

## Saab - An Unlikely Le Mans Contender

by David Blumlein

It is perhaps particularly apposite that I should be considering Saab at this time for the future of this interesting company remains very much in doubt and we could be witnessing the historic end of this Swedish chapter unless Spyker's rescue plan comes to fruition. In 1990 Saab came under the umbrella of the General Motors organisation and it has to be said that the American giant did little that was noteworthy with the marque in sharp contrast to the relatively small firm's outstanding achievements in its first two decades or so. We note that General Motors itself, once proudly the biggest industrial empire in history, has been teetering on the verge of total collapse and only survives thanks to a massive injection of subsidy courtesy of the American taxpayer. It started off in a very precarious fashion when floated in 1908 and its founder, William Crapo Durant, seemed more interested in buying up companies that were available rather than companies which had earning potential. Within a year or two over twenty companies were added to the payroll, most of them undistinguished marques that have long been forgotten to the annals of history. And similarly doomed in 2009 seemed to be Pontiac, Saturn and Sweden's Saab. I must confess to having a strong affection for those unusually shaped little two-stroke machines that oozed so much individuality and character and which were really tough contenders in the market-place and particularly of the rally scene. So where did they come from?

We have to go back to Sweden in the mid-Thirties when it was becoming increasingly clear that war clouds were gradually looming over Europe. Sweden had a small and ineffective Air Force and the necessity to do something about this prompted the creation of Svenska Aeroplan Aktie-Bolaget to start producing military aeroplanes urgently. Actually the company started by producing Junkers JU86 aircraft under licence but soon turned to home grown designs. History records that Sweden remained neutral and, unlike Norway and Denmark, was spared the ravages of war but come the immediate post-war period and our Swedish aircraft manufacturer found the same as others, namely that military orders dried up, the civil aviation market had yet to take off and, if the company were to survive, it would have to diversify. And so, just like the Bristol Aeroplane Company in England, Saab's thinking turned to cars.

Clearly the immediate need was going to be for cheaper economical cars (although it has to be said that Bristol was not envisaging mass-production). A favourite before the war in Sweden had been the German two-stroke DKW, a car that exploited the notion of a transversely mounted engine driving the front wheels long before the Mini! However, this was positioned in a fashionable Thirties-

style long bonnet and failed to take advantage of the saving of space that Issigonis utilised so well. The popularity of this competent German car, whose engineers had done a lot of work to improve the characteristics of the two-stroke cycle, lay behind the initial thinking of what a future Saab should be.

We need to meet now three names whose talents were instrumental in creating what the public came to know as the Saab 92 (numbers 90 and 91 were reserved for Saab civilian aircraft prototypes): Gunnar Ljungström, Sixten Sason (the designer) and Rolf Melde (engineer). Ljungström had worked for both Rover and Standard before the war and joined the fledgling Saab company in 1937. The first body designs were completed by January 1946 and a full-scale wooden model was finished on 15 April. It was decided that the engine would follow very closely the design of DKW. In fact the first prototype was equipped with a DKW engine while Saab's own version was being developed. This in-house unit was then fitted in some DKW cars for testing and Rolf Melde actually won his class in his 'DKW Special' in the Sharpnäck Rally of 1948. The first prototype and three other test vehicles covered huge mileages in testing: 530,000 kilometres or thirteen times around the globe! It all came together by 10 June 1947 when the new car was shown to the public for the first time in the staff club at Linköping.

It created a sensation, the unit construction body adopting the lines of an aerofoil, the result of work carried out at the National Swedish Aeronautical Research Institute. The two-cylinder vertical two-stroke, incorporating loop rather than cross-flow scavenging, was developed from DKW patents which conveniently expired in 1944. Torsion bars set transversely front and rear gave independent suspension all round and the radiator, as on the Fiat Topolino and the then current Jowett Javelin, was mounted behind the forward set engine which drove the front wheels. To Saab's great satisfaction, Sweden's largest car agency, Gunnar Philipson, ordered the first eight thousand Saabs to be produced and paid up front for them. Production did not get underway properly until 1950 after an initial batch of twenty cars had been constructed in the summer of 1949. At first the plant at Tröllhatten could only turn out three or four cars a day but this was stepped up to one every twenty seven minutes by March 1954. And, in the best traditions of Henry Ford's Model T Ford which was available in any colour as long as it was black, the Saab 92 could be had in any colour as long as it was bottle-green!

It was not long before the company plunged the exciting newcomer into competition: a mere two weeks after production started K.V Svedberg, sales manager and part time



Saab 93b Le Mans 1959  
by Top Model Collection (TMCGOLD050)

rally driver from one of Philipson's dealerships, took one of the new cars on the Östergötland Runt rally and won the event outright. To add to this two cars were then prepared for the 1950 Monte Carlo Rally, chassis nos 7 and 8. Drivers were the Norwegian woman rally star Greta Molander, who had rallied Dodges and DKWs for Philipson and who won the Ladies Prize in the 1937 Monte Carlo rally in a Philipson-entered Plymouth, together with Margaretha von Essen and in the second car Rolf Melde accompanied Svedberg. The little cars finished 55th and 69th, a good start from such a new design. The climax that first year was Rolf Melde's victory in the Rikspokalen Rally in the November, Saab also taking the team prize (Melde, Svedberg and Molander) while Greta Molander won the Ladies Prize. These victories were to presage the international successes that came later with the amazing Erik Carlsson in the Monte Carlo and RAC rallies especially.

By 1955 the first major redesign was ready and in the December the model 93 was launched. This had a more powerful three-cylinder two-stroke engine giving all of 38 bhp from its 748 cc capacity. Furthermore, it was now mounted longitudinally ahead of the driven front axle and the revised independent suspension now used coil springs. The car sported a vertical radiator grille and, by this time, the bodies had been available in a variety of colours! Saab purchased the former Electrolux works in Gothenberg to produce the new engine although the first three thousand engines were manufactured by Heinkel in Stuttgart. By 1958 the 93B had appeared, very similar but incorporating detail improvements.

This was the model that was entered for Le Mans in 1959. Two-strokes were not new to the world of competition. We find examples of the four-cylinder French Côte two-stroke running in the 1911 Coupe de l'Auto race at Boulogne where one three-litre car finished tenth. Three cars ran at the first Grand Prix de France (as distinct from the French Grand Prix) at Le Mans that year but without success. Two such cars took part in the Coupe de l'Auto in Dieppe in 1912 yielding a ninth place finish and two more places were gained in the second Grand Prix de France that September, once more at Le Mans.

So the pattern we could say, was firmly set for two-strokes to perform on Sarthe territory and once the 24-

Hour race had got underway in the Twenties, a two-stroke contender tried its luck in the 1929 race. This was admittedly a real "one-off", a Cozette-engined experimental two-timer sitting in a front-drive Tracta chassis. Alas, it did not get too far! Then in 1950 another oddity, the M.A.P. Diesel was a two-stroke, this car's real fame resting on the fact that it was the first mid-engined car to run in the 24-Hour race; one of its drivers was none other than Pierre Veyron, whose name now adorns the current Bugatti supercar, bringing him a far wider recognition than he ever achieved as a perfectly competent driver of Bugattis before the war. And, yes, he did win the 1939 Le Mans race with Wimille. The little two-stroke Czech Aero Minors did well, winning the 750 cc class in both 1949 and 1950. And DKW engines were seen in the Monza model in 1957 and later in a C.D. in 1963, neither finishing the race.

By 1959 two little Saab saloons did look somewhat incongruous on a grid dominated by full sports-racers which were now setting the trend at Le Mans but welcome they were nevertheless. They were two private entries, one from Sid Hurrell of Britain whose S.A.H. Accessories and Tuning company had long championed the Swedish marque. His car, no. 43, had the misfortune to seize a piston in the fourth hour. The other, Swedish entered by the enthusiast Sture Nottorp, did much better. Nottorp had already raced at Le Mans in 1954 with a new Frazer Nash Le Mans coupé which he had taken delivery of in the April. It had a special remote control gearchange and adjustable rear torsion bars, this latter feature subsequently fitted to all cars, but a miscalculation which brought the car in a lap too early for refuelling resulted in immediate disqualification after eleven hours. Now he wanted to compete with the Saab and he enlisted Rolf Melde who boosted output to 65 bhp with the help of three large Solex carburettors and, most importantly, a four-speed gearbox which Saab had been experimenting with. Co-driven by Gunnar Bengtsson, one of Sweden's best racing drivers, the first Swedish car to take part in the 24 Hour race did well: it finished twelfth out or only thirteen finishers from fifty five starters and came third in its class having averaged 81 mph!

Nottorp's success is a timely reminder of just how good those early Saabs were.