

# The First Racing Prototype Sprite

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Last summer's Healey Challenge event at Mid-Ohio was special for many reasons including the presence of Geoff Healey and John Colgate. John was the first American to drive for the Healey racing team, winning at LeMans and Sebring in Sprites and achieving success in Big Healeys.

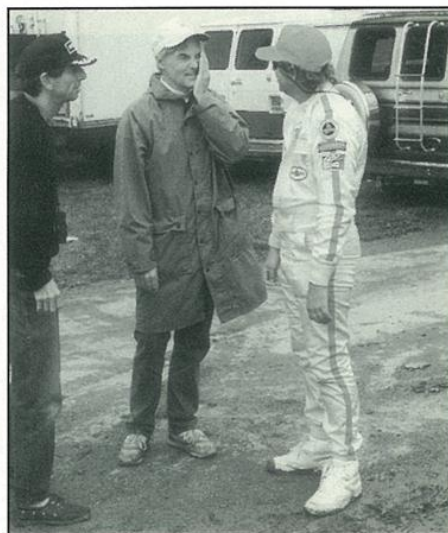
But for a few of us who are fortunate to see it, there appeared a truly historic and unique car that may, in fact, be the rarest Sprite ever built. This car was the first racing prototype Sprite ever built by the Experimental Department headed by Roger Menadue at the Healey Motors garage in Warwick.

Geoff Healey, who headed the racing effort out of Warwick, spent a considerable amount of time studying this car at Mid-Ohio and reminiscing with John Colgate, who co-drove this car to a victory in its class at the 12-hour 1961 Sebring race.

Geoff fondly recalled that this car was the first all aluminum bodied Sprite. The streamlined body panels were made by an old "panel basher" named Bill Buckingham and the chassis/frame alterations were done by Roger Menadue. This car was the first attempt at building a car specifically designed to meet the stringent FIA rules that governed many of the famous long distance races like LeMans. Later versions of this design evolved into the famous Sprite

Above: John Colgate powers the prototype Sprite out of turn four at Mid-Ohio last year.

Below: Tony Peck, John Colgate & Mark Flanders discuss racing strategy for the Mid-Ohio Healey races.







*Speeding up the long straightaway, these two Sprites stay close together during the 12-hour Sebring race in 1961 and finished first and second in class. "Number 65" finished well ahead of many far more powerful and expensive cars. (Photo courtesy of Champion Spark Plug Company.)*

coupes like Bill Wood's Sprite featured in the January **CHATTER**.

John's memories were much more personal since his performance at the 1961 Sebring event was one of his most significant victories and was not without some problems. John drove nine of the twelve hours, including the last six hours straight. John recalls that a halfshaft broke while he was driving about a mile or more from the pits and he had to push the car backwards to the pits to get it fixed.



*Warwick "Panel Basher" Bill Buckingham fashioned the streamlined body panels out of aluminum. (Photo courtesy of Geoff Healey.)*

During the night portion of the race a Cobra spun out right in front of the car and resulted in a slight accident which dented the front wing and destroyed the left headlight. After coming into the pits, Roger Menadue taped a flashlight to the wing to act as a headlight because you had to have two headlights to compete. After that John said, "My lefthanders were a little dim!" Geoff interjected this: "John knew the track so well that he went just as quickly."

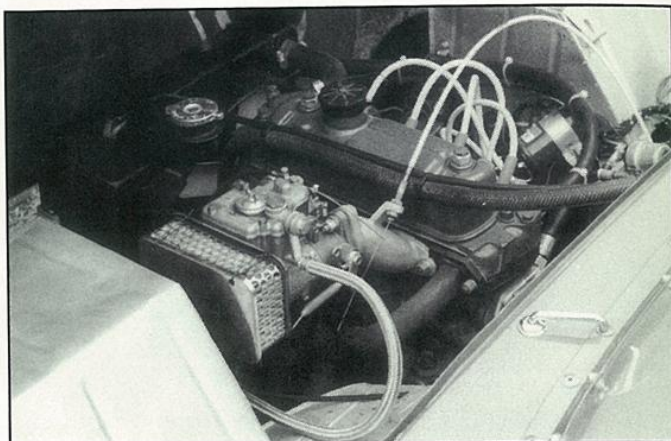
The 1961 Sebring race was one where inspired ingenuity like this paid great dividends. None of the Sprite team was forced to retire from this car killing race that saw 65 cars of various makes and engines start, but only 37 finish.

John drove this car again at Mid-Ohio and thought the new roll bar had reduced the driver's leg room, but pictures of the car at Sebring indicate that maybe John isn't as flexible as he was 30 years ago, since the rollbar appears to be placed in a similar position,



*Chief Healey mechanic Roger Menadue tapes a flashlight to fender to replace damaged left headlight during the 1961 Sebring race. (Photo courtesy of Champion Sparkplug Company.)*





but smaller. Some changes that have taken place include the installation of a 1275cc engine with a Weber carburetor in place of the original 1100cc engine equipped with SU carbs, and Mini-Lite racing wheels in place of the original 60-spoke wire wheels.

This historic car is now owned and raced by Mark Flanders of Fort Lauderdale, FL. Mark first heard about a "Special Nassau Sprite" back in 1974 while he was racing in SCCA events. A racing friend's girlfriend's father was said to own this rare car, but other than talking about it, the car was forgotten.

Then, in 1986, Mark again heard talk of this car and he tracked down his old racing buddy who had married the old girlfriend, and yes, her father still owned a "special" Sprite. A few phone calls later and Mark had arranged to see the car, which had been stored in a loft of an old warehouse since the mid-60's.

Excitement gave way to reality after a full day of work with a fork life moving junk finally brought the car out where it could be looked at carefully. An inch of dust and dirt, as well as a rather large rat nest in the boot, made the car look like something out of a monster movie.

After two frustrating attempts to have the car restored, Mark found Paul Tsikuris of Lakeland, FL whose Healey restoration business is well known to Healeyists throughout the southeast. The dark blue faded paint was replaced with Healey Blue as it

was run at Sebring in 1961, and the many dings and dents were repaired and panels replaced. The new roll bar was installed to help stiffen the car and even Mark agrees that it may be overkill for such a little car.

The one and a half year restoration was finished in time for the SVRA event at Moroso in 1989. Since that race it has raced at Palm Beach in '89, Mid-Ohio in '90, and it just finished 3rd in its class at this year's SVRA Sebring event.

Mark has uncovered information that this car was run by Donald Healey at the 1961 Nassau race. Geoff Healey recalls that this car was returned to England after the 1961 Sebring race and Mark has talked to an old Eccurrie Ecosse mechanic who remembers the car at Silverstone, paired with two lightweight Jaguars, which may account for the dark blue paint.

Whatever the racing history, it is obvious that this is one of the most famous and rarest Sprites ever built. Seeing this car at Mid-Ohio and, hopefully at this year's SVRA Heartland Vintage Grant Prix where the Austin-Healey Sprites and MG Midgets will be honored, is a real treat for any Sprite enthusiast.

*Clockwise from top left: Geoff Healey discusses the racing history of this historic Sprite at Mid-Ohio; 1275cc engine with Weber carb replaced the original S.U. equipped 1100 engine; Large racing gas cap sits atop large enduro tank; Stark interior provides little room for driver.*

