

By John Christy

Super Sprites at Sebring

PROBABLY the most frequent question heard after the Sprites' first outing in the rain was: "What's in them? The more usual "Wot'll she do" type of quiz had already been abundantly answered.

Quite obviously they are not showroom models. The first things that meet the eye are the 13-inch wire wheels, steel-rimmed, 58-spoke Dunlop units built especially for the Healey concern and soon to be made an optional item. At first glance the hubs seem the same as those on the MGA, Triumph, large Healey and so on but they aren't. They are the same diameter but the spline section is about half-an-inch shorter. These hubs are backed up by Dunlop disc brakes on all four wheels. It was this last item that, coupled with fairly light weight, allowed the Sprites to dive so deeply into the turns. The brakes were absolutely amazing, showing no fade and only minor pedal loss throughout the entire twelve hours.

The wheels as yet have no part number but the number of the brake kit is part #Q.2337.

The suspension front and rear was stiffened with optional competition springs #Q.2334 and 2335 respectively. Additionally, a torsion anti-roll bar, part #Q.2315 was used on the front end. Damping was by standard shocks with different valves.

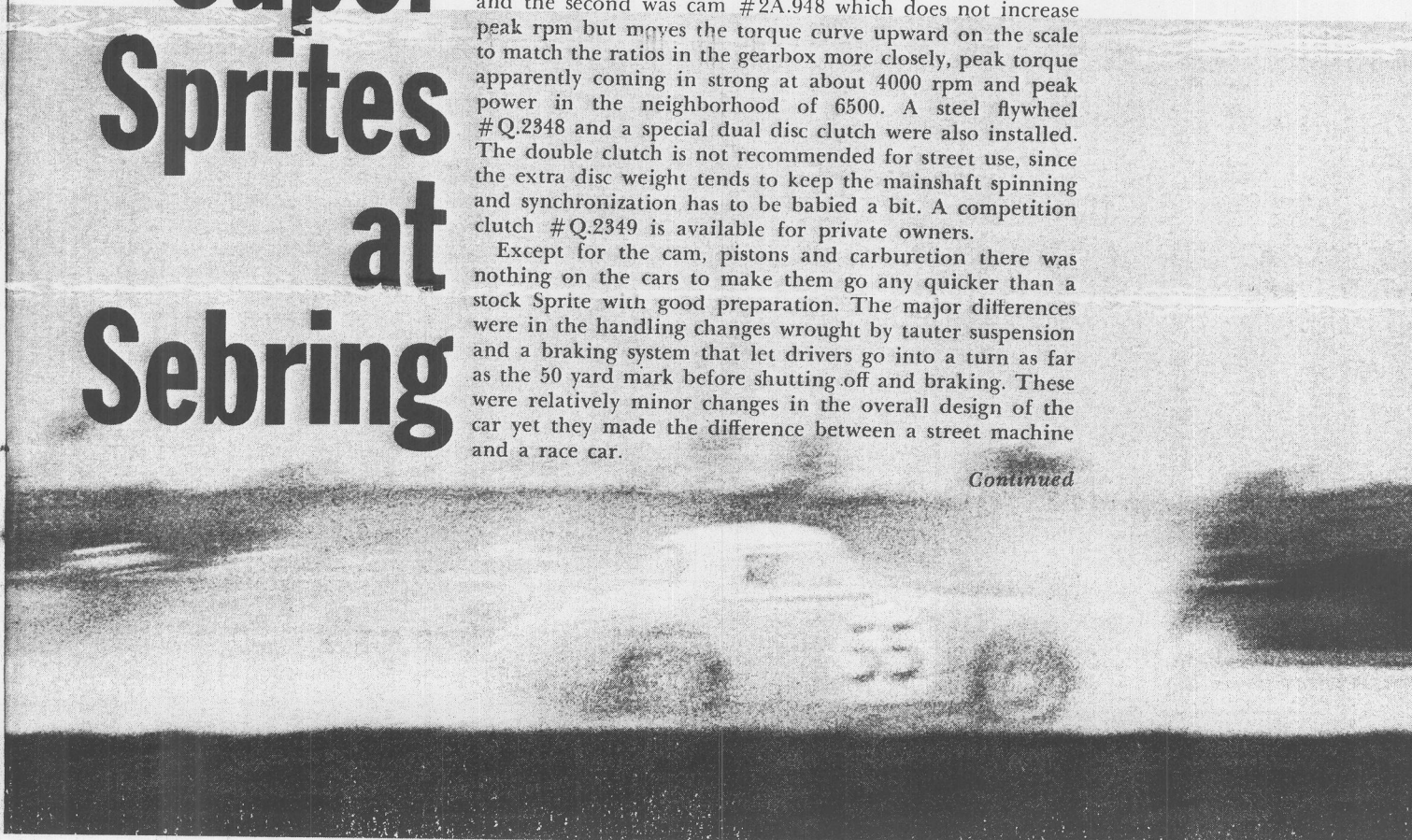
Gearing was also an optional set-up with the close ratio gearbox, #Q.2354 carrying ratios of 3:1, 1.99:1, 1.35:1 and 1:1 for first, second, third and fourth gears. The rear end carried the 4.55 to 1 ring and pinion.

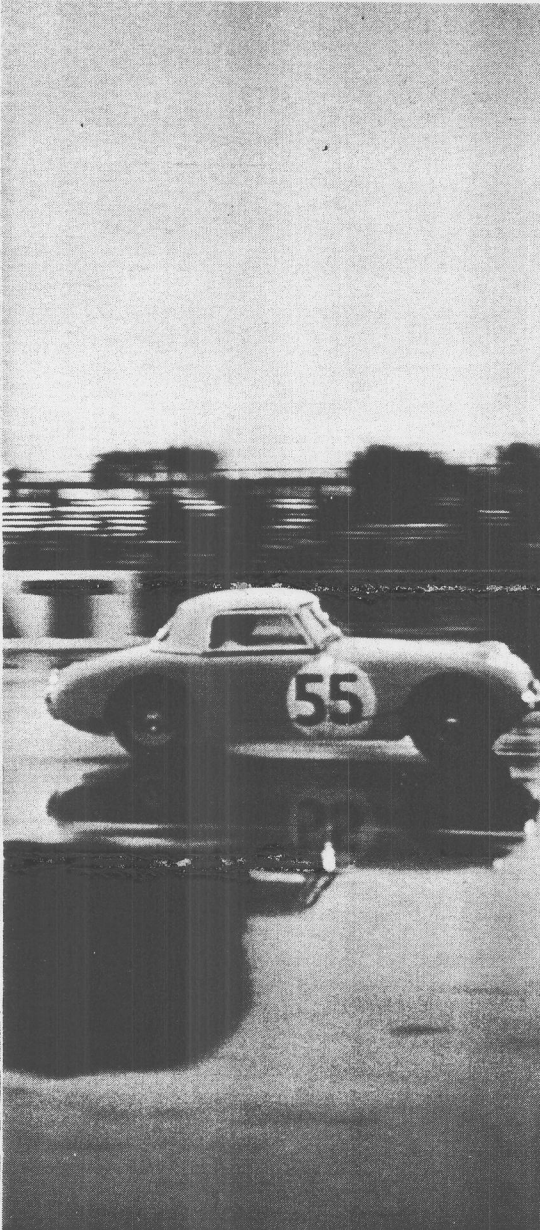
The engines were given the standard factory competition treatment. The head is reworked in similar fashion to the one described in our December 1958 and January 1959 issues. It can be matched as described therein or a factory unit #Q.2302 can be ordered. It was equipped with 1¼-inch S.U. carburetors and special manifold #Q.2344 on the intakes. The exhaust carried a special tuned header system with the two outside ports connected in a Y and thence carried to the rear. The center exhaust port carried its own pipe separately to the rear, the whole forming a dual pipe system.

Inside the block proper, except for a superb balance job, only two changes were made, also listed options. First was a set of pistons, #2A.946 with flat, instead of concave, tops and the second was cam #2A.948 which does not increase peak rpm but moves the torque curve upward on the scale to match the ratios in the gearbox more closely, peak torque apparently coming in strong at about 4000 rpm and peak power in the neighborhood of 6500. A steel flywheel #Q.2348 and a special dual disc clutch were also installed. The double clutch is not recommended for street use, since the extra disc weight tends to keep the mainshaft spinning and synchronization has to be babied a bit. A competition clutch #Q.2349 is available for private owners.

Except for the cam, pistons and carburetion there was nothing on the cars to make them go any quicker than a stock Sprite with good preparation. The major differences were in the handling changes wrought by tauter suspension and a braking system that let drivers go into a turn as far as the 50 yard mark before shutting off and braking. These were relatively minor changes in the overall design of the car yet they made the difference between a street machine and a race car.

Continued





With identification light atwinkle, lonely Sprite steams by on soggy circuit.

Marcus Chambers, Sprite Team Manager (second left) runs through race strategy with his drivers.



THIS PARTICULAR story of Sebring really begins some six years ago and about 2800 miles from the Florida Highlands.

In the summer of 1953, a short, stocky Englishman with a perpetual twinkle in his eye, accompanied by an assorted crew of mechanics arrived on the flat sea of pure white salt that is the Bonneville Speedway. With him was a businesslike little roadster painted a rather hideous shade of dull green. The object was to set records and set them they did — by the hatful. Thus was introduced the Austin Healey to Americans and thus was introduced Donald Healey to the author, beginning a friendship that has continued in a series of sporadic meetings at one motoring function or another. The most recent was Speed Week at Nassau.

Over luncheon in the warm Bahamas sun the talk got around to the latest Healey brainchild, the Sprite. Then came the jolt. Two jolts, actually.

"We're entering Sprites this year at Sebring. How would you like to drive one?"

It was only after the surprise of the first sentence, surprise at the audacity of entering the tiny Sprite in that manufacturers' merry-go-round, that the tag-line question sunk in.

Would I like to drive a factory team car at Sebring? Do wheels turn, is Alaska big? Hell, yes, I'd like to drive at Sebring.

Donald went on to tell about the planned entry. There would be four Sprites, one on reserve. No Hundred-Sixes. The first car was already undergoing test under the direction of Donald's big guard-dee-mustached son, Geoffrey.

"It's a bit warmed up, of course," he said. "Disc brakes, wire wheels and that sort of thing. It'll break a hundred I should expect."

Having been familiar with the speaker's speed efforts over the past six years, I was prepared to believe that these would be very adequate little automobiles indeed. Then the willies set in. First, would I be able to do two jobs adequately — to pay attention to the task of driving and at the same time pay attention to the bread-and-butter work of covering the race.

Another thing: Sebring is a race in which the fiercest machinery in the world, and the smallest, compete on the same course at the same time. The Sprites fell into the latter category. It's a creepy feeling to know that someone, the likes of Stirling Moss or Phil Hill, is at one point or another on every lap going to boom by you at some 70 miles faster than you're going, flat out and with foot firmly bolted to the firewall. Creepy.

A few weeks later, after all this had time to sink in came a letter asking confirmation. I confirmed and in return got a letter officially appointing me to a seat on the team, the car and driver position, first or second to be assigned later. Go get an FIA license, said the letter.

Followed months of somewhat nervous anticipation and finally the sixteenth of March rolled around. The check-in at race headquarters and ensuing physicals were a breeze.

The team was garaged in the town of Avon Park, just far enough away from the hectic pace at Sebring to allow some peace

and quiet. There, in a large service station garage were four of the happiest yet most capable looking little blue roadsters I've yet seen, aswamp with busy mechanics working on last minute details under the direction of Geoffrey Healey.

The drivers, seven of us; Ed Leavens, Phil Stiles, "Doc" Kunz, Fred Hayes, Hugh Sutherland, John Colgate and myself, were taken in tow by Marcus Chambers the team manager. Marcus, a large, rounding, sandy-haired man whose spectacles are forever sliding down his nose in such a way that most of his glances are sent over the top of the rims, got right down to cases. We were told how high we could rev, what the signals meant and then he asked for questions. They came thick and fast from all sides. Each question was answered carefully until all angles were covered. How fast would we come in to the pits? Not at all fast — haste makes waste. Would we kill the engines by stalling with the clutch? Yes, to prevent any tendency to run-on. We'd park with brakes off, and out of gear. We'd be given our lap times by signal board and told either to speed up, hold position or slow down as the case demanded.

"Just so you don't feel alone we'll be chatting with you by signals from time to time." Very reassuring — it gets lonesome on five-odd miles of concrete if nobody pays attention to you.

Then we were formally introduced to the cars. Each driver got in and squirmed around, pushing pedals, wiggling gear-levers and trying the seatbelts. Hayes and I were assigned to Number 55 with Johnnie Colgate assigned as reserve and/or third driver. The mechanic on the car, Brian Griffin from Canada, listened as we requested minor adjustments, then made a few suggestions himself.

Thus were we and the Sprites fitted to each other.

And all this while it rained. And rained. And rained.

The next day — the first day of practice — dawned the same. Wet. The entire land seemed to be a dismal sea of puddles. The course was as wet as any racing plant can get. Where there wasn't standing water there was running water coming from some place else. It was probably the worst set of conditions possible to make acquaintance with an automobile one was expected to drive some hours at full noise.

Doctor Kunz, Phil Stiles, Fred Hayes and John Colgate started. Instructions were to take three laps at 5500 revs maximum then bring the cars in for plug checks. Then back out for another five laps to round out an hour. The stop was also a pit rehearsal with the driver hauling himself out of the car and over the pit wall as quickly as possible so the allowed three men (two mechanics and a fuel man) could get to work. The stops came off like clockwork — no worry here unless someone (the most likely one would be me, I thought) got excited and goofed.

The first job of an incoming driver was to report immediately to Geoff Healey. Any odd noises, car misbehavior or problems were to be reported first. Then and only then was the incoming man to brief the next driver.

"How was it," I asked Hayes on his plug check stop with #55.

"Wet," said Hayes succinctly. "The car goes beautifully, though. It's pretty slick when you hit the puddles but otherwise it's sticking pretty good."

He went back out then. Times, which started at about five minutes, thirty seconds were coming down. First 5:20, then 5:15 and finally one car clicked through at five minutes flat.

Then it was our turn. Sutherland, Leavens and me. Colgate was still happily buzzing around in the reserve car.

"Watch the two half-lefts," Hayes had said. "They're slick."

I took off after a thud on the back from Geoff. Down the pit runway in low cog, past the beckoning flagman and out onto the course under the Amoco bridge. Then came the first half-left.

I took what I thought was a nice line. Sure it was. Just the other side of the turn, which in the dry can be taken in a racing Sprite at 5500 rpm in top gear, was a sheet of water. Sprite #55 shot straight sideways for about 20 feet. Like any newcomer I had taken the turn with room to spare — room for which I thanked whatever guardian angel looks after the likes of me. The next turn was a bit better, slick but no side-stepping. The entrance to the road section was treated, at least by me, with all due respect on this first lap. For two reasons. First, I had seen a Lotus dump through overcooking it on that corner a couple of years back. Second, I had just gotten around to discovering I hadn't bothered to fasten the seat belt. One thing I did notice though — nobody else was treating any part of the course with undue disrespect. Not that day.

The esses were slithery but Hayes was right. Where there were no real puddles the Sprite stuck very nicely indeed. Then the long bend — not flat out this time around but later taken full bore with ease. This time I was busy struggling with that damn belt. The hairpin came up fast but this is one you just haul down for and loaf around. Heroism here just wastes time. Then the warehouse straight, newly paved and dead smooth this year. Then Webster, the hard right, hard left and back out on the airport. And another puddle. And another sudden shot to the right. Next the long straight after a hard right turn. For me a 360 degree turn. Too much confidence, too much right foot and a puddle. By the time I got things sorted out I had done a long slow loop down the straight. Headed in the right direction still, I took off down the straight with the Sprite happily jumping puddles the whole distance. Then another straight and the U bend into the pit straight. It seemed as though it had taken a half hour — and probably had. The next lap was easier and the next easier still. Then the come in signal was flashed. It would have been welcome at any time during that first lap but now it was a bloody nuisance.

The rain had made things rough for us but doubly so for others. While the Sprites did their share of slithering, some of the other cars were almost unmanageable. It became a standing joke that the Sprites could turn in laps considerably hotter in this slop than such redoubtable machinery as Oscas, Stanguellinis and Lancias. Even the Alfas were given a rough time.

As one Osca driver put it in a mock

fury that was only half simulated: "Every time I looked back there'd be a spray of water coming up. I'd pull over expecting a Porsche or something bigger and every time it'd be one of those pesky little Sprites!"

Thursday's practice session was cancelled. The rain had increased in fury making it virtually impossible to see through the streaming windshields. The night session was called off, too. Headlights shining on that wall of water just made it that much worse.

Friday was blessedly clear — not sunny, mind you, but clear or at least rainless. Out on the course we each got about three laps, all there was time for in the short session allotted. The rescheduled night practice allowed another three laps mostly for headlight checking and marker orientation.

Suddenly it was Saturday. Happily it dawned clear — even, believe it or not, sunny.

"Be at the course at eight o'clock sharp," Chambers had said. It was a wise precaution. Race day at Sebring begins early as spectators, officials, mechanics, drivers and anybody else connected with the event all try to get through one narrow road and one small gate at approximately the same time — normally about 9 a.m. If you head out before eight the normal five-minute trip takes only half an hour. If you wait until nine you'll be lucky to see the start from outside the fence.

When we arrived on the scene the Sprites were already lined up, ready. The next hour and a half was taken up with quiet talk and getting the working and timing pits ready. Finally came the call to drivers for the usual pre-race briefing and the cars were rolled into their starting positions.

Starters for the Sprites were Stiles, Leavens and Hayes. At the end of the count-down the sprint started and they were off, strangely enough in numerical order. 53, 54 and 55. Less than five minutes later they came around in the same order. Then the order changed. Hayes had turned a lap at 4:29.

Out went the "slow down" signal and the three little blue hard-tops started circulating between 4:30 and 4:40, depending on traffic. One thing became immediately apparent. In dry conditions the Sprites could go deeper into the corners than almost any other car and go through as fast as all but Porsches, Oscas and the like. Bigger machinery had to haul down earlier and go through most of the turns slower. This sort of thing had the flag-men on the corners ready for the men in the white coats before the first hour was up. A Sprite would come barreling into a turn followed by something bigger and faster; out would come a marshal waving a blue flag frantically at the little A-H. At first we would obediently move over only to see the larger car brake down a hundred yards further back and then loaf through the corner at ten miles an hour less than the optimum cornering speed of the Sprite.

From then on the Sprite drivers began to get selective, the flagmen seemingly unable to figure it out. If it was a Porsche or an Osca coming up, or if the approaching car was close enough that the sight of the Sprite in the line might be un-

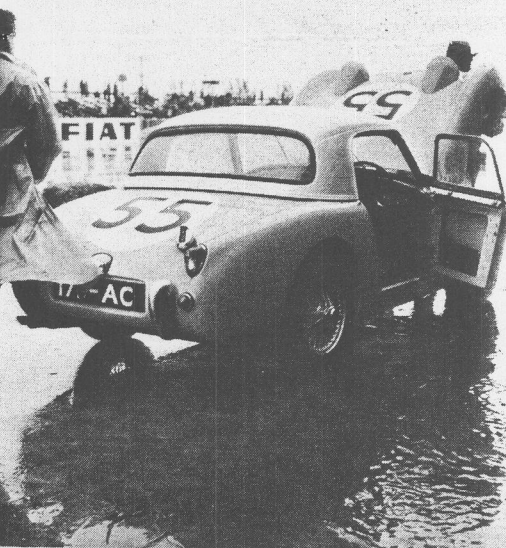


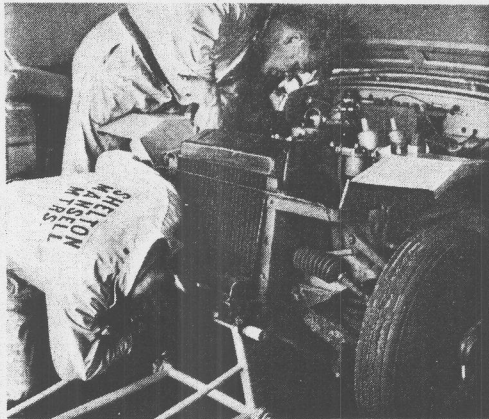
Geoffrey Healey directs car preparation prior to the race.



Light, disc-braked Sprites could go deeper into corners than many fiercer machines.

Wet track hindered the Super Sprites less than other cars with more torque.





nerving we moved over. Otherwise we went through full tilt and *then* moved over to allow the faster accelerating car to go by.

First casualty of the team was Ed Leavens. A pair of rubber marker cones were kicked in his way by another car under somewhat less control. Ed came dragging the cones with him into the pit with a mangled tire, the result of battering from the markers but otherwise none the worse for wear. The car was soon sent on its way with a bare lap lost in the pits.

At three hours the other Sprites were brought in one by one, refueled and the drivers swapped over. Sutherland took over 53, Kunz went in 54 and I went in 55. For the next two hours I never saw another team-mate. We were about a mile or so apart and the lap speeds were so even — 4:32 to 4:35 — that no one gained or lost enough to see another member of the team.

Then it happened. Coming out of the hairpin, I went for third gear and the throttle felt spongy. The same went for fourth. At the approach to Webster, the 90-degree right, 90-degree left, I dropped to third and then to second and for an interminable second the throttle stayed flat on the floor. Then, before the willing little engine over-revved beyond 6600 (6500 was the limit for top gear, 6000 rpm in the intermediate gears) the pedal oozed back up. I toed it and found that with care I could use it even for downshifts. It couldn't be kicked but it could be juggled. The rest of the way to the pits was third and mainly fourth gear country anyway. Heading into the big U turn onto the pit straight and making a downshift there was a sudden harsh rasp. Sudden memories of a similar noise that heralded a broken crank in a larger Austin Healey came flooding in.

But it wasn't. One of the tuned exhaust pipes had apparently fatigued and cracked. The noise was just raw exhaust from one port. I made the pits sounding like a thrashing machine. Except for the pipe and the broken throttle return spring the car was intact. It took about 15 minutes for the efficient mechanics to replace the spring and with the aid of a cut up beer can and a bit of wire to repair the exhaust. Johnnie Colgate hopped in and was off to resume the grind. Within a few minutes the others were called in for fueling and driver changes.

Then, at about six hours the clouds came drifting over.

Within a few minutes big drops, just a few, fell. We speculated; did we want the rain or didn't we? It would slow us up but it would slow the others up more if practice was any criterion. Then, again we were doing well in dry weather. There wasn't anything we could do about it but talk. We got the rain whether we wanted it or not.

As the drizzle turned into a real rain, the signalman went out and flashed a new sign to the MGs and the Sprites. In big block Da-glo letters it read:

EASY DOES IT LUV

Small puddles became big ones and then turned into lakes. Big machinery that had been thundering by moments before slowed to a comparative crawl. Two cars, a Porsche and a Lotus went by side by side with one sending a continuous shower into the other the length of the straight.

The Sprites continued their grind, now slowed down to five-minutes-plus a lap. Even the big equipment was well up in the four minutes and some odd seconds per lap.

Then 55 was overdue. One minute went by and then another and then yet another. Just as the wait began to get unnerving, Hayes, who had taken the car from Colgate for his second stint, came sputtering in. This time it wasn't just a throttle spring. The whole linkage had come adrift in the road section. Hayes, with rare presence had unbuttoned the hood and set up the fast idle screws to 2500 rpm and pattered back in where aid was available. If nothing else it was an answer to those who maintain there is no need for a racing driver to know anything about his car mechanically. Three laps went by while the resourceful crew taped and wired the linkage together and Hayes went out again with instructions to finish the race since the load of fuel taken on during the stop was enough to carry him through.

Kunz then came in. The car was gassed and checked. Sutherland hopped in and started off. He got about ten feet and stopped. Awful noises had come from the gearbox. Still in the Sprite pit area, the car was checked and it was discovered that first and second gears were useless and third possibly damaged. Donald and Geoffrey had a quick conference and Sutherland was sent out, told to use top gear as much as possible and third only in emergencies. The other car suddenly came bump-bumping in with a flat. On inspection the tube was found to be entirely gone — missing completely. The car had, up to then, only two unscheduled pit stops, once for the pylons caught in the underpinning and once for a stuck gear lever. A quick tire change and fuel-up and out it went with Leavens up still leading the class.

That, thankfully, was the last of the damage. The next hour and a half went uneventfully.

The finish order was Sutherland/Stiles, Leavens/Kunz and Hayes/Christy/Colgate. All three cars finished, somewhat the worse for wear, true, but they finished one, two three in class beating other cars in classes much higher and even breaking up the finish order of the redoubtable DOHC Abarths. In fact one, #55, was in good enough shape to be driven, with no more than a plug change, to California starting the next morning but that's another story.

As for this particular story, I for one am proud to have been part of it and proud of the mechanics, the cars and the team that made it possible. Thanks, fellows.

—John Christy



Sprite power never faltered during twelve hours. Big track, little car (below) combined to produce big results.