because of that, a more development-minded engineer. It was Nibel and cohort Max Wagner who swiss-cheesed the Type SSKL into immortality, though the Great Depression ultimately ensured their triumph was short-lived. When the Depression arrived Mercedes-Benz racing budgets were cut back to almost nothing, and luxury carmakers were hit particularly hard by tough economic times. Total Mercedes-Benz production was 8252 in 1929, 6063 in 1930 and only 3633 in 1931. Even worse, production of the large, lucrative passenger cars—the 260, 370 and 460—fell precipitously. Sales of the 460 dove from 666 units to a mere 152 between 1930 and '31, while the already limited-production SS dropped from 67 units in 1929 to 30 a year later and just two for 1931.

Still, the entire range of Type S cars has had an influence completely out of proportion to their build numbers. Why? Because they captured the popular imagination: When you think of big, high-performance, prestigious sports cars from the interwar era, you think of the S, SS and SSK. Can there ever have really been cars like this—oversized, flamboyant machines carved with Teutonic insolence from pure billet steel? Were they real, or just a fevered engineer's dream? Actually, they were both.

The **Trossi** *Car*

The Type SSK in our photos—chassis #36038—was completed by Mercedes-Benz in 1930 during the depths of the Depression. Mercedes S-type cars were usually right-hand drive; left-hand drive, as fit to this car, was only by special order.

Mercedes-Benz shipped #36038 to its Tokyo dealer as a bare chassis, where it sat for over a year unpurchased—a sign of the times. It then went back to Stuttgart, was spruced up a bit and ultimately went to Milan, where Count Carlo Felice "Didi" Trossi finally bought the roller in 1932. Didi Trossi—a great Anglophile—then had the chassis shipped to England, where its extravagant bodywork was added in 1933.

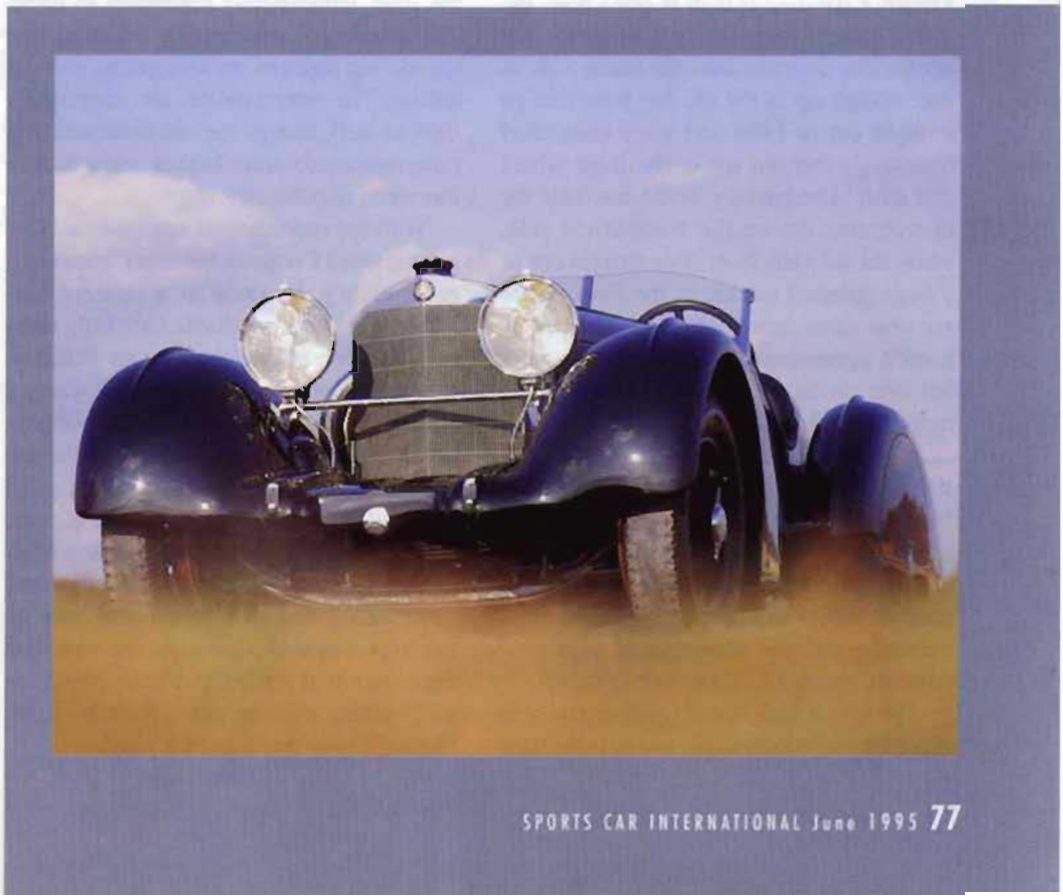
Unfortunately there's no coachbuilder's plate today, but according to restorer Paul Russell the generally accepted story is that Count Trossi himself sketched out the bodywork and had it constructed by an Englishman named Willie White—presumably a fabricator Trossi had met through his racing activities. (Trossi was then the president and chief backer of the Alfa Romeo racing team being run by Enzo Ferrari.)

No matter its provenance, the Trossi SSK's body was formed from the expected hand-hammered aluminum over oak frames, although quite atypically not an ounce of filler seems to be have been used in the process. Trossi also had the SSK's 20-inch wheels replaced with 18-inch units to lower the car and add a more modern appearance.

The resulting shape proved fabulously advanced for 1933. Perhaps a few one-off showcars from the period drawn by Saoutchik, Zagato, Park Ward or Le Baron share some of its swoopiness, but arguable none are as sophisticated or complete as Trossi's car. Particularly notable are the fully rounded fenders, possible homages to the streamlined wheel spats fit to America's open-cockpit fighter planes of the era. With its long engine cowl, multipane windshield, pointed tail and cut-down cockpit edged by a leather roll, Trossi's SSK also wears elements of the sleek Schneider Cup and Thompson Trophy air racers that flew between the wars.

Didi Trossi bought and sold the car three times between 1933 and 1949, obviously missing it when it wasn't in his garage at Castello di Gaglianico. After his death in 1949 it went to Argentinean racer Ricardo Polledo, but when the Perón government wouldn't allow the SSK into the country a frustrated Polledo sold it to Manhattan exotic-car dealer Charlie Stitch in 1952. Between then and 1988 it resided with American collectors Carter Schaub and Ray Jones, Britain's Sir Anthony Bamford and Californian Tom Perkins. The current owner, Ralph Lauren, bought it from Perkins in '88.

Paul Russell and Company performed a complete restoration for Lauren, and over a period of 18 months the shop bills alone reportedly approached $500,000. Perhaps it was enough: The Trossi SSK won Best of Show at the Pebble Beach concours in August of '93. Russell's team also restored Lauren's 1991 Pebble-winning Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic, and since Pebble Beach is generally considered the pinnacle of concours competition one could argue that Paul Russell and Company is currently the most successful restoration firm in the world. If



Curious that Trossi's car should look so French; the design is probably Italian and the assembly surely English.

so, it seems only fitting; to many fans of the interwar era, Trossi's SSK is the most desirable automobile ever built.

Driving Goals

Behind the wheel, you have to remember that a Mercedes SSK was the IMSA WSC prototype of the 1920s: It's not meant to be comfortable, it's meant to be *fast*.

You do that by putting the biggest possible engine into the smallest possible car and leaving everything else at home in the garage. Thus, despite the immense hood and a radiator standing as high as one's nose, the SSK's cockpit is barely big enough for two adults. The floor sits over the frame rails so you're high up in the air, but your feet go straight out in front and your knees feel hopelessly trapped under the huge wheel and dash. The parking brake and half the instruments are on the mechanic's side, while the tall shift lever rises straight out of a huge polished casting in the floor. There are also three beautifully finished pedals hidden somewhere in the car's bowels: a left-side clutch, a central accelerator and a right-side brake.

To get underway the mechanic pumps a large T-handle to pressurize the fuel system. Next, set the hand throttle and spark advance levers on the steering hub and press the big starter button; the old monster reluctantly rumbles to life if you've done it all correctly, and you immediately adjust the throttle down from 700 revs or so to 500.

The clutch and shifter work as easily as those on any modern car, though you have to know what you're doing to work the non-synchro box without grinding. Upshifts are a relative piece of cake, but the downshifts take more practice—it's very different than what you'd feel in a Bugatti of the same era, which seems to be sewn together from a multitude of small, delicate bits. The SSK feels more like something whacked together from a few great big chunks of beautifully finished metal.

All things considered, however, the Trossi car is a pussycat. Everything is deliberate, formal and substantial as it sails down the road, unbelievably rewarding to drive. The steering is predictably heavy at low speeds but lightens up as soon as you get rolling. The other controls are surprisingly light as well, though the old-fashioned (but power-assisted) drum brakes seem to take forever to stop the car.

With the supercharger engaged the SSK pulls about 17 pounds for every horsepower—roughly the same as a modern hot-hatch. Still, when mechanic Jack Daly and I saw 100 mph in Friday-afternoon traffic on Route 128 outside Boston the SSK was just settling in. The only worrisome part of driving that fast in this multimillion-dollar car was the 65-year-old brakes, but Jack and I eventually developed a system: I'd come bombing into the corner and execute a heel-and-toe downshift. Simultaneously I'd yell *"BRAKES!,"* and Jack would haul back on the huge handbrake lever. As we went into the corner he'd gradually release, giving me trail braking into the apex. Perfect—it felt like we'd been practicing for years.

SPECIFICATIONS

1930 Mercedes-Benz Type SSK

General
Vehicle type: front-engine RWD roadster
Structure: steel ladder frame with wood-framed aluminum body
Price: RM 29,000 (1930, chassis only)

Engine
Type: inline-6, selenium-alloy block and iron head
Displacement (cc): 7065
Compression ratio: 6.2:1
Power (bhp): 300 @ 3400 rpm
Torque (lbs. ft.): 512 @ 2000 rpm
Intake system: 2x1bbl. updraft carburetors, 1 Roots-type supercharger
Valvetrain: one overhead cam, two valves per cylinder
Transmission type: 4-speed manual
Final drive: 2.50

Dimensions
Curb weight (lbs.): 4200*
Wheelbase (in.): 116.0
Length (in.): 188.0
Width (in.): 71.0

Suspension, brakes, steering
Suspension, front: beam axle with parallel leaf springs and hydraulic shocks
Suspension, rear: live axle with parallel leaf springs and hydraulic shocks
Steering type: worm and sector
Wheels (in.): 18x5
Tires (in.): 18x6.5
Brakes, f/r: 16.5-inch drum/16.5-inch drum

Performance
0-60 (sec.): 9.0
1/4 mile: 16.9 sec. @ 88 mph
Top speed (mph): 125*
SCI observed fuel economy (mpg): 9

**estimate*

In the end, it's the sheer mechanicalness of the SSK that's so memorable—it feels like being strapped to a naked, running engine. Vibration, gear whine, exhaust noise...a thousand different sensations pummel you at once. For a half an hour it's exhilarating—for 16 hours of the Mille Miglia, it must have been excruciating.

On second thought, perhaps it's not just the *cars* that have gotten more delicate in the last 65 years. ●