

# AutoWeek



Photo: Leigh Dorrington

## 1953 DVU Special

### A taste of the special brew

By LEIGH DORRINGTON

David Uihlein was born with more than a silver spoon in his mouth. His grandfather, Joseph Schlitz, brewed “the beer that made Milwaukee famous.”

Throughout his long and productive life, Uihlein, now 86, has been an automotive enthusiast. He is one of the founders of the Harry A. Miller Club, which celebrates the automotive genius of his fellow Wisconsin native each year with the Millers at Milwaukee meet for vintage Indy cars at the Milwaukee Mile. Uihlein owns several of Miller’s masterpieces, which won the Indianapolis 500 12 times in 17 years between 1922 and 1938 and spawned the immortal Offenhauser engine.

More than 50 years ago, however, Uihlein had his own idea for a dominating race car. The September 1953 issue of *Speed Age* magazine provided an exclusive look at “Uihlein’s 130 mph MG.” The article, by Vic Roberts, described “a serious threat to foreign domination of the 1.5-liter class.”

The David V. Uihlein Special was based on a stock MG TD. The product of Milwaukee-area craftsmen and a seemingly unlimited budget, the DVU reflected the leading performance thinking of the time. Designers E.J. Healy and Weikko Leppanen created a bespoke hemispherical head with dual overhead camshafts. The head and cam housings were cast of nickel-alloy steel. In a highly unusual arrangement, the stock camshaft was left in the block to drive the oil pump and distributor. The stock bore and stroke of 2.62 and 3.54 inches were

retained for a displacement of 1250 cc. This, as Roberts said, was in order to measure performance increases from the head compared with a stock MG. Two SU carburetors fed into the left side of the dohc head. Spark plugs were located in the center of the two camshafts.

Carl and Tudy Marchese of Milwaukee undertook construction of the engine and chassis. Although an Indy roadster-type chassis was considered for the DVU Special, the team retained the MG TD frame and again cited the opportunity to provide performance comparisons with the stock MG. A lovely, lightweight, two-place body was constructed by Joe Silnas of Indianapolis and resembles an Indianapolis race car of the period. The finished car weighed 600 pounds less than a stock TD.

The DVU's competition debut came at the Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Illinois, in June 1953. It was driven by Karl Brocken but was retired with minor, unidentified mechanical woes. Additional records show the car competed at Omaha and Lockbourne Air Force Bases and Cumberland, Maryland, in 1953 and 1954 and had two F-Production victories before being retired after a final outing in the long-forgotten Wisconsin Grand Prix.

The engine eventually found its way into a Bandini sports car that is still owned by Uihlein, and the special became just another old race car. The Creative Workshop in Dania Beach, Florida, restored the DVU Special in 2003. The car has been shown at concours d'elegance at Amelia Island, Winter Park and Naples, Florida.

Today, the DVU is powered by a 1600-cc Alfa Romeo engine chosen to resemble the layout of the original powerplant. The Creative Workshop's Jason Wenig, who managed the restoration, explained that the cylinder head flow was completely remachined to provide a cross flow to mimic the original engine with two SUs on the driver's side and exhausts on the passenger's side.

Settling into the car is more like slipping into a shoe, with the ground just inches away from the driver's elbow. The engine barks to life with the push of a starter button on the dash and produces a glorious, raspy sound through four parallel chrome exhausts running straight along the passenger's side of the car. Performance is brisk, but that really isn't the point, is it? The DVU Special represents a unique, long-overlooked chapter in the history of American "specials," built to beat the best that Europe had to offer in the years after World War II.