

The Alco-6 *Black Beast* Racer



Year Built: 1909

**Manufacturer: American Locomotive Company,
Providence, Rhode Island**

Model: Alco Bête Noire (Black Beast)

Engine: 6 cylinders

Bore: 5 1/8 inches

Stroke: 5 1/2 inches

Engine Displacement: 680.8 CID

Horsepower: 100

Maximum speed: 120 mph

Wheelbase: 134 inches

Weight: 3,300 pounds

Original Cost: \$6,000 (1909)

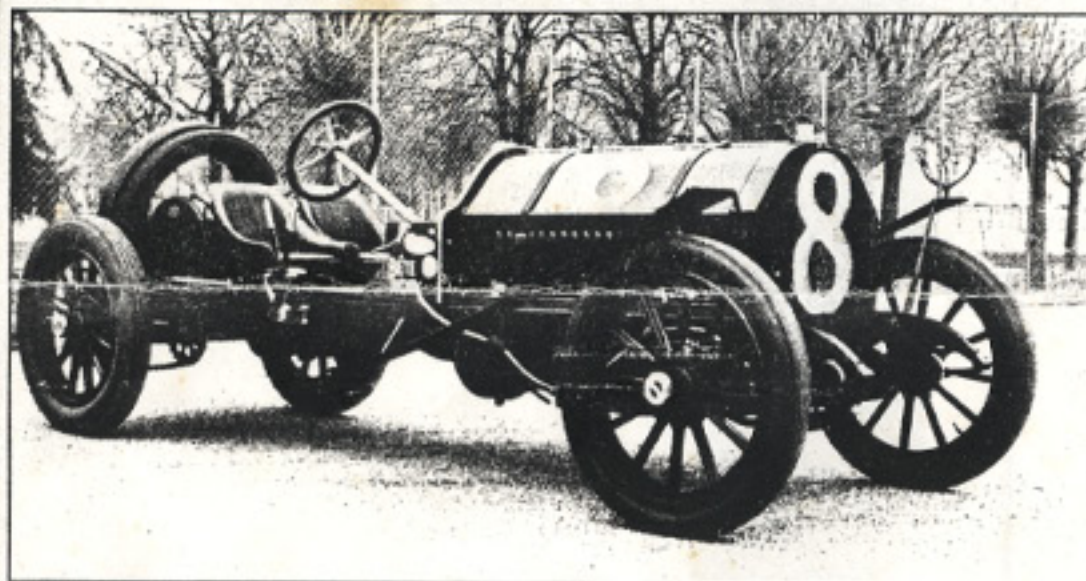
Current Owner: Howard Kroplick, East Hills, New York

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1909 ALCO Racer

A heroine's comeback

by Griffith Borgeson



The Black Beast won the Vanderbilt Cup Race over the Long Island Parkway in 1909 and 1910.

The perennial Berliet Foundation stand at Retromobile had never known such crowds. People were drawn by the wonders of a car that for 87 years has borne the name *la Bete Noire*, or the Black Beast. The car's most universal attraction is sheer physical presence—that of a veritable road locomotive, stripped to the bone for speed. Its wheelbase is a far-flung 133.5 inches, about half of which seems to be occupied by massive, glittering engine.

Everything on *la Bete Noire* hangs out, including its roller-chain drive and spiky steel sprockets. Aside from a pair of bucket seats, there is no body and zero protection. Its combat record is impressive, and includes consecutive wins by the same driver and riding mechanic in the Vanderbilt Cup races of 1909 and 1910.

Another attraction for the mainly French crowd was *la Bete Noire*'s Franco-American lineage, which made the Berliet stand the car's natural home away from home. It stood in the company of an immaculate phaeton-bodied sister chassis of identical vintage. One of the most refined road machines of its day, the sister chassis differs from *la Bete Noire* only in having clean and silent shaft drive. The racer remained true to traditional chains, which were then believed to be superior transmitters of torque.

Although the bloodline of each car is the same, the badges on the cars' radiators are different. The race car has "American Locomotive" lettered to form a large circle, with the acronym ALCO horizontally in the middle. The touring car has the name "Berliet" arched over the head-on image of a classic American railroad locomotive, cow-catcher and all. This symbol, though increasingly abstract, was retained by Automobiles Berliet for nearly 80 years.

This Franco-American saga began just over 100 years ago, when a Lyonnais machine-shop owner named Marius Berliet decided to build an internal-combustion engine of his own design. The engine ran in 1894, and by 1895, Berliet had built the prototype that would give birth to his line of ultra-quality cars. Meanwhile, eight specialists in the field of locomotive design were combining to form the giant American Locomotive Co. in the United States. The new firm quickly decided to enter the burgeoning automotive field.

Technological leadership in the auto industry was still concentrated in Europe, so ALCO sought to buy American rights to an outstanding product. The company negotiated a deal with Automobiles Berliet, by now recognized as one of the world's prime marques. A contract signed in July 1905 included these terms: American manufacturing and sales rights to Berliet designs; loan of a

Berliet engineering team to set up manufacturing facilities in an ALCO plant at Providence, R.I.; a supply of French-made parts until Providence should be self-sufficient. The deal was a rich one for Berliet, but the parts-subcontracting clause proved to be the golden egg that financed a major expansion in France. The locomotive on the Berliet badge was chosen as grateful salute.

Neither Marius Berliet nor ALCO board members had any interest in promoting their products through racing. But ALCO test driver Harry Fortune Grant recognized the potential in a new Berliet chassis, released in 1908 with a 580-cid six-cylinder that produced locomotive-like torque. "Strip it of non-essential weight and bolt seats to the frame and it can win anything

in its class," Grant argued, all the way to top management.

The engine fit the 600 cubic-inch limit for what was arguably the world's most prestigious race—the Vanderbilt Cup, held annually on Long Island. Grant eventually won his point, and was given a chassis to prepare for the 278-mile Vanderbilt spectacle in 1909. The result was the Black Beast, and victory for Harry Grant, who finished with a five-minute lead over the FIAT in second.

The 1910 Vanderbilt race proved to be the ultimate in more ways than one. It drew a record 30 entries and an estimated 300,000 spectators. Most were on their feet and yelling during the final lap; Grant finished with a 15-second lead, after blowing a tire with only a handful of miles to go. Unfortunately, it was a deadly race. Three spectators were killed and 20 were injured in a series of accidents; street racing on Long Island was finished.

ALCO's patience with racing soon ran out, and in 1914, so did its interest in building cars. Yet Berliet thrived, and built cars in one form or another until it was integrated into Renault in 1980.

In 1968, American collector Joel Finn discovered the rusted remains of the Beast in a barn in Chardon, Ohio. Finn recognized its importance, bought it, and had the car restored to perfection. From him it passed to the Harrah's Collection, and eventually showed up at auction at Coy's of Kensington, in England, in 1993. *La Bete Noire* was acquired by architect Jean-Louis Duret of Annecy, France, who commissioned another restoration by Laurent Rondoni and began driving the car—a lot. The ALCO has competed in Edwardian events at the Nurburgring, Paul Ricard and Alpes-Retro, a 746-mile run over 20 Alpine passes.

Duret describes *la Bete* this way:

"I was clocked at Ricard at 108 mph. But I leave the fast driving to Rondoni's son, Raphael. He's topped 121 mph.

"The sound is truly terrifying. The stub exhaust pipes are unbearable at speed. I had a bolt-on header made to take the hard edge off, but we don't use it while racing. The worst is the chains. At high speeds they add a lot to the effect of terror."

Asked if he would fire up *la Bete Noire* at Retromobile, Duret's voice trailed off. "I'd like to, but panic being what it is..." ■

Racing History

The 1909 Alco-6 *Black Beast* Racer competed in 15 major automobile races including; two Vanderbilt Cup Races, the first Indianapolis 500 Race, two Elgin Trophy Races, and one American Grand Prize Race. The Alco-6 won six races highlighted by two Vanderbilt Cup Race victories.



1909

- **Dead Horse Hill Climb**, Worcester Massachusetts, June 12, 1909- Finished 1st in class, 2nd in Free-for-All Race, and 2nd in Record for Hill Race
- **Bunker Hill Day Special Match Race**, Readville, Massachusetts, June 17, 1909- Finished 1st
- **#5 Lowell Trophy Race**, Merrimac Valley Course, Massachusetts, September 8, 1909- Running first until three laps from the finish when blown tire tore off chain. Finish 7th.
- **#11 Fairmont Race**, Philadelphia, PA, October 9, 1909- Did not start, broke steering in practice.
- **#8 Vanderbilt Cup Race**, Long Island, NY, October 30, 1909- Finished 1st, averaging 62.8 mph.

1910

- **#3 Dead Horse Hill Climb**, Worcester Massachusetts, June 4, 1910- Finished 2nd in free-for-all
- **#27 10-Mile Race** (stock chassis with engines 451-600 CID), Indianapolis, Indiana, July 1, 1910- Finished 1st
- **#27 20-Mile Race** (stock chassis with engines 451-600 CID), Indianapolis, Indiana, July 3, 1910- Finished 1st
- **#27 Cobe Trophy Race**, Indianapolis, Indiana, July 4, 1910- Finished 4th
- **#6 Elgin National Trophy Race**, Elgin Road Race Course, Indiana, August 27, 1910- Finished 12th. Left race due to twisted clutch.
- **#18 Vanderbilt Cup Race**, Long Island, NY, October 1, 1910- Finished 1st, averaging 65.2 mph
- **#7 American Grand Prize Race**, Savannah, Georgia, November 12, 1910- Finished 12th. Left race due to gear failure.

1911

- **#19 Inaugural Indianapolis 500 Race**, Indiana, May 30, 1911- Finished 33rd, completing 51 of the 200 laps. Left race due to bearing failure.
- **#1 Elgin National Trophy Race**, Elgin Road Race Course, Indiana, August 26, 1911- Finished 2nd



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The same identical stock chassis won the race in 1909 and 1910. The brand of the technical committee proves this. It didn't "come back." It stayed.

With other makes (some specially built for the race) working in teams of two or three cars and virtually relayed against it, this lone entry beat them all and made a faster average time than ever was made in any long distance road race in America, even by the special racing machines of 120 horse power in the Grand Prize—278.08 miles in an average of 65.16 miles an hour.

An Unequalled Performance By an Unequalled Car

It was a last year car, yes, but what did the trick was the same exclusive ALCO steel and iron of vanadium alloy, ALCO distinctive heat treating processes and ALCO construction methods that are embodied in all models. The hood was never lifted and the engine never "missed." When no stop was made for tires or supplies the laps were reeled off with only eighteen seconds maximum variation.

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