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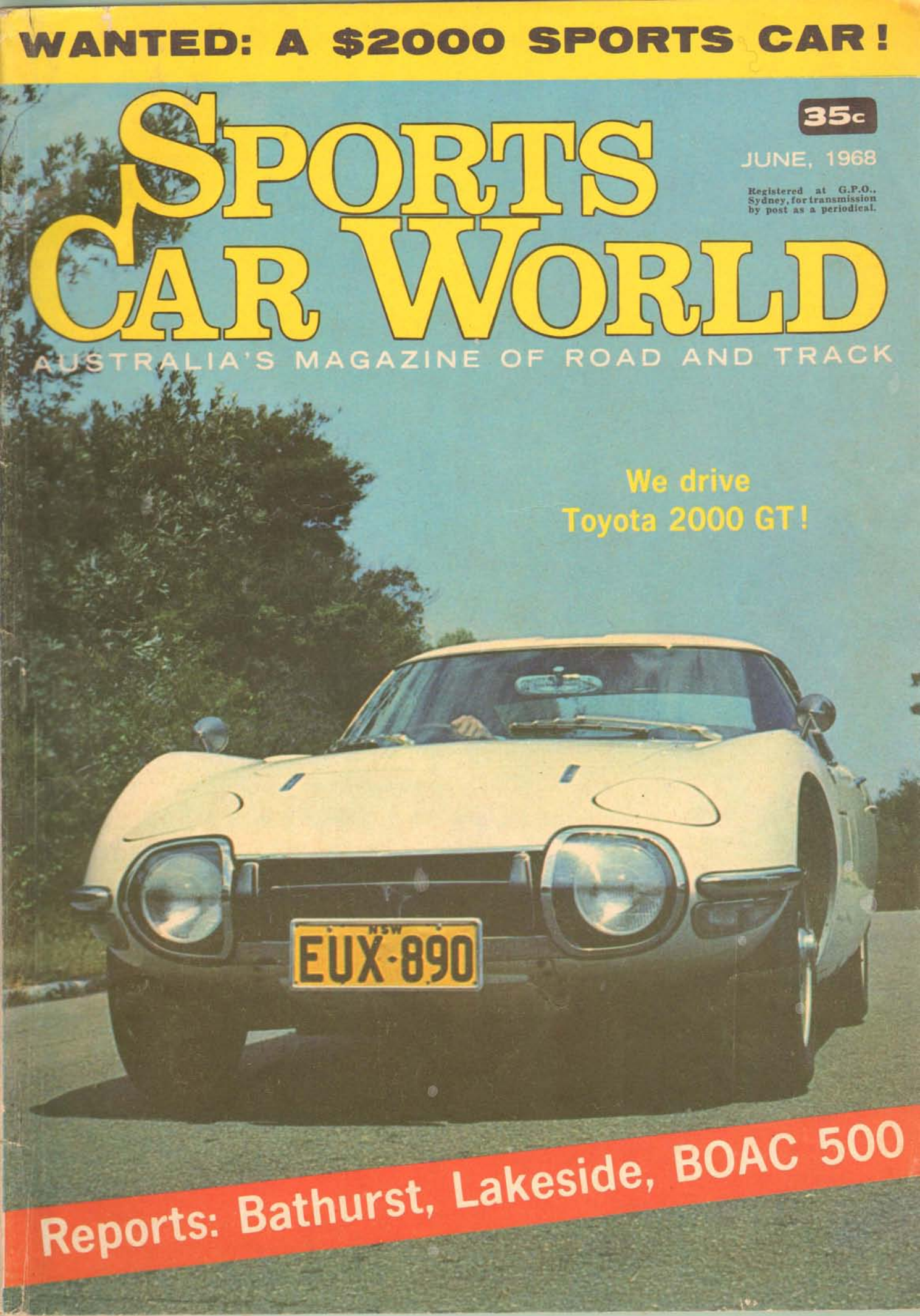

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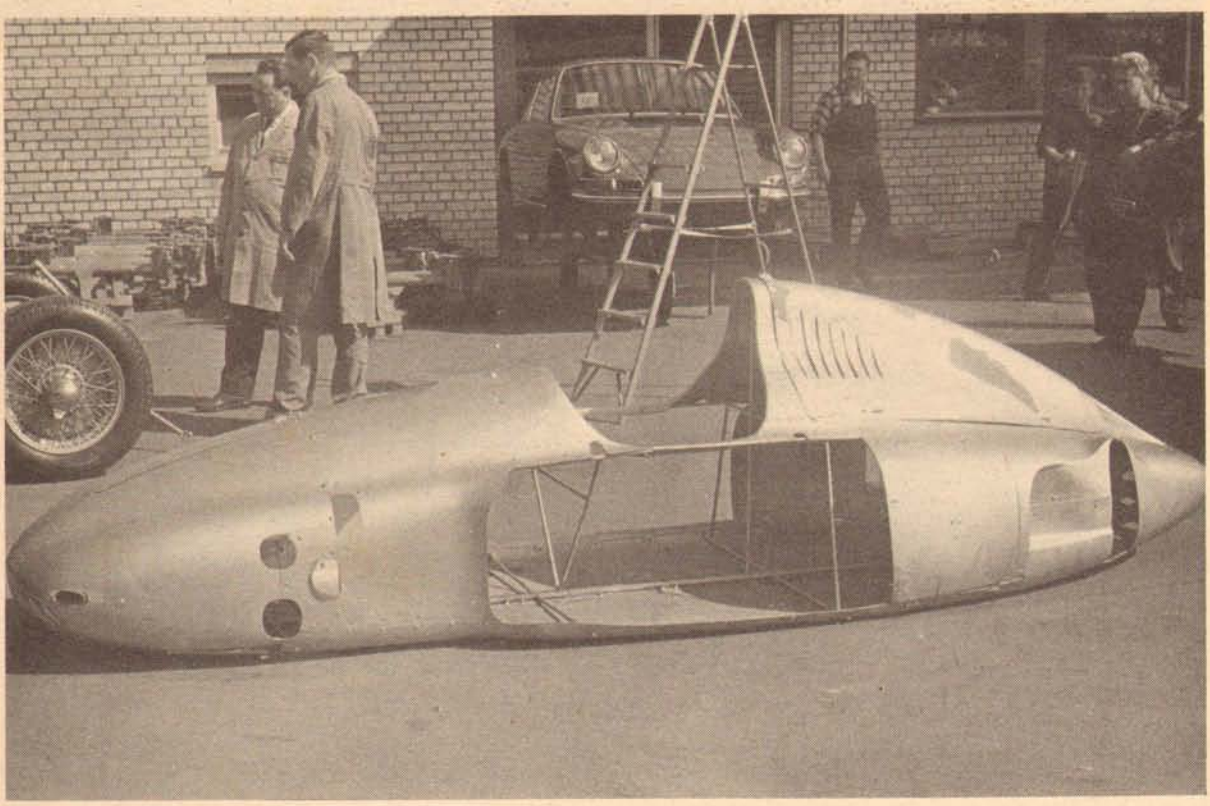


The wafer-thin aluminium space-framem body of the ill-fated Cisitalia rests in the sun at the Porsche factory at Stuttgart. The car had an incredible history that is still not ended.

CISITALIA: A MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION?

In concept it was a winner. It had everything going for it . . . except luck. Here Pedr Davis looks at the ill-starred Cisitalia. The racing car that never flew — and now looks like ending up as an American playboy's toy.

NEVER in the history of motor sport has a grand prix car cost more money, attracted more interest, and been wrapped in more intrigue, hope and despair than the Cisitalia.

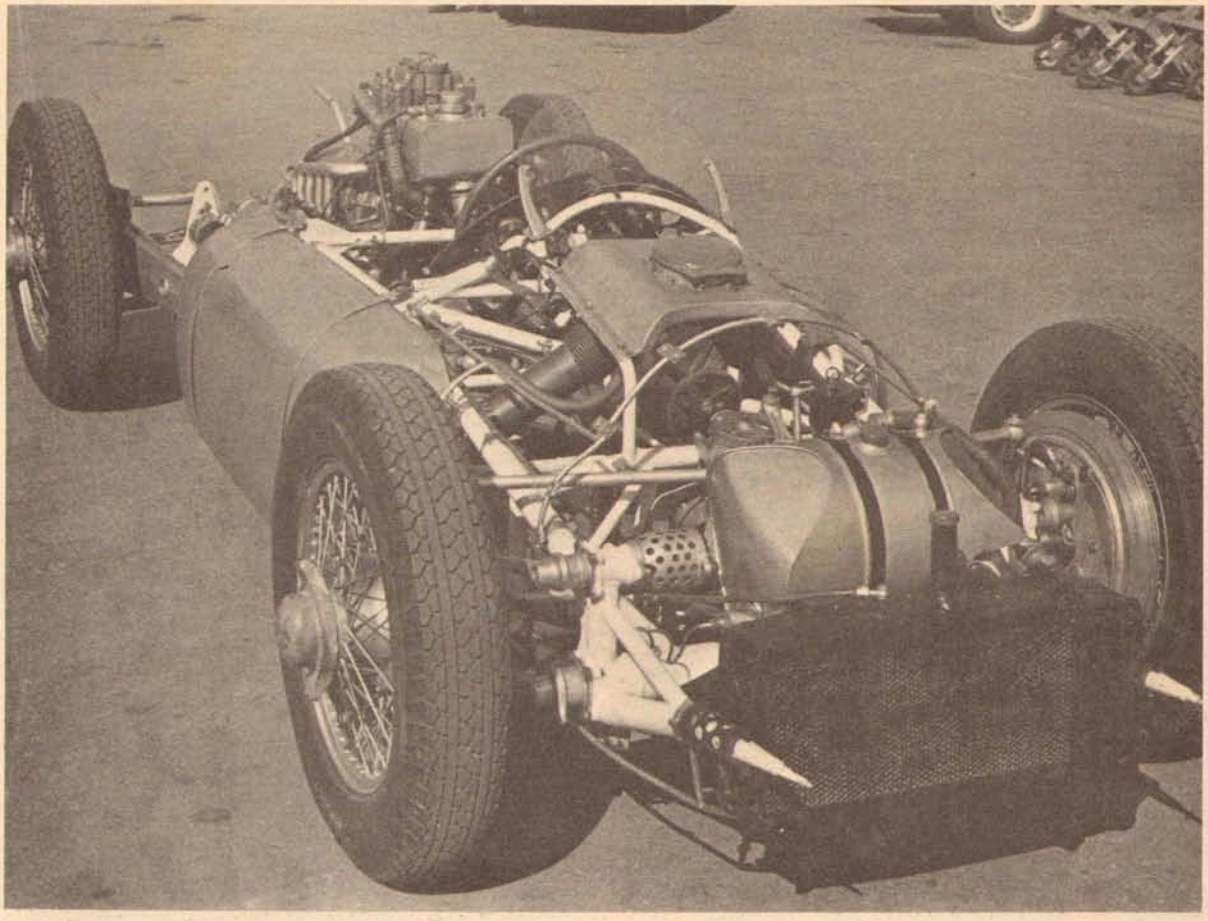
Though a million dollars were sunk in the venture, the car never raced. When it was clear that the Cisitalia could never run in anger, its owners took a final kick at the publicity bucket, announcing they would have a crack at the South American land-speed record. The car managed a paltry 148 mph on the third attempt.

Even a comparison between the 16-cylinder BRM and the Cisitalia makes the former look like a roaring success.

Why then did Perry Porsche, son of Dr Ferdinand Porsche, secretly rescue the battered, cannibalised car from the hinterlands of Argentina? Why has Briggs Cunningham announced with unconcealed glee, that the newly-rebuilt racer is to be exhibited exclusively at his Costa Mesa car museum?

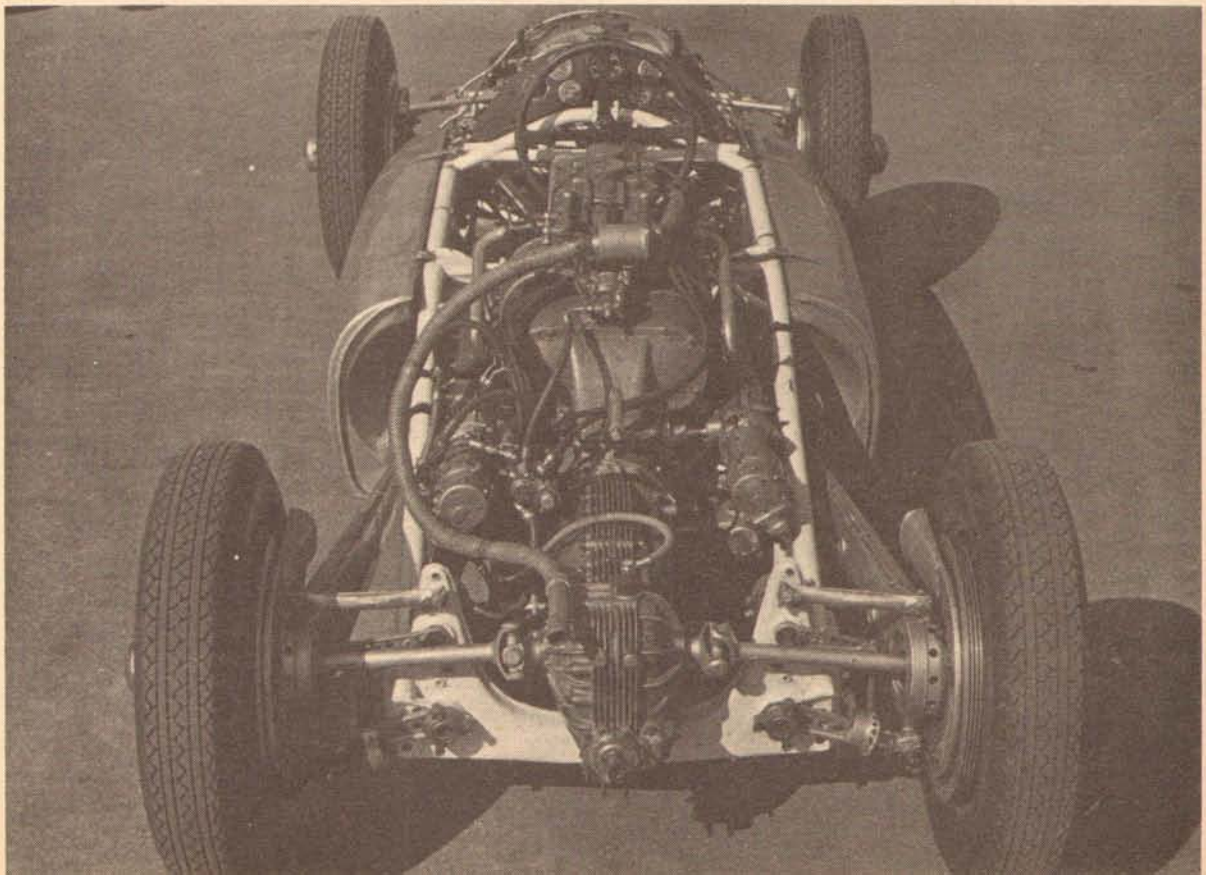
Because the Cisitalia was a brilliant concept and perhaps the zenith of Porsche design; because this car linked such famous names as Tazio Nuvolari, Piero Taruffi, the enigmatic Piero Dusio as well as Dr Porsche and his son Ferry, present head of the Stuttgart factory. Had fortune smiled on the Cisitalia the entire course of motor sport could well have been change.

Piero Dusio, the financier behind the project, is a name little known to any but the best informed enthusiast. Yet few men have had a bigger influence on motor sport. In a few years after World War II he created a new grand prix category, a new kind of sports car, and a new concept of styling. He also conceived the Cisitalia



Naked but not unashamed. The front view of the unfortunate Cisitalia showing the design that was inspired by a bundle of old bicycle frames. It could be used as four or two wheel drive at will.

The Cisitalia's Other End. Its water-cooled engine had two banks of six cylinders horizontally opposed, each bank with its own supercharger. But the 12-cylinder engine didn't fire for years.



Dusio was an industrialist who raced cars as a hobby and built anything that made money. When the war ended, he had a lot of bicycle tubing on hand. So he designed a space-frame racing car and dropped in a hot Fiat 1100 engine. The little machine weighed only 800 lb and managed 65 bhp. It could reach 100 mph, and was named the Cisitalia.

So promising was the car that Dusio retained Piero Taruffi to manage his new racing department. In the summer of 1946, a gaggle of six Cisitalias driven by Nuvolari, Taruffi, Cortese, Chiron, Biondetti and Dusio took the field. Opposition included Gordini, with his famous Simca, a few Maseratis and a host of Fiat-based specials.

The Cisitalias immediately took command of the race. Their high power-to-weight ratio and tenacious roadholding were superior to anything on the track. As boss, Dusio was allowed to come home first, followed by his five stablemates bumper-to-bumper.

The new car and its successors were widely credited with starting the FIA Formula Two in 1948; the little monoposto certainly dominated the scene during the early days of the new formula.

The lightning success of his monoposto lifted Dusio's sights to the sublime heights. Why not enter grand prix racing? Why not mass produce a sports car?

It was at this stage that the Porsche family became involved. Even today there is no telling who did the lion's share of the designing. The records show that the Cisitalia GP was the work of Dr Ferdinand Porsche. But it is also known that the car was substantially designed while the veteran designer was in a French prison, having been arrested (on rather obscure grounds) by the French Occupation Forces.

The arrest of his father was one of two coincidences which preceded the decision of Ferry Porsche to start work on the Cisitalia. The second was that the Porsche concern already had evolved a 1½ litre GP car between the time Dr Porsche left Auto Union and the beginning of World War II.

While Porsche was in prison Piero Dusio approached young Ferry asking the firm to design the most advanced GP racing car in the world. At that time, Ferry was desperately trying to raise one million francs — the sum demanded by the French as surety before they would release his father. The new design job seemed like an act of God. For the wealthy Dusio offered to lay down a substantial advance — in francs if need be — to secure the release of Dr Porsche.

The actual release took many months but meanwhile a team headed by Ferry Porsche and Karl Rabe started designing.

They had plenty of material to draw on. Dr Porsche had done considerable work on a 1½ litre rear-engined racing car in 1939 when a 1½ litre formula was being mooted. Auto Union too, had done a similar exercise. Tests with a single cylinder led them to believe that they could get 327 bhp from a complete 12-cylinder engine. Some sources say Auto Union built a prototype racer and that it ended up in Russian hands, via Czechoslovakia.

Be that as it may, the fact is that when Dr Porsche finally got out of gaol in August 1947 — a 72-year-old man broken in health — he is reported to have studied the plans of the Cisitalia and said: "I would not change a single bolt."

The water-cooled engine featured two banks of six cylinders, horizontally opposed. Each bank had its own supercharger. Chains drove the dohc valve operation. The engine was at the back of the space frame. It could drive all four wheels or the rear two only, at the driver's option. An electric disengaging unit allowed the driver to use 4wd for hard acceleration in the lower gears, then switch to two-wheel drive for fast runs down the straight. Power went to the final drive by a five-speed gearbox, equipped with a motor cycle-type gear shift.

Ferry Porsche: Went to court to try and win custody of the Cisitalia — then spent a huge sum on a secret hunt for the car in Argentina.

The 1492 cc engine ran on a compression of 15 to 1 and developed 450 bhp (din) at 10,500 rpm or 500 bhp at 12,000 rpm. The all-syncromesh gearbox was mounted in front of the rear axle. Equipped with an aluminium body, the remarkable car was only 13 ft 2 ins. long and weighed 1600 lb.

While the Porsche concern was responsible for the design, Dusio undertook to build the car. For some extraordinary reason he scorned suggestions that specialists be called in to make intricate components under sub-contract. Having decided to later manufacture sports cars, Dusio started to equip his small factory with expensive production machinery.

He was then virtually hand-building his 1100 cc Cisitalia sports car (with exquisite Farina coachwork) as well as his 1100 cc racing cars. The vast expenditure on new plant quickly drained away his working capital.

The project might have died on the spot had not Tazio Nuvolari entered the scene. Italy's best-known racing driver, he was, even in 1947, a remarkably clever, if ageing, competitor. Nuvolari first drove a Cisitalia monoposto in its maiden race and for the 1947 Mille Miglia he took one of the Cisitalia open sports models. Although

the little car had only 56 bhp, Nuvolari put up an astonishing performance. He would have won the Mille Miglia outright had he not lost 20 minutes changing a magneto in torrential rain. In the end he was nosed out of victory by a 2.8 Alfa — a closed coupe with a vastly more powerful engine than the Fiat-based Cisitalia.

Still dreaming of a comeback on GP circuits (between 1934 and 1936 he won 14 grand prix races and was placed in another nine) Nuvolari inspected the plans for the Porsche-designed Cisitalia. Told that it would cost $75,000 to complete and race the prototype, he loftily announced he would raise the cash single-handed.

"I shall be responsible," he said.

But it could not be done. The factory was almost broke and creditors seized its assets. After some negotiations an Italian-Argentine group bought the concern lock, stock and cylinder barrel. The one prototype (which had never been assembled, let alone run) went with a medley of cars, frames, castings and equipment to the Argentine.

The new firm — reputed to have had the backing of the then dictator Peron — was primarily interested in building road cars and showed more interest in the sports model than the 1½ litre racer. They built a few mundane vehicles, such as station wagons equipped with reconditioned Jeep engines, then sank into a swamp of financial and political woe.

Dusio meanwhile, had risen from the ashes. He bought a block of shares in the company, mainly because he was keen to see his brainchild where it belonged — on the race track.

The Porsche family had other plans. They wanted the car back in Stuttgart. They started litigation to this effect, based on a claim that they owned the car. Dusio, who had spent a reputed million dollars, counter-claimed that he owned the racing car as he had taken over the entire Cisitalia project.

Just how this tangle straightened out is not clear. Probably it never was, because the situation became even more confused. The Cisitalia factory in Argentina almost closed through lack of finance. Then they changed their name to Autocar and got a new board of directors.

Half the board was keen to get the prize asset on the race track to publicise the bread-and-butter vehicles. The other half violently opposed the scheme on the grounds of cost. A major row flared for some months. It was not until mid-1951 that the board agreed the sleek blue-and-yellow racer should make its debut.

Then the fun started. The Autocar technicians were at a loss how to assemble the car. They were not likely to get much help from Ferry Porsche because he was demanding its return to Germany. So they assembled the car as best they could, discovering that the 12-cylinder engine had not even been fired. Its piston tops had never so much as seen a spark plug flash.

In January, 1952, they had made enough progress to warrant the decision to enter a formula libre event. Tests at that time showed some 280 bhp at 8000 rpm, a conservative figure alongside the high potential of the engine. But at least they had the car running. The technicians then told the board that the springing was too soft and the ground clearance insufficient. Finally they discovered — or said they did — that the front differential had a different ratio to the back.

After these problems had been sorted out, veteran driver Felice Bonetto offered to make the first test runs. Two laps later he came in wreathed in smoke. The panic subsided only when the pit crew found the matter was trivial: oil was leaking onto a hot exhaust pipe. Next the five-speed gearbox began to play up. So the car was withdrawn from the race.

The factory was now in a quandary. It had a million-dollar race car on its hands; a car that had never raced and would soon be redundant as the 1½ litre formula was almost dead. So the powers decided on a final fling. The car would attack the South American speed record which then stood at a paltry 141 mph.

Calculations showed that the Cisitalia was good for 190 mph with standard gearing, or more than 200 mph with higher ratios in its quick-change diffs. Experiments with the engine meanwhile

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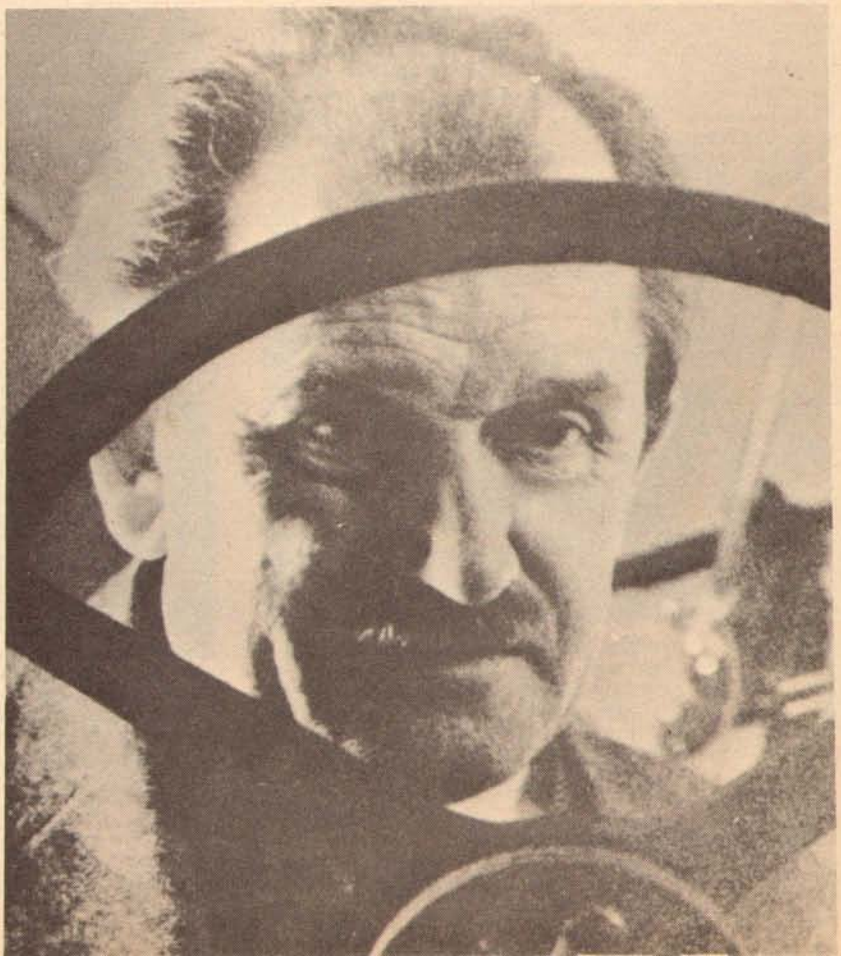

Dr Ferdinand Porsche — the man credited with the design of the Cisitalia. Some claim he was in a French prison when he was supposed to be inventing it but basis was his.