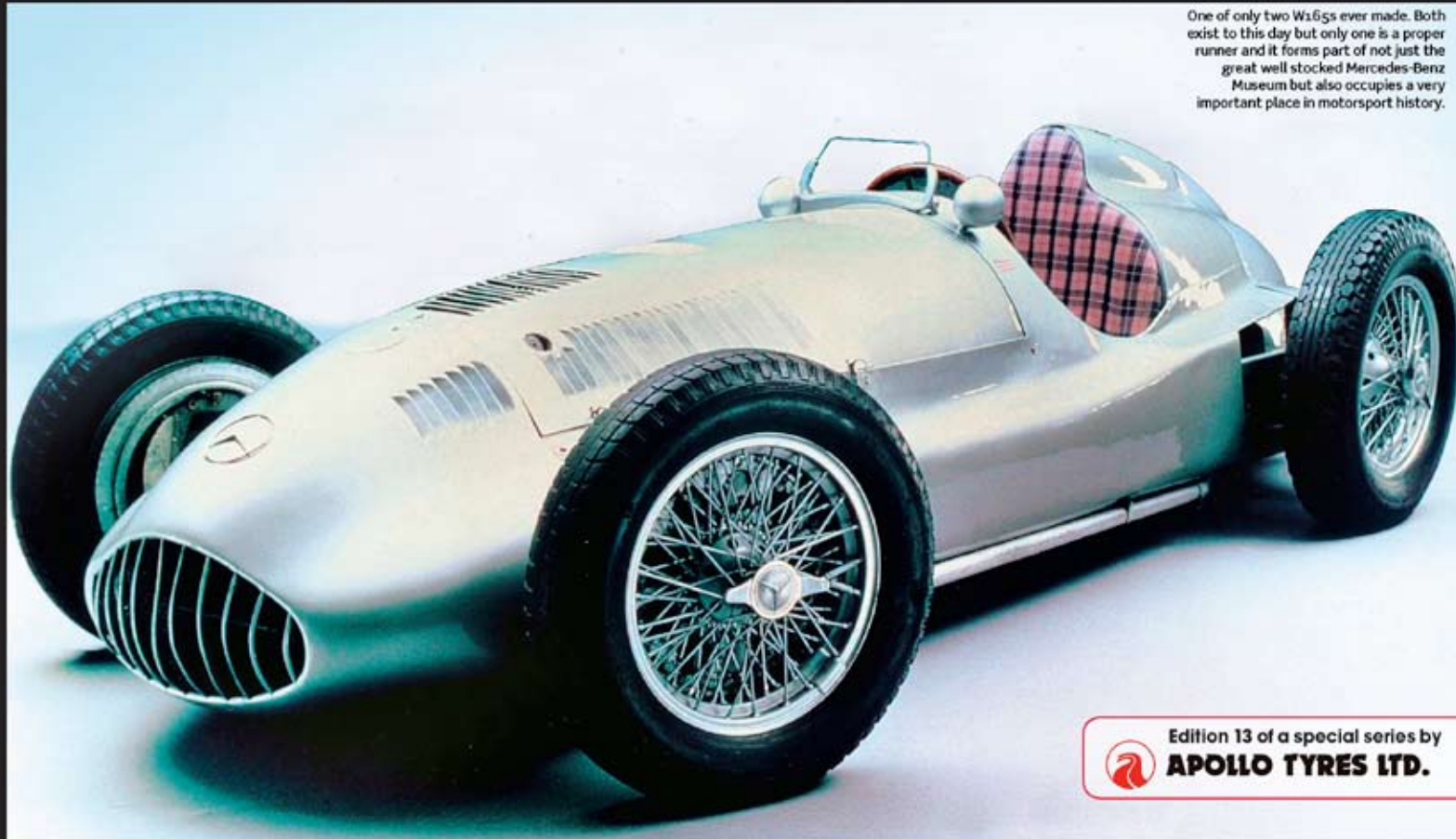


**UNSTOPPABLE**


## MERCEDES-BENZ W165

This has to be the greatest racing car ever in motor sport history: a car built in secret in just seven months to lay it across conniving Italian race teams and organisers in the only race which mattered. The W165 won the 1939 Tripoli Grand Prix and after that was never driven in anger again.

One of only two W165s ever made. Both exist to this day but only one is a proper runner and it forms part of not just the great well stocked Mercedes-Benz Museum but also occupies a very important place in motorsport history.



Edition 13 of a special series by  
**APOLLO TYRES LTD.**



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On the "unstoppable" journey to success.

FOR ME THE GOLDEN AGE OF GRAND PRIX RACING has to be the 1930s, especially the Age of the Titans when the German Silver Arrows (read them as Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz) unleashed a blitzkrieg over the Italian, French and British teams in the period 1934-39 and in so doing completely annihilated any and everyone who stood in their way.

Of course there was bound to be animosity, even among the teams from the AXIS countries. The simple fact of life was that Adolf Hitler, for all his follies, was a motoring nut and among the few good things he did was to fund both Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz to go and fight the good battle on the classic Grand Prix circuits of the world. (Hitler also gave Germans and the rest of us the autobahn plus seduced enough of his countrymen to put in their savings to conjure up the Volkswagen Beetle). The Italians and the French never knew what hit them and while the individual brilliance of the likes of Tazio Nuvolari snared a few wins here and there, from 1934 onwards the silver arrows were inevitably in a class of their own and virtually hogged all steps of the podium.

The Italians were partners in arms on the political scene with Germany and Benito Mussolini was also perceived to be some kind of motoring enthusiast. It was most galling therefore to see his red cars being given the boot in every GP in the mid-1930s. A few discreet whispers and lo behold, the Italians and the French found common ground and began to switch classification of their main events to the 1.5-litre voiturette class when the GP formula was for supercharged 3.0-litre cars.

Alfa Romeo and Maserati had devised all new cars for the 1.5-litre formula in 1938 itself and this was supposed to be the new standard for the GP class from 1940. However, Mercedes-Benz knew that it had to tackle the Italians at their own game on this front because the organisers of one of the greatest GPs of that time: the Tripoli Grand Prix, run on the Mellaha circuit, had announced that their 1939 event would run to the 1.5-litre class and not the GP class.

The Mercedes-Benz team under their charismatic team manager



Rudolf Caracciola tanks up his W165 which finished second to Lang.

Alfred Neubauer and their great engineer - designer Rudolf Uhlenhaut began work in secret on a new 1.5-litre racer in late 1938. Even though the grapevine started suggesting that something was up at Unterturkheim, the project was completed in utter secrecy and just a month before the Tripoli GP, the German team filed entries for Hermann Lang and Rudolf Caracciola in the new car, designated the W165.

The entire racing world was stunned when barely six months to the day the project had begun, the W165 appeared on the grid for the Tripoli event on May 7, 1939. The Italians who had hoped for a home win with either an Alfa Romeo 158 or a Maserati (including the fully-faired example of Luigi Villorosi) were shocked beyond belief when the pert little silver slugs fired up in pit lane. The 1,495cc 90-degree V8 engines with four-valves per cylinder predated the Renault V6 1.5-litre of GP racing's turbocharged formula in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It employed twin Roots-type superchargers blowing through twin side-draught Solex carburetors. Ignition was by a special Bosch magneto and the engine developed 256bhp at 8000rpm, a phenomenal output for an engine of its size in that day and age. Transmitting the power to the rear wheels was a 5-speed transaxle which was normal Mercedes-Benz racing practice in the 1930s. In fact much of the lessons learnt from the supercharged 3.0-litre Grand Prix cars was employed on the W165 and this included a lightweight but utterly stiff tubular chassis, independent front suspension by means of twin wishbones and coil springs while a De Dion type layout with torsion bars did duty at the rear end.

The sound of the Mercedes V8 contrasted against the straight eight Alfa-Romeo Type 158 Allentas and the Maseratis, the shrieking V8 sounding like the veritable angel of death for the Italian machines. The 1939 Tripoli GP grid had 30 cars, 28 of them being Italian machines with just two German cars against them. Sadly for the Italians, these two silver arrows took the top two spots on the grid and when the flag fell to start this 30-lap race over a 390.4km race distance, Lang and Caracciola just flew away and were never seen. Lang won the race at a heady average speed of 196.14km/h from Caracciola who was second, some



Lang pulls into victory lane at the end of the race with team boss Neubauer (left) applauding his efforts.



Start of the Tripoli Grand Prix and the Italian cars are already languishing. No one came within sniffing distance of the two W165s.

three and a half minutes behind. The latter however had been driving with a slightly lower final drive ratio than Lang. Neubauer and Uhlenhaut having hedged their bets between outright pace and reliability but they needn't have worried.

This was Lang's third straight Tripoli Grand Prix win and it was some 21km/h quicker than the winner of the 1.5-litre class from the previous year and just about 8km/h slower than his own winning speed in a 3.0-litre GP car at the same circuit in 1938! A single surviving Alfa 158, driven by Villorosi was a distant third. The Mercedes W165s had ground Italian pride into dust but while the company had prepared to go racing in 1940 with the W165, the advent of Hitler's folly in perpetuating WWII scuppered this. After the war the company thought to revive the 1.5-litre project but decided against it. The two W165s from Tripoli were thankfully interned in Switzerland during WWII and they still exist today. One of these is now in full running order and just for the sense of history and drama it is a sight which any true motorsport enthusiast should try and experience once in his or her life. Of course given its provenance and what it did to Italian pride on May 7, 1939, it remains unsurpassed and unstoppable in its mystic.

Adil Jal Darukhanawala