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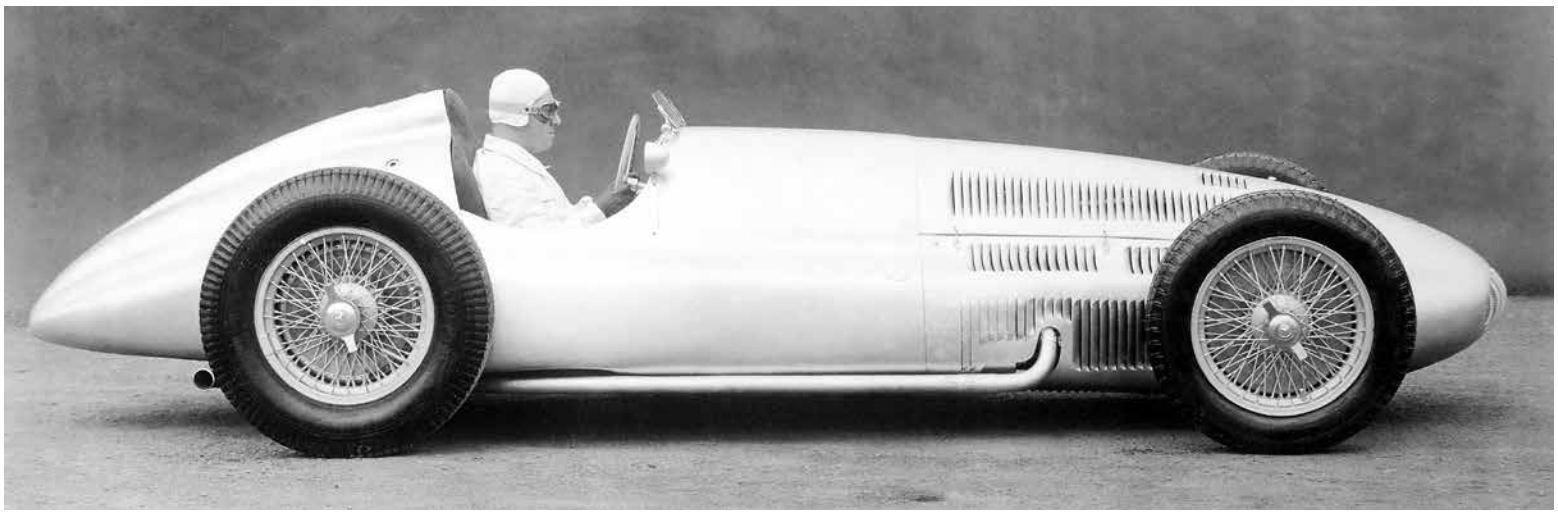
Racing into the Future

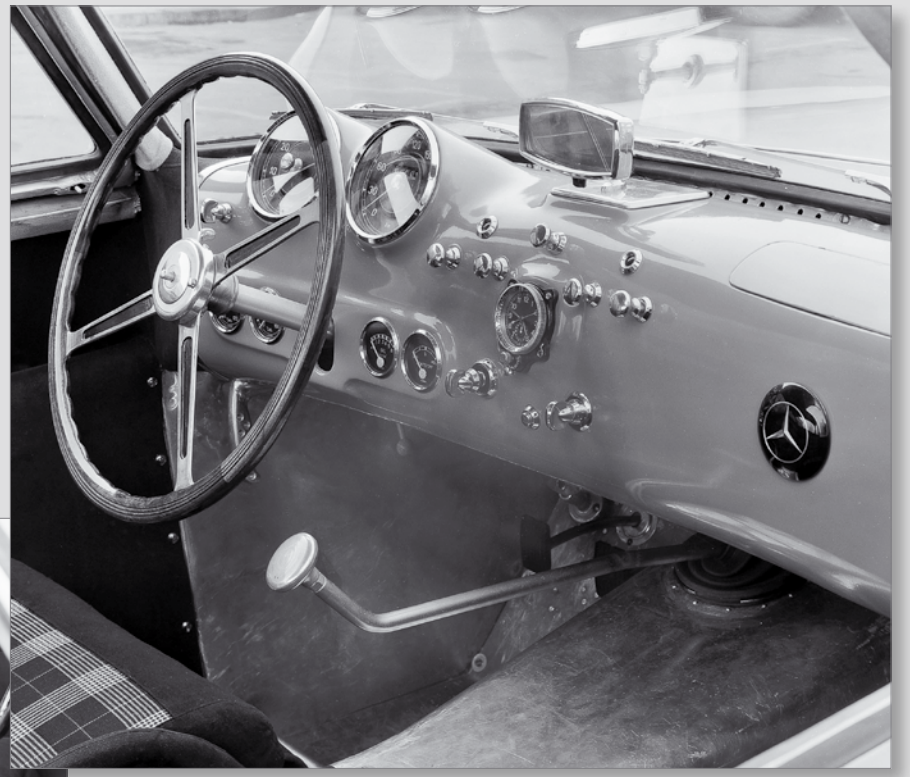


The W-154 was developed to compete in the Grand Prix Formula that took effect in 1938. Engine displacement was limited to 3 liters for supercharged, and 4.5 liters for naturally aspirated engines. Depending on their engine's displacement, cars had to weigh at least 882lb (400kg), and no more than 1874lb (850kg). The W-154's V12 engine displaced 2962cc and developed a maximum of 483hp. Its top speed was approximately 186mph (300kph). (Courtesy Daimler Media)

Its return to pre-eminence in motorsport was nearly two-and-a-half years away when Mercedes-Benz announced plans to enter three 1938 W-154 Grand Prix models in two Formula Libre races in Argentina; the Gran Premio Presidente Peron, and the Gran Premio Eva Perón, held respectively on February 18 and 24, 1951. This venture wasn't successful in the sense of victories in either race, yet it encouraged Mercedes-Benz to commit its resources to the development of a world-class competition sports car for the 1952 season and, looking forward to the new formula for Grand Prix cars scheduled for 1954, design a totally new Formula I racing car. The result of the former decision was the 300 SL, of the latter, the W-196, which was driven by Juan Fangio to consecutive

To achieve the desired rigidity of the 300 SL's space frame, it had to be as wide as possible in the passenger compartment. This led to one of the 300 SL's most spectacular, controversial and memorable features – its gull wing doors. Pulling on a discreet bar disengaged the door lock, allowing the door, assisted by a telescopic spring, to swing upwards. The door's upper edge was deeply recessed into the roof, and its bottom edge ran along the body's waistline. (Courtesy Daimler Media)

The 300 SL's steering wheel was detachable. Its instrument panel was efficiently arranged in a straightforward fashion. Located from left to right in a shroud intended to shield them from reflections was a tachometer reading to 8000rpm and a speedometer with a maximum mark of 270kmh. Positioned on each side of the steering column were smaller temperature and oil pressure gauges. Just below an array of electrical switches in the middle of the dash was a chronometer. No fuel gauge was provided. (Courtesy Daimler Media)



The 300 SL's plaid fabric-trimmed bucket seats were well padded: ideal for long-distance racing. (Courtesy Daimler Media)

Seen here is the space frame of 002 during its restoration. Both of the historic posters displayed on the wall of this immaculate facility are seen elsewhere in this book. Using sophisticated technology that was not available in 1952, the restoration team learned that, even after sixty years, the space frame's dimensional deviations were comfortably within acceptable tolerances. (Courtesy Daimler Media)

Easily seen in this view of 002's double wishbone/coil spring front suspension are its numerous weight-saving perforations. Holes were also bored through other components, including the front axle, and even the handbrake lever to reduce the 300 SL's weight. The first two 300 SLs were built by hand in Rudolf Uhlenhaut's Stuttgart-Unterturkheim racing workshop. The remaining eight 300 SLs for the 1952 racing season were constructed, as depicted by Daimler Media contact Birgit Pillkahn, "more rationally in the Sindelfingen factory, using pressed parts for the chassis without using large-series production methods." Common practice in the early fifties for most manufacturers was to build their competition cars essentially as one-off vehicles. As the season progressed and racing experience accumulated, modifications and refinements joined features intended to cope with conditions unique to each race course. In that context chassis 002 is a repository of hand-crafted features that its designers deemed suitable for its purpose: winning races. (Courtesy Daimler Media)