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## From Italy to Indy to a Place in Sports Car History



Photos by Bob Coates

The entire production of Maserati 8CTF grand prix racecars, reunited for the first time since 1948

By DONALD OSBORNE

FAMILY reunions need not be limited to endless exchanges of hugs, sharing of reminiscences and snapping of photographs. At the recent gathering of a large Italian family in Pennsylvania, for instance, chrome was polished, exotic engines revved up and yes, photos were snapped.

**Though it was a reunion of cars, not of people, the event had a few things in common with a gathering of human relatives: the group was large, close-knit and rich with fascinating history.**

In attendance were the only Maserati 8CTF grand prix racecars built — a set of triplets from 1938 that included the winner of the Indianapolis 500 in 1939 and 1940. Also at the Skytop Lodge in the Poconos were the swoopy 450S Costin Coupe, a veteran of the Le Mans 24-hour race, and one of the oldest Maserati grand prix cars, a 26-B from 1928.

It was not all Maseratis or all racecars, though. Scores of old and new Ferraris, Lamborghinis, DeTomasos, Lancias, Alfas, more common Maseratis and lesser-known marques joined the activities at the 2006 Le Belle Macchine d'Italia, whose name translates to “the beautiful cars of Italy.”

While it is not on the scale of the events held each August in Monterey, Calif., this three-day reunion, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in June, serves as the gathering point for most of the East Coast branches of Italian-car owner clubs. Catering to the participants and their guests, rather than to the public — as is often the case at high-profile auto events — it has the feeling of a big (and somewhat loud) family gathering.

The three 8CTF racecars, which had not been displayed together since 1948, were the stars of the show this year. Though built for the grand prix circuit in Europe, these Maseratis achieved their greatest success here in America.

Maserati's rise as a carmaker began with the efforts of a large family — there were seven Maserati brothers — that started the company bearing the family name in 1926. The brothers soon found success on the racetrack and were recognized as creative and talented engineers — but their racing always depended on the sale of one car to finance the development of the next.

That situation severely limited Maserati's chances. In Germany, the Nazi government had decided to publicize German industrial might by providing financial backing for the race teams of two automakers, Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz. The results were overwhelming; with almost unlimited budgets, the German teams dominated races in the second half of the 1930's.

One of the 8CTF's, purchased by Count Felice Trossi, did achieve some success. Like a number of drivers in an era when earnings were sparse and racing was considered a gentleman's sport, Trossi was a wealthy nobleman who indulged his passion for speed while supporting struggling car builders like Maserati. In 1938, Trossi's car, now owned by Joel Finn of Roxbury, Conn., either led or set the fastest lap in every event in which it competed.

Unfortunately, the rules in Europe stipulated that all components in a car had to be from the same country as the car itself; the spark plugs, made by Maserati, proved to be the weak link, with the car often failing to finish races.

In the United States, the main sanctioning bodies — the Automobile Association of America and the United States Auto Club — had decided that costs needed to be controlled. Under the new rules, cars built to run in their events had to use engines based on production cylinder blocks rather than racing-only engines. This so-called "junk formula" effectively froze technical development in American racing for almost a decade.

Officials of the Indianapolis 500 adopted European grand prix rules for the 1938 race, clearing the way for an interesting cross-cultural exchange. For one driver, Wilbur Shaw, the potential was apparent. Having driven an older Maserati in the 1936 Vanderbilt Cup race on Long Island, Shaw decided that a new Maserati would be just the thing for the Indy 500.

Shaw ordered one from the factory, and after some negotiation it arrived in his Indianapolis shop in 1939. Unfortunately, a mechanic at the factory had neglected to drain the engine before the car was loaded onto the ship; the water inside froze and the block cracked. A new block was shipped, and Shaw's crew rebuilt the engine in a week using the original internal parts.



1972 Lamborghini Miura SV Photo by Donald Osborne

finish, a feat it repeated the following year. For its 10th birthday in 1948, the car managed to lead the race and set a new average speed record on its way to a fourth-place finish. Only an oil leak that developed in the 55th lap of the 1949 race kept the veteran car from another top-five finish.



1956 Maserati 300S Photo by Nathan Leach Proffer

Shaw's idea paid off — he won the 1939 Indianapolis 500 in the 8CTF, named the Boyle Special, in commanding fashion. The reason was clear: compared with the American competition, the Maserati was from another planet.

**Miles Collier of Naples, Fla., a noted collector and owner of many important racing and sports cars, owns another of the 8CTF's. "The 8CTF incorporates what was to my mind the best technical build quality then available in Italy," he said. "The quality of the elements is breathtaking."**

In Shaw's hands, the 8CTF was finally able to show what it was capable of — he won Indianapolis again in 1940. A threepeat seemed to be in the cards in 1941 until a wire wheel collapsed while Shaw was leading.

The car wasn't through yet. After World War II, it was back at the Brickyard again for the first postwar 500 in 1946. Driven by Ted Horn, it managed a third-place

record on its way to a fourth-place finish. Only an oil leak that developed in the 55th lap of the 1949 race kept the veteran car from another top-five finish.

That wasn't the last time the Boyle Special ran on the Indy track. In 2002, before the Formula One United States Grand Prix, [Michael Schumacher](#) put it through the paces, 63 years after its Indianapolis debut.

Bill Spoerle, chief restoration manager for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum, oversaw replacement of the engine's piston rings in the early 1960's. When asked if it wasn't worrisome to take the Boyle Special out of the museum, he replied: "We do not abuse our racecars.

"I told Schumi, 'Take it easy, keep it down in the revs, it's an old car and I'd hate to see it broken,' " said Mr. Spoerle, using the popular nickname for the Formula One driving champion.



1957 Maserati 450S "Costin Coupe" Photo by Bob Coates

The 8CTF in the Collier Collection carries the name of Lucy O'Reilly Schell, an Irish heiress who ran a race team with her American husband and continued after his death in an accident in 1939. She entered the 500 with her 8CTF with two French drivers, René Dreyfus and René LeBègue. Sharing the car, they finished in 10th place in 1940. The car was driven the following year by Dennis Nalon and finished in 15th place.

The Count Trossi 8CTF owned by Mr. Finn, who has been racing for more than 40 years, is now active on the vintage racing circuit, with perhaps the most racing miles of any of the three. Mr. Finn has driven the car in at least 20 events across the country in the 24 years he has owned it.

Because it was common for engine and chassis parts to be swapped among active racecars, he found it necessary to buy another of the 8CTF's, the Lucy O'Reilly Schell car, to get back some of the original parts for his. Mr. Finn also rates the Maserati as the best of the prewar grand prix cars; as the owner of Bugatti, Talbot and Mercedes-Benz racecars, he is in a good position to make such a judgment.