

# *A Love Affair Made in Italy*



By Greg Drufke

During the 1960s British sports cars dominated the American sales market. Although immensely popular with hard-driving enthusiasts, there were many Americans like myself who wanted something more family-oriented and comfortable.

In 1906 Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino or Fiat incorporated as the successor to a company formed by Giovanni Agnelli. Fiat started to build autos in the United States during 1910. Fast forward 60 years, Fiat also saw the same desire of British manufacturers and entered the United States Market with new designs.



*A rare picture of Gianni Agnelli (left) with his grandfather, Giovanni Agnelli (right), the founder of FIAT, taken in 1940. (Photo courtesy of [italyonthisday.com](http://italyonthisday.com))*



*Greg Drufke stands proudly next to his 1969 Fiat 124 Sports Coupe.*

One day as I drove to my shift at a steel mill in Chicago, I went over a set of railroad tracks. I thought I heard something crash to the street. I glanced in the rear view mirror and saw my toolbox, which had been in the trunk of my car, now lying in the street. I retrieved the tool box and quickly realized it had fallen through a badly rusted part of the trunk floor. I said to myself that I needed a new car.

This was during the Muscle Car Era. However, due to the influence of co-workers at my previous place of employment, I had come to appreciate foreign cars. I had purchased a new 1966 Volvo 122S, but we needed two cars since my wife worked too. I also really liked the Fiat Series 124 coupes, as they had a decently sized rear seat and reasonable trunk size. There were three Fiat dealers fairly close to us, but their inventories and selections were low. The 1970 model cars would be coming soon. I specifically wanted a green car with a tan interior. As luck would have it, a small dealership had exactly what I wanted. These cars all came with the same features. There were no options except the dealer-installed radio.

So, I headed out to the Fiat dealership with my rusty trade-in. I thought it wouldn't take too much time to buy the car. I approached the salesman, who also happened to be the dealership owner. He was a one-man operation. I looked over the 1969 Fiat 124 Sport Coupe on the sales lot, took a short test drive, and said I was ready to buy it. To my surprise, the guy made a flimsy excuse, said he had to do something, and left me standing there. At first, I didn't think too much of it.





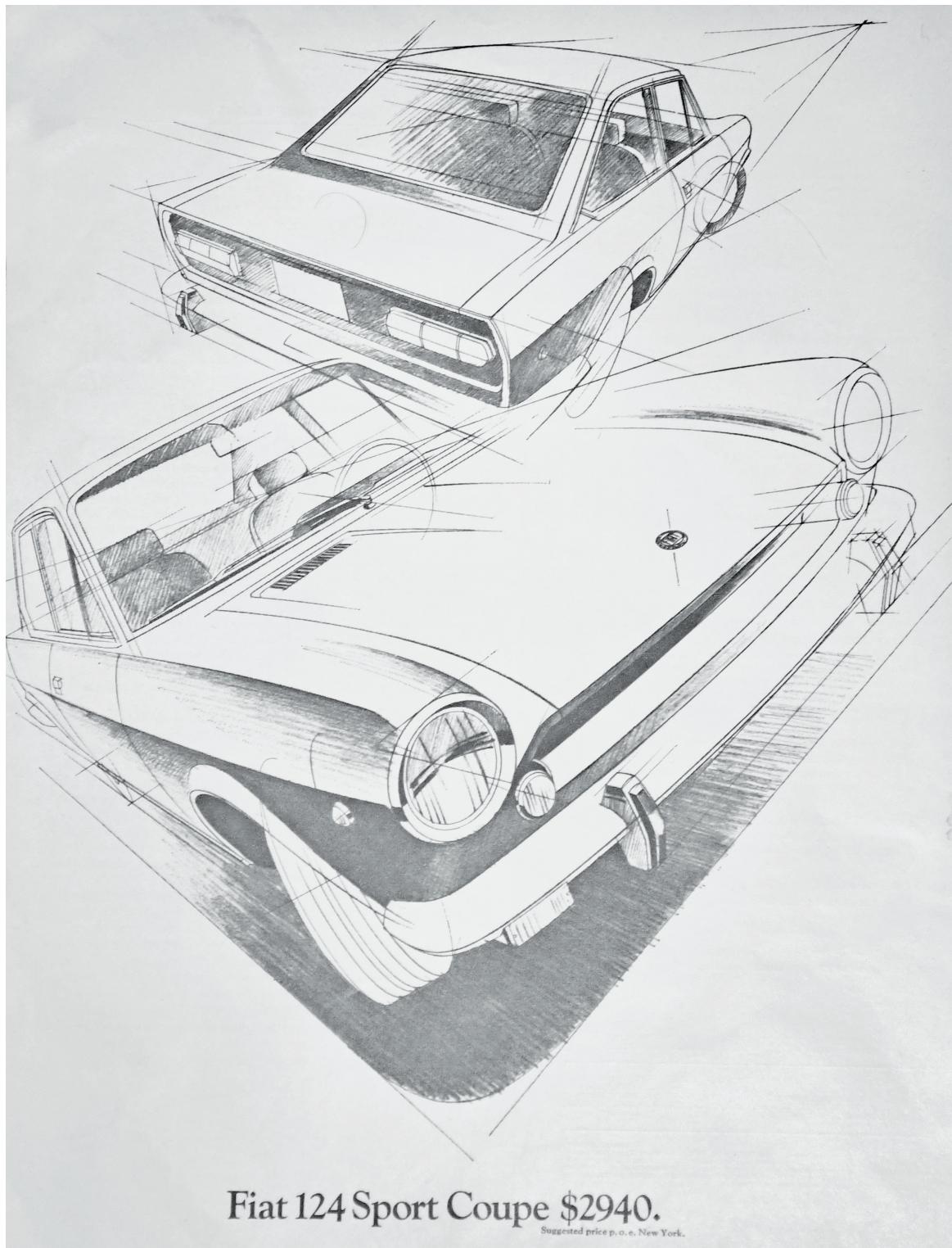
But the next two hours were like playing cat and mouse and looking everywhere for him. After searching the shop, office, and parts room, I finally cornered him and insisted on making the purchase. For some reason, he did not want to sell the car. We finally finished the deal. Thankfully, that has never happened to me again.

The 124 Series Coupe debuted in 1967 with a new body and drivetrain. The inline four-cylinder (1438cc) engine has five main bearings. The dual cams are belt driven. Other components include a cast iron block, Weber carburetor, and five-speed transmission. Fifth speed is overdrive, so cruising along highways and interstates is quite comfortable. The car has Bendix type disc brakes on all four wheels.

I had joined a Chicagoland Fiat Club, and members got me interested in Gymkhana auto racing. Though I had little extra time at this point in my life due to shift work, I managed to drive out to a racetrack west of the city a few times. Even though this was one car on the track racing against the clock, I think the experience can improve anyone's driving ability and efficiency. Plus, it's a blast!

Over the next dozen years, my wife and I used the Fiat for everything. We commuted to work, ran errands, and traveled down to South Carolina for vacations. The only major problem we had with it started after a few years. The paint began to fade badly. We repainted the Fiat the original green color.

Due to a career change, we stored the car for six years. Then we moved about 60 miles further away. The Fiat sat with an old battery and stale gas. Amazingly, it started right up and made the 60-mile trip to its new home.



Above: A 1969 Fiat 124 Sports Coupe ad that appeared in *Life* magazine on February 21, 1969. Page 22 features numerous views of Greg's 1969 Fiat 124 Sports Coupe.

Since then, it has shared in fun local car club events with our other antique cars. In 2018, we used the Fiat to participate in the Grand Indiana Tour in South Bend, Indiana. I have enjoyed being a VMCCA member since 2002. I recommend it as a great way to enjoy your antique autos.

(Photos by Greg Drufke and image courtesy of Tracy Leshner)