

# SPRINT VELOCE ZAGATO

## 1956-1959

when all the stars were aligned



photo by Ruggero Santilli

*History is often a series of connected events – if one link is missing, the others might never happen. For instance, if an obscure and long-forgotten race course official had stayed at his post in 1956, then perhaps there might never have been a Sprint Veloce Zagato (SVZ), Sprint Zagato (SZ), the TZ or TZ2, and the Sprint Speciale would not have gone into series production. But all the stars seemed to be aligned that day, despite a heavy downpour.*

The starting point of major racing success for the Giulietta series began with six Alfa Romeo Sprint Veloces at the Mille Miglia on April 28, 1956. One of the cars, driven by Sgorbate and Zanelli, won its class. A good beginning, but surprisingly not the essential component in the

development of the Giulietta. It all centers on another Sprint Veloce, the one that crashed and changed Alfa racing history. Driven by brothers Carlo and Dore Leto di Priolo, their Alfa slid on a treacherous section of the muddy course. A race official assigned to signal and warn drivers had instead decided to seek refuge from the downpour. The new Sprint Veloce slid down a steep embankment into a creek bed and was demolished.

### **Act 1: What do you do with a broken SV?**

The driver was lucky not to have been killed in the crash because a Giulietta steering shaft is of typical 1950s design: a solid metal shaft affixed to the steering gear box at near the front of the vehicle, then angled back and aimed at the driver's chest. From the only known photo, it appears



that the car was rolled. Despite this, no one was seriously hurt, so soon the Leto brothers had a wrecked Sprint Veloce to place in their garage next to their Fiat 8V by Zagato. The Zagato brothers, Gianni and Elio, had a reputation for making new bodies for cars that made them lighter and faster.

### **Act 2: Enter Zagato**

Craftsmen hammered metal into a shape based on sketches by Gianni Zagato. The new car was recognizable as Giulietta, but the front and rear had been pushed downward in the Zagato style of the period. They named their variant of the Sprint Veloce the Sprint Veloce Zagato. The new aluminum body was 240 pounds lighter than the one from Alfa Romeo. Zagato bodies also tended to be relatively fragile, not as strong or rigid as those designed by Bertone, but all a racecar needs to do is survive a single season while winning.

### **Act 3: A racing legend is born.**

The SVZ's debut was at the Coppa Intereuropa on September 2, 1956. It was the fastest car in its class during qualifying, then beat Jo Bonner's second-place Sprint Veloce by 22 seconds in the race. The Zagato version of the Sprint Veloce had defeated the factory cars as well as setting a new speed record for the race despite running in the rain.

That fact probably gave Alfa Romeo a bad case of corporate indigestion, despite the SVZ wearing an Alfa badge on its grille. Shortly after, Nuccio



From the top: The crashed Giulietta Sprint Veloce of the Leto di Priolo brothers at the Mille Miglia of 1956 (*La Manovella*, July 2001) • The Abate SVZ at the Mille Miglia of 1957 (*Anselmi*) • Sprint and the first SVZ (*Anselmi*)



The 1957 SVZ of Carlo Mario Abate, one of the three SVZs built that year. (Anselmi).

Bertone was requested to design a faster Giulietta. Bertone's chief designer, Franco Scaglione, the creator of the Giulietta Sprint's form, took pen in hand and sketched a Giulietta-scaled GT from his 1900-based BAT 9 aerodynamic study of the prior year, the first Sprint Speciale. Instead of Zagato's intuitive shapes that called for decreasing body mass and length plus a low front end, Scaglione's design channeled air around a long, smooth body with an abruptly sliced tail. However, aerodynamics solved only one part of the equation. The slippery shape of an early low-nose Sprint Speciale would pass an SVZ of the same horsepower on an oval track or at Bonneville, but the shorter and lighter SVZ was more agile for driving in Italian road races.

#### **Act 4: Back to the Future**

By 1959 Alfa Romeo management changed direction, presumably with input from Consalvo Sanesi, the head of Alfa model testing and development. Sanesi had been an Alfa Corse driver and chief tester for both production and racing cars. His lap times in the 159 Alfetta at Monaco were within approximately one second of Fangio's, but Sanesi, a company employee, was under orders not to get ahead of the Grand Prix stars. He was that great a driver, but for Sanesi it was part of his daily job of testing and making adjustments. The new plan was for Zagato use Alfa's resources to develop the SVZ into an official Alfa Romeo, the Sprint Zagato. Bertone's more robust design and handsome shape made the Sprint Speciale an excellent choice as a performance GT for wealthy gentlemen who could



The first SVZ, driven by Massimo Leto di Preola (Anselmi).



The SVZs of 1958-1959 had shapes that foretold of the Sprint Zagato to follow. This photo shows a 1958 SVZ, chassis #4458, driven by Sergio Cannara in 1959. This car is now lives in Miami, Florida (photo courtesy of Ruggero Santilli)

also race it on weekends. It went into production.

Meanwhile, the higher top speed of the larger and heavier Sprint Speciale caused Elio Zagato to blink. In 1960, Zagato hired a new chief designer named Ercole Spada. He applied many of the same principles to the Sprint Zagato that Scaglione used for the Sprint Speciale, resulting in the SZ Coda Tronca, the TZ and a golden era of Alfa Romeo in racing. But that is another part of the story for another time.

Not all people are born to be heroes. If not for the cowardly race official deserting his post to find shelter from the rain, the brothers Leto would have remained a footnote for possibly finishing fifth or sixth in the 1300cc Class at the 1956 Mille Miglia in an Alfa Romeo Sprint Veloce, then driving home, parking it in their garage next to the Fiat...and there the story might have ended.