



## Sprinzel Speaking...

### "SEBRING"

There was always something very alluring about the Sebring Races, while we were freezing in the UK. The very idea of racing in Sunny Florida in early March, while the rest of the Brits were experiencing the usual cold, wet, foggy and often icy, short days and long nights, was just so tempting.

Admittedly, when we got to the famous circuit, it really was just another airfield, with minimum facilities and virtually non-existent safety measures. The volunteer staff were about as amateur as you could get, the 'pits' were really the pits - bare concrete block structures, as dark and damp as those anywhere else in the world of motor racing.

But it WAS Florida! Great weather, neat little towns, unbelievable Supermarkets for those of us from Europe, wonderful breakfasts at Howard Johnson's (even if there were separate facilities for African Americans) and there was a large swimming pool at the Avon Park motel. Bowling Alleys and Ball Parks gave us something else to do when we had had our fill of motor cars, and another thing we had never seen, drive-in movies. Our airliners first brought us to Miami or Palm Beach so we had a day or so to enjoy these unusual cities, before jumping into the huge - for us - hire cars and driving to the track. This really was Paradise. And if you bought a six-pack of Schlitz beer, the cooler came free!

The British Car Companies had always had a fascination with Sebring, and the dates were well clear of other major events on the Competition Department's calendars. It was also seen as a reward to the regular drivers, who normally worked full seasons of long and tough rallies around Europe and East Africa, where there was never enough time to enjoy such pleasures, as we would find around Central Florida. Although Porsche, Ferrari, Cunningham, Jaguar, Aston Martin and Maserati were the main challengers, there was always a good batch of MG's, Sunbeams and Triumphs to join in the fun, but Donald Healey's enthusiasm made sure that Austin-Healey's were well represented at the races both here in Florida and in Nassau, where Donald had a home, as did one of his favorite drivers and friend Stirling Moss.

Healeys's team of Sprites absolutely dominated their class in the 1959 12 Hour event taking the top three places and 31st overall among the 'grown ups' in the race. This encouraged Donald and Geoff Healey, and Roger Menadue to continue with Sprite entries until 1968, although Jim Baker entered two Coupe Sprites, which looked very much like ex-works cars. Over the years, Donald's Sprites were always the cars to beat, and clocked up some great results in both events, with a string of class wins. If you are interested in the details, Geoff Healey's terrific book "Frog-eyes, Sprites and Midgets" gives pages full of excellent photos, facts and results for which we obviously don't have space in this article.

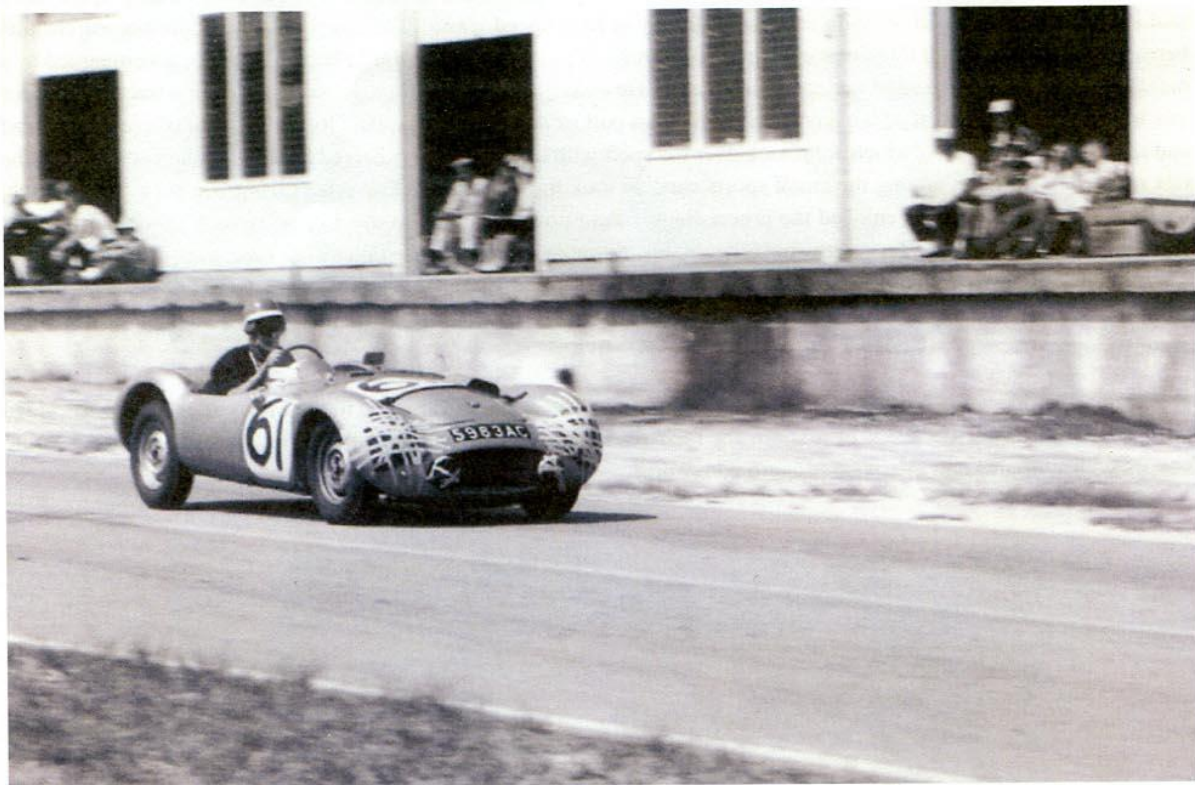
There were two races in a Sebring weekend - the famous 12 Hour on the Sunday and a very popular 3 and later 4 Hour race on the Saturday for smaller GT cars. As the 12 Hour field, included virtually every top class International driver who could find a drive, they were all available for the Saturday race, so the enthusiastic crowds had the spectacle of Sprites and Fiat Abarths in fierce battles with some of the world's best drivers at the wheel. Stirling Moss, Bruce McLaren, Graham Hill, Pedro Rodriguez and Briggs Cunningham were just some of the names that drove these modified production cars and even Steve McQueen and Pat Moss joined in the general fun.

The circuit itself was a little unusual. Most tracks are more or less the same width all the way around, but Sebring start and finish straights were on very wide concrete aerodrome runways. The start part of the track turned sharpish left onto a much narrower section with a tricky 'S' bend under the MG bridge. Then a 90 deg. right-hander that was flanked by deep sand into which over enthusiastic drivers spent some time digging out, in much the way the famous corner at the end of the Mulsanne straight at Le Mans caught out the unwary. This led to the back straight, again quite narrow, with a row of industrial buildings on the left and into the sharp right and left of Webster's, which seemed to almost



disappear among quite high grassy banks more like a rally section on a country lane than on an International circuit. Coming out of Webster's, the road obviously went back onto the wide concrete runways with a right angle onto the long back straight. This ran along the back of the pits and into a wide and sweeping 180deg bend, back onto the start and finish straight, very reminiscent of the famous final corner at Monza. So, all in all a very tricky circuit with not only differing widths and road surfaces to contend with, but also as mixed a collection of corners as could be found anywhere. Naturally in those days, there was not a sight of Armco barriers or angled and striped kerbing to be seen, and the back straight was artificially narrowed where straw bales marked the very wide runway separating the racecars from actual aircraft landing and taking off on practice days, if not during the actual races.

I had two visits to the Florida events, one in 1960 with co-driver John Lumsden driving Donald Healey's entry in the 12 Hour race with the lightweight Falcon bodied Sprite, and then again the following year with my own team of two Sebring Sprites with Stirling and Pat Moss, Paul Hawkins and Cyril Simson as drivers.



The Falcon bodied Sprite on the back straight at Sebring.

At the end of 1959, I had sold my Speedwell tuning firm to Graham Hill, and joined the Donald Healey Motor Company to set up and run the Special Tuning division at the Healey Grosvenor Street showroom in London's Mayfair district. As part of the deal I was to drive at both Sebring and Le Mans, although a broken wrist from a crash on the Greek Acropolis Rally, prevented my going to Le Mans - where John Dalton and John Colgate won the class with our Sebring car.

Healey's top engineer Roger Menadue and I flew to New York, and then down to Sebring to meet up with the cars, which we watched being unloaded with those strange scissor lifts, out of very small freight doors in the side of the plane. Stirling was to drive the standard bodied Sprite in the shorter race, and John and I were in the Falcon for the 12 Hour event. During practice Stirling drove our car, and knocked four seconds off our time, but he explained he had ignored the straw bales leading onto the back straight, so that he could keep flat out around the right-hander, giving him a speed advantage that obviously could not be done with marshals present during the actual race. He also advised me





to use third gear around the MG Bridge Esses, where he felt top was out of the power range and could prove dangerous, in fact a privateer Sprite had a very serious accident doing just that, so caution prevailed. Anyway a second lap against one of the world's top drivers was not exactly a disgrace even without these differences. Stirling won his class in the GT race, taking second overall, so things had started well for the team.

We had a great start, even though I hate Le Mans starts because you have trouble doing up safety belts during the race, Geoff had a neat start switch which put on ignition and starter in one sweep. I managed to get up with quite a few of the fast guys, but of course they soon zoomed by our little Sprite on the long, wide straights. I think Stirling's Birdcage Maserati passed me about every seven laps, giving a friendly wave each time, but it is a little difficult keeping one eye on the tachometer and one in the mirrors!

Three hours on found us fighting for the lead with one of the smaller sports cars, when all the power went on the narrow back straight. I pulled to the side, and found the head gasket had blown, so walked back to the pits for a spare and a tool kit. Getting the head off with stuff whizzing by at high speed was a little scary, but seeing the burned channel between cylinders two and three was even more worrying. I pushed the little Sprite back to the pits, accompanied by a marshal, who was there to see I got no outside help. He even got me a cup of grapefruit juice from a trackside vendor as I was pushing in the heat of the day from the furthest part of the track to the pits. Roger got hold of a standard head and soon had it fitted, after which John took over his spell with a much lower powered Sprite! In the end we were the last remaining finishers among the small sports cars, so took the class win. The prize giving was on a grassy patch, where all the drivers sat and enjoyed the proceedings. Pete Lovely sat next to me, I think he took third and the class win in his Ferrari. In later years, he brought his Formula one and two Lotus's to take part in the European Championship events and used my Lancaster Gate showroom as a workshop to prepare for the next race, which certainly brought a smile to the face of my customers who were surprised to see a Grand Prix car in such humble surroundings.

Nineteen Sixty-one was a banner year for my little Sebring Sprites. We had moved to the Mews after Healey's decided Grosvenor Street was too much of a strain for their resources, and we had begun to build the alloy bodied Sebring coupes with Williams and Pritchard's superb bodywork.

RACE		SEBRING RACES		COMPETITION NUMBER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12 HOUR	MARCH 24 and 25, 1961		1
<input type="checkbox"/>	4 HOUR			
<input type="checkbox"/>	F.J.R.			

INSPECTION RECORD	
ENTRANT	John Springle Ltd
CAR	Sprite 6 C.C. 995
CLASS (G.T.)	6 (SPORTS)

This is to certify that each driver listed below has been examined. Signature of examining physician next to the driver's name indicates that the driver is in satisfactory physical condition to participate in the race.

Driver 1: P. Moss M.D. [Signature]

Driver 2: J. Springle M.D. [Signature]

Driver 3: \_\_\_\_\_ M.D. \_\_\_\_\_

CAR EXAMINATION	
<b>ENGINE</b>	<b>WHEELS and TIRES</b>
Fuel System Oil Lines	Condition of Tires Wheel Spokes
<b>COOLING SYSTEM</b>	<b>FRONT END</b>
Radiator Water Pump Water Hoses	Front Hub Cape Dir. of Rotation Linkage Steering Play Front Wheel Bearings
<b>ELECTRICAL &amp; ACCESSORIES</b>	<b>F.L.A. REGS.</b>
Battery Secure Head Lights Tail Lights Stop Lights Horn Windshield Wipers Rear View Mirror Wiring Fire Extinguisher	Interior Width Ground Clearance Luggage Space Windshield Turning Radius Fuel Tank Capacity
<b>BRAKES</b>	<b>COMPETITION NUMBERS</b>
Adjustment Hydraulic System	Location Size

This certifies that the above car has been examined and has been approved to run in this competition.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Chief Scrutineer

This card must be kept with the car, and be available for inspection upon demand. The Inspector's punch must appear in each block, and the card must bear the Chief Scrutineer's signature, before the approval seal can be affixed to the car. Failure to comply with this instruction may result in disqualification.

RACE		SEBRING RACES		COMPETITION NUMBER
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<input type="checkbox"/>	4 HOUR			
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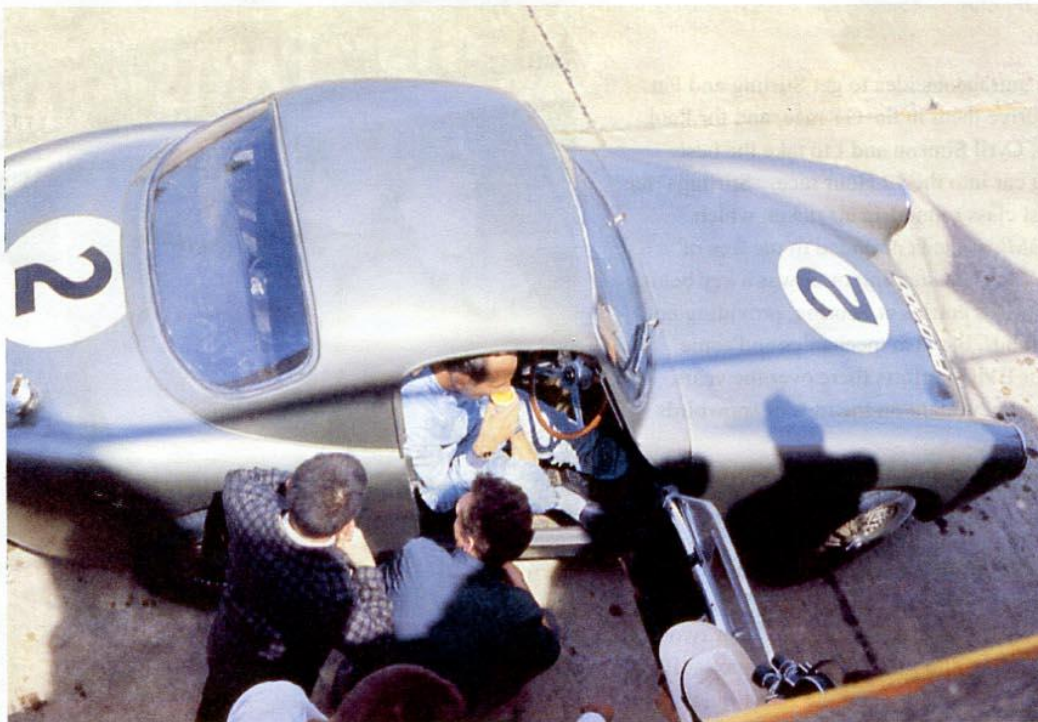
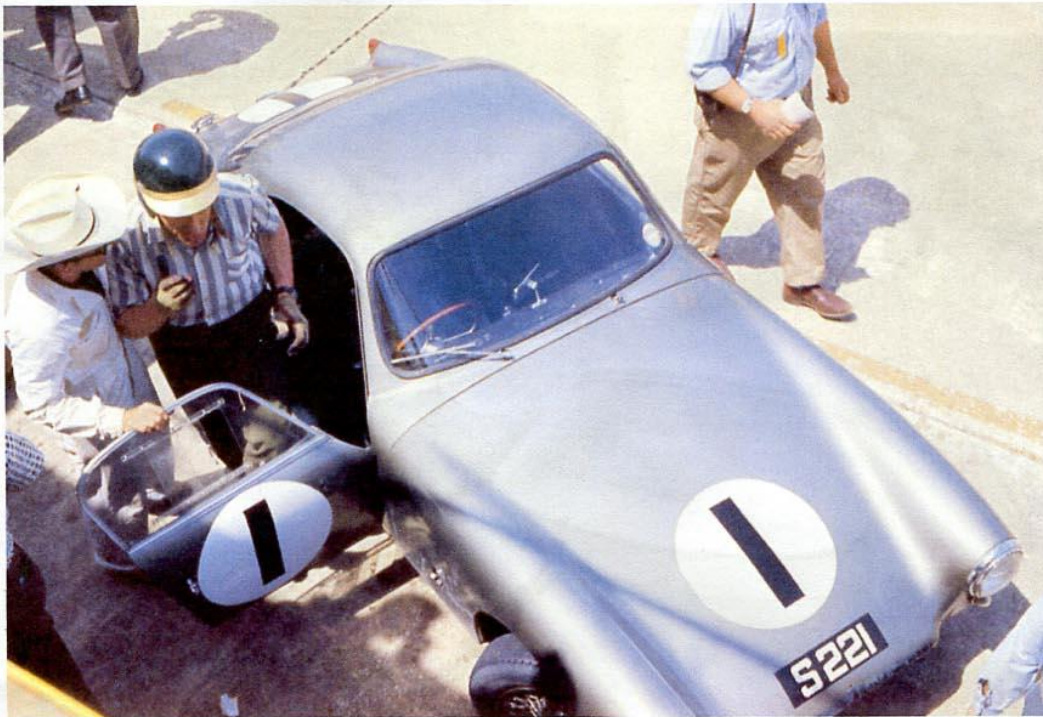
CAR EXAMINATION	
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Top : Paul Hawkins with S221 during practice.  
Above : Stirling Moss takes a break.

(Photos on this page courtesy of Jonathan Whitehouse-Bird)







Above - Excellent pit shot - Paul Hawkins helps Cyril Simson get into S 221 while team member adds fuel, everyone else in the area looks on intently!

I had the outrageous idea to get Stirling and Pat Moss to drive them in the GT race, and for Paul Hawkins, Cyril Simson and I to take the best surviving car into the 12 Hour race. Stirlings' fee was a first class round trip air ticket, which happily BMC Canada provided to me free of charge. The Canadian Importer was a key behind most of BMC's entries at Sebring, providing not only the funds, but also mechanics and some drivers for BMC's efforts there over the years, which put a new slant on the idea of snowbirds

Right - All smiles with Paul Hawkins (left) and owner of S221 Cyril Simson. Far left is Johnny Hill, a NASA technician that used to mechanic for us.

Anyway, we were up against my old employers team, which included Bruce McLaren, Walt Hansgen, and Briggs Cunningham. Our two cars were slowed a little with clutch slip, not suffered by the factory cars who had the latest nine spring clutches, but on this occasion the whole bunch of Sprites were beaten by the two Fiat Abarths, who did not need to stop for a tire change. Paul





Hawkins fitted a new clutch to Cyril's car, and they then raced in the 12 Hour event. Unfortunately Cyril, the car's owner, overdid it at the sandy corner, and spent some time digging out, but they did finish - third among the Sprites, so the trip was certainly worthwhile for the publicity. After all, it was the only time that Stirling Moss and his Championship winning, rally-driver sister ever raced together in identical cars.



Stirling and Pat Moss

John Sprinzel – February 2014



We have been into Sprites a long time - A.H.S.D.C. 10th Anniversary Hill Climb - Lakeland. July 11th, 1976. Left to Right - Tony Bennetto, Ray English, Noel Constantine (outright winner), and Phil Evett (right/rear).

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