

Ladies First

An all-girl team finds Sebring glory in a very special Sprite

BY JIM DONNELLY

PHOTOGRAPHY INTERPRETED BY HAL CROCKER, FROM HIS ARCHIVES

They called them the Sebring Sprites, even though they raced elsewhere, everywhere from the Targa Florio to Le Mans, and got their ultimate shape for rocketing down Mulsanne. Okay, so maybe a 1,275cc engine slightly overbored to 1,293cc doesn't exactly produce Edwards Air Force Base velocity, but be assured, these were exotic, lightweight thoroughbreds, the best that Austin-Healey produced at Warwick. At first, as designed by Donald Healey, the Sebring Sprites were evolutions of standard Spridget technologies in various states of tune.

As the late 1960s approached, the Sebring Sprite was on its way to the Sarthe, with bodywork designed by Geoff Healey, and tested in the Longbridge wind tunnel, that drew clear inspiration from Kamm-tail predecessors such as the Ferrari 250

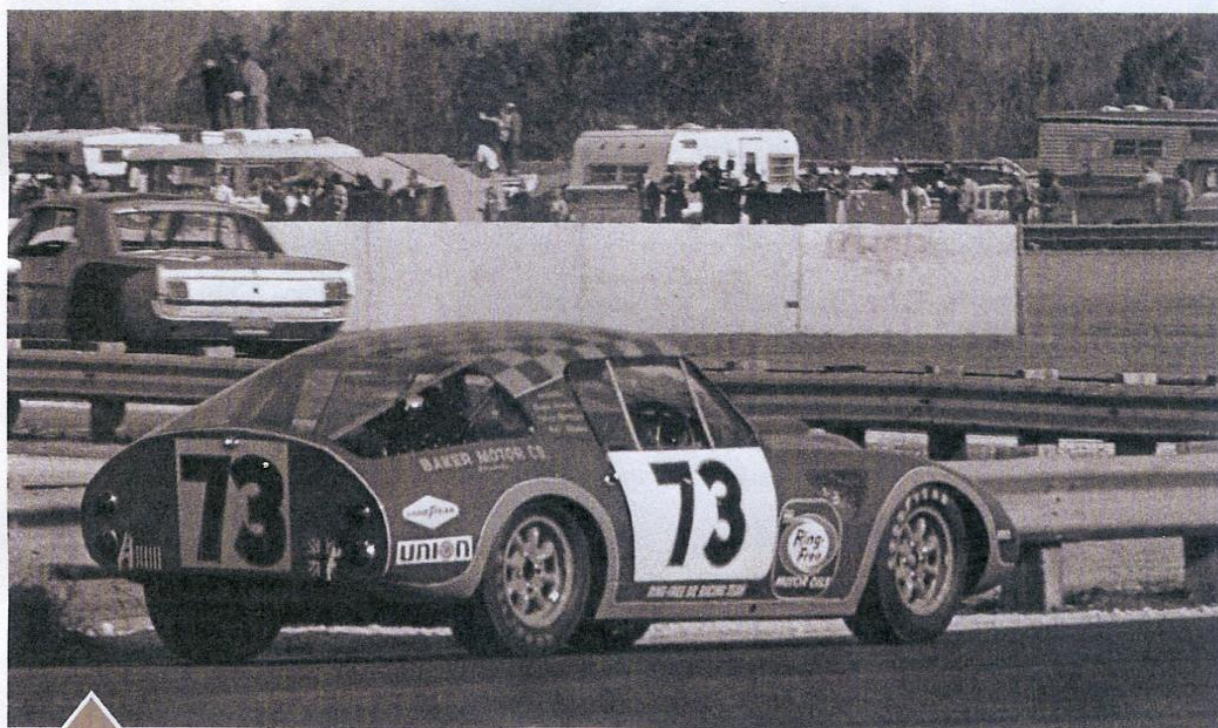
GTO and Shelby Cobra Daytona coupe. In 1967, one such aerodynamic Sprite coupe won the Motor Trophy as the highest-finishing British car at Le Mans. Very soon, however, Donald Healey departed as the former BMC was merged into British Leyland in 1968.

The new conglomerate sold off most all of the competition Healeys, including the Sebring Sprites. A few worked their way stateside into privateer hands, including those of Jim Baker, who owned a huge imported car dealership in Atlanta. He also happened to be the neighbor of Hal Crocker, who captured these images of Baker's Sebring Sprite in action. The car factored in a hugely memorable event, an early class win at Sebring featuring an all-women team of drivers. As Hal told us, the catalyst was Baker's obtain-

"IF YOU LOOK AT THIS PHOTO, you can see that the fuel filler is in a different location than on some of the other cars. There were little subtleties between them. And these Sprites were some of the last ones, the racing coupes, built by Austin-Healey. The Ring-Free car, I understand, was the last one built by Donald and Geoffrey Healey, and it benefited from them having learned a lot of tricks that were incorporated into that car, including Lucas fuel injection. This is Jim Baker running in 1969 during an SCCA regional race at the Roebling Road course [then called Savannah International Raceway] in Savannah. The car was classified as C Sports Racing. You can see that there was a real resemblance between these cars and the Cobra Daytona coupe that Peter Brock designed for Carroll Shelby. I don't know a lot about aerodynamics, but I do know that there was considered to be an advantage in having the tail end chopped off in this manner. There's more than a passing similarity."

ing sponsorship from Ring-Free Oil, then owned by the Macmillan Oil Company of Allentown, Pennsylvania, which had discovered a marketing niche by backing female drivers in amateur racing. The 12 Hours of 1970 would be an enduring accomplishment for team, sponsor and especially, the drivers. 🌐

"CHUCK REYNOLDS, WHO WORKED AS JIM BAKER'S SALES MANAGER, is in the Ring-Free Sprite just ahead of the N.A.R.T. Ferrari 312P at Daytona in 1970. The Ferrari had Mike Parkes and Sam Posey as its drivers, and I can see that it's Parkes in the car here, because of the helmet and the bandana over his face. That Ferrari finished fourth overall in the race. If you look back at the history books, you'll learn that it wasn't uncommon for cars to fall out like the Sprite did. It was an endurance race. It wasn't unknown to have half the cars drop out before it was over. What probably blew the head gasket on this little car was the banking. You'd get up on the banking and hold it all the way to the floor and just come around. The engine would never get a chance to breathe. The banking was really hard on a lot of cars. The NASCAR drivers knew enough to lift so the engine wouldn't develop a back pressure and suck the oil up inside it. The sports car guys didn't know that. The banking was probably the single biggest cause of engine failures at Daytona."



"IN 1970, THE 24 HOURS OF DAYTONA WAS RUN UNDER INTERNATIONAL MANUFACTURERS CHAMPIONSHIP RULES, so the Le Mans Sprite was actually factored into the Prototype class despite having less than 2.0 liters of displacement. Bobby Rinzier is in the car here, early in the race. He was partnered with Chuck Reynolds as his co-driver. The Sprite lasted 178 laps before falling out with a blown head gasket."

This was early in Bobby Rinzier's career, but Bobby didn't have a real long career as a driver. Bobby figured out that there were guys out there who were faster than him and crazier than him, and he had too much sense to be a real good race driver. Bobby went on to co-own, with Charlie Kemp, the RC Cola-sponsored Lola in the Can-Am series and then bought a couple of Porsche 917-10s from Roger Penske."



"THE RING-FREE TEAM CAME TO SEBRING IN 1970 with three women as their drivers. They were Janet Guthrie, Rosemary Smith and Judy Kondratieff. The Sprite is getting passed here by the Matra-Simca MS 650, which you can tell is being driven by Dan Gurney, since he's sitting so tall in the cockpit. Gurney shared that car with François Cevert. This location is where you came out of the hairpin, with Gurney passing the Sprite on the outside. It's changed a little today. Behind that dirt bank is a service road. There are still some trees. The hairpin has been totally modified with a chicane. The Sprite team won their class, Prototype 2.0, for 19th overall. Gurney and Cevert were 12th overall, running as a 3.0-liter prototype. So the ladies did okay."



"FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, AFTER THE SEBRING RACE, are Judy Kondratieff, Jim Baker, Rosemary Smith and Janet Guthrie. Rosemary was the one with the most experience among the women on the team, and she was from Dublin, Ireland. When she was younger, she had been a model and a clothing designer, and she became interested in rallying. Her real claim to fame was that she had quite a bit of success as a rally driver in Europe, to the point where she got factory rides. The class win at Sebring was kind of near the end of her career. Rosemary got married, retired from racing for about six months, but then got rid of her husband, and this might have been her return to racing. Judy was from California, and I remember that Judy had trouble with the car; couldn't get used to the left-hand shifting, didn't know the track. She was the weak link on the team. Practicing, coming into the hairpin,

she couldn't find a gear, missed a shift and ended up in the sandbank. Plus, she confessed to me that she couldn't see real well at night, so being an ex-medic, I told her she needed to start taking Vitamin A. Eventually, Judy got the hang of it and became comfortable in the car. Janet Guthrie, at this point, was not real well known. This was before she went on to Indy and to NASCAR. Judy went on, and she went to work for Bruce McLaren's wife, after Bruce got killed. Judy worked for the McLaren F1 team doing timing and scoring, and even got into studying aerodynamics. She ended up meeting Howden Ganley, who was an F1 driver, and they got married. Judy came down with ovarian cancer and died while they were living in Europe. Jackie Stewart delivered the eulogy at her memorial service. So she was well respected in the Formula 1 community."



"THIS IS THE SPRITE ON THE GRID BEFORE THE 1970 RACE at Sebring. What you should notice is that there's a 911 behind them, and what looks like a Camaro behind the 911. I know there were a couple of Camaros and Mustangs that qualified behind the Sprite. Also, in this photo, take note of all those people jammed on top of that building on the pit side. It's a wonder the thing didn't collapse. I'm not sure if that was some kind of a VIP spot because the tower and the press room were located elsewhere. The Martini & Rossi bridge, however, was brand-new in 1970. Our old boy Hans-Dieter Dechent, who owned the Martini International Racing Team, had a Porsche 908/2 entered at Sebring that year, and then came

back in 1971 with a Porsche 917, and Vic Elford and Gerard Larrousse won the race for him. Jim Baker, who entered the Sprite for Ring-Free, had another car at Sebring in 1970, a Chevron B16 Ford, which he shared with Bobby Rinzler and went out with a broken crankshaft. If you look at this front view of the Sprite, you'll see the panel on the nose that's cracked open. That was for cooling the engine, or the brakes, or possibly both. At Daytona, the panel was kept down because of the speed. I think the panel was adjustable. In the photo from Sebring that shows the Matra passing the car, the panel was a little cockeyed, but it's not like the Sprite had been hit, because there's no other damage to the car."



"LATE IN THE RACE AT SEBRING, the Ring-Free Sprite came in for a routine stop and refueling. The guy on the left, behind the car, is holding a stopwatch. I'm only guessing, but since they're fueling the car with a hose and not a can, he could be using the stopwatch to time the fuel going in, so they know they've got it fully fueled that way. Behind the rear wheel, you can see that the lettering says the Sprite was painted by Billy Cook. He was from Atlanta, had a company called Atlanta Body and Fender, and he went on to become the chief technical inspector for IMSA. If you crashed your Ferrari, that was the shop you went to, because Billy was known for doing the best body work in town. He basically did all of Baker's high-end stuff."