

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

DUNG BEETLE

We're talking some serious humiliation here. Came the wrap-up of 1958's amateur and professional sports car campaign, every Ferrari of high-pedigree in America had been handled its lunch by a fantastic Egyptian dung beetle. Called the Scarab, it was a front-engine V-8 Stovebolt special that roared and thundered, was painted patriotic blue-and-white, and was made in the U.S.A. for the U.S.A.

Born and bred in Los Angeles, where everything in the 1950s that was fast came from, a Scarab – a team of Scarabs -- was scheduled to travel to Europe and muscle in on the sports car World Championship tournament, where, right on their home circuits, they were going to do a number on every fire-engine red, caterwauling, four-cam, V-12 Ferrari that old man Enzo kept in his prancing-stallion works. But it never happened. Outlawed and jerked around by a scandalous change in the international engine formula, no Scarab sports car ever set wheels on the continent.



Because it happened better than half a century ago, in 1958, the Scarab's one great campaign is barely remembered any more, just like the legend of the Scarab itself. Nobody now can verify it, but apparently just three, maybe four, sports car Scarabs ever existed, all manufactured in L.A., by Reventlow Automotive, the Scarab bank, whose

exotically-named boss, Lance Reventlow, who concocted the Scarab's exotic name, and was the young, enormously over-pampered son and only heir of Barbara Hutton, the department store millionairess, who collected husbands like trophies, and whose

second playboy spouse, Porfirio Rubirosa, had sparked Barbara's world-owes-me-a-living offspring's out-of-control passion for his Scarabs and sports car racing.

For Reventlow Automotive's monster crusade of 1958, patron Reventlow appointed himself second-string Scarab wheelhouse man behind first-string danger junkie Chuck Daigh, sports car-racing but ex-dry lakes bellytanker pilot, cigarette boat chauffeur shotgun-riding passenger to Indy 500 stars in the Mexican Road Race, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

In roughly eight months, Daigh, Reventlow, and their Scarabs had hit the biggest races on both coasts twice, occasionally dropped in for a match out in the Midwest, and made a tropical detour to sunburst Nassau for Speedweeks. Result: something like eight wins in 13 starts, and all the Ferraris running and ducking for cover.

Out of all these eight wins, by far the most prestigious occurred in Reventlow Automotive's home southern California, at Riverside Raceway, host to the first professional Grand Prix in the history of American sports car racing, the 200-mile Times-Mirror meet, which attracted a record 70,000 spectators.



Heavy pride had been on the line. Taking no chances that his stable of caterwauling, overhead cam, prancing stallions would lay down to some Egyptian beetle that really was little more than hot rod with push rods, Ferrari's L.A. distributor and erratic

racing driver, a German – all his Ferraris were painted Teutonic silver – named Johnny von Neuman spared no expense.

Von Neuman already owned a Ferrari quartet – his own 4.1, which had just won Vacaville, a pair of Testa Rossa three liters for Richie Ginther, and a third Testa Rossa for his racing stepdaughter, Josie. So von Neuman had had the factory import to Riverside the fastest, most fearsome, engine it had going --4.1 liters of power with a dubious history.

Its first driver, in the 1957 Mille Miglia, had been the Marquis de Portago, a dashing Spanish rake, and soldier-of-bedroom who had girl friends all over the globe. Upon arriving in Rome, cross-over point for the 1,000-miles, Portago saw a sexpot movie starlet in the crowd; couldn't resist stopping to get a torrid French kiss; a little later had his 4.1 rocketing across the Po Valley; lost control, flew into some spectators and killed many, the Ferrari's hood completely shearing off beheading his riding passenger and himself.

The next year, 1958, at Monza for the Race of Two Worlds the "Portago" 4.1 was bolted into an open-wheel Ferrari Formula Libre, and handsome Luigi Musso earned the sobriquet "Bravest man in two shoes" for the way he rimmed Monza's tall walls before the big 4.1 over-heated and exhausted him.

Bringing out a fifth Ferrari -- this one red -- to house the 4.1. von Neuman named future World Champion Phil Hill his pistolero. But it was a scorching day at Riverside and, just as had happened to the late Musso at Monza, the 4.1 over-heated, and the Grand Prix was won in a runaway by Chuck Daigh's first-string Scarab, which itself was threatening to over-heat.



Richie Ginther's Testa Rossa had Daigh's Scarab almost lap it twice; von Neuman's 4.1 didn't complete a lap -- didn't even make around the first corner. Bearing down on Reventlow's hated Scarab just ahead of him, von Neuman became over-excited, mistook

the throttle for the brake, and took a big bite out of Reventlow's rear end, mortally wounding both the Scarab and himself.

Reventlow, his fuel tank squashed and gushing fuel, threw a temper tantrum when he was black-flagged and kicked out of the Times-Mirror Grand Prix.

And that was the short, Ferrari-bashing, 1958 season of Reventlow Automotive and its brilliant Scarabs. -JS