WITH ALL DUE RESPECT

The legendary Phil Hill used to race this glorious Ferrari barchetta – which is why a perfect cosmetic restoration would have been a sin. ***Dale Drinnon*** *was seduced from the start*

PHOTOGRAPHY Martyn Goddard

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FOR A MOMENT I freeze mere inches from the driver's door in a paralysing wave of angst. Then I do my umpteenth re-check for protruding zipper pulls and ballpoint pens in hip pockets, and slip delicately into the cockpit. Brushing a belt buckle against a sparkling new restoration would be nightmare enough; leaving the slightest mark on this car, though, smacks of tearing the flyleaf on a Guttenberg Bible, and my stomach goes fluttery at the mere thought that mine could be the foot that finally crumbles the antique clutch pedal rubber, or that my fingers erase the last traces of Phil Hill's DNA from the shifter knob.

This is, after all, more than a rare, milestone, racing Ferrari. It's the singular unrestored 375MM known to remain, a veritable time capsule of 1950s international motor sport, and maybe it really does deserve to be atop a museum pedestal, protected from defilement by unworthies like me. Even after the soothing little pre-launch rituals have been performed, the switches are switched, the fuel pump has pumped, the throttle is half-depressed precisely so, it takes an act of deliberate will to reach out and stab the starter button.

The V12 whoops to life like I've zapped it with a cattle prod. It isn't the high, lilting, operatic kind of V12 whoop, either; it's a big-bore kind that begins as deep, guttural growl and builds to raw berserker bellow. *WHOOP*. As though all those decades locked away, still and silent, have only made it meaner and rowdier, less a saintly Lazarus returned divinely from the dead than a psycho-killer busted out of prison and utterly boiling over to kick ass and take names. Suddenly I'm not so much worried about the car; hell no, I'm worried about my own hide.

Which probably isn't a bad approach for any of the 375-series sports racers, unsullied time capsule or not. Combining the biggest racing engines Enzo Ferrari would produce before the Can-Am and his lifelong indifference to the science of handling ('I build engines,' went an infamous Enzo-ism, 'and attach wheels to them'), along with his conviction that disc brakes were nothing but British voodoo, they were powerful, direct, and elemental, and not to be taken lightly.

They were also quite effective. Like the 340-series sport preceding it in 1950, the 375 was based on the normally aspirated Aurelio Lampredi Formula 1 V12 that replaced Gioacchino Colombo's much smaller supercharged version. In the case of the 340, it was a 4.1-litre worth 280 horsepower; in 1953, however, Ferrari started fitting two-seaters with the 4.5 (recently legislated out of the monoposto World Drivers' Championship – waste not, want not) making some 340bhp.

Designated the 375MM – for 'Mille Miglia', of course – and usually in closed Pinin Farina bodywork similar to that of (or, in fact, often inherited from) a 340MM, the new car won two of the three victories that secured Enzo the inaugural World Sportscar Championship. Ferrari repeated the title in 1954 with help from the 375MM and the 375MM Plus, a 4.9-litre variant with only four additional horses. In the meantime, however, Ferrari announced a special run of 4.5-litre customer 375MM Pinin Farina Spiders. In 1953, for any serious privateer, that immediately became the Big Gun.

And wealthy American amateur Bill Spear was pretty serious. Besides winning the 1953 SCCA overall drivers' championship in a 340 America, he had taken seventh at Le Mans that year for Briggs Cunningham (and during his time earned multiple top-five finishes at both Le Mans and Sebring), where a 340/375 Berlinetta set fastest lap and gave Jaguar's C-types everything they could handle until the clutch went south. Spear came home to the States, suitably impressed, and duly ordered one of the sexy new PF Spiders.

He would receive the car on these pages, Chassis 0382AM, completed in December 1953 and arriving at Luigi Chinetti Motors in New York on New Year's Eve. It was the ninth and final copy from the official batch of 4.5 customer Spiders (although 26 of the 375MM series were reportedly built in total). To break it in properly, Spear entered the car that March in the USA's longest, toughest event – the 12 Hours of Sebring – with frequent collaborator Phil Hill as co-driver.

They made a good team, battling at the front with the fierce Lancia D24s right from the start, and Spear was leading when a differential problem sidelined them on lap 60. Over the balance of 1954, he ran a busy nine-race domestic schedule with 0382, winning four, coming second twice, and claiming a still-standing track record on the last of the legendary Watkins Glen public road courses. He finished second in season points, behind only the even wealthier Jim Kimberly – in another 375MM Pinin Farina Spider.

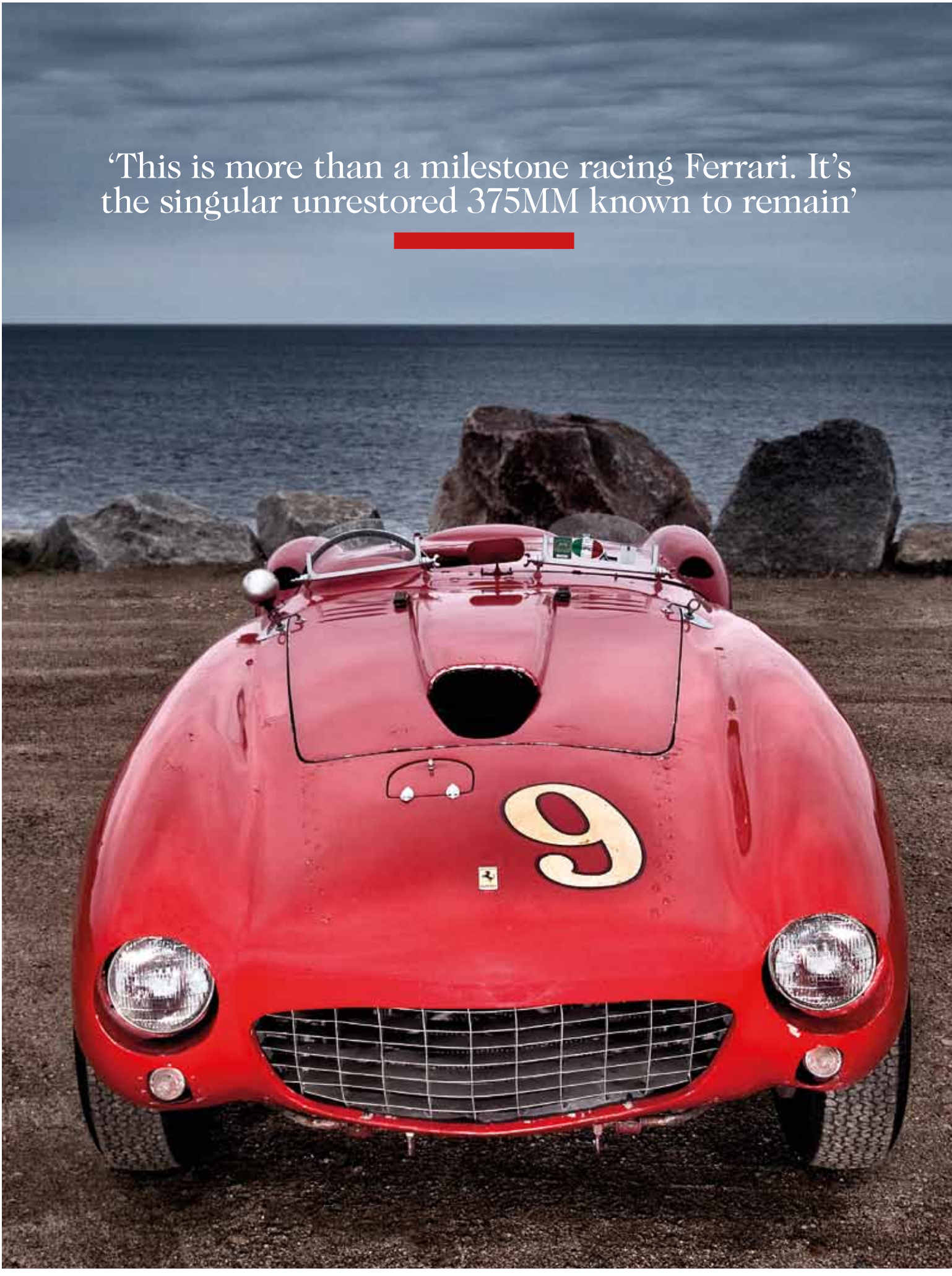
For 1955 Spear moved to a Maserati 300S, less powerful but friendlier, which placed him third at Sebring, and he sold the Ferrari on. It thereafter followed the usual ageing race-car syndrome of owner changes, alternating track and road use, and slow decline, but stayed in SCCA 'new car' racing for a surprisingly long while, until 1966. In '72 it finally passed from motoring author and historic racer Joel Finn to John B 'Ian' Gunn, who gave 0382 its last competitive outing, finishing fourth at the 1973 Watkins Glen Vintage GP. He then parked the car in his garage, with tired brakes, a baulky gearbox and general exhaustion.

It stayed there untouched for more than 36 years. But don't assume 0382 was forgotten. Gunn, an eminent physicist specialising in electronics (you're likely near a Gunn Diode even as we speak) as well as a motorcycle racer and collector, and a compulsive home mechanic and machinist, apparently just decided bike racing was more fun, and restoring cars for cosmetic reasons wasn't his style. Nonetheless he loved the Ferrari, and refused to sell it. Upon his death in 2008, those wonky brakes were probably still on his to-do list; it was simply a very long list.

Fortunately, Andreas Mohringer, the well-known Austrian enthusiast of classic racing machinery, has a similar aversion to restoration for restoration's sake. He bought the car from the Gunn family in March 2010 and immediately sent it to Paul Russell and Company, of Essex, Massachusetts, to be →

Right
Any imperfections that were evident in this gorgeous car's (now) 62-year-old bodywork at the end of its unusually long racing career are still present – and correct.

‘This is more than a milestone racing Ferrari. It’s the singular unrestored 375MM known to remain’



mechanically re-commissioned, and left in gloriously age-ripened, as-raced for 19 unpampered years, unrestored condition.

He made an excellent choice of shops; Paul Russell and his colleagues, including those whose jobs don't directly involve the hands-on technical disciplines, conduct their world-class restoration facility in the manner you'd expect from a world-class medical practice – with conscientious deliberation and great concern. The prime directive of this project was in fact, as Paul likes to say, 'the traditional physician's credo: first, do no Harm.'

Given the established mission statement of minimum-possible intervention, that meant considerable patience and commensurate forethought. The engine was pulled, for example, and the cylinders oil-soaked for a week before it was even turned over by hand, and then supplied externally with full oil flow and pressure on a test stand before being spun on the starter.

In spite of the caution, compression was good and so was valve action, so the cylinder heads were never removed. Likewise, the timing chain proved acceptable, but the tensioner was marginal, so a replacement was made for the spacer Ian Gunn had machined in the '70s to address the same problem.

As always, a plethora of little things threw up their roadblocks, too. Removing the lids of old Webers for rebuilding is never straightforward; they're invariably stuck solid, and any attempt at prying them off ruins both the brittle aluminium and the gaskets underneath; in this case, they were no longer available. Standard procedure calls for a gentle sideways hammer tap – which yielded absolutely nothing. The solution, technician Bob Lapane told me, was ultimately 'heat and cold cycles… lots and lots of them'.

The issue of replacement or refurbishment on an individual component, however, sometimes came down to 'correct for period', and the period chosen was the car's latter SCCA years. Therefore the American brake master cylinder fitted by Gunn right after the '73 historic race was ditched for original equipment, while the seat covers, looking suspiciously like ski boat items but visible in early-60s photographs, were removed by upholsterer Richard Barnes, painstakingly cleaned, re-stitched, and reinstalled. Even the period tyres, so fossilised they could support the car without air pressure, were re-used, at least for the unveiling at Pebble Beach.

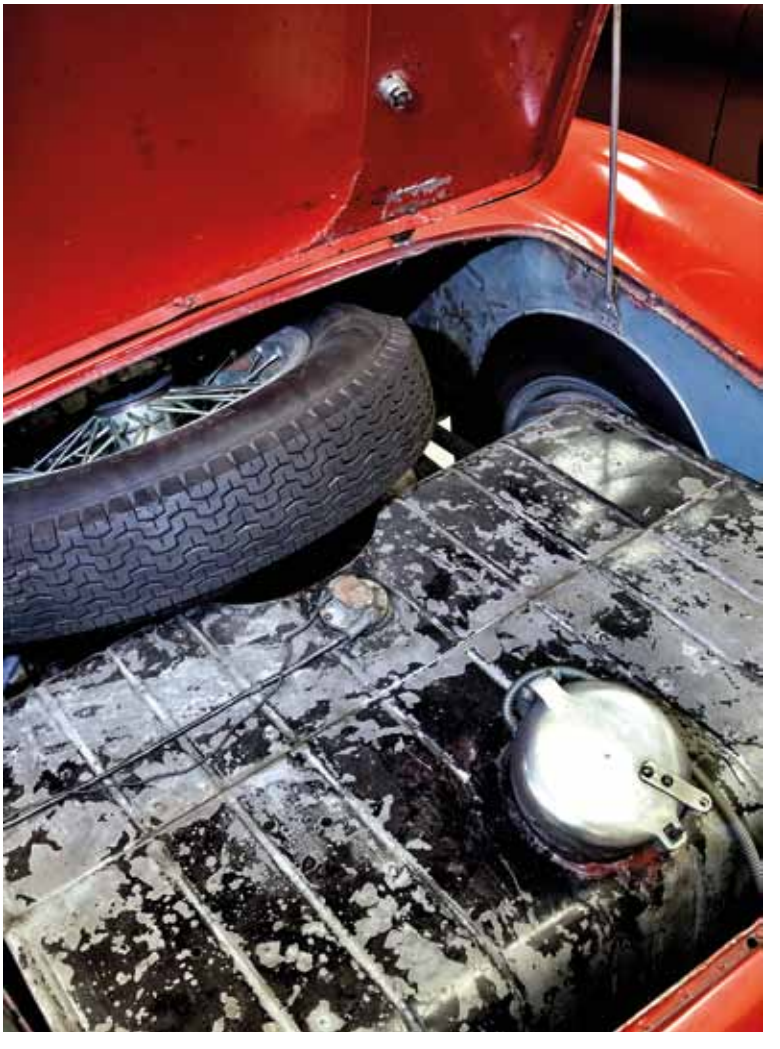
> 'It's a genuine delight up to 95%, but in those last five ticks it'll swing around like a bad habit'

In the end, hardly anything was replaced outright except pure expendables such as clutch friction material. Walking around the car at Russell and Co it looks every inch its battle-scared original self, down to the slightly askew jaw-line leftover from pouncing atop a Formula Junior racer in 1966, the incident that changed SCCA philosophy on which cars should share a track together. On the bulkhead behind the driver's seat a splatter of ancient scrutineering stickers remain; the seat itself is so 1954-close to the steering wheel that it's hard to believe the amply proportioned Bill Spear could have squeezed himself in.

Being medium of build, however, and not of the straight-arm driving school, I'm relieved to find it suits me perfectly. It's also comforting to sit so high in the cockpit, with a clear, reassuring view. Although not really comforting enough to keep my mind off the story of a previous owner I won't name who allegedly looped this sucker on his debut drive. Twice. Before getting out of the car park.

So I'm supremely, agonisingly circumspect in the initial stages and, quite happily, the car responds in kind. Mild-mannered might be a →

Right
The great Phil Hill once sat behind this wheel and the Ferrari scored four race victories in its maiden season; triple-carb 4.5-litre V12 puts out 340bhp.



1953 FERRARI 375MM PININ FARINA SPIDER

ENGINE 4522cc V12, SOHC per bank, three four-barrel Weber 40 IF/4C carburettors **POWER** 340bhp @ 7000rpm **TORQUE** 300lb ft @ 4300rpm **TRANSMISSION** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Worm and sector **SUSPENSION** Front: double wishbones, transverse leaf spring, Houdaille dampers. Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, trailing arms, Houdaille dampers **BRAKES** Drums **WEIGHT** 899kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 170mph. 0-60mph 5.5sec (est)

misnomer; it certainly is civilised, though, and well beyond my expectations so long as it's treated with respect. The car can be launched neatly on reasonable revs, although it loads up quickly if asked to labour long below 4000rpm, and a fair dose of raucous throttle-blipping is necessary to keep the carbs clear. (A pity, that. Ahem.)

Clutch take-up is smooth and dead easy; the brakes have a high, hard pedal, pull up evenly and in an acceptable distance on light-to-medium demand, and with four-wheel drums and 340bhp, I have no intention whatsoever of demanding anything more.

The transmission requires some getting used to; on inspection at Paul Russell, the synchros were found to be naught but shrapnel in the bottom of the casing and, since a concours deadline was looming, the internals were shimmed to compensate and it was reassembled as a crash 'box. That said, it still shifts better than some that were designed unsynchronised from the get-go.

Above
The 375MM Pinin Farina Spider looks delicate and pretty, especially from this angle, yet it was tough and brawny enough to compete in the demanding Sebring 12 Hours.

With a measure of low-speed acquaintance safely under my belt, I become progressively braver, and it's easy to see how you could quickly become over-confident with 0382. Whereas the 340MM was constantly nervous and everyone knew it, too many to their mortal detriment, the 375MM is much like a Lancia Stratos or early Porsche 911: a genuine delight up to 95%, but in those last five ticks it'll swing around like a bad habit if you're unready or unable. Power oversteer must come to it as naturally as whacking an unwary gazelle comes to a hungry lioness, and with roughly equal warning.

But true to Mr Ferrari's promises, there is nothing at all wrong with this engine. Every start is on the button, as long as you remember to half-crack the Webers; power and response are smooth and instant, and despite my prudent regard for age and provenance – no, honestly – it flings me down the road with a heart-pounding satisfaction. It's loud, macho and incredibly seductive, and soon I'm thinking, well, hey, the owner uses this regularly at events such as the Goodwood Festival of Speed and Bahamas Speed Week, surely it couldn't hurt to have one, good, full-on charge through the gears…

Then, from a sky that scant seconds earlier had appeared completely innocent, a faint sneer of raindrops litters the windscreen; unbidden, my right foot lifts in amazingly direct proportion to the puckering I experience elsewhere about my anatomy.

I immediately turn around, revs barely above tickover, and crawl back to base. There's brave, dear reader, and there's plain old crazy, and, sometimes, you've really got to recognise the difference. *End*

THANKS TO Paul Russell and Company, www.paulrussell.com.