

RACE OF MY LIFE

INTERVIEW BY KEITH OSWIN

John Sprinzel

Liege-Rome-Liege

August 31-September 4,
1960

Austin Healey Sprite

There are two events which were really tremendous to do: the Liege and the Safari. In fact the Safari is still fantastic but, of course, the Liege is no longer with us. It was a 24-hour road race across Europe which you couldn't possibly run in that form today.

In 1960 I did the event in a Sprite that had been built for a customer at Healey, John Patten, who bought the car with the understanding that I would live with him on the Liege.

It was a 1-litre, steel-bodied, frog-like Sprite, competing against 1000cc Porsches and, of course, the big Healeys led by Pat Moss and in Wisdom, David Siegle-Morris with Vic Elford, and John Gott ordered by Rupert Jones.

We crossed Europe by a similar route to the recent Pirelli triathlons, over the Vivione, Gavia and Stelvio passes (though the first two stages were both cancelled thanks to land slips after heavy rain) into Yugoslavia to Sophia and back at incredible average speeds. The passes were incredibly narrow, nothing like they are today, and we were really driving hard from start to finish.

The event hadn't actually gone on since 1956, but the organisers were hoping to return this was Olympic year. Fortunately the roads became so icy that it was impossible.

The Liege used to run at a 50kph average to satisfy the authorities. However, we were provided with a second sheet of paper with the timing time of the controls.

If you ran at the official 50kph average you would arrive back at the finish in Liege a day and a half earlier than the rally!

What happened was that they timed each control an hour or two earlier than the schedule so that, the time you were into the rally, you were probably on a 75-80kph average.

You weren't actually penalised for keeping to 50kph – except that the control would be closed and you would be out of the event...

On our way back out of Yugoslavia, we passed so many people who'd had punctures or ones that we found ourselves going second overall.

We then had to cross the alps again, and into France the classic Alpine passes. Pat was in front of us, and the Austin Porsche of the Sanders and son team.

At the time we had tackled the French tests, it wasn't rising that we'd fallen back to 1st place, but we were still going



at it like the clappers.

We began the tests at three minute intervals, but we also started simultaneously, three abreast at every control.

This was very clever because, in our case, we had a Porsche and, I think, a lightweight Peugeot alongside us at every start.

The Porsche would always get away first, the Peugeot second and us third.

There was still three minutes behind us to the first 'crazy' of the next batch, so I knew I wouldn't be blocking anyone – though we needed that gap with brilliant

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drivers like Lucien Bianchi and Olivier Gendebien in the entry.

The term 'rally' never appeared anywhere in the regulations, although it did count for the European Rally Championship.

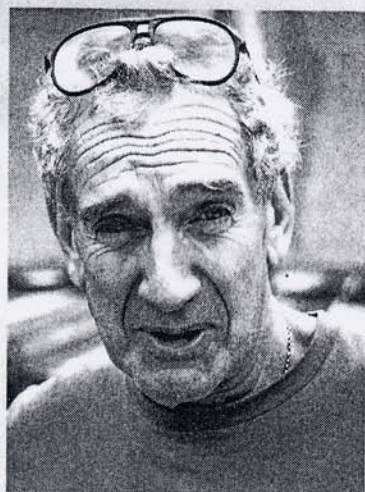
The attrition rate usually saw only around 10-20 cars finish out of the 110 or so that started. This meant that your trio didn't last very long, so you could very quickly end up with a six minute gap and plenty of clear road in front and behind.

Of course, our trio lasted all the way back to Liege, so we had a real race from start to finish! It was just so much fun. John had never taken the usual 'wakey-wakey' tablets we all used to keep us going. It was a bit silly not to have tried them before the event, and I didn't realise he hadn't. On the second night he took one and zonked out.

He had double vision, couldn't see to drive at all, and his navigation was a bit suspect, so I had to drive the whole event. But when you are told that you are starting the return leg in second place, you don't need outside help to stay awake.

Ours was a private entry and, although we had some factory support, we didn't ever need it. The only thing we did was dent one wheel rim – very unusual even these days. Between us, we won overall and (with Pat), took the team prize and class awards. ■

JOHN SPRINZEL – RALLYING LEGEND



John Sprinzel, 62, was one of Britain's rally legends in the late '50s and early '60s. In 1959 he took his Austin Healey Sprite to the British Rally Championship title – the second to hold the crown. Born in Berlin, his family came to England in 1933. He later joined the air force. From early beginnings in grass track motorcycling, he turned to ocean racing before taking up rallying, making his debut in car number one on the 1955 RAC Rally. He worked with Graham Hill at Speedwell Conversions, raced Triumphs and an Austin A35 before purchasing the Sprite. He stayed with BMC until 1961 and also rallied alongside Eric Carlsson at Saab. He retired in 1973 to teach windsurfing with his wife in Hawaii, and represented Greece in the 1982 and '84 world championships.

Next week Wayne Taylor