

When Maserati ruled Australian tracks

By Richard Batchelor

The fabled Maserati marque is now a part of the Fiat empire and some Maserati owners today might not realise that, during a golden era in the mid-to-late 1950s, they were the fastest cars racing in Australia. Whilst Maseratis did not win all the races, they were the benchmark.

As a school boy in 1955 I read about a two year old Maserati A6GCM grand prix car which had been imported by Melbourne car dealer Reg Hunt. The impact this had at the time would be similar now if a 2011 Ferrari or Red Bull Formula One car was imported to race on Australian tracks. The Maserati A6GCM was to be raced at the Fishermen's Bend airstrip in Melbourne the following Sunday, and I persuaded my father to take me. This was the actual car which, in two litre form, had been driven to victory by Juan Manuel Fangio in the 1953 Italian Grand Prix at Monza, but it now had a 2.5 litre six cylinder engine from the latest Maserati 250F race car. Hunt's Maserati was the star of the meeting and I can still hear the scream of the engine as he accelerated through the gears away from the track's three hairpin bends. From that day I was hooked on motor sport.

After recording minor wins at Fishermen's Bend, Albert Park and Bathurst, Hunt took the Maserati to Port Wakefield in South Australia for the 1955 Australian Grand Prix (AGP), held in October that year. After only four laps he had a 23 second lead over Jack Brabham's rear-engined Cooper-Bristol but then a cam follower broke, putting the engine onto five cylinders. Hunt's reduced pace allowed Brabham to take the lead but the Maserati's engine held together and Hunt finished the race only three seconds behind the future

three-time world champion, with whom he shared the fastest lap.

The following year brought huge excitement for racing fans in Melbourne with the announcement that Albert Park was to be the venue for the 1956 Australian Grand Prix, to be held in conjunction with the Olympic Games. The great race featured the Maserati factory team of Stirling Moss and Frenchman Jean Behra in the latest 250Fs and another 250F driven by British ace Ken Wharton. By then Hunt had acquired a 250F as had his great local rival Stan Jones, while Kevin Neal was now racing Hunt's A6GCM. Hence six front line Formula 1 Maseratis faced the starter, along with another 16 cars, including a pair of very fast but ill-handling 3.4 litre Ferrari Super Squalos driven by British aces Peter Whitehead and Reg Parnell, with another Ferrari, a 3.0 litre type 625/750, driven by 1954 AGP winner Lex Davison (grandfather of current stars Will and Alex Davison).

The race was held in overcast conditions over 80 laps (about 402 kms) and a very large crowd estimated at 110,000 was present. Whitehead used the grunt from his bigger engine to out-drag Moss and Behra off the starting line, but the Maserati pair had the race under control before the end of lap one. A brief shower of rain made the early laps tricky but enabled Moss to demonstrate his mastery, after which the track dried out, by which time he already had a substantial lead. Moss continued to clear away from his feisty little French team-mate, followed by Whitehead in the Ferrari, with Hunt and Jones getting together in an epic duel. This was to last for most of the race, Hunt eventually taking the honours after Jones had slowed

due to oil breather problems, and they showed a clean pair of heels to Parnell in the other big Ferrari. With about six laps to go heavier rain fell and the pace of the surviving runners slowed markedly. At the chequered flag, after a faultless display of high speed precision driving, Moss had lapped the entire field apart from Behra, some drivers several times, and he had the Frenchman in his sights as the flag fell. Moss won in 2 hours 36 minutes 15 seconds, set the fastest lap of 161.3 km/h, and was followed across the line by Behra, Whitehead, Hunt, Jones, Parnell, Davison and five other finishers. Another ten cars had failed to finish.

These were very dangerous times. Moss was hitting over 250 km/h along the Aughtie Drive straight, streaking past trees and other solid hazards clad only in his polo helmet, t-shirt, cotton pants and loafers . . . and no seat belt! The rain late in the race added to the hazards, for while grand prix cars of the day wore treaded tyres, after 300 kms or so they must have been like slicks. Despite this Moss continued to maintain his relentless pace, giving each lapped driver a courteous wave. Fortuitously, the late rain caused only one serious accident, Kevin Neal breaking both his legs after losing control of the A6GCM Maserati and hitting a race marshal and a tree. The marshal also survived the accident.

One week previously Moss and Behra had also flown the Maserati flag in the Australian Tourist Trophy for sports cars, finishing one-two in the beautiful 300S two seaters. After the meeting the factory sold these cars to Reg Smith and three time former AGP winner Doug Whiteford. Smith in turn sold his 300S to a nuggety former cyclist and motor sport novice called Bob Jane. Whiteford was to dominate sports car racing in Australia for the next few years. Jane also achieved some solid results with his 300S until 1962, when he switched to racing saloon cars with great

success. The two factory 250Fs and a spare car were shipped back to the factory in Modena.

Ken Wharton was killed in a race crash in New Zealand only a few weeks after the Albert Park meeting. Peter Whitehead, whose CV included wins in the 1938 Australian GP at Bathurst and the 1951 Le Mans 24 Hours, lost his life in a 1958 tarmac rally. Behra was killed in 1959 when his Porsche went over the top of the banked Avus track near Berlin. Moss's front line career ended in a huge crash at Goodwood in 1962 and in the same year Jack Myers, who had finished 12th in the Albert Park GP, lost his life at Catalina Park. Dangerous times indeed.

After his stirring drive at the AGP Reg Hunt retired from race driving to concentrate on his very successful car dealerships. Hunt's retirement left Davison and Jones to dominate local motor sport. Davison scored two more AGP victories in his Ferrari and one in a Cooper-Climax, before losing his life at Sandown in 1965, while Jones piloted his venerable Maserati to an AGP win in 1959.

Formula One cars of the day were very fast, even by today's standards. They could go from 0-160 km/h in about ten seconds and, with suitable gearing for circuits with long straights, could approach 300 km/h. The drivers sat close to unprotected aluminium fuel tanks and it is perhaps understandable why they eschewed wearing seat belts, as in a crash the fire risk was huge. Imagine driving one of these projectiles at Bathurst, the venue of the 1958 AGP won by Lex Davison in his Ferrari, when the track was narrower, bumpier, with more trees, barbed wire fences and just a few straw bales on the corners. Or at Longford in Tasmania, where Stan Jones gave his Maserati 250F its last great victory in 1959.

Albert Park had an additional hazard, as much of the track was lined with wooden posts about 80 cm high on which was mounted a continuous steel cable, about neck high for somebody sitting in an open wheeler. The danger of this barrier was illustrated in an earlier meeting at Albert Park, when an Austin-Healey left the road at high speed and went under the cable before careering across Queens Road through everyday traffic and into a wooden fence. The cable ripped off the Healey's screen and rear view mirror but the driver had the extraordinary presence of mind to duck down into the passenger seat and survived unhurt. A driver was also killed at the track when his Bugatti rolled over after striking a kerb. Attitudes to safety were different then and the 1956 AGP was allowed to go ahead with the cables and kerbs still in place. The attrition among top drivers overseas was very high and I used to dread reading Monday's paper out of fear that another ace had been killed. Many of these accidents also included multiple spectator casualties, the most terrible being at Le Mans in 1955, when a driver and over 80 spectators died. As US ace Dan Gurney observed, "When you left your hotel on race morning you wondered if you had brushed your teeth for the last time."

Motor sport in Australia received a huge boost from the 1956 AGP. Moss would return to Albert Park two years later with a mid-engined Cooper-Climax for a race styled the "Melbourne Grand Prix", which he won from Jack Brabham's similar car, setting a new lap record 2.2 seconds faster than the record he set in the Maserati. The relentless increase in speeds in Formula One was continuing, as it does today.

During the four years from its introduction in 1954, to the end of 1957, the 250F Maserati was one of the world's most formidable grand prix cars, only overshadowed by the brilliant

Mercedes W196 raced during 1954 and 1955 by the great Fangio, who had Moss as his team mate in 1955 – the all-time 'dream team' as, unlike Prost and Senna, they actually liked one another! After the launch of the 250F in 1954, Fangio used it to win the Argentine and Belgian GPs whilst waiting for the Mercedes W196 to appear. He won his second world title that year after recording four more victories with the W196. He was to win the title again in 1955 for Mercedes. In 1956 Moss won the Monaco and Italian GPs for Maserati in a 250F but Fangio in a Ferrari notched up his fourth world title. Fangio switched back to Maserati in 1957 and won his final title, with victories in Argentina, Monaco, France and Germany, in a light weight version of the 250F.

In its most successful year, 1957, the 250F's 6 cylinder twin-cam, twin-plug 2.5 litre engine was putting out about 260 bhp at 7,400 rpm, fed by three horizontal double choke Weber carbs. The chassis was a space frame made mainly from small diameter tubes and the five speed gearbox was combined with the differential. Front suspension was by unequal length double wishbones and coil springs. At the rear there was a de Dion assembly, forward facing radius rods and a transverse leaf spring. The car had very wide finned alloy drum brakes with steel liners and ran on 16in wheels, 5.50in wide at the front and 7in rear. A V12 engine was tried in a 250F during 1957 and showed promise in Behra's hands but wise old Fangio stuck with the proven in-line six to win his fifth title

By 1958, despite constant development, the 250F was obsolete and even the great Fangio, in a one-off drive in the French GP at 47 years of age, could do no better than fourth. Fangio was nearly lapped by race winner Mike Hawthorn's Ferrari, but Hawthorn held back out of respect for the *maestro*. By then the 250F had to play second fiddle to much faster

front-engined cars from Ferrari and Vanwall, plus the “new age” mid-engined models from Cooper and Lotus. However for the period 1954-57 the Maserati 250F had proved very competitive with eight victories in 27 world championship races. One of the best looking and sounding race cars of all time, the 250F is still thrilling the crowds at historic meetings today.

Postscript

Sir Stirling Moss is now 83. The severe injuries he sustained at Goodwood in 1962 prevented him from resuming his front line career but he later took up racing historic cars, including the Maserati 250F. In March, 2010 the tough old legend broke his legs when he fell three floors down the elevator shaft at his London home, after the doors opened when the lift was still one floor above. Sir Stirling only retired from racing historic cars in 2011. He continues to attend AGPs as an honoured guest.

Stan Jones had already achieved racing immortality when he drove his Maybach Special to defeat Ken Wharton’s factory BRM in the 1954 New Zealand Grand Prix. He won the 1958 Australian Driver’s Championship in his Maserati 250F and gave the car its last major victory, the Australian Grand Prix the following year, after which he switched to racing a Cooper-Climax. After suffering two strokes, Stan moved to London to be with his son Alan, and died in March, 1973, just short of his 50th birthday. Alan greatly regrets that his father did not live to see him become the 1980 world Formula 1 champion.

Three time world F1 champion Sir Jack Brabham is now 86 and lives in Queensland. A living legend in Great Britain and Australia, his public appearances are less frequent now due to kidney problems.

Reg Hunt sold his car dealerships in 1998 and lives quietly in Melbourne, where he is the

esteemed patron of the Maserati Club. Reg, Sir Jack and Sir Stirling are truly “The last of the Titans,” those daring young men who thrilled Australian crowds in the 1950s, racing Formula 1 cars on highly dangerous tracks, their only concession to safety being flimsy polo helmets made from layers of cloth and gum.

The old Albert Park track was bulldozed when the current circuit was built during the mid-nineties. However a relic of the old track remains. Down by the sports and aquatic centre a 150 metre section of road called Albert Road Drive South starts at the roundabout near the outdoor pool and now ends abruptly in parkland. It is used as a car park by Parks Victoria employees and remains exactly as it was in 1956 – even the asphalt looks original! In the fifties this section of road comprised the braking area for the 90 degree left hand Jaguar Corner at the start of Aughtie Drive (the old circuit ran counter-clockwise). There is an adverse camber on the right hand side of the road, the racing line, and it must have been devilishly slippery braking from over 200 km/h during the rain in 1956. It was here that Kevin Neal lost control of his Maserati and those big trees, one of which he hit, are still there. It is a sobering reminder of an heroic age – a time when Maserati ruled Australian tracks.