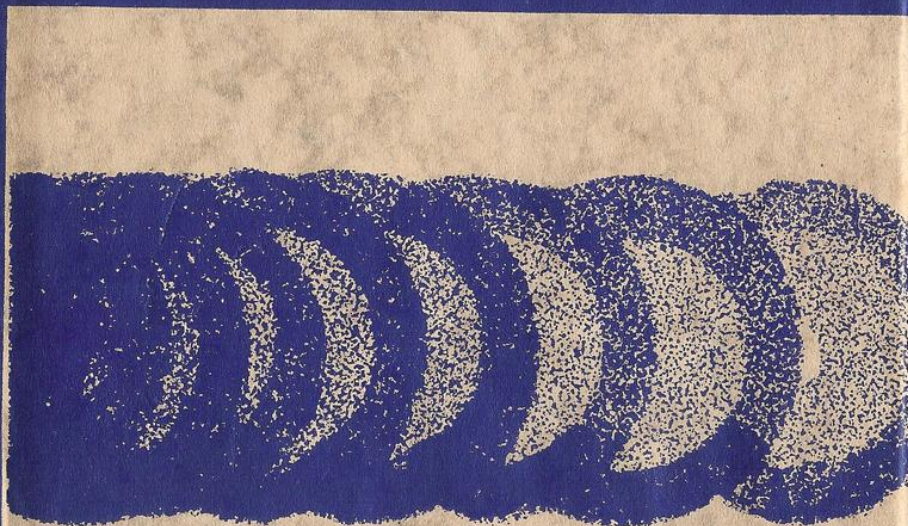


Competitive Driving



edited by
PETER ROBERTS

FOUR

Against the Clock

JOHN SPRINZEL

Garage-owner, author, rally driver, water-skiing expert, John Sprinzel is a man of many parts. Tall and long-limbed, this thirty-two-year-old driver, whose greatest delight is to see an international rally start with an arctic blizzard, has been charging around Europe on the international rally circus with more than moderate success since 1955. For his first rally, the 1955 R.A.C., he drove an Austin A30 and found that not only did he enjoy the sport but that he could drive well enough to complete an international event. His advice to the sportsman who wishes to enter the big time is spartan but has been found sound by those who have followed it.

British Rally Champion in 1960 and well up in the results of countless events on the continent over the last ten years, he has also made no small mark in the racing field, winning his first race (at Goodwood) in 1957 and taking part in events as far apart as Silverstone and Sebring. He has a preference for rally driving in small cars in the roughest of weathers, arguing that the worse the conditions, the less the advantage to the larger vehicles, and that a fair-weather rally in Europe is only a gastronomic tour.

The avalanche of Scandinavian wins in recent rallies—the most painful of which was surely the 1963 R.A.C., when over half the first twenty places fell to Viking crews—is a sharp and salutary pointer to the young rally drivers of this country.

We must face the fact that international rallying is now a professional driver's sport. The days of the brilliant private entry cleaning up the prize money have been dead for at least the last three years, and now if an unsponsored driver can manage to scrape into the first twenty in a reputable international he can consider himself more than lucky. For he will have pitted his skill against the might of the manufacturers' teams, drivers who are supplied with everything from the car down to a spare pair of gloves.

There are sometimes even more official team service cars than works competitors on some of the bigger rallies. When I drove for the American Ford team in the 1964 Monte, for instance, we were provided with no less than a hundred assorted types of tyres for each car. And we were able to spend several days practising the run a month before the event. No private driver could hope to do this—and today it is the only way to win. The only rallies in which the privateer has any hope of scoring are events like the Welsh International, the Scottish International, the Circuit of Ireland—the ones that the works boys have not yet blown wide open.

For the newcomer to serious rallying there is only one sure path to fame—or, at least, to being noticed by a works manager. It's no good buying an old jalopy, entering club events, graduating to the bigger rallies in this country and expecting to be spotted and offered a drive in the European circus.

Use a little psychology: buy a car that other people are not

currently using for rallying. For instance, if you buy a Cooper S, a Volvo, a Cortina G.T. or a Saab you're simply bucking the teams—you just can't win, even though your middle name may be Manuel. Dig around for a car that the big boys have not yet discovered, perhaps a Hillman Imp or a Vauxhall Viva: one in which you will not be competing directly against organized teams. It will not be expensive to run, you can tune it to your heart's content without having to spend £400 to bring it up to the standard of a factory-tuned Cooper S, and even though you may come tenth, with nine Cortinas in front of you, your effort will get a mention in the Press. The same result in a Cortina would merely label you as a tenth-rate Cortina driver. Even if you bought, say, a Humber Super Snipe, and clocked a no-heroics twenty-seventh in a big event, you would make a more noticeable mark in the motoring Press than if you bought a Ford Falcon and finished eighth. And a mention, even in very small print, can be useful.

This was the reason behind my choice of an A30 when I started rallying back in 1950; in it I made a reputation for doing interesting things with a car that was considered to be rather prosaic, and official offers began to come my way. . . .

After flying for a couple of years in the R.A.F. I had felt that I needed more creature comfort than my old motor cycle afforded, and swapped it for a single-seater hill-climb car. This I converted to a two-seater, but soon discovered that the thing was about as comfortable as Wright's first airplane. After another series of canny swaps I acquired the A30, a car that somehow ended up as my mother's property. This, however, did not prevent me from deciding, in an over-hilarious moment during a party, to agree to enter a rally—whatever that was—in the car.

I read up the definition of a motor rally and with an old friend who had lived in Sweden most of his life (and presumably knew something about the sport) I entered us in, of all events, the R.A.C. Rally.

We drew No. 1 and were featured on television as we left the ramp, a piece of gratuitous publicity that revealed to my mother the reason for our borrowing her car for what we had termed a short winter holiday. We had a magnificent rally, snow and ice all the way, and hounded by practically every TR2 in the country arrived at the finish sixth in a class of twenty. Not bad, we thought, for a completely standard A30 and a girl-friend in the back.

Then, of course, I was hooked. I wrote a number of letters to B.M.C. telling them what a brilliant driver I was (just as everyone else does), having finished a rally in one of their products, but it was some two years before I finally received a reply from Longbridge.

By that time I had stepped up to the big stuff—an A35! In it we went on the Sestrière Rally as a 'works assisted' car and by several strokes of quite unmerited good fortune beat all the British small cars and were accepted as members of the full works team for future events.

I had not yet competed in many really tough rallies in this country—a few southern rallies, perhaps, but since rallying is a northern sport in Britain I had not gained a great deal of testing experience. This, incidentally, is always one of the big problems for an aspiring rally driver living in the South. The only decent grounds are in the Lake District, Yorkshire, Wales or Scotland, and the expense involved in getting there and back is a heavy deterrent to drivers from the over-populated lower half of the country.

But today, no matter how much practice the new driver may be able to get in British rallies, it will not help much if he wishes to compete seriously in the major continental jaunts, for rallying in this country has simply not progressed in a way that helps a driver learn the skills necessary for the European events. The lack of good rallying terrain is partly to blame, but even more frustrating are the present regulations, particularly those which outlaw high average speeds. If we limited motor racing in this country to 750 c.c. cars we would never develop any Grand Prix drivers, and that is exactly what is happening to the rally talent here through limiting rallying to night navigation events and 30 m.p.h. average speeds. Even on special stages the speed is set at a puttering maximum of 50 m.p.h. Consequently our home-bred drivers are never required to move as fast as continental rallymen, and are usually content to drive over a special stage in a gear (or even two) lower than necessary. On the other hand the Scandinavians encourage their young drivers—some of them are as young as seventeen—to take out their old Saabs and Volvos and spend high-speed week-ends diving over unmade and tortuous tracks during the icy winter months. Most of them expect to suffer a few spins and loops during their initial years at the sport but the philosophy seems to be that if they bash up their old cars they'll have learned better by the time they are offered a works drive. Make no mistake, there is a deep reservoir of these young Carlssons and Tranas waiting to snatch the championship—and keep it. And with this early background of rough-and-tumble training they're good.

You, with your newly bought Viva or Imp, will find that it is useless to fritter away your valuable time in British club rallies if your intention is to enter the international field. The way ahead

for the serious driver is a tough one involving a great deal of self-sacrifice, and one on which an affluent uncle with an itch to start a motor stable can be a considerable asset. You will have to abandon your job, take a three-month holiday in Scandinavia, and enter every little rally, road event or ice race that you can find. This is a tremendous step to take, and costly, but if you have the guts and the ambition you'll find a way, even if it means taking a job as a grease-monkey at a garage in the Arctic Circle. It has been done before—Geoff Mabbs went to Finland to polish up his skill; Paddy Hopkirk also went abroad to put punch into his driving—and it made the world of difference. This, in my opinion, is the only way to get enough genuine international-type rally driving under your belt. I would suggest that this plunge should be taken as soon as you find that you can drive, and certainly before you get too much Sunday-school rally experience in this country, experience which can only blunt your enthusiasm and damage your driving ability.

Don't get me wrong about British club rallying. I think that it is a most pleasant way of week-ending, like fishing, or hiking, or gambling. But twenty years of the Matlock Rally would not help a driver to get a place in the Marathon de la Route. Let's face it, if Swedes and Finns can take ten out of the top twenty places in a rally, as they so often do, then their countries are the places to learn to drive properly.

Before you jump over this particular cliff there is one form of the sport in this country that can be useful—saloon-car racing at club level. Enter as many as possible, find out just how fast the car will go round a corner before it breaks away; learn the limits of the car, discover exactly what angles you can adopt and still remain in control. Then when you have this knowledge at your fingertips

you will be able to tackle a special stage in a rally with the extra confidence that will take you over it at maximum speed.

So start by buying the right car, enter it in saloon races and get away to one of the continental countries and begin rallying.

Then come back and clean up some of the awards in the national rallies of this country (use one of the recognized navigators, not an enthusiastic friend who may know nothing about map reading) to qualify for the major international events. . . .

What are the qualities necessary to a top-grade rally driver? Firstly, as in all branches of motor sport, you will need cash—it helps driving enormously. You must be physically fit—there will be plenty of car-lifting and shoving to do in the winter events. You must train yourself to be able to stay awake for long periods; you must be able to live on scratch meals for a week. Your reactions must be lightning fast—rally roads are usually narrow, and unlike race tracks are used to two-way traffic, most of which seems to be encountered on a blind bend. Your mechanical appreciation must be fairly sensitive; rallies are won only at the finish and you will surely have to get out-and-under some time during an event. Or if a garage is at hand you must be able to diagnose a fault rapidly and tell the mechanic precisely what is needed to get the car back on the road. And, of course, you must have driving skill: this you will certainly lack when you begin, but, contrary to common belief, it can be learned. I can remember some of today's best British drivers, who when I started were just ordinary, not-so-fast club drivers. The Morley brothers, for instance. And look at them today. Then there are people like Carlsson: even as little as four or five years ago he was always bending his car, or rolling it, or wearing out the brakes. I know because I often sat by helpless in the passenger seat while he did it!

Today the Saab is not as competitive as it was in those days, but Erik's technique has improved so greatly that the car's lack of punch is noticeable only on long, fast hill climbs. Erik's long experience of Saabs—he has been their test driver for years—has taught him every idiosyncrasy of the car, and now he knows its habits as well as he knows his own. His technique is no mystery—he doesn't even use the left-foot-on-the-brake method beloved of the Swedes when piloting front-wheel-drive cars—but after years of driving Saabs to the limit, of deliberately flipping Saabs in testing, of eating and sleeping Saabs, his car has become almost an extension of his own brain. And Erik's mental reaction is one of the fastest in the sport.

As a new and independent driver you will need to know how to prepare your own car. No. 1 job—before you even consider jazzing up the power—must be on the brakes. They should be more than adequate for the rough competitive work of the vehicle. A production car's anchors are usually less than sufficient for rallying—so find someone who can advise. Next, suspension. The car must handle as you want it to; tyres, springs, shock-absorbers must be set up for rallying or you deny yourself a chance of good driving from the outset. Then comfort; the driver's seat must be the type that grips you well enough to support you; if you have to hang on to the steering wheel to keep upright on a bend, your seat needs changing. It must enable the driver to reach the gear lever without strain, the pedals without stretching, the switches without leaning forward. Personally, I like to build my own seat, but there are several good ones on the market.

The car must be given a chance to finish the rally without falling apart. So it is vital to see that all the nuts and bolts are screwed up

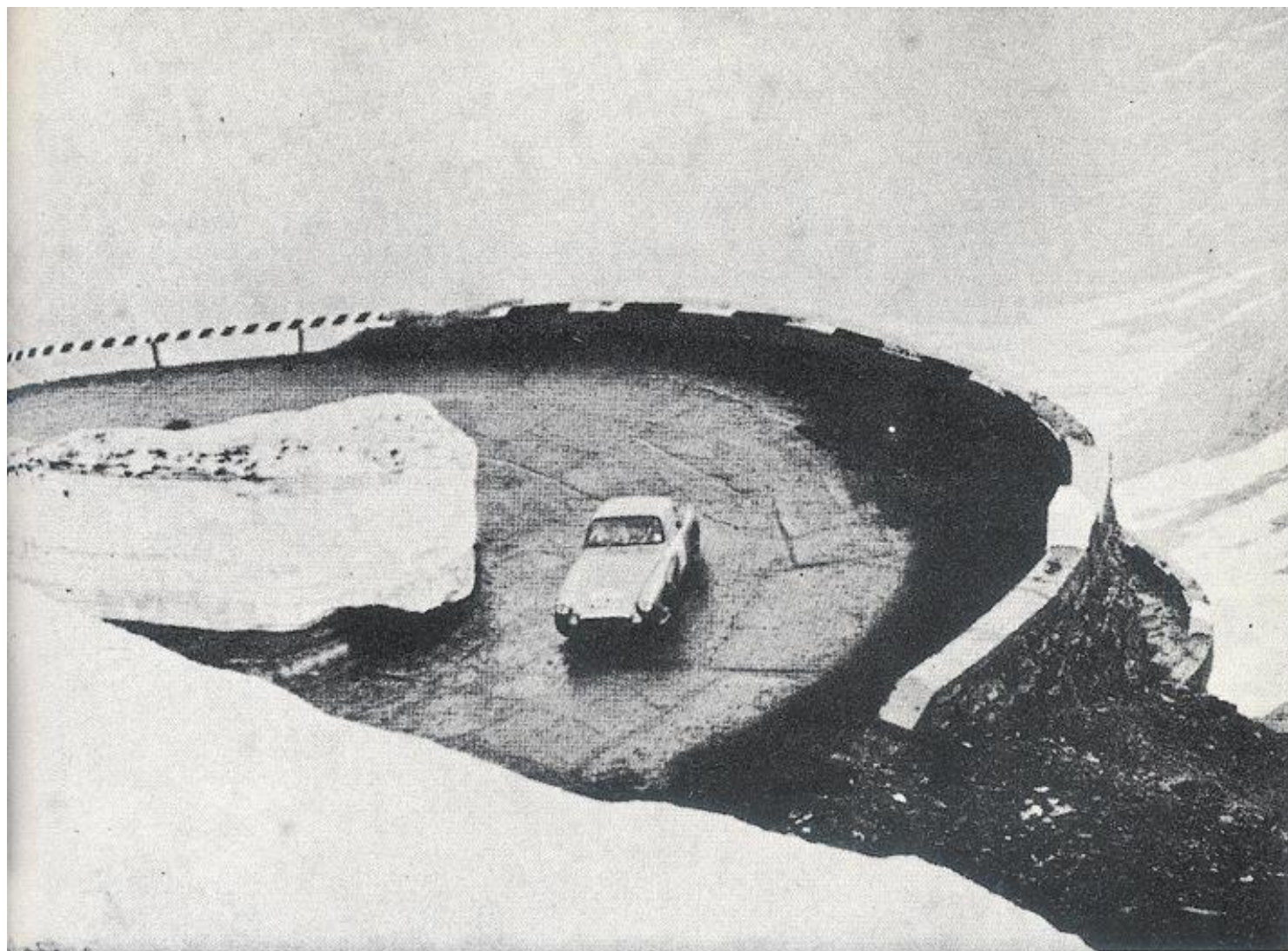
tightly. Wire-lock nuts that need locking, examine every thread, every working part, every door hinge—more awards have been lost by silly things falling off than by bending the car. Last in importance is the actual tuning of the car. For this go to the experts, tell them exactly how much tuning you need and the money you have available for the job, and let them tailor it for you. Don't just dive into the nearest shop and buy some glittering conversion—it probably will not comply with the regulations. And make sure you take the correct tools, lights, spares, tyres, a fuel tank with enough range, and some sort of underneath protection for a rough rally. Double check with the competitions departments of the manufacturers to make quite sure that the bits you intent to put on the car are homologated.

Some people clutter up the inside of the car with so many rally 'aids'—computers and clocks and lights and kitchen sinks—that they need a pack-mule to get them round the route. After ten years of rallying I find that I have gradually jettisoned most of the highly technical kit beloved of the novice. I have a map light, an accurate wrist watch, and I cut a hole around the milometer in order to see the coming-and-going numbers, and that's it. Anything more is just so much junk.

I may wear a pair of ski-slacks over which I put racing overalls, and if the car is known to be a cold one I wear long underpants. Avoid long duffel-coats and wide-bottomed slacks, as gear levers have a tendency to get lost up sleeves and trouser-legs.

Town shoes can be a nuisance in the snow; a pair of racing boots fit the bill very well or, like Erik Carlsson, carry a pair of slip-over galoshes for use when you get out of the car. They can prevent feet sliding on brake or clutch pedals.

Long before many of the big rallies start, the serious competitor



No time to look at the view as the Sprinzel Sprite slews round a mountain bend in the Alpine Rally in June 1961

will get out on the proposed route to make his *recce* (I told you this would need money) and spend a weary week making accurate and detailed pace notes. This preparation can mean the difference between getting a place and getting hopelessly lost. And when seconds count the knowledge of precisely where the road branches off into the bush, or where a fast corner lies invisibly over the brow of a hill, can make or break a run to the next control point.

These pace notes are in fact a complete survey of the route. From them the navigator is able to tell the driver exactly how to negotiate the road ahead. To prove their value, try driving over a few miles of complex and unknown country, and time your run. Then get your navigator to make pace notes of the route. Now drive back over the route under the detailed instructions of the navigator—slight left, flat-out right, sharp left by church and so on—and just see how much time you save.

Pace notes will save you more time through slow corners than through fast ones, where you may be able to save only a split second. But if you plot the slow ones well you may be able to whittle off a couple of seconds a go, for if you brake from ninety down to thirty for something you can take at fifty the lost seconds will soon pile up. But all notes must be made with infinite care. On a fast special stage you may be travelling at some 100 m.p.h., and when your navigator calls out 'Slight right' you must be able to believe him. The result of inaccurate notes may be left to the imagination.

As we pass over the rally route during a *recce* we usually take a heavily inked mental note of any particularly suicidal corners, blind crests and so on, and also we decide on the various methods of getting past certain hazards in one piece—on ice, on snow, in fog—whatever the weather chooses to inflict upon us.

In fact I enjoy driving on ice, although I haven't a snowball in hell's chance of matching my skating skill with the Swedes. Ice driving demands a sort of crazy philosophy. If you begin to think: 'My God, this is ridiculous. I can't stop, I can't steer. We could be killed any second,' it slows you down considerably. Same in fog—you can work yourself up to a high speed, but the minute you stop, or slow down, or lose concentration, or ponder on the dangers, you may as well get out of the car and watch the rally as a spectator.

Ice driving can only be done with effect in the highest gear that will keep the car mobile, and almost all the steering is done on the throttle. Most corners are taken well in advance of the actual bend in the road—keeping the power up one points the car in the direction of the exit long before one gets to the corner itself. Eventually, and with a modicum of luck, the wheels will grip and take the car round.

Even the experts occasionally make a boob on this last manoeuvre; some years ago when I was navigating for Carlsson we had reached the summit of a small ice-covered hill and saw a doleful Paddy Hopkirk walking towards us, waving at the car with the obvious intention of warning Erik that there was trouble ahead. Erik must have braked a little too fiercely, for we spun in a half-circle and continued to descend the hill backwards at quite a frightening speed. Now this would spell disaster for most normal drivers and a major panic could be expected. Not Erik, though—he just tweaked the hand brake, spun us back round in the right direction and continued ploughing on.

Snow is no great problem. It gives much better adhesion than ice and if the driver overcooks something it rapidly slows the car down; even the banks lining the road can often be used to bounce

a vehicle back roughly in the right direction. And one can easily observe where gravel has been thrown over snow-covered roads—and keep the wheels on it.

One point about fog. An iodine light set very low on the car is occasionally a help in light fog, but generally the maxim is 'the less lights the better'—and that includes fog lamps. Basically, driving in dense fog is driving on faith, and one adopts the Swedish philosophy of assuming that the road must go somewhere, even though it may look (as it so often does) as though it has decided to vanish into thin air. This, of course, is no policy for the impecunious owner-driver. Even Erik is reputed to have bent some fifty-three motor cars. Tom Trana is said to be on his twenty-ninth—and he is only twenty-four years old.

Night driving of the more straightforward kind is probably more dangerous than any of the other rally hazards. I am a chain-smoker, and find that eye fatigue bothers me more than most, but any rallyman will admit that this strain causes more disasters than any other single factor. Nightwork demands good lights, really powerful and well-adjusted beams that prevent the constant peering through the screen that eventually tires even the most acute vision.

Don't be a hero, let the navigator have a go at night—even if you are a better driver.

And if you begin to see burning houses out of the corner of your eye, or little men crossing the road carrying ladders, or walking pillar boxes, then for heaven's sake stop, you're at your last gasp. I often take stay-awake tablets on a doctor's prescription—not because they are strictly necessary, but because I consider that it is better to take them and not get overtired than not to take them and invite an accident by allowing fatigue to creep upon me

unnoticed. Most doctors will prescribe these tablets if they know their client is about to take off on a long and tiring event. Curiously, though, if you find that you are doing really well in a rally you will not need any sort of stimulant other than the possibility of winning.

The toughest of them all, the Marathon de la Route, demands careful physical preparation. Stay-awakes or vitamin tablets become even more necessary, and several nights of early kip before the event are important. In effect the rally is a ninety-six-hour non-stop race at very high average speeds over very rough country—just a long overland dash from Liège, in Belgium, to Bulgaria and back.

Normally I drive the entire rally with the exception of a couple of hours on the German *autobahn* and perhaps four on the Yugoslav *autoput*. It's still my favourite event.

The 1963 Liège, for instance, was a real cracker. As usual, of the 125 competitors that left the start, just a handful (twenty in 1963) remained mobile enough to get back to Belgium. The weather was unusually wet during the rally and many people found themselves bogged down in roadside fields before the contest was a third through. Some lost too much time between controls to stay in the running, others came to grief in the bottomless pot-holes of the Yugoslav roads.

The incredibly rough roads, plus the fantastic average speeds of somewhere around 50 m.p.h. (even the police are co-operative about this, by the way), weed out all but the most robust car and competitor. The 1963 event was a major effort from the start. Teeming rain and crowded roads transformed what was normally a simple run through Italy into a speedboat race through a sea of jostling hippopotami, so that when we arrived at the really

testing part of the rally, the Yugoslav section, we were all like damp washrags. The special stages to Sofia wrung the remaining energy out of us and the run back from Bulgaria on roads like the surface of the moon were driven in a dream-like state of almost complete exhaustion. Try driving some 500 miles on dust-clouded mule-tracks at an average of fifty after a few days on biscuits and cold chicken legs and you'll see what I mean.

The Liège is one of the few rallies that has retained its character since the old days (I like to think of it as the last surviving city-to-city road race) and if you manage to finish it you're down in the books as a genuine rally driver, a member of a small and extremely exclusive club.

The magnificent reception during the last few miles of this rally is something one never forgets. When the survivors arrive back in Spa the police organize them into an escorted triumphal convoy to Liège. For thirty miles the cars parade through the country in order of finish; the winners' vehicles are garlanded with flowers, the cheering crowds line the route, the police motor cyclists sound their sirens. After a few miles of dignified procession the atmosphere subtly changes as the speed starts to hot up. Tiredness vanishes, one or two wits try to pass each other, and by the time the cars reach Liège itself the parade has developed into something like a road race for kids. The Belgian police have seen it all before, and wisely clear the roads of other traffic before the rally maniacs arrive. A wonderful hour; one feels like a member of a conquering army liberating a city.

Generally, though, rallying has little of the packed crowds of other sports, little of the tenseness and excitement of being watched by 10,000 people all hoping you'll flip your car. Most of the rally driver's skill is demonstrated in front of an audience of one—his

navigator. The magnificent escapes from disaster, the masterful skill and control, the brilliant cornering, are witnessed only by the tired and cynical bod sitting next to you, a sleepy, bad-tempered character who has already made up his mind that nothing in this world will induce him to risk his neck with this nut of a driver again. Perhaps that's why rally drivers, like anglers, talk so much and so freely about their experiences. . . .

How do I rate other international rallies? Each has its own flavour, its special characteristics, some of which we could do without, others that make the event one of the high points of the sporting year. Here are a few snap descriptions, thoughts that immediately jump into mind when events are mentioned:

The Monte: long, boring main-road sections, a lot of fuss for very little fast motoring. The worse the weather, the better the rally; in the dry it's no rally at all, just a promenade, a gastronomic tour.

The Tulip Rally: the worst rally in the calendar, so dull. One enters it in the faint hope that it might possibly improve this time. Nothing ever happens on the Tulip; there are a few tests, hill climbs and so on, but they are over before drivers get into the swing of the event.

Acropolis: a great rally, tremendous fun; tough, fast, bad roads, fine organizers. Not really one for the private owner, as it is so long and damaging to the car—and too expensive to enter. But if you're lucky enough to drive for a team, one of the best.

Midnight Sun: very specialized, very monotonous road sections, but with good special stages. The picture that springs to mind is one of the dozens of ambulances that lie in wait like benevolent buzzards near the start-line. Extremely well organized, with the army controlling all the special stages by radio-telephone. The

road sections themselves are alive with police cars and radar traps, right up to the Arctic Circle. I was picked up recently by a policeman who had seen me on what must have been a closed-circuit television screen and who accused me of crossing the centre of the road to take a corner. This sort of thing, plus the severe penalties for driving misdemeanours in Sweden, cramps our style more than a little.

The Alpine: another great rally, a go-go-go event with a million hairpins. The object is not necessarily to win, but to bag a coupé. Plenty of sleep, lots of switchback driving.

Geneva: not a rally that attracts many. I have never driven in one, but I'm told it has good tests and hill climbs.

R.A.C. Rally: now one of the best rallies in the book. No main-road sections worth talking about, but with more special stages than any other international rally, involving 400 miles of hard work. This event has improved out of all recognition during the last few years; it has changed from a typically British navigational rally to one that is as testing as any international event in the calendar.

The Safari Rally: a cross between the Acropolis and the Liège rallies and a really interesting run. Long, tough and very fast, with average speeds of 50 m.p.h. the whole way. Armed Masai warriors standing in the road with one foot balanced on the other knee are apt to distract you as you pass through the bush, but they add tremendously to the local colour. These gentlemen are not as simple as they look and now have a standard charge for posing for a photograph.

Tour de France: an excellent event, although it can, if the driver is not a dedicated sportsman, become another gastronomic event, mainly due to the lavish generosity of Mr. Shell. A long

drive—about 5,000 kilometres—around Europe, cramming in as many circuit races as possible. Tough, because it lasts for twelve days, and because there is no time let into the schedule for servicing the cars—and racing wears them out very quickly indeed. There's always a lot of work to be fitted in, changing dampers, brake-pads and so on. If you drive for a team some of the work will be done by your servicing crews, and even if you are a privateer you'll get first-aid from Shell or Dunlop, who are an immense help to all competitors in time of trouble. But it's still a lot of hard work. . . .

To the lay public the sport of rallying has, at the moment, a doubtful aroma. We see newspaper reports of village barricades manned by irate natives, we hear of treasure-hunt clues left on civic monuments, of cattle roaming the roads after gates have been left open, of farmers who have declared war on motor sport. What can be done to clear our name with these people? For, let's face it, although the average rally held under the auspices of the R.A.C. is a well-conducted, quiet and properly routed event, we are, as a group, in bad odour.

The answer lies in public relations. The organizers of the bigger British rallies—the Express and Star, the Regent and others—take the trouble to go round the route well in advance and call on everyone who lives in the area. A marathon task, but one that pays off well. The locals become curious, take a proprietary interest in the rally, help the competitors, open gates, man controls, cheer the cars on their way.

We must also face the fact that too many rallies take place in this country. One hundred really good events in a year—two every week-end—would be adequate for the enthusiast, with some small afternoon treasure hunts for those who enjoy more leisurely

JOHN SPRINZEL

sport. And we must take special precautions about noise during the night. The police tell us that we are welcome to rally our heads off during daylight hours, but become less friendly when they see a route map marked 'night section'. Now that the Motor Rallies Advisory Committee (more widely known as the Chesham Committee) has presented its report, in the not very distant future we will see offending organizers hauled up not only before an R.A.C. tribunal but also before a magistrates' court.

It is, I suppose the inevitable result of too much sporting enthusiasm coupled with a certain amount of irresponsibility. We can only hope that the law tempers justice with mercy until the 'fringe' organizers learn to come to heel.