

Escape Road

The competition Bugattis: Beauty is as beauty does

By Alex Gabbard

Among decades of magnificently creative automobiles, how can one line of cars emerge and remain universally renowned as *the* quintessential sports/racing automobile? Perhaps it's because of man's subliminal desire for perfection in shape and proportion. Perhaps it's simply that of all the cars made, one must emerge on top. Perhaps it's no more than the recognition that a particular design is just right.

Shape? Proportion? Beauty? Yes. But somehow these descriptions are incomplete, for to be considered true sports racers they must prove themselves in the heat of competition. And when a line wins 1,045 races in one year (!), and more than 2,000 in total as did the famed Bugattis, is that proof? Undoubtedly. But to be "quintessential," there must be more. Whatever Bugattis have, and however you describe it, the spell they cast is timeless.

Maybe it's because Ettore Bugatti came from a family of artists that he produced cars that are regarded among automobilia's greatest artistic works. But unlike artworks whose nature is static, Bugatti's cars were dynamic expressions of form and function; his was the ability to design and build cars that were fast and durable.

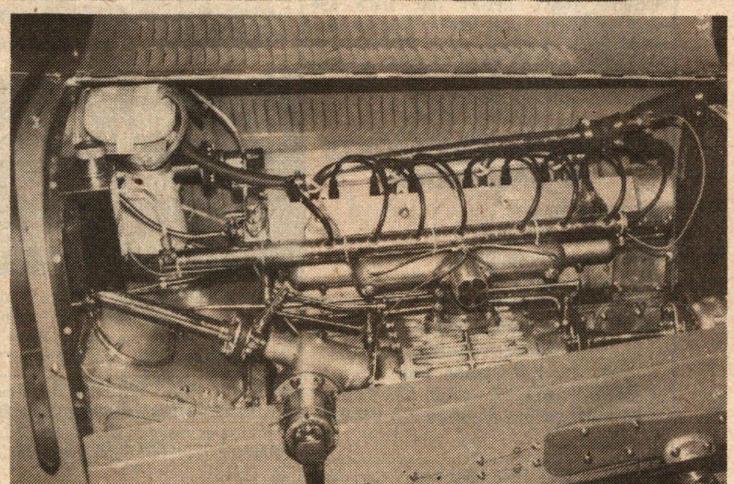
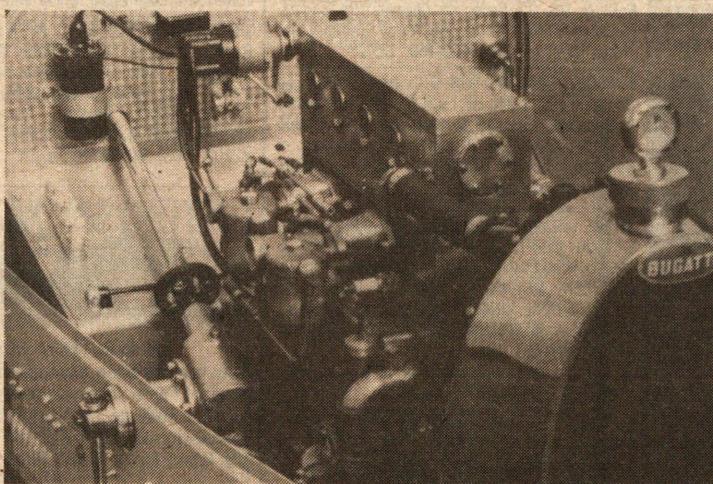
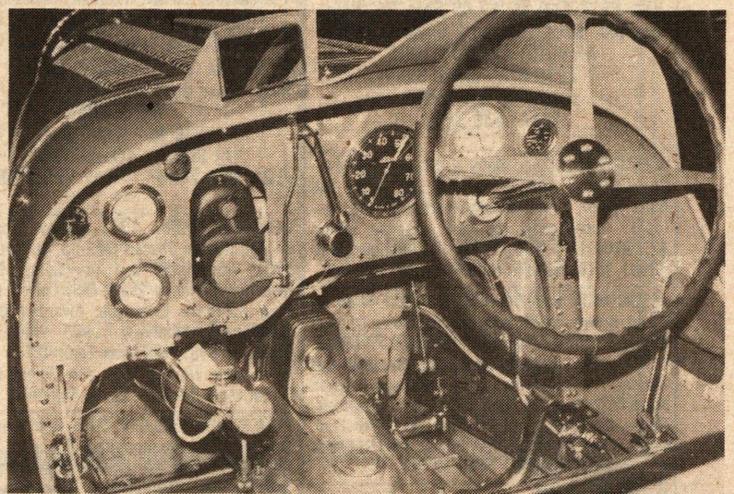
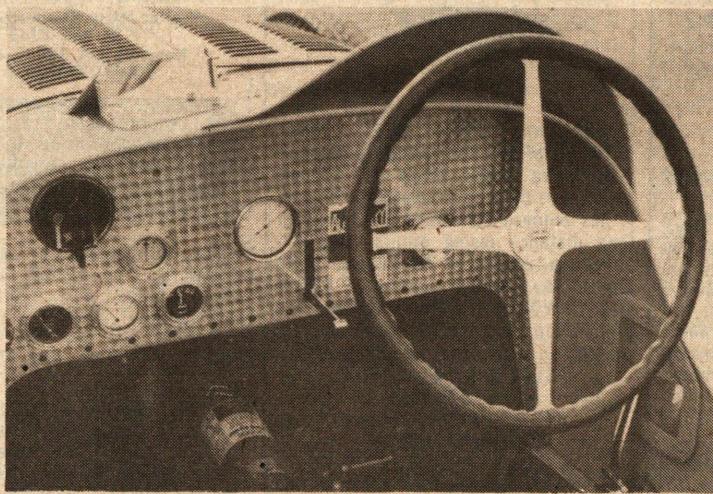
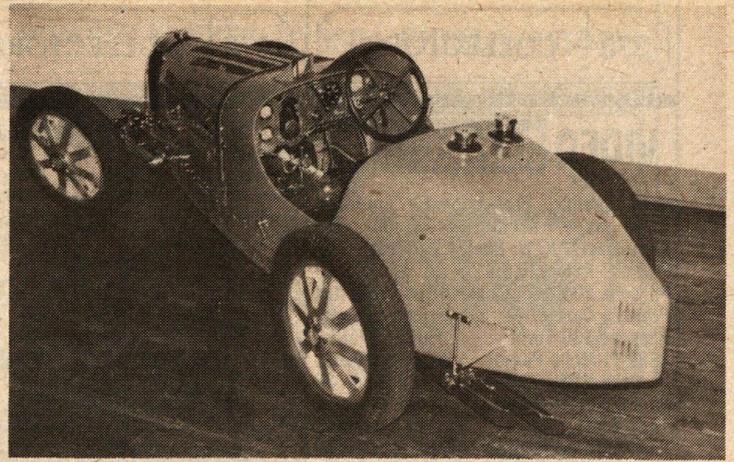
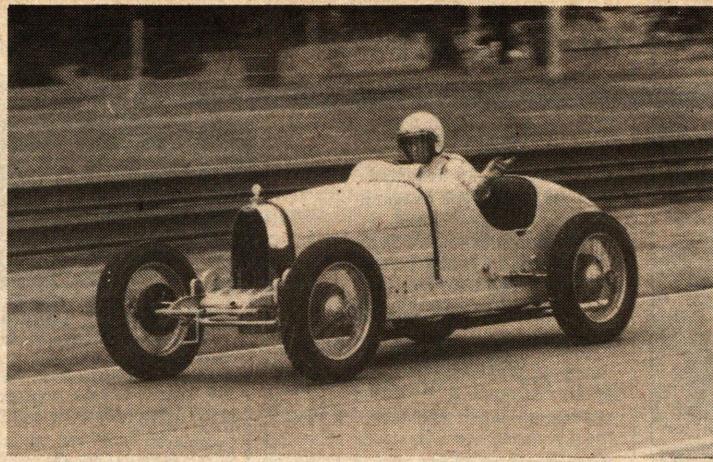
For about six years following 1924, Bugattis were the world's premier Grand Prix cars, and remained competitive through 1934. Whetting the competitive edge of Bugatti and other GP teams in the early '20s were the triumphs of FIAT, whose works cars set the temper of Grand Prix racing for years to come. FIAT launched the ascendancy of in-line eight-cylinder engines, then introduced supercharging, then dominated the circuits of Europe, then vanished. Bugatti recognized the advantages of a number of FIAT features, which he used.

Among Bugatti's first efforts was his "tank-like" streamliner of 1923, the Type 30. The Type 35 followed in 1924 and included many technical improvements to the eight-cylinder engine, better brakes and the famous "boat-tail" body.

Bugatti GP cars were conceived in the framework of production racing cars intended to be sold in large enough quantities to earn a profit but at a price that would attract amateurs. Thus, they had to be simple, reliable, fast enough to win and rugged enough to finish, which they did regularly. The Type 35 was first raced at the French GP of 1924. Some seven versions followed as rules changed; other similar cars were the Types 37 and 39, then the Types 51 and 59 of later years. Each came in response to some set of rules and showed evolution required to stay competitive.

Rules changes for 1925 included dropping both the riding mechanic and engine size. The new formula called for 1.5 liters, and without the mechanic Bugatti streamlined the bodies with covers over the vacant seat, provoking a dispute with the Delage team manager at the French GP that year. Bugatti withdrew his cars, then was persuaded to run them, which he did with the covers installed.

That year was the first big one for the Molsheim works, which netted five Grand Prix wins and several high finishes with cars considerably down on power compared to those of competitors. The following year saw the lowest depths of Grand Prix racing of the era, as teams found it increasingly more costly to race. The French GP that year was a fiasco; three Bugattis were the only cars lined up



At left, top to bottom, Bugatti's four-cylinder Type 37; at right, the Type 51, powered by a DOHC eight-cylinder supercharged engine.

Alex Gabbard photos

at the fall of the flag. At the Spanish GP only Bugatti and Delage competed.

Like other builders, Bugatti responded to lack of power with supercharging, which was applied to the 1.5-, 2.0- and 2.3-liter cars in the Type 35 line. The 35B, among the best known of the line, developed 135bhp at 5,300 RPM. Zero to 100 MPH came up in a quick 15 seconds. With a 3.6:1 final drive gearing, its four-speed transmission delivered 50 MPH in first, about 72 in second, 100 flat in third and on to over 120 in fourth (remember, this was 1926!) and if you wanted more, an alternate gear set of 3.37:1 added about 10 more MPH.

From 1927 onward, interest in Grand Prix racing was at an all-time low, as fuel consumption rules, weight restrictions and other ideas were instituted, and rarely enforced, in hopes of promoting greater enthusiasm. Delage, FIAT and Talbot withdrew from racing in 1928, leaving the field clear for Bugatti. "International" racing saw exclusive Bugatti Grand Prix races held at LeMans from 1928 to '30 that were run under no official formula.

Nevertheless, many of these races proved exciting and were showcases for driver skill. Louis Chiron and Albert Divo, two of the greatest French drivers of the day, emerged as a formidable team with Chiron taking four Grands Prix.

Road racing five laps over Sicily's tough 67-mile circuit, the Targa Florio, furnished the most impressive string of victories for Bugatti. Opposition, unlike GP racing, was stiff and involved no less than 22 other marques. Bugatti won the Targa five years running, from 1925 through '29,

which set Italian pride aflame. Chiron and Divo, the latter having won the two previous Targas, served notice in 1930 that Bugatti was back to defend its tradition. A formidable Alfa Romeo team composed of Achille Varzi, Giuseppe Campari and Tazio Nuvolari let it be known that the blue French cars had had their day. The race was dramatic:

Hearing echoes of his own car, Divo was convinced he was being closely followed by another car. Turning to see, he was distracted long enough to crash his Bugatti into a bridge abutment. Chiron carried on and showed clearly that Varzi's P2 Alfa was the only car capable of beating him. But, distracted when his young and inexperienced riding mechanic became ill, Chiron skidded into a retaining wall and damaged two wheels that had to be changed before continuing.

Varzi, too, had his problems. He lost his spare tire, which produced a puncture in his fuel tank. With victory in sight, he had to stop for fuel, but a mixup with his mechanic caused a spill that caught fire on the hot exhaust pipe. Undaunted, he roared off while crouching close to the wheel to give his mechanic room to beat the flames down with a seat cushion.

Ignoring his engine's rev limit, Varzi pressed the Alfa for all it was worth on the final five-mile sprint to the finish and beat Chiron by two minutes. With that victory, Bugatti's fortunes began to decline and Alfa Romeo's rose steadily.

With the P2, Alfa posed the greatest threat to Bugatti in the early 1930s, but Bugatti responded with the Type 50 cars with improved DOHC supercharged

engines. Then Alfa came out with its P3, which eclipsed the Type 51. Bugatti's rebuttal was the Type 59, which has been proclaimed by Bugatti buffs as the epitome of the classic Grand Prix racing car prior to the emergence of the Germanic age of Mercedes and Auto-Union and independent suspensions.

The Type 59 twin-cam straight-eight originally displaced 2.8 liters and delivered 230bhp but by 1934 went to 3.3 liters and 240bhp. Still later engines displaced 4.7 liters.

However, Bugatti's small automotive concern, whose financing depended solely on selling expensive cars to wealthy clientele, faced the forces of Mussolini, who was eager for the acclaim generated by Grand Prix victories in the name of Fascist Italy. Thus, Alfa Romeo gained big military contracts which offset the costs of racing, while no such benefits were handed Bugatti in the doldrums of politically paralyzed France. In an era when many advances in GP car design were rapidly developing, the precepts under which the Type 59 was designed were outdated even before the first car was finished. Like most other last efforts in a changing world, the Type 59 failed to meet the expectations of the drivers although Rene Dreyfus, former champion driver of France and highly successful Type 35 driver, did beat Alfa and the German GP blitzkrieg at the Belgian Grand Prix in a 59.

The Type 59 may have been Bugatti's swan song in Grand Prix racing, but what a quintessential song it sang.

