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MERCEDES-BENZ 300 SLR 1955 UHLENHAUT COUPÉ



Story by Roger Thiedeman

In August 1955, motor racing writer Denis S. Jenkinson – 'DSJ' or 'Jenks' to legions of 'Motor Sport' magazine readers – was in Kristianstad, Sweden for the non-championship Swedish Grand Prix. Leaving his hotel for the circuit, 'Jenks' accepted a lift from Rudolf 'Rudi' Uhlenhaut, Daimler-Benz's brilliant engineer, race car designer, and motor racing director. But the seasoned, bushy bearded journalist didn't anticipate what was in store when he swung over the raised door sill into the cramped passenger seat of the strange yet familiar-looking Mercedes-Benz gullwing coupe, and Uhlenhaut gunned the car out of the hotel carpark.

As 'DSJ' described it later, 'the noise inside the coupé body was out of all proportion...for just a few brief miles I was able to thrill to exciting acceleration in bottom and second gears, as the tachometer whistled round from 2500 to 6000 almost as quick as you could follow it.' When Jenkinson commented on the 'fantastic noise level' inside the cockpit, Uhlenhaut told him a few pence would cure it – and gave 'Jenks' a pair of ear plugs!

Whether or not the last part is apocryphal, it underscores the raw power and sheer brute force of what was Uhlenhaut's latest creation: a street-legal, enclosed variant of



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1:18

the Mercedes-Benz 300SLR open-cockpit sports/racing car that dominated the World Sports Car Championship (WSCC) in 1955. 'Jenks' was, of course, no stranger to the 'topless' 300SLR, having already carved his own niche in motor racing history when he navigated Stirling Moss to that epic victory in the 1955 Mille Miglia aboard car #722. But this exciting new gullwing machine was something else.

Its basic body shape was inspired by the 1952 Le Mans and Carrera Panamericana-winning six-cylinder 300SL (Type W194) sports/racing gullwing coupés, and the derivative road-going 300SL (Type W198) gullwing coupé introduced in 1954 – one of the most attractive cars ever produced for public consumption. Mechanically, Uhlenhaut's car and its open-to-the-elements 300SLR siblings were almost identical to the

contemporary Mercedes-Benz W196 eight-cylinder, single-seat Formula 1 Grand Prix cars that, on debut in 1954 and again in 1955, left the motor racing world in awe of their sensational success. The sports/racers shared the GP cars' tubular framework, braking system, powerplant layout – with fuel-injected, straight-eight, double overhead camshaft engine canted 60 degrees over to the right (offside) – and five-speed gearbox at the rear, integral with the final drive unit. But a significant difference was the larger displacement of the 300SLR's engine: 2979cc (178cu in) against the F1 car's 2496cc (150cu in).

Introduced in 1955 to compete in the WSCC, the two-seat 300SLR (Type W196S) made its mark as quickly and spectacularly as did the W196 GP cars the previous year. From the type's first official outing, at the memorable 1955 Mille Miglia,

300SLRs performed brilliantly and reliably, finishing one-two in nearly every race that year. The exception was at tragedy-marred Le Mans, where the Fangio/Moss car was leading comfortably when the team was withdrawn as a mark of mourning for Pierre Levegh and the 82 spectators killed when Levegh's 300SLR speared off the track in an accident that wasn't his fault. But the team still ended the season on a high, finishing first, second, and fourth at the Targa Florio in Sicily.

And that, it seemed, was that for the Mercedes-Benz W196 Formula-1 and 300SLR sports/racing cars. Daimler-Benz pulled out of motor sport at the end of 1955, ostensibly because the company had achieved the success it aimed for when launching a finite two-year racing program in 1954. Others say the company was reacting to a public outcry against



motor racing ignited by the massive Le Mans death toll.

But the 300SLR story had a fascinating postscript. When the type was mooted, it was intended to build the cars with gullwing coupé bodywork for long-distance races. But team drivers preferred open-cockpit machines, so the idea was shelved – at least temporarily. Then, during the two-month lull between races following the Le Mans disaster, Uhlenhaut decided to complete a 300SLR gullwing coupé on which work had begun but was subsequently abandoned. The seventh of only nine 300SLRs built, it was followed by

a second coupé, at least one of them being used for race practice and development work, usually driven by Uhlenhaut himself – a talented driver in his own right, whose skill and lap times often rivaled those of the works team's professional racers. Daimler-Benz made plans to run two open and two coupé 300SLRs at a race in Mexico later that year. But when the race was cancelled, and the company withdrew from motor sport soon after, any tantalizing thoughts of gullwing 300SLR racing glory fizzled out.

Yet the pair of enclosed-body 300SLRs lived on – as the personal company cars

of Uhlenhaut, earning them the unofficial sobriquet 'Uhlenhaut Coupé'. In full road trim, an Uhlenhaut Coupé with its eponymous creator at the wheel would thunder along the autobahns at nearly 300km/h (186mph). Once, it covered the 190km (118 miles) between Munich and Stuttgart in under an hour – a trip that takes 2½ hours today.

It is almost trite to say CMC's 1:18 Uhlenhaut Coupé is typical of the company's attention to minute detail, superb finish, surgically precise door and panel shut lines, and many other admirable attributes. But the cliché is unavoidable.



From front to rear, this model is replete with detail and features that would thrill even the most fastidious or blasé collector. Small clear-plastic side/parking/indicator lights on the front wing extremities – for roadworthiness compliance – flank the radiator inlet with large three-pointed star which combines with hood bulge and finely etched grille to give the car a purposeful yet sensuous look. All badging on the opening trunk lid – including the 'D' (for Deutschland) national identifier – is 3-D and not tampo-printed.

Beneath the hood, a symphony of pipes, pumps, tubes, hoses, clips, springs, cabling,

castings, and other mechanical componentry is replicated in a variety of materials. And who can miss those two massive ventilated inboard brake drums between radiator and engine block? Finely detailed and faithfully evoking the original, CMC's exquisite engine and ancillary under-hood equipment could comprise a standalone model inviting leisurely inspection.

Inevitably the engine and, indeed, other aspects of this model draw comparison with the CMC 300SLR Mille Miglia car. Thus, it is interesting to note that the Uhlenhaut Coupé, like its sports/racing counterpart, didn't have an engine cooling

fan. This suggests that when the straight-eight, fuel-injected engine was fired up and 'roaring' to go, the car didn't stay stationary for too long!

Like the open-cockpit 300SLR, the gullwing coupé had front and rear wheels/tires of different diameters – repeated here along with the model's two removable spares in the trunk replete with fuel tank, filler cap, pumps, and plumbing. To its credit, CMC did not 'fudge it' by fitting the Uhlenhaut Coupé with inappropriate components from the Mille Miglia version: the former has Dunlop Sport rubber in lieu of the latter's Continental Renner/



Racing 'boots'. The wheels themselves are worthy of the jeweler's art: aluminum rims with fine, stainless steel wire spokes complete with nipples and tire valves, and removable three-eared hubcaps. Equally commendable are the windshield wipers built from separate components.

The gullwing doors, which easily stay open aided by hinged locking struts, have separate external inset handles, and swiveling flip-flap vents on their windows.

In closed position they emphasize the snugness of the coupé cabin already cramped by the slanted, bulky prop-shaft tunnel. Yet here too, rather than copy the open cockpit and its layout from the Mille Miglia racer, CMC has engineered an authentic replica of the real thing, from the four-spoke, grained-wood steering wheel with horn button and direction indicator switch, to full instrumentation comprising glass-encased dials, plus all controls,

switches, gated gear lever, and pedals. Padded cockpit trim in rich maroon leather complements the matching textured parcel shelf and red-and-black plaid seat upholstery.

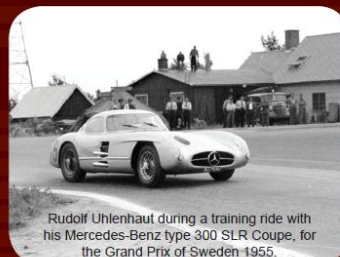
Today, one or both Uhlenhaut Coupés are in the custody of the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart. But those of us who can't get hold of one could do worse than settle for CMC's splendid 1:18 replica of that 'coddabeen champion' sports/racing car.





Mercedes-Benz racing prototype 300 SLR "Uhlenhaut-Coupé" (W 196 S), 1955.

Images kindly supplied by
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Rudolf Uhlenhaut during a training ride with his Mercedes-Benz type 300 SLR Coupe, for the Grand Prix of Sweden 1955.



Rudolf Uhlenhaut with his private car built on the basis of the Mercedes-Benz car 300 SLR (W 196 S), 1955.



Mercedes-Benz racing prototype 300 SLR "Uhlenhaut-Coupé" (W 196 S), track test in Untertürkheim. Pictured is a special version of the 8-cylinder sport roadster from the year 1955.

RUDOLF 'RUDI' UHLENHAUT

Rudolf 'Rudi' Uhlenhaut was born in London on July 15, 1906, the son of a German father and British mother. Graduating from Munich University in mechanical engineering, he joined the experimental department of Daimler-Benz in 1931. At the age of 30 he was appointed technical director to the competitions department.

At the time Mercedes-Benz was less than competitive on Grand Prix circuits, with rival Auto Union's rear-engine cars in the ascendancy. So Uhlenhaut decided to test-drive his company's racing cars to determine how they could be improved. This led to him designing the W125, which gave Rudi Caracciola the 1937 European championship. In 1938 a change of formula resulted in another successful and legendary Uhlenhaut creation, the

Mercedes W154 Grand Prix car.

Uhlenhaut remained with Mercedes-Benz during the war, continuing his work when the company returned to competition in 1952, introducing the 300SL road-racing gullwing coupé. Almost midway through the 1954 racing calendar, Mercedes-Benz resumed Grand Prix racing with the Uhlenhaut-designed 2.5-litre, eight-cylinder W196, initially in streamlined form. The car was an instant success, and despite its late start to the season took Juan Manuel Fangio to his first World Championship title with Mercedes-Benz. That car/driver combination repeated the exercise in 1955, with another W196 driver, Stirling Moss, finishing second to Fangio in the championship.

A gifted driver, Uhlenhaut could have become a successful racer if he set

his mind to it. But he did not, some say because his wife disapproved, while others insist Daimler-Benz wouldn't risk their invaluable engineer on the race track. It is rumored that during a test session at the Nürburgring circuit, Uhlenhaut – by then in his late 40s – outperformed the great Fangio.

Uhlenhaut continued with Mercedes-Benz as chief development engineer for passenger cars, his work including the experimental rotary C111. Remarkably, at the time of his retirement in 1972 Uhlenhaut had never owned a car. But until his death on May 8, 1989, he used a pair of hearing aids because of auditory damage probably caused by all those years of driving raucous, high-powered cars – not least his beloved 'Uhlenhaut Coupés'.