

Pegaso – A Spanish Disappointment

by David Blumlein

Which make of sporting car wins the big prize for non-starting and usually failing when it does start? One of the main contenders for this dubious honour has to be the Spanish Pegaso which certainly did not fly as competently as the mythical horse whence it takes its name.

We certainly do not look upon Spain as a leading light in the overall history of the motor car. Yet it had in the early days a most enthusiastic motoring monarch, King Alfonso XIII, and the Hispano-Suiza company produced before the Great War a very sporting model that was eventually honoured with the king's name. This firm, under the expert guidance of Mark Birkigt, went on to produce one of the best aero-engines of the First World War, the overhead cam V-8 which, built under licence by several companies including Wolseley, spread its influence into the early M.G. cars. But the Barcelona firm sprouted a branch in France and this really became the true centre of the famous marque's activities in the inter-war years.

Spain, cut off from mainstream Europe in many ways, was moving towards political disaster: in 1931 King Alfonso was overthrown in a revolution and by 1936 the country was in the throes of what was to be a vicious civil war for three years. Add to this the state of neighbouring Europe over the following five years or so and we can see that poor Spain came out of this turmoil with her economy and industry effectively destroyed.

So where does an exotic GT car like the Pegaso come from? You would expect any efforts at motoring in Spain to mirror the situation as in devastated France, with economical cheap runabouts, and Spain indeed resorted to various cyclecar vehicles, the most noteworthy of which was Gabriel Voisin's Biscuter; there was also the competent Barcelona-produced Eucort car, a proper DKW-based 2 or 3-cylinder two-stroke model of which some 1500 were made. And there was an important state-sponsored organisation called ENASA which in 1946 took over the former Hispano-Suiza Barcelona factory for the manufacture of Pegaso lorries and the whole was under the direction of the Barcelona-born Wilfredo Ricart.

Having created an exciting twin-cam 1500cc sporting car in the early twenties, Ricart went on to design the Ricart-Espana, which looked after the needs of the politicians and bishops, then worked

on two-stroke diesels before being lured as a consultant to Alfa Romeo in 1936. There he was to design the Type 512 mid-engined flat-12 racer that never raced, eventually wisely moving for safety back to his natural home in 1945.

ENASA was persuaded by Ricart to let him give Spain a "jewel for the rich" and he came up with the advanced Pegaso Z102 which was presented at the Paris Salon of 1951. ENASA looked upon this as a "technical and scientific exercise", enabling its staff to gain experience in producing work of high quality, and it has to be said that every component of the car was made in-house except for the Bosch electrics, the wire wheels, brakes and some of the exotic bodies which were chiefly the work of Saoutchik and Touring.

The car had an advanced specification for the time: a 2.5-litre V-8 with twin cams per bank (the first production car to do so), five speed transaxle, independent front suspension by wishbones, torsion bars, a de Dion rear end with transverse torsion bars, dry sump lubrication and a choice of two or four Weber carburettors. At first this engine turned out 165bhp but the capacity quickly climbed to 2.8-litres and power climbed to 225bhp with Marshal-Nordec single and two-stage blowers becoming available.

Very exciting on paper, but when the car tried its hand in the world of competition, things never really seemed to work out as expected. The standard car, with factory bodywork, formed the basis of Pegaso's first official entry, two such examples being entered for the 1952 Monaco Grand Prix which was that year an event for sports cars, the organisers not considering it feasible to put together a satisfactory field of single-seaters with the change from the original Formula 1 to the 2-litre Formula 2 for the Championships Grand Prix.

The Pegasos, certainly looking the part with their red bodies and yellow bonnets and noses, arrived with 2.8-litre engines for Juan Jover, car no. 52, and Joaquin Palacio, car no. 54. The former was something of a veteran, having finished 2nd in the first post-war Le Mans race in 1949, partnering Henri Louveau in the 3-litre Delage; the latter was one of the company's chief test drivers. In practice the cars' shortcomings were quickly revealed and they were well off the pace – their handling was suspect with their short wheelbase, and the cars were eventually withdrawn before the start.

DAZ Hobby hand built DAZ43001
Pegaso Z102 Monaco 1952



Two such cars were also entered for the 1952 Le Mans for Fabregas / Iglesias and Jover / Palacio but they too were withdrawn owing to inadequate preparation.

It was clear that to compete with the likes of Jaguar, Ferrari, Maserati, Aston Martin, etc., a more specialised version of the car would be needed and development led to the creation of a 'twin boom' design, the Bi-Torpedo, which was initially aimed at the 1953 Le Mans race. Setbacks again! The car was seriously damaged in a fire at the factory and two open 'barchetta' roadsters, with Touring bodies, were hastily prepared. In the meantime a Pegaso finally made its competition debut in the Rabassada Hill Climb near Barcelona where Palacio set FTD and Fernandez came fourth in the prototype.

In the June the two open cars based themselves in the Chateau de Grand Luce and duly turned up for practice, no. 28 for Prince Metternich and Jover, no. 29 for Palacio and Pablo Reh. The cars were turned out with white bodies with a red stripe down the middle. But calamity awaited them once more: Palacio was unhappy with the brakes but the team's fate was sealed when Jover had a serious crash during practice at Tertre Rouge and it was felt wise to withdraw the cars – a Pegaso was never to take part in the 24-hour race!

The factory's attention now turned primarily to hillclimb events in Spain and France and here the cars achieved some success. For the races they were really too heavy which in turn taxed their brakes too much, coupled with which their poor preparation and lack of long-distance experience contributed to their inability to shine. On the hills the Pegasos were helped by their short wheelbase, good roadholding and power – the 3.2-litre two-stage supercharged engine was now available. Attempts at some record-breaking were also made, the car achieving 151mph on the Jabbeke motorway in northern Belgium, for a short while rendering it the fastest production car until Jaguar had other ideas!

Little involvement in interna-

tional racing took place until the end of the 1954 season, although Pegaso won the Spanish National Sports Car Grand Prix at the Barajas Airport near Madrid earlier that year. Rather unexpectedly, two open cars were entered for the Coupe du Salon race at Monthlery in October. Georges Grignard, a Lago-Talbot veteran, was entrusted with a 2.8-litre supercharged car but this deigned to produce an increasingly large cloud of black smoke, incurring a pit stop which did little to help! Meanwhile Palacio was lapping slowly with a 3.2-litre normally-aspirated version, eventually finishing 8th two laps down.

Three cars ran in the sports car race, the Premio Playa Rhin, supporting the Spanish Grand Prix on the Pedrables Circuit at Barcelona. Equipped with two-stage superchargers, two cars retired with engine problems while the third caught fire. A final effort was made for the Carrera Panamericana in November, this turning out to be the only time a Pegaso took part in a world championship round. The single car, a 3.2-litre supercharged Touring 2-seater, was entered by the President of the Dominican Republic for Palacio and Fernandez. It actually went well, being fourth fastest on stage II and third on stage III, equating to seventh overall. But luck deserted the team on the fourth stage: rounding a bend, Palacio found Bechem's 1.5-litre Borgward stuck in the road, the Pegaso struck it, bounced off and careered off course, catching fire and reducing itself to scrap.

We hear no more of these interesting cars in top-line competition, although their 'gentleman amateur' owners continued to drive them in hillclimbs and rallies, a Saoutchik coupe, for example, taking part in the Sable-Solesmes Rally of 1955. And we have had to wait until the last year or so for the Sunred SRI 21 GTI to take regular part in Spanish GT races and, more significantly, for the promising Epsilon Euskadi LMP1 to grace the international scene, becoming the first Spanish car ever to take part in the Le Mans 24-hour race, in 2008. That was a piece of history!