

AN SS AT DAYTONA



By Donald Hughes

Thanks to the current owners of this Alfa, Laurie and Verna Fraser of Vancouver, British Columbia, who sent a copy of the original typed manuscript by Donald Hughes, plus team snapshots, to Alfa Giornale for publication. We came across this car and the Frasers while searching for unique Alfas across North America for the 2007 AROC meet in Detroit. Sprint Speciale number 81 is active again in vintage racing. Printed with permission of the author.

The Frasers recently sent a note that they plan to bring this car at the 2009 AROC national meet in Portland.

When Alfa Romeo introduced the Giulia version of the Sprint Speciale in mid-1963, the SS became the fastest car in the 1600 series and, in fact, the fastest series-produced road car Alfa had ever built.

By the fall of 1963, however, the Speciale's potential as a road-racing machine had been quickly supplanted by the appearance of the Giulia TZ. The TZ, strictly a competition design with a tubular chassis, took on the task of bringing Alfa back to professional sports car racing after the years of war and rebuilding.

So the Sprint Speciale, built on the older and less competitive 101 series chassis, was never raced much in Europe or America in spite of speed, braking power, fuel capacity and aerodynamics which well suited it to sports car competition.

Of the fewer than 200 Giulia Sprint Speciales imported into the United States, only one, so far as is known, has competed in this country in a major international automobile race. That was in 1969 at the 24 Hours of Daytona. The SS was a 1967-registered model owned and entered by Automobiles of Italy, Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Drivers were Bill Pryor and Joe Marina. The car was one of 63 which started the race and was among only 29 which finished 24 hours later, placing 25th in the overall standings and 3rd in the GT class under two litres.

Except for an Austin-Healy prototype, the SS at 1570 cc had the smallest displacement of any car in the race. The competition included factory teams of Porsche 908 and Matra racing prototypes, a pair of Ford GT-40's from England, two



teams of Lola-Chevys (including the Penske car which won the race), and an assortment of Ferrari 275GTB's, Porsche 911's, Camaros, Corvettes, and even an Alfa Type 33 from South America.

Among the drivers were Ickx, Hobbs, Hailwood, Pescarolo, Donohue, Siffert, Elford, Redman, Stommelen, Bonnier, Gregory and Posey.

Here are the recollections of Alfa Sprint Speciale co-driver Joe Marina about the event and the experience of driving an SS in 24 hours of world championship endurance racing:

How did you and the SS happen to race in the 24 Hours of Daytona?

It really goes back to 1967. Toly Arutunoff, who had been racing SCCA and FIA events for a long time, was without a car for the 12 Hours of Sebring. So we made a deal with him, that he would finance the preparation of my 1600 Alfa Spider and would drive it, and I would have a chance to co-drive it.

Well, I didn't get an FIA license that year, so I didn't get to drive the car. So when 1969 rolled

around, he felt that he sort of owed me a ride in one of his cars. He was looking for a GTV to race at Daytona and couldn't find one at a believable price. Then he stumbled on the Sprint Speciale in Nashville. It was owned by a BMC dealer and had come originally from somewhere up north.

Did you consider the SS a competitive car for Daytona?

The suspension is not as competitive as the 105-chassis GTV, but we thought the aerodynamics of the car would be fairly slick, and you want something slick for a race like Daytona. Arutunoff enjoys taking an unusual car and making it competitive. The Sprint Speciale really goes right along with his thinking on this. Nobody had ever raced an SS as far as we could find out at the time. So we thought it would be a neat way to go.

How did you prepare the car for the race?

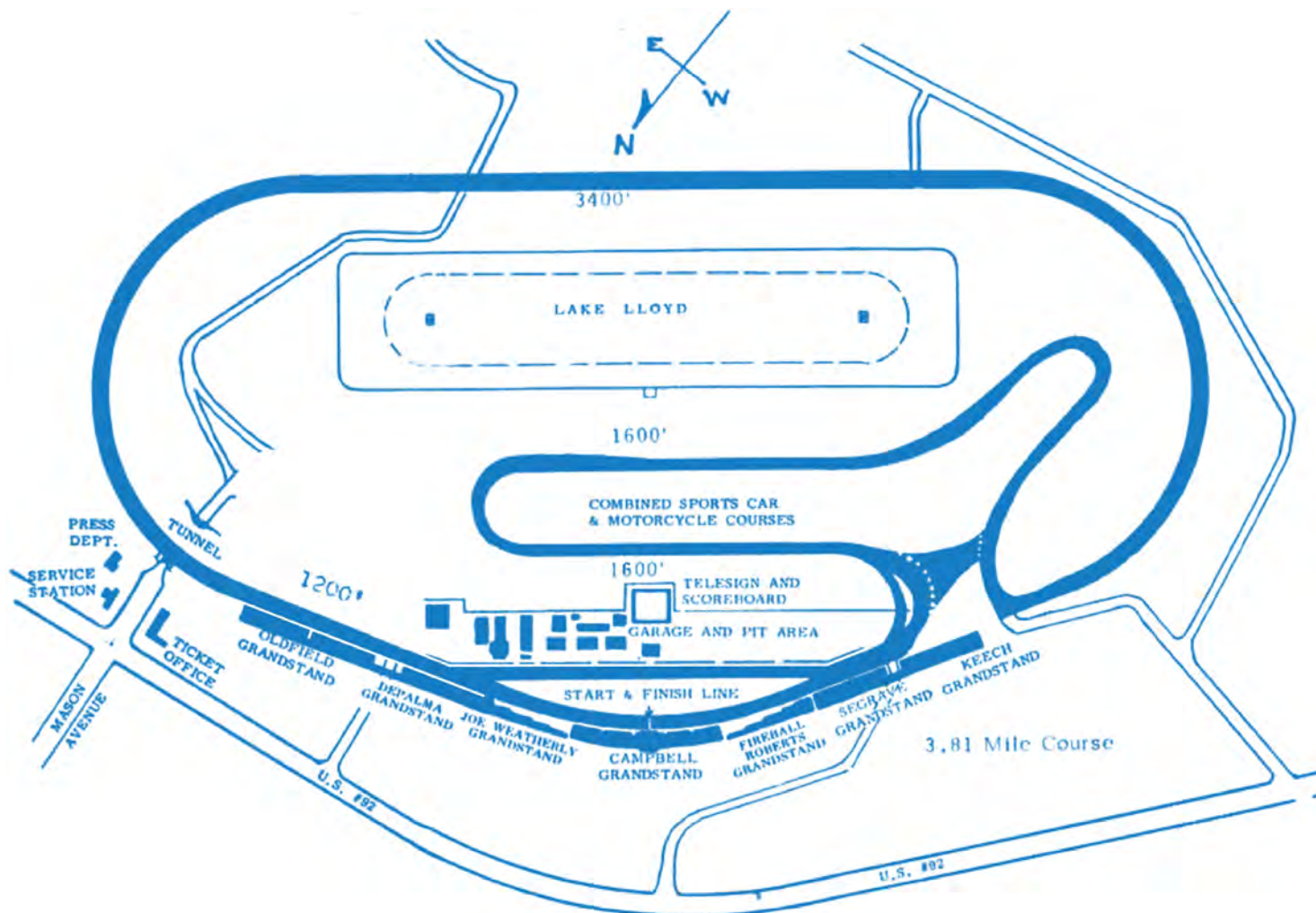
Daytona is run under international rules and it's a completely different ballgame from what SCCA allows. This car competed in the GT class under two litres, and you're severely limited in

what you can and cannot do in the way of engine and chassis preparation. It has to be almost stock. For example, you're not allowed wide rims, so you can't run on wide tires. So we were running on 5.50 by 15's, a skinny tire compared to what everybody runs now.

Along this line, one reason we thought the Sprint Speciale wouldn't be bad to run at Daytona is that the stock gas tank is 22-plus gallons. You are not allowed to change the size of the regular production tank unless a larger size is listed as an option by the manufacturer. And most other cars of that size carry only a 12- or 13-gallon tank.

Engine wise, for an endurance race you want the car to be as bullet-proof as possible. The car only had six or seven thousand miles on it when we bought it, but we put in new rod bearings and main bearings, pulled the head and replaced it with a copy of a Conrero head I had

been using on my 1600 Spider. It had the Conrero cams and the Webers and everything already set up. But probably, as it turned out, we lost some of the top-end speed off the car when we did that. Because it was a copy of about a 1965 Conrero head and the thinking back then was in terms of large ports. Since then Alfa and just about everybody else has figured out that small ports is the way to go. We only had about three weeks to get the car ready. We put on a set of Konis, converted the exhaust to a side-exit system, put on a heavy-duty sway bar in front, installed the oil-catch tanks required by FIA rules, high-powered driving lights, fire extinguisher, seat belts, shoulder harness, submarine strap, roll bar. You should try putting a roll bar inside a Sprint Speciale. It helps if you're about three feet tall and weigh 73 pounds, because there's no way to get in there and weld.



Pen and typewriter map of the Daytona layout in 1963, as taped to the original manuscript.

How did you qualify for the race?

The international races are, in theory, open to everyone, but actually they're quite restricted. In 1969 at Daytona you had to qualify within 120 percent of the time of the fastest car in your class. This was the under two litres GT class, so this put us in with 911 Porsches, they were probably the fastest car in the class.

We didn't have any trouble qualifying though we were pretty well back, 62nd out of 72 qualifiers or something like that. But this is not surprising when you consider what's ahead of you in a race like that. Our attitude was, obviously we weren't going to set the place on fire, but let's go run endurance racing and see if we can finish.

What was it like, the experience of running the SS in 24 hours of world championship endurance competition?

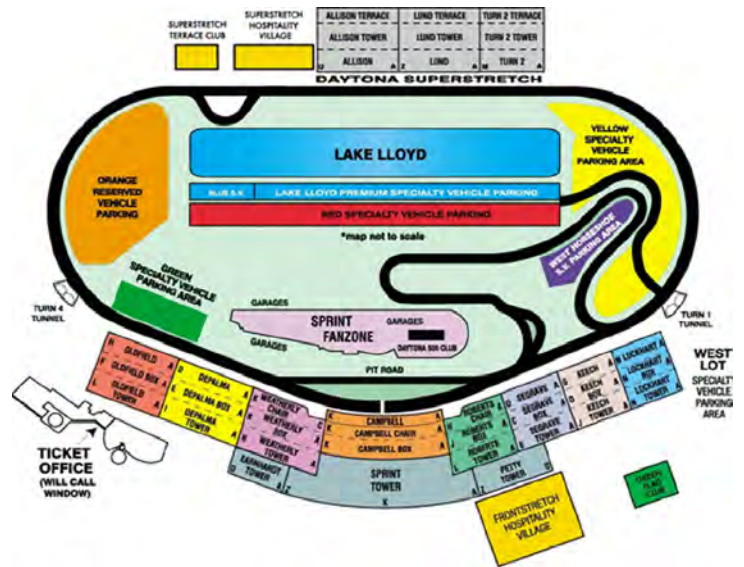
It was a blast. The car was very pleasant to drive. Very comfortable. It was a closed car, and that really makes a difference—though we were required to drive with one window down.

There was more exhaust noise than wind noise and this can get to you after a time. You can drive, by FIA rules, four hours at a time, and then you have to rest one hour. But what we were doing, each of us would just drive out a full tank of gas, about two hours and 15 minutes at a time. We were averaging about ten miles a gallon at track speeds.

But listening to an engine running at 7,000 rpm for a couple of hours, and the noise of the bigger cars going by at maybe eight or nine thousand rpm for that length of time, probably the biggest fatigue factor was noise. The car was very, very stable at speed.

What kind of top-end speeds were you getting on the fastest parts of that track?

For a car of this speed range, from the time you go out onto the banking until you come back off at turn one is flat out all the way, which in the SS the way we had it set up was about 120 miles an hour, maybe 125. You would come onto the banking from the infield course in second gear, and then run up through the gears and into fifth gear about halfway



Modern Daytona track layout is much the same.

down the long back straight, running in fifth probably for a mile and a half flat out.

What lap times were you turning on the 3.81 mile Daytona course?

We were turning 2:56's consistently, within about a second of that. We set a very conservative red line and kept it as close to 7,000 as we could. In the 1300 spider that I race now, I consistently run it to 8,000, 8,500, 9,000 if need be, but that's for 30 minutes and not 24 hours.

How would you describe the cornering characteristics of the SS at racing speeds?

Severe understeer. An Alfa has a fair amount of understeer built in, and the heavy-duty sway bar in front minimized the body roll but aggravated the understeer. Of course, it was nice and safe with severe understeer, but the only way you could make the car go fast around a tight corner -- and there are several very tight corners on the sports car course at Daytona -- was to dirt track it, break the rear end loose

On the banking of the tn-oval, which was designed for cars to run 150 to 200 miles an hour, with the SS at 120 to 125 miles an hour you were very secure. So the banking was just driven like a straightaway, flat out. We tried to stay as low on the banking as we could, but more or less let the car find its own fastest line on that part of the track.

How many pit crew members did you have?

It takes a lot of people for 24 hours. That's a lot of tires to change, a lot of gas to add, you have to have timing and scoring. We didn't expect to win the race but we wanted to put on a good show, and we did. (*Car owner Toly Arutunoff writes: "We couldn't find black contact paper for the race numbers on the car, so they were dark green flocked. Pleasantly fuzzy, and we told people that helped to break up the boundary layer, a la Petty's vinyl-topped NASCAR Plymouth of that era."*)

We had a pit crew of seven or eight, and they did a great job. The signal crew deserve some sort of medal for surviving the whole 24 hours in the signal pits at Daytona, where cars are going by at 130 or 140 miles an hour literally a few feet away. And most of the international circuit drivers, when they came down the stretch by the pits, didn't mind at all putting four wheels on the grass to pass a slower car. Jackie Ickx would go out repeatedly into the grass. Signalman Tommy Dews recalls: "You'd be standing out there on the edge of the track at night holding a signal board, all those driving lights coming at you, and then you'd suddenly realize that some son of a gun wasn't on the track at all and was coming down the grass right at you."

What mechanical problems did you encounter during the race?

We had a U-joint loosen up, probably from vibration, early in the night. We came in, put the car on a jack, went under and found that some of the drive line bolts had backed off. That was very minor and didn't cost too much time.

We had an oil leak develop at the valve cover gasket, probably from back pressure in the engine. And the front suspension got slightly

Richard Sirgany photo



toed out, which we adjusted. We did have to change brake pads once, but we expected this because of the tremendous speed differentials at Daytona.

The only big problem was that after nine hours, about midnight, the clutch gave out. It got to where it would not disengage, and we ran the last 15 hours of the race without a clutch that amounted to anything. The high rpm's apparently caused the internal fingers inside the disc to centrifuge themselves to death.

Well, you can shift a car without a clutch if you double clutch and try to match your engine rpms up, but you can't get it to start from a dead stop. And in 15 hours I'm sure we had to make at least seven stops.

You can't push-start a car during the race, you're not allowed to use any external force to start a car, but it doesn't say you can't jack the back end of the car up, build up some rpms, drop it off the jack and let the car take off. But we also found with this method that you couldn't get enough rpms built up to get the car going without either breaking an axle or killing the engine. So we mixed up a little solution of water and engine oil, dumped it on the ground, and then dropped the car off onto it to get it going again each time.

And this was probably the highlight of the race. We had the chief steward over there, and James Garner, everybody would yell, "Hey, the Sprint Speciale is coming in again!" And we asked the chief steward if it was illegal and he said no, as far as he could tell it was legal and about the neatest thing he'd seen all day.

What shape was the car in after the race?

An Alfa, like a Porsche, is really a race car detuned for the street. We tore the engine down after the 24 hours and couldn't see any wear at all on the rod bearings, and very little wear on

the main bearings. The pistons were still good. They did need new rings, but what do you expect for 24 hours of racing? It was a very, very durable engine.

We were afraid the transmission would be in sad shape after all that shifting without the clutch. When we opened it up, there was one bearing that was a little bit rough and the synchro rings were worn, but everything else in the gearbox was still good.

Toly Arutunoff: "During the final daylight hours, Bill Pryor had to take evasive action in front of an accident and spun into the grass outside turn two, coining to a complete standstill. With no clutch, he gritted his teeth and revved the engine, bouncing the gear lever until the car started moving, when he let the revs drop to match the speed and fully engaged first, and drove off. I didn't think that could be done without a lot of transmission damage."

What was the competition like and how did you feel about the outcome of the race?

Mark Donohue of course won it that year. They had the John Wyer GT-40 Ford team there. James Garner's All American Racing team of two Lolas. The entire Porsche factory team. And a variety of very strong independent entries from all over the world. (Arutunoff: "The Penske car which won the race after, I think, about two hours' work in the pits, was aided by a couple of cans of radiator stop-leak which we gave them. I think they had a head gasket seeping.")

In judging the results of a race like this, you have to look at how many aren't running at the end. The purpose of an endurance race is to finish. It doesn't make any difference how fast you're going at six o'clock in the morning -- if you're not around when the checkered flag falls at three in the afternoon, it doesn't count.

All the Porsche 908's gave up the ghost at almost the same spot on the track. The GT-40's went out cracking cylinder heads. Of five Corvettes that started, only one managed to finish. There were two Alfa GTV's from Mexico that qualified but for some reason didn't run the race. There was an Alfa Type 33 from South America, an independent entry, that was

involved in the worst accident of the night. An E-Type Jaguar coupe got crossed up in front of him and the SS hit him and went upside down, and there were two or three other cars involved.

That gave us the distinction, since we were the only Alfa to finish the race, of taking home the trophy for Best Alfa Romeo from Bill France.

Did you yourself have any close calls?

As the race went on, the outside of the turns got very slick due to oil and rocks and sand, pieces of tires and pieces of engines going to the outside.

I was going to let another car by on the inside of turn two and I went wide and got out on the marbles. This was at night, and I managed to loop it off to the inside, and with all the lights coming into my face I really thought I was dead. But it didn't hurt me or the car, and after losing just 15 or 20 seconds I got right back up on the course.

I discovered, incidentally, that you can drive a car like the SS faster on a track at night than in the daytime. It may have something to do with your concentration being sharpened by the limiting of peripheral vision at night, I don't know. But our lap times were slightly better after dark.

Also during the night, the SS was almost involved in the wreck that took out the Type 33. Bill Pryor was in it at the time, and we lost sight of him in all the smoke. The wreck happened right in front of him, and it was three or four minutes before we found out whether or not he was piled up underneath the car. But he did manage to make it through the smoke.

– Donald Hughes

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Giulia Sprint Speciale AR381340, the SS of Daytona, has lived in Canada since 2004.

And at times, in the early mornings on a twisting road, the present owner can hear a voice from somewhere deep inside the car telling him how it felt to run with the champions in the 24 Hours of Daytona.