

TRANSFORMER

1971 Alfa Romeo GTV Trans-Am

by Casey Annis



If you ask any pre-teenage boy what a transformer is, he'll tell you it is either a hugely successful toy, or more specifically, an ordinary car that "transforms" into a larger-than-life fighting machine. In the case of this month's featured profile car, both definitions would be correct.

Trans-Am Origins

As readers of this magazine will be well aware, in 1966, John Bishop of the SCCA created a dedicated race series for sedans (FIA Group 2 touring cars, specifically) called the Trans-American Sedan Championship. This series was made up of two races within each race, one for sedans with over two liters of engine displacement and another for those under two liters. In the under-two-liter category, a wide variety of sedans were raced including everything from Saabs and Minis to Ford Escorts and even Volvos. But by far the most competitive U-2 sedan of those early Trans-Am years was the Alfa Romeo GTA.

In 1963, Alfa Romeo replaced its long running and hugely successful Giulietta series, with a new 1,600-cc powered series known as the Giulia. The all-new sedan in this series featured a fresh unit body construction GT penned by Giorgetto Giugiaro and built by Bertone. Coupled with the firm's all-alloy, twin overhead cam engine mated to a five-speed gearbox, the new Giulia GT was nimble, fast and a worthy successor to the famed Giulietta, with nearly a quarter of a million units being built (in various guises) between 1963 and 1977.

Of course, it didn't take long for European racers to see the potential that the new GT held for the various touring car series across Europe. In fact, the Giulia became so popular that by 1965 Alfa's in-house racing department, Autodelta, was enlisted to construct a special lightweight racing version of the Giulia GT. This new, factory-built racer was known as the GTA, with the "A" standing for *alleggerita*, Italian for lightened. The GTA

benefited from special "Peraluman" panels—a lightweight alloy of aluminum, zinc and titanium, used by Zagato in the construction of the earlier Giulietta SZ and TZ models. In addition to the 200 kilos saved by the panels, the GTA also benefited from a modified 1600-cc, twin-plug engine breathing through twin 45 DCOE Weber carburetors and a few other demon tweaks. The result was the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing.

Though it was too late in the 1965 season to homologate the GTA fully, the car was approved and ready to compete internationally in 1966. Of the first batch of right-hand-drive GTAs built by Autodelta for the 1966 season, a handful were designated to compete in the European Touring Car championship (where they won their class), while six examples were sold to the United States for customers to take part in, among other things, the SCCA's inaugural Trans-Am championship.

One of those six chassis (#19660731) was sold to a Houston, Texas-based racer by the name of Joe Locario. Locario raced the car through much of the late '60s in the SCCA, but eventually placed an ad to sell the car in the February 2, 1969 issue of *AutoWeek*, the asking price...\$3,800!

That *AutoWeek* ad caught the eye of Berkeley, California-based Steve Griswold, son of famed U.S. Alfa racer Frank Griswold and an Alfa racer and dealer in his own right. Griswold and partner Jon Woodner bought the GTA, and with the help of a young mechanic in his employ by the name of Jon Norman, proceeded to prep the car to race in the Trans-Am. Like the previous Alfas Griswold had raced, he had the GTA repainted in his signature pale green, with blue hood, trunk and doors. Griswold and Woodner set out to race the GTA in the final four West Coast Trans-Am races of the 1969 season, which included a 20th overall and 7th in class finish at the Laguna Seca Trans-Am round. However, at the next round, at Sears Point, Woodner badly crashed the car in practice, prematurely ending their 1969 season. At this point, mechanic Norman offered



Jim Williams

(Opposite) In the twisty bits of the Infineon road course, the editor discovered the Norman Alfa cornered as if on the proverbial rails, its wide Panasport wheels and fat Hoosier tires keeping it firmly attached to the track. (Above) Looking remarkably composed for a 40-year-old race car, this GTV has benefited from the vast amounts of care and development that have been lavished upon it over the years. (Below) Twin-nacelle Alfa dash holds just the basic instrumentation, while steering wheel and gear lever have been extended rearward in search of better weight distribution. (Bottom) Two-liter twin-cam Alfa Romeo 4-cylinder mill nestles tidily underhood, fed by a pair of 48 DCOE Weber carburetors, and ready to deliver its 200-plus horsepower kick.

to buy the car from him, as he was looking to step his own racing program up to the big leagues of the Trans-Am.

Norman had earned his SCCA license in 1967 at the wheel of a Lotus 7, but working for Griswold, he soon found himself racing one of Griswold's older Giulietta Spiders in 1968 and 1969. When Woodner stuffed the GTA at Sears Point, Norman saw an opportunity to buy the wreck, repair it himself and in so doing, kick his career up another rung on the racing food chain. Working in his spare time, Norman got the GTA back together to take part in his first Trans-Am race, the April 19, 1970 season opener at Laguna Seca. Still running Griswold's green and blue livery and race number "58" Norman qualified 3rd, but due to a flat tire finished a credible 9th in class in his first Trans-Am outing.

From there Norman DNF'd in his next Trans-Am race at Donnybrooke, but came back on August 2 to finish an impressive 3rd in class at the Mt. Tremblant round. Norman then rounded out his inaugural Trans-Am season with a 9th at Watkins Glen, a 11th at Kent and a 12th at Riverside.

Season of Change

The SCCA has never been an organization content with a good thing, and so in 1971 they again tinkered with the under two liter Trans-Am rules, basically dictating that the Trans-Am would run to its B Sedan rules. In so doing, they essentially spelled the end of competitiveness for the venerable GTA, as the rules dictated only U.S.-spec cars. Fortunately, at the same time that the SCCA was allowing B Sedans with up to 2.5 liters of displacement, Alfa Romeo came out with the new 1750 GTV, a 1,750-cc version of the Giulia GT platform. Though the new engine would prove to have some teething problems in that first year of Trans-Am competition, the handwriting was on the wall that if you were going to race an Alfa, you needed to step up to the new GTV. As such, Norman put the GTA up for sale and found himself a GTV.



Jim Williams



Jim Williams



Jim Williams



In an earlier guise, Norman and the Alfa (right) contested the 2.5 Trans-Am Challenge in 1972, and is seen here at Laguna Seca where he finished 11th.

The rules at the time dictated that while you could run up to 2.5 liters of displacement, there was a corresponding weight penalty for the larger engines. Due to this and the relatively unproven nature of the new 2-liter engine that Alfa was soon to release, Norman elected to run his new GTV with the tried and proven 1,750-cc setup. However, when it came to chassis prep, Norman took advantage of all the tweaks of the day, including acid-dipping the bodyshell *a la* Roger Penske and company.

Norman's new GTV Trans-Am car was completed in time for the July 17 round at Elkhart Lake, where he finished 18th in class. The new 2.5 Challenge, as it was now known, had a standalone race at the Olathe Naval Air Station, in Olathe, Kansas, on July 25, but Norman went out after five laps with engine troubles. Heading back to California, Norman entered the GTV in the next to last round, the Mission Bell 200, at Riverside, on October 3. However, on lap 40, the Alfa's brakes began locking up. On the entrance to Turn 7, the locking brakes caused the car to veer to the right, crashing into the embankment. According to Norman, "It caught the car at both ends and bent it like a banana. In retrospect, I think acid-dipping the body weakened the metal, making the accident far worse than it should have been." The GTV was essentially a write-off, thus ending a pretty disappointing 1971 season.

Gratefully Dead

Licking his wounds, Norman returned to Berkeley with the remains of his GTV and got back to work at Griswold's dealership. However, in December Lady Luck came calling when Griswold's sales manager took a phone call from an anonymous Alfa owner. The man on the end of the line wouldn't give his name but said he had just crashed his GTV and needed a replacement car as soon as possible. Needing to go survey the extent of the damage, the manager grabbed Norman and the pair headed off to a home in Marin County.

When they pulled up to the house they were met by a man who called himself Billy. Living in the Bay area, throughout the

late '60s, it didn't take Norman long to realize that this Billy was in fact, Billy Kreutzmann, drummer for the Grateful Dead. Kreutzmann led them to a burgundy GTV that had been hit both in the front and the back. Kreutzmann went on to explain that in a moment of "indiscretion" one night he had driven off of an embankment, stuffing the nose and damaging the tail. Kreutzmann said, "My wife is coming home in a week...and I can't have her see this car." The manager said that the only GTV that they had in stock was silver, to which Kreutzmann replied, "That's fine, I'll tell her I had the car painted." As a result, Kreutzmann got a new GTV and Norman bought himself a new donor tub to rebuild his Trans-Am racer.

Rebirth

Over the course of the next nine months, Norman and friends, including Dennis Etcheverry and Jon's brother Jeff, worked nights and weekends to rebuild the damaged GTV Trans-Am car using the donor tub from Kreutzmann's crashed GTV. This work included brazing all the seams in the donor body, relocating some of the suspension pick-up points and hand stripping the sheet metal—Norman had learned his acid-dipping lesson the hard way! On Saturday night, September 16, 1972, the work was completed, the car was loaded onto a trailer so that Norman and crew could drive through the night to make it to Portland International Raceway for Sunday's Trans-Am round.

Pulling into Portland, bleary-eyed on Sunday morning the crew rolled the resurrected GTV off the trailer and placed it at the back of the field (since it had missed qualifying on Saturday). The car turned its first wheel in anger as the green flag dropped. With no time to shake the car down, Norman did well to finish the race at all, nevertheless in 11th place out of a 20-car field. From there the Trans-Am circus moved south, back to Laguna Seca, where on October 15 Norman finished in 11th place.

Unfortunately for Norman, the season would end on a doubly disappointing note at Riverside on October 28. First, Norman and the GTV retired on the eighth lap with an overheated engine.

Then, subsequently, the SCCA announced that in 1973, there would no longer be a 2.5 Trans-Am Challenge category. At first blush, it appeared that this would be the swansong for Norman's resurrected GTV—yet it would prove to be just the beginning.

Let the Winning Begin

Just a few weeks later, Norman entered the GTV in an SCCA regional race at Laguna Seca and notched up the first of what would become many, many race wins with the car.

Campaigning the car in B Sedan for 1973, Norman went on to become the Northern Pacific B Sedan Divisional Champion, earning himself a berth at that year's National Championships at Road Atlanta, where he finished 9th. The following year, Norman finished 2nd in the Northern Pacific Championship, again earning a spot in the National Championship race, where he improved his finishing position up to 7th.

In 1974, Norman changed his personal racing direction, focusing on racing his Lotus 69 and a pair of March 76Bs in the Formula Atlantic series (See VR, Racecar Profile, July 2010), but that doesn't mean that the Alfa sat by the wayside. The Alfa was raced in the new IMSA GTU series by a laundry list of well-known West Coast drivers including Monterey Historics impresario Steve Earle, Steve Griswold and racecar restorer John Anderson. In fact, even a young Rick Knoop, who would go on to no less than a class victory at Le Mans, earned his racing license in 1977, at the wheel of Norman's GTV!

Born Again

In 1981, Norman abandoned his own Atlantic racing ambitions and turned his attentions back to the GTV. With the benefit of ten years of racing and developing Giulias, Norman made several changes to the GTV for the 1981 SCCA season. First was an upgrade to the full 2.0-liter engine, which by this time was producing 210 reliable horsepower. The other was a change at the rear of the car. Giulias could be ordered from the

factory with a sliding-bloc rear suspension, whereby the rear wheels were located by an attachment point that slid up and down inside a fixed channel, welded to the body. This was a racing option, developed by Autodelta for the GTAs. But the SCCA rules allowed for conversion to a Panhard rod type of location system, which Norman felt would give the GTV better road holding at the rear. He was right.

According to Norman, the 1981-'82 seasons were probably the high water mark for the car. Norman again finished as runner-up in the Northern Pacific B Sedan Division, sending him back to Road Atlanta for the Runoffs. However, this time Norman stunned the field when he put the green and blue Alfa on the front row. Sadly, Norman was punted off the track at the first turn, on the first lap, but amazingly stormed back from last position to finish 5th overall. Despite the disappointment at the Runoffs Norman could still be proud of the fact that earlier in the year he had won the Pacific Coast Road Racing Championships at Sears Point. The following year, 1982, was much like the previous, with Norman finishing 3rd in the Northern Pacific Division and 5th again at the Runoffs.

By 1987, the SCCA had created a new professional race series they called NASPORT, which featured essentially SCCA GT3 and GT4 cars racing for prize money. Despite the car's age, the Alfa proved competitive in the new series and in 1990—nearly 20 years after it was built!—the GTV finished 2nd in the series championship. Norman and the Alfa competed in NASPORT again in 1991, but by June's Rose Cup race at Portland, Norman had decided to retire the car from active competition.

In the final analysis, the GTV had started 142 races and finished on the podium 102 times! Additionally, the Alfa held B Sedan lap records at Seattle International Raceway, Portland Raceway, Westwood, Sears Point, Laguna Seca, Riverside Raceway, Phoenix International and Firebird. An amazing record for a car with such a long and varied life. As Billy Kreutzmann might have said, "...what a long strange trip it's been."



With the Alfa in B Sedan trim, Norman shared the front row for this 1973 regional race at Laguna Seca with Lee Mueller in Joe Huffaker's factory-backed D Production Jensen Healey. Norman's efforts earned him the Northern Pacific Division B Sedan championship that year.



Norman Collection

Norman's Alfa leads a Triumph Herald and a Datsun 510 out of the Turn 9 hairpin at Laguna Seca during a 1973 SCCA Regional at the circuit.

Yet another rebirth

After 1991, Norman pushed the GTV to the side of his shop and focused his racing energy on building and racing a GT3 tubeframe Alfa Romeo Alfetta. But like so many racers, by 2000, the appeal of historic racing had become too much to resist, so the GTV was dragged out of the corner and a full restoration was undertaken, returning it to its original B Sedan specification. Since that time, Norman and his GTV have been the scourge of historic production car and Trans-Am races all over the United States, consistently winning in class or showing its rounded tail to much bigger, and seemingly meaner machinery.

Controlling a Transformer

As anyone who knows him will tell you, Jon Norman is a very easy going, accommodating kind of guy. I had approached him about the possibility of test driving his ex-Gilles Villeneuve March Formula Atlantic car and not only did he readily agree to that, he further suggested that while I was up, I should take a spin in his GTV as well. How can you say no to an offer like that?

Through the great support of Tom Franges and CSRG, I was generously given an opportunity to have Infineon Raceway (nee Sears Point) all to myself during the lunchtime break of their March race meeting. The plan was to take some laps in the Alfa and then switch over to the March. Since I own an Alfa, and have raced a GTV, I figured this would give me the chance to settle into something easy and familiar before I addressed the more daunting prospect of driving the Atlantic car. How wrong I was!

Like many full-race sedans, the doors are pinned closed so you

have to climb through the window to settle your butt down and into the upright fiberglass seat. And, like all the Trans-Am cars I've ever experienced, once ensconced in the seat, you are also surrounded by a myriad of grey tubes, spanning every conceivable direction. These, of course, make up the robust roll cages in these cars, which when designed properly, not only provide great safety, but serve dual duty as a makeshift tubeframe chassis!

Sitting in the car, there are lots of little detail items that demonstrate this car has been incrementally developed and refined over its now 40-year history. The driver sits well back in the stripped and austere cockpit, with the steering wheel extended a good foot and half from where it is attached on one of the rollbar crossmembers. Likewise, the long, extended gearshift lever, is connected to a customized bracket and linkage system to put the knob right at hand's reach, above a transmission tunnel-mounted switch box with the ignition, fuel pump and starter switches. In essence, everything has been extended or relocated to accommodate the repositioning of the driver as far back in the cockpit as possible. Weight distribution being key.

With our track time upon us, Norman pokes his head in the window and says, "It's all pretty straightforward and basic, flick the ignition on, turn on the pumps, then push the starter." Heeding his advice, I do as instructed, crack the accelerator open a touch and crank the starter over. The Alfa cackles to life...and I mean cackles. The 2-liter fires right up and settles into a decidedly sharp bark, which is the hallmark of any race engine running really high compression and a big cam. This fact is reaffirmed when blipping the throttle elicits back a sharp, staccato burst...this thing's got a serious engine. I dip the clutch and push the lever forward into first gear and receive a horrible screeching noise in return. Jon immediately appears at the window, "I forgot to mention it has a crash box, so you'll have to muscle it a little. We'll give you a push to help get it in first." The first beads of sweat begin breaking on my brow despite the fact that it is a cold, overcast day in Northern California.

With a push from behind and a firm jab of the lever, I manage to select first gear with a minimum of graunch, as I trundle out into Infineon's pit road. Luffing along in first gear, the Alfa is alive with energy and vibrations—the Plexiglas windows are buzzing, the engine is humming, the whole car seems to come alive with pent up potential energy.

Toddling around the track behind our camera car, I get a chance to take the GTV in without having to worry about speed, shifting, corners, etc. The Alfa feels "wider" to me than my mental image of the car allows. Perhaps, it is the tight, rock solid feeling of the suspension and steering, which translates into zero body roll and a stuck-to-the-road surefootedness.

After a lap or two of this low speed work to get the photography out of the way, it's time to get down to brass tacks. Coming out of Infineon's Turn 11 and onto the front straight, I push my right foot down and the Alfa launches forward with a high pitch wail. Surprisingly quickly it's time to snatch second gear, and snatch is the operative term. I'm momentarily shocked when I pull the lever back as it didn't feel like I had actually pulled it out of gear, the travel was that short. But when I tentatively let the clutch out, second was in fact engaged and so I reburied my foot and accelerated up toward third. When the time comes, I make a quick, clean shift, up and over to third and let the clutch out. What greets me is a huge drop in engine rpm, as the

Alfa tries to dig itself out of what I can only assume is fifth gear. What the *&^%?! I couldn't have moved the lever over more than a couple of inches, how could I have found fifth? In my Giulia Spider, fifth gear is so far over to the right, I need to pass the knob to the passenger to finish the shift. Well, apparently not in Norman's gearbox!

After a moment or two of utter confusion, I slow down a little, get back to second gear and re-accelerate toward the Turn 12 kink on the front straight. This time, I cautiously find third, though I could swear the lever went straight forward and not over, and proceed hard toward Turn 1. Snatching fourth down the straight was blindingly quick and easy, as I all I had to do was pull back maybe an inch, but I was already getting worried about downshifting to go up the hill between Turns 1 and 2.

I trailed the brakes going into Turn 1, and easily made the straight downshift to third, and knowing I was going to have to crest the blind, right-hand turn that is off-camber at the top of Turn 2, decided it would be more judicious to take it in third rather than swirling the pot looking for second! The Alfa crested the top of the hill and rolled through Turn 2 like it was on rails, giving me the opportunity to accelerate hard through the downhill run to Turn 3, before another squeeze of the remarkably responsive brakes and a quick, left-right flick through Turns 3 and 3A and another downhill blast to the right-hander at Turn 4. Having raced a number of under-2-liter production cars, I have to say the amount of power that Norman's Alfa was putting to the ground was eye-opening. The responsive, instantaneous snap from hitting the accelerator pedal felt more like a Formula B car

or a Super Vee, than a 40-year-old Italian sedan. I was beginning to see why Norman was so easily able to harass big-bore Trans-Am Mustangs and Javelins.

After braking for Turn 4, I dove right, down into the apex and squeezed on the gas, carrying the acceleration out in a satisfying surge of power all the way through Turn 5 and up the hill to Infineon's Turn 6 Carousel, which is a blind, "Oh my God, I'm being launched into deep space" left that crests before the apex and then launches you back down the hill in a long, "this is really not a good place to lose it" left-hand bend that in turn, catapults you out onto the back straight toward Turn 7. Despite my own insecurities, the Alfa sliced through this section like it didn't even need my involvement.

Launching onto that back stretch, I was able to upshift quickly to fifth gear—which apparently was the one gear I absolutely knew how to find every time!—and rocketed my way down to the braking zone for the double-apex hairpin at Turn 7. Seeing the number 3 brake marker coming at me with alarming rapidity, I held the accelerator for a moment or two more, prayed that Jon knew what he was doing in the brake department and stomped on the center pedal, while toe-and-heeling the gearbox, and again hoping I magically found all the right gears. Two surprises were in store: 1) The brakes hauled the Alfa down so fast, I realized I had actually braked too early; 2) Somehow, in all the frantic action, I had actually worked my way down to second gear with out screwing anything up! Maybe I was getting the hang of this after all.

Powering out of Turn 7 in second gear, I set up for my favorite part of the track, which is the fast "rhythm section" through the



Geoffrey Hewitt

At Road Atlanta for the '81 SCCA Runoffs, Norman qualified on the front row for the B Sedan race but got pushed off at the start and finished only 5th.



esses. In the best handling cars, you can accelerate all the way through Turns 8, 8A, 9 and then hopefully hold on for a sphincter-puckering blast through Turn 10. The Alfa was more than up to the task and ate up the esses so fast that I wasn't really prepared to make the potentially underwear-soiling commitment to a full, foot-on-the-firewall blast through Turn 10—but I did go through it about as fast as I've ever gone. At least until 30 minutes later, when I took the wheel of Jon's magical March.

After another lap or two of this, I found myself doing a better job of getting down into the right gears to get more power and slide out of the trickier corners. However, on what would become my final lap, I crested the hill at Turn 6 and started that long downhill sweep when the strangest thing happened—I couldn't remember which gear I was in! Having improved my rapport with the car each lap, I had essentially taken damn near every turn in a different gear. Now I couldn't remember...was I in third? Or was it fourth? In reality, this hesitation probably only occupied a second or so, but not wanting to miss a shift and do damage to the car, I instinctively got off the gas and dipped the clutch. This was fine, but now I was coasting downhill, out of the powerband, in neutral. When I finally elected to select a conservative gear ratio and start over, I couldn't find one...graunch! The beads of sweat returned. Just to make matters worse, after dipping the clutch again and letting the engine return to idle, the engine died on me! Crap! Now I'm coasting, without the engine running and I still can't find a gear! Immediately I had a vision of poor Jon watching his car and I being pulled in on a towrope, not knowing what if anything I had done to it. Not wanting to put him through that, I collected myself, jabbed the starter button and with some fancy footwork managed to get the beast breathing again. By now I was rolling downhill at a death-defying 5-10 mph, so I blipped the throttle a few times and went for second gear, which I felt pretty confident at that point I could find. Clunk, it went in gear... whew! I proceeded to toodle down through the esses like I had always planned on this being my cool-down lap.

When I got back to the garage, I pulled off my helmet and went over to Jon. "How was it?" he asked, with an impish grin. "Great," I said. "But you didn't tell me how tight and narrow the gear selection is."

"Didn't I?" he remarked with a half laugh. "Yeah, we changed the linkage so that it's got a really short shift like a Hewland."

Despite my personal inadequacies with the gearbox, Norman's Alfa is an impressive piece of kit. With 40 years of development and refinement this car is as fast and dialed-in as any production-based car I've ever driven.

Is this car a hugely successful toy? With 102 podium finishes, I think that's a safe bet. Is it a normal car that transformed into a larger-than-life fighting machine? Undoubtedly. But this Transformer is not for kids. 🚗

(Left, Top) The Alfa's Fuel Safe fuel cell is carried out of harm's way in the well of the trunk, protected by an extension of the roll cage. **(Left, Middle)** If the car as a whole doesn't show many indications of its age, one only needs to look at the original factory chassis plate to find indications that it is indeed four decades old. **(Left)** Details of the workings of the extended gear lever system are evident in this view, with only minimal movement required to change ratios in the Alfa 'box that carries Hewland internals. Also right at arm's length for the driver is the Master Switch Box that controls the car's electrical systems.

Jim Williams



Jim Williams

SPECIFICATIONS

Chassis/Body	1971 Chassis #1532283, #58 Alfa Romeo GTV
Wheelbase	92.5 inches
Track	Front 53.6 inches, Rear 51.6 inches
Weight	2,256 lbs.
Suspension	Front: Standard Alfa Romeo independent with modified pick-up points and Koni double-adjustable shocks Rear: Standard Alfa Romeo with Panhard rod location system and Koni double-adjustable shocks
Engine	Alfa Romeo 2000, Bore 85mm, Stroke 88.5mm, Displacement 2005-cc, Compression 13.0:1, Torque 172 ft-lbs @ 6500 rpm, Arias pistons, Carrillo rods, Megacycle cams
Power	213hp @ 7400 rpm
Carburetors	Twin Weber 48 DCOE
Exhaust	Custom 4 into 2 TRI-Y fabricated by Norman Racing
Clutch	Tilton flywheel and clutch
Gearbox	Standard Alfa Romeo, modified to use Hewland gears
Rear End	Standard Alfa Romeo using ZF limited-slip
Brakes	Front: Lockheed 4-piston calipers, vented rotors Rear: Standard Alfa Romeo ATE calipers and rotors
Wheels	Panasport (Minilite Replica) 15x7
Tires	Hoosier Street T.D. 45x578x15

RESOURCES

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