

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Birdcage Bob

Right up the old-fashioned creek was where you were in 1959, 1960, and 1961 if you were crazy enough to try winning a big sports car race without a Maserati Birdcage. Birdcages won sprints of 30 minutes, grands prix of two hours, and punishing enduros lasting eight-hours. In Germany and Cuba, Birdcages buzzed to victory up in the fog-blind mountains of the Nurburgring, and along the throbbing boulevards of Havana. Racing in California, at Riverside, on the rim of the boiling Los Angeles desert rim, Birdcages won still more; and in Wisconsin, speeding through the aromatic bratwurst forests of Road America, more still.



The Birdcage, which came in two models, roadsters and coupes, was an undersized three-liters, and a few were just two liters. They were the Orsi family's great gamble to try and climb back into sports car racing's world tournament, after all of the firm's giant 4.5's had gotten destroyed in Venezuela's crash-and-burn Grand Prix 1957.



And a most inspired gamble it was: take a chassis of intricate, thin-gauge tubing that truly resembled a birdcage; mate an upswept duck-butt tail to front clamshell fenders; fire the whole shooting match with a zooty four-cylinder Maserati that sounds just a Meyer-Drake Offenhauser, but minus all that high-revving Ferrari rigmarole of a Ferrari – this was Maserati's great invention, the Birdcage.

A Birdcage was so flyweight and easy to steer that Carroll Shelby, a medical basket case of a wheelman with a case of angina, once won a big grand prix in one, popping nitro tabs during up- and down-shifting. Birdcages raced by Stirling Moss, Dan Gurney, and Masten Gregory also won major matches...Briggs Cunningham, of Le Mans 24-hour fame, erected

an entire scuderia around Birdcages... clueless Camoradi U.S.A. was consigned custody of all the Birdcages of the works team...

So often, and so easily, did Birdcages win races that a mentality of “if you can’t beat ‘em, crash ‘em,” overtook members of the enemy. Especially out in the Colorado Rockies at Continental Divide Raceway, where the Birdcage which had just won Riverside’s big 200-miler, and also collected a first at an amateur show at Stockton, got well smashed by a V8 backyard bomb which jumped straight into its cockpit.



Meantime, up in the California north, at Laguna Seca, one Birdcage mauled a second, rupturing open its rear oil tank, and the huge slick trapped and wiped out a quarter of the starting field, taking out both Birdcages and V8 big bores in a series of skids and spins.

Other large-scale Birdcage muggings occurred in Florida, where all of them broke down during the 12 Hours of Sebring, including the one that had built up a lead of six laps; on the Buenos Aires Autodrome where they wilted in the Argentine heat while running first and

second; at Nassau, in the Bahamas, during Speed Weeks; and during Sicily's Targa Florio. Then there was the big disaster In France, at Le Mans: after clocking 170 mph down the Mulsanne straightaway the leading Birdcage unloaded its engine in the middle of the night with a rending explosion that knocked out all electricity and lights. And at Pescara, on the Italian Adriatic, another Birdcage sacrificed its lead by foundering in a hairpin and flipping over flaming. Only one Birdcage ever killed. It was in 1965, at Le Mans. and it took down poor Casner, founder of Camoradi U.S.A.

What may have been the fastest Birdcage of them all came out of Los Angeles, and its reign was brief, 1959-1960. Its driver was the one and only Bob Drake, a noted free-spirit among L.A.'s sports car set, and it was odd finding him racing something as exotic as a Birdcage because – aside from time he'd spent briefly in a big Ferrari 4.9, which he hadn't liked -- ordinarily he was jockeying either a pop-gun Triumph TR-2 roadster or a junky but very fast Cooper-Climax rear-engine.



Offered the chair in a Birdcage he immediately became “Birdcage Bob.” During his first start and win, which was an amateur sprint on Riverside’s long course, he annihilated a V8 backyard bomb of seven liters. Soon afterward at Palm Springs, he won by pasting the same backyard bomb all over again. But where Birdcage Bomb really got rolling was at Vacaville, a few hundred miles north of L.A, where he won by shattering the track record for all but three laps of a 60-mile sprint.

Like all Birdcages, Birdcage Bobby’s sounded like an Indy 500 Meyer-Drake Offy; its downfall was that it also smelled like one. After another victory, this time at Santa Barbara, the Birdcage, and Bobby, got spiked forever when somebody blew the whistle about the ‘Cage carrying a load of doped fuel -- high-test gasoline mixed with nitro. Afterward, Birdcage Bobby and his Birdcage disappeared forever.

Authority Norman Gaines, a veteran man-about - racing, nailed a startling item about the Birdcage. What with all the world-wide publicity ink, you'd have imagined that the Orsi clan ran a Birdcage assembly line comparable to Henry Ford's. Yet only something like 14 Birdcages, including a failed rear-engine, ever existed.



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