

BLACK BEAUTY Mercedes-Benz SSK
by Mark Gillies
Photography by Martyn Goddard

This was an appointment I had long been looking forward to. For years, I'd heard the screech of their superchargers and the bellow of their exhausts, been impressed by their sheer physical presence and their wonderfully rakish lines, but wondered just how good they actually are.

And here in front of me is an example of Germany's finest sports car of the late 1920's. Not just an example, either, but the most spectacular looking and, probably, the one in the best and most authentic condition. Mercedes-Benz SSK chassis 36038 is not only forever linked with the great Italian racing driver Count Felice Trossi, but the car has been rebuilt so beautifully - by Paul Russell and Company of Essex, Massachusetts - that it won the Best of Show prize in the 1993 Pebble Beach Concours, the most glittering old-car event in the world.

It presents a wonderful sight, this car. Most SSK (or 38/250) Mercedes came out of the factory wearing skimpy two-seater bodywork, with cycle-type wings and the spare tyres perched on the body's rear deck. But this SSK is fitted with flowing wings and tail, and has the aggressively raked lines of a masterpiece from Touring or Zagato. The shape reduces the car's massive size, and has a compelling beauty, despite the slightly odd juxtaposition of voluminous, sweeping front wings and tall, proud V-radiator.

Yet this remarkable car's shape was the combined effort of Trossi and an unknown British coach builder, Willie White, whose panel bending skills made Trossi's vision into metal. Cleverly, he extended the bonnet sides to align with the racy V-windshield, and lowered the line of bonnet and radiator to give a more elegant look. The steel wings are glorious pontoon affairs that look as spectacular in plain view as in profile. And for an unknown, some of White's detailing was gorgeous: the way that the rear wings and tail have matching spines, the rear wing spats that have Mercedes three-pointed star motifs on them, and the sculpted paneling over the dumbirons.

Having been restored by Russell's Company, of course, the car's condition is outstanding. The black paint work is lustrous, the black leather trim is unmarked, and the chrome gleams with flawless perfection. Burnished copper brake drums - better to aid heat dissipation - glow behind the black painted wheels shod with 6.00/6.50 Michelin tyres on 18 inch diameter rims, smaller than the standard 20 inch SSK fare. It's almost too good to drive, but that's why I'm here.

Despite the fact that it occupies almost as much road space as a modern Mercedes 500SEL, there's space for just two in the SSK's cramped cabin. It's not easy to enter the cabin either, for there are no doors, and the rear wing encroaches on the lowest part of the cockpit. It's a feat of athletic endeavor to get in without resting your feet on the black hide. Once ensconced, you sit high in relation to the bodywork, and view the world over the windscreen and along a bonnet that could pass as the foredeck of a reasonably sized boat.

The cabin's a good place in which to be. The massive steering wheel, inner cockpit sides and seats are all trimmed fabulously in leather, while the floor is rather more prosaically covered in black rubber. The instrument panel is engine-turned, and houses a mass of dials: most are classic Mercedes white-on-black instruments including the standard Junghans clock, but the Jaeger ammeter was almost certainly bought by White to finish off the fully stocked panel. Most of the gauges are self explanatory, but there's an additional one for fuel pressure, because that's supplied by hand pumped air - there's a handle peering under the dash on the passenger's side. The little knob labelled 'ATHMOS' next to the steering column pumps fuel into the system for cold starting. The huge

tachometer has handwritten markings all over it, courtesy of Trossi, who conveniently worked out the speeds in the gears: at 4000rpm in top, the car should do 248km/h, but I'm not likely to find that out in a land where 100km/h is over the national speed limit.

It has a slightly odd driving position, this car. You sit close to that oversized wheel, straight backed, with your legs bent in order to operate the pedals. The gearlever, large enough to be a medieval knight's sword, sprouts by your right hand, alongside the chromed handbrake. Although the gate is laid out on a conventional H, with first up and towards you (reverse requires that you lift the lever up, and over to your left) the throws are long and wide. To the right of the gearlever, there's a little chromed knob that operate the exhaust cut-out, and there's also a little button hidden away to your left, by the dashboard's extremity, that works the high/low beam.

Starting drill is complicated even by vintage-car standards, so the average driver of today is unlikely to be able to drive off in this delightful machine. You flick the lever on the chromed panel to the left of the wheel to 'BM' (Battery/Magneto), turn the ignition key 'on', then play around with the levers on either side of the steering-wheel boss. Check that the right-hand one, for the ignition advance and retard, is shut (that is, fully retarded), that the hand throttle on the left side is closed, stroke the hand pump under the dash a few times to ensure that there's some fuel pressure registering on the gauge, caress the throttle pedal and press the starter button. If you've got everything right, the mighty engine fires up with a rumbustious bellow, a screech from the supercharger, and a coating of fuel-rich black smoke from the exhaust.

It's one hell of an engine, the SSK unit. It's monstrous in size, fully occupying the space under that huge bonnet. Elegantly finished in black, offset by twin engine-turned Pallas carburetors and cam cover, and magnesium for its supercharger casing and inlet manifold, this 7069cc unit has six cylinders of 100mm bore and 150mm stroke. The lengthy crankshaft runs in four main bearings, and the two valves per cylinder are operated by a single overhead camshaft, which is driven off the rear of the crank via a vertical shaft and helical gears. A two-vane, two-lobe Roots-type supercharger is driven off the nose of the crank, and blows air through the carburetors - most superchargers suck air/fuel mixture from the carbs. Twin plugs per cylinder provide the ignition, one bank of six plugs being controlled by a magneto, the other half-dozen by coil and distributor.

This particular car is fitted with one of the rare 'elephant' blowers, which were mainly fitted to the firm's racing cars. This is 317mm tall, rather than the standard car's 283mm, with an inlet port of 70mm x 111mm, instead of 64 x 107. It also blows at around 12psi, compared with the normal SSK's 10psi. This car's engine has the racing-type twin oil pump, along with domed racing pistons which help boost output to 300bhp at 3400rpm, with a colossal 70.1kgm of torque at 2000rpm. The blower isn't permanently engaged, its use being activated by extreme depression of the throttle pedal.

It provides one hell of a lot of performance, too, accompanied by a soundtrack that's Wagnerian in its drama and cacophony. At idle, there's this wonderful brassy exhaust note overlain by the whining of the blower, but as you rev the engine, there's immense exhaust boom, a deep roar that's allied to a clattering of the valve gear and a shriek of meshing metal as the blower's extra power arrives after heavy provocation from your right foot. You can quite easily stick the car into fourth gear early, and let that massive torque lug you from well under 1000rpm, but there's a great deal more aural satisfaction from letting the motor have its head. There are also some wonderful noises off, the engine sounding like a demented Gatling Gun as I lift off the gas at speed.

It's not sound without any fury, either. Despite a severe weight penalty of around 1500kg, the SSK shifts at the top end in a way that few prewar sports cars can. Acceleration from rest is blunted by the bulk, but it doesn't take long to get it up to more than 150km/h in third gear, and on a couple of

occasions I'm pulling more than 160km/h according to the writing on the tacho. Once the car is rolling, it's very fast, and it's certainly easy to believe the 200km/h that less well-endowed SSKs could manage in tests in the 1920s. Really prod the throttle hard at speed - and it takes some effort, for the first part of the right pedal's travel is spongy by comparison - and the supercharger comes in with a banshee wail that signifies the arrival of even more motive force. At full tilt, with the supercharger engaged, with the wind rasping over the screen and into your eyes, and the maelstrom of engine and exhaust noise, the SSK is an utterly stirring machine.

Another surprising aspect, apart from the car's sheer speed, is the gear change, which is far more pleasant than a comparable Bentley's, even though it requires good timing in order to achieve sweet shifts. First to second needs a double declutch movement, which is too slow for a good change from second to third: a fast, conventional shift is what's needed here. Third to fourth seems best with very rapid double declutching, whereas downshifting needs double-clutch footwork and healthy doses of revs in neutral. The worst part of the gear change is avoiding a crunch of chattering gear teeth as you move the lever through neutral: really louse things up, and you have to stop the car and start again. The clutch is heavy but progressive, and doesn't, by the ensuing smell, seem to enjoy hill- and standing-starts.

None of the controls are light. The brakes need a monumental shove, and it's best to remember that these drums are slowing down a very fast, very heavy car: they're easily the worst feature of the SSK, and on a par (for awfulness) with the anchors fitted to vintage Bentleys. The gearshift demands positive movements, and is in no way delicate. And the steering needs Arnold Schwarzenegger inputs at low speed to deflect the car from the straight ahead. The worm-and-nut arrangement is very high geared and very accurate, but is never less than meaty in its weighting.

The SSK chassis is conventional enough for its day, with deep channel section sidemembers to its ladder-type frame, which has a 2949.6mm wheelbase. Semi-elliptic springs and beam axles are fitted at both ends, with Houdaille hydraulic dampers in the front and SIATA (cockpit adjustable) hydraulic units in the rear. This particular car has the late-model torque reaction arms fitted to the front axle.

The chassis works - again - surprisingly well. I'm normally not much of a fan of larger prewar cars, because they substitute brute force for handling delicacy, an asset that helped cars built by makers such as Bugatti and Alfa on the Continent, and Riley and Aston Martin in England. But the SSK is extremely good. You have to manhandle it into slower corners, overcoming initial understeer by the judicious use of the right boot, but it sticks remarkably well, and in a pleasantly neutral manner. Around the faster stuff, its grip is tenacious for a prewar car, the balance remarkably neutral, and just small movements are needed to change course. It would be fatuous to say that you think it through bends, but it's remarkably deft in fast corners, and rides bumps exceptionally well for a car of this age: ridges cause the rear end to hop, and there's a touch of scuttle shake over poor surfaces, but it pummels most irregularities into submission.

If you're daring - this is Ralph Lauren's car, and it is rather valuable, after all - the tail will hang loose, but in a nicely controllable way. At speed, there's a slight deadness to the steering, but the car tracks well. I can't say how much I enjoyed driving this SSK: it really was a treat, an assault on the senses of the most exhilarating kind. And the pleasure was enhanced by realizing that this is one of the most historic examples of one of the most glamorous of sports cars.

The SSK was the ultimate road-going development of a line of cars whose development was started by Ferdinand Porsche - later to design the Auto Union GP car, the Volkswagen Beetle and his eponymous 356 sports car - in 1924. Called the 15/70/100, Porsche's design for Mercedes was a 4.0-litre six-cylinder supercharged touring car that evolved first into the 6.3-litre 24/100/140, then into

the more sporting 33/180K and finally into the magnificent 6.8-litre 36/220 S (Sports) of 1927. By fitting the car with a 7.1-litre engine and a taller radiator, this was transformed in 1928 into the 38/250 SS (Super Sports), and by shortening the chassis from 3400mm to 2949.6 as well as increasing the power from around 200bhp to 225 into the SSK (Super Sports Kurz). The rarest and most desirable 38/250 was the lightweight - relatively, that is - SSKL (L for Leicht) racer, which had around 300bhp on tap.

As well as being one of the outstanding sports cars of the late 1920s, the 38/250 model in SS, SSK and SSKL guises had a great competition career, being able to take on both sports cars such as Bentleys and Alfas and racers such as Bugatti and Alfa in Grand Prix. In 1928, for instance, SS works cars were first, second and third in the German (sports car) GP, while Caracciola won both the Semmering and Freiburg hillclimbs in SSK racers. In 1929, Mombberger was third in the German and Italian GPs in an SSK, Caracciola won the sports car TT in an SS and took third place against a horde of more nimble Bugatti type 35s in the inaugural Monaco GP.

The following season, an SSK won the European hillclimb championship, Caracciola took the Irish sports car GP and was sixth in the Mille Miglia. He bettered that result in 1931, winning the classic 1000 mile Italian road race in an SSKL against a horde of more nimble Alfas: it was, quite simply, one of the great drives. The same driver backed it up with a hillclimb title again, a win at Avus, in the German GP and in the Eifelrennen, against Alfa, Maserati and Bugatti opposition. Also in 1931, an SSK finally finished at Le Mans, running in second in the hands of Stoffel and Ivanowsky. By 1932, the SSKL was running out of steam - or rather, the competition was even more fierce - but Manfred von Brauchitsch still won at Avus in a bizarre streamliner that hit 251km/h and averaged 195.6km/h for 200km. Moreover, Hans Stuck still managed to dominate the Continental hillclimbs, finishing the year as Alpine Champion.

This marvelous competition history is one of the reasons that the SSK is so revered. This particular example is a late (1929) model that was sent to Tokyo in chassis form in 1930 before going out to Italy at the back end of the same year. Milanese dealer Carlo Saporiti held onto it for nearly two years before selling it to Italian sportsman Count Felice Trossi, who was later to drive for the works Alfa and Maserati GP teams.

For some unknown reason, Trossi sent the car to England to have its bodywork fitted - I can't find any record of Trossi doing business in England before he loaned Whitney Straight a Duesenberg racer in 1934, but it's not inconceivable that his racing contacts gave him advice. Between its date of first registration in 1932 and 1949, when he died of cancer, Trossi owned the car three times, with two other custodians in between times.

Ricardo Polledo then unsuccessfully tried to import the car into his native Argentina: despairing of success, he sold the car in 1954 to Charlie Stitch, a New York dealer. He passed the car onto collector Carter Schaub who held onto it until 1962. It then ended up in the hands of one of the murkier figures in the old-car world, Ray Jones, who has been responsible for cloning more Bugattis and Mercedes 38/250s than anyone else in the world. There's no doubt he was planning to produce two Trossi SSKs, because he built some body parts for a replica, but fortunately never got any further. From Jones, it went to English collector Anthony Bamford, then back across the Atlantic to Tom Perkins and, in 1988, to Ralph Lauren.

Paul Russell, who restored the car for Lauren, says that all the numbers match on this car, so there's no evidence of Jones tampering with it: and certain features, such as damage to the tail when a roof collapsed on top of it in Stitch's ownership, bore the authenticity out when the car was stripped for a 5000-hour, two-year rebuild. The engine was refurbished using new liners, some new gears were

made for the transmission, and the rear inner wing panels had to be replaced, but mostly Russell and crew just rebuilt and repaired existing components. Some parts were so good, they were left alone, such as the plating on the reflectors of the Markhal lights.

It's certainly a very sympathetic restoration, untouched by the chrome-plated excesses of some American restorers. And it's certainly been put back into fine working fettle, too, the SSK storming along in the grand manner. I've seldom driven a more invigorating old car than this Mercedes, nor a more surprising one: while I still dismiss Bentleys as lumbering trucks, the SSK really is a sports car. Even if it is a very big, very powerful and very manly one.

EPILOGUE:

This pre-publication English version of the article, originally commissioned by the Japanese publication "Supercar Classics", was kindly supplied by writer Mark Gillies.

We have had the pleasure of hosting Mark before, when he came to do a piece on a M-B 540K Cabriolet A (with which we had won the Mercedes-Benz Trophy at the 1992 Pebble Beach). As soon as he heard that we were indeed going to be restoring the Trossi SSK, he was asking us when he could take it around the block. With Mr. Lauren's generous permission, we were pleased to be a part of granting Mark's wish.

We have been a fan of Martyn Goddard's photographic work for many years, going back to 1986 when he documented our cross country trip in a caravan of 300SLs for Automobile Magazine's 'Monterey or Bust' article. Since then we have been fortunate to see him and enjoy the fruit of his labors on a regular basis.

By the way, this SSK is not only a joy to drive but also a joy to behold - judged to be the Best of Show at the 1993 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance just a few weeks before Mark's visit.