

WHILE ENGLAND was in the midst of her usually cold and dreary winter, the thoughts of the rally 'circus' generally turned to the Sebring races. Two days of motor sport in the hot sunshine of a Florida spring was such an irresistible prospect, and when Donald Healey first offered me a job and a drive in the twelve hour race, it was an offer-I couldn't-refuse.

Usually, BMC and Rootes sent off teams of Sports and GT cars, for publicity in this very lucrative market, although top honours were obviously fought out in the more rarefied air of Ferrari, Maserati and Porsche in the Overall category. Among the GT's Carrera and Berlinetta's fought it out with Corvette, Bristol, Alfa, Lotus and Elva, but the Healeys MG's, Sprites and Sunbeams were by no means outclassed — or even disgraced.

On my first visit, the cars were shipped out to New York, and then air-freighted to Sebring — which is an active airfield in the middle of Florida. The task of getting the Falcon fibre-glass bodied Sprite out of the ancient transport plane was quite hilarious, including much heaving and swearing, and ended with the little car precariously balanced on the top limit of a fork lift truck! I didn't dare watch the last bit... We ourselves had flown down on an airline which claimed to be the 'Air Line of the Stars' but we were not quite sure... as we boarded the flight South from New York, pale faced stewardesses were loading bags and bags of extra life rafts and gear, while the passengers stared at banner headlines and photos in the papers, depicting another messy air crash scene, where an Electra had shed its wings in mid-air... "what plane were we on?" we hardly dared ask... of course it was an Electra, and *that* was my most frightening bit of flight (including a year's RAF training as a pilot!). Still we made it, and everyone staggered gladly out of the alcohol haze of the flight towards the Hertz desk and our first taste of American road transport.

Most drivers picked the biggest, widest, loudest, gadget-full devices they could find — with juke-box, stove, and power-tops all

The successful 'rival' Sprites at the end of the 12-hour race.

of which they played with for the first days of Florida sunshine. Jack Sears and Pete Riley had one of the new Chevvy Corvair Coupes (or Coops as they say out there), this was quite highly thought of, though not, in later days, by Ralph Nadar and his safety squad. The drive to Avon Park BMC's regular motel headquarters, was quite an eye-opener, with the fast black-top roads alternating with quite rough dirt roads, horrific speed limits, and repeated signs everywhere. Quite how anyone has time to look at the road with the blight of traffic signs, warning notices, advertising hoardings and the like, is very hard to know. The most repeated warning was the 100 dollar fine for litter, but this seemed to be ignored as much as the 50 and 60mph speed limits. One time, Paul Hawkins and I reached the end of one of the big motorways to calculate we had averaged just under 100mph — a glance at the toll ticket showed our time had been punched so we preferred a fine for a

with fried bangers, eggs, waffles and such all covered with maple syrup. Sounds horrid, but washed down with quarts of fresh grapefruit and orange juice, it really was quite tasty... except the grits... "You all ain't eaten yore grits... was the morning chorus... and we certainly were going to 'have a nice day' 'have a nice day'.

As race day got nearer, the sleepy towns around Sebring came slowly awake, as thousands of enthusiasts arrived complete with tents, to enjoy this annual motoring pilgrimage to the South. The local highway patrols stood taller than ever with new stetsons and drawls and boots all polished up for the occasion, and the hordes of bossy 'officials' became more and more impossible under the shelter of their huge armbands and badges. The *real* track marshalls were excellent and highly organised, but the free-loaders were quite unbearable and were in great danger from my Australian buddies. America does tend to be a land where a uniform is important — even the Coke delivery lads and the caterers are all in uniforms with 'Bud' and 'Bill' officially emblazoned on one breast, while the company insignia decorates the other... a bit like Grand Prix drivers nowadays.

The pre-race practice and scrutineering were great fun, even the medical was thorough — far more so than anything I have experienced in Europe — and apart from the novelty of an entry list which contained a large number of complete amateurs, with stock sports cars in full road trim, ariels at the ready — the organisation was tremendous.

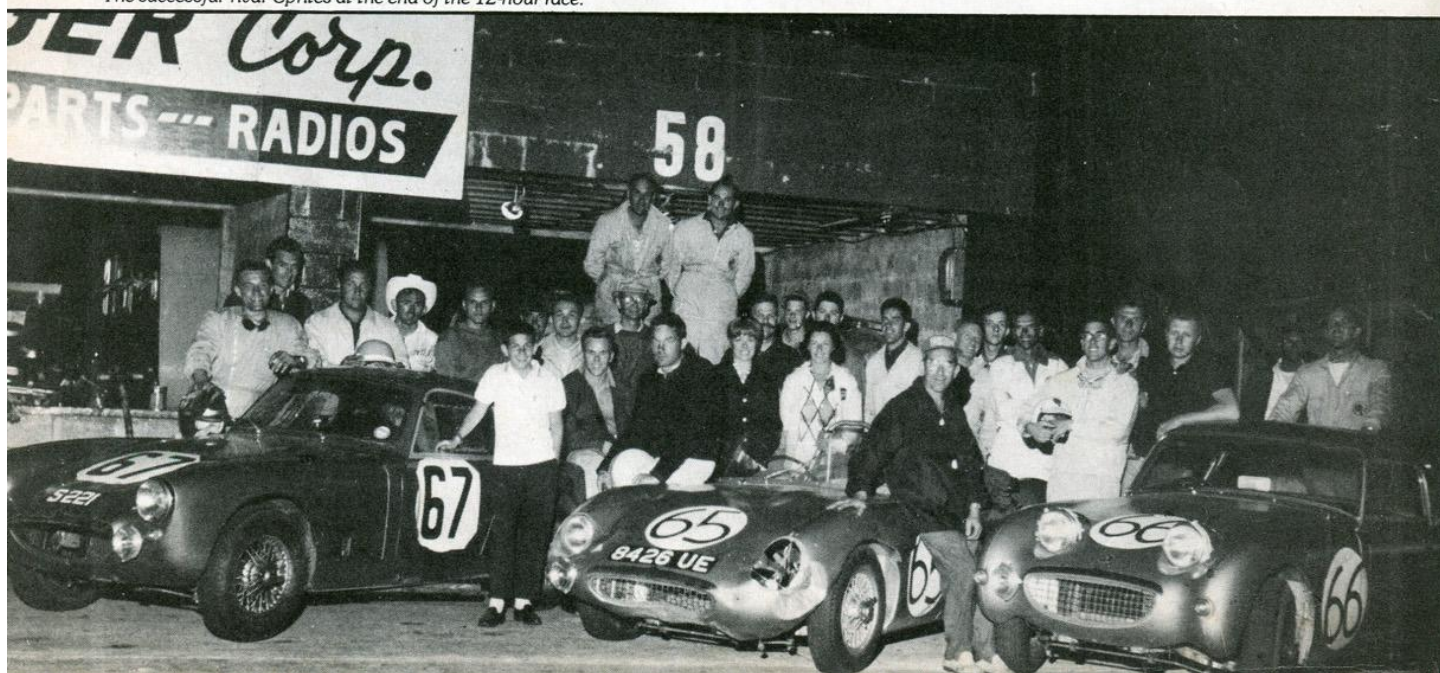
It was also the first time we had experienced a computer results service, which was quite a novelty for those far off days. The Friday races usually included a four-hour race for up to one-litre production and sports cars, and this was always a real battle between Sprites and Fiat Abarths. Stirling Moss usually drove a Sprite, and had quite a lot of success. It is no surprise that my own modified production Sprites were eventually called 'Sebring's' after the many visits to this sunny circuit.

SPRITE FIGHT

John Sprinzel recalls
the simmering days in the
Sebring sunshine

lost ticket rather than printed proof of our indiscretion.

Avon Park was a typical small 'town' in Southern USA of the late '50's. The motel was on the by-pass, complete with vibrating beds, ice machines and coke machines (all slot-operated of course), and was next door to a Howard Johnson eatery. Most meals were a bit 'plastic' but the service was friendly, and breakfasts were unbelievable,





Stirling Moss leads Bruce McLaren out of the hairpin... the Grand Prix stars enjoyed their dice in Sprites, actor Steve McQueen also thrashed the little Healey.



MY DRIVERS: Stirling talks tactics with Pat and Paul Hawkins, persuading his sister to give up her Sprite because his clutch was failing! Stirling had put up a fine display of driving one handed while he groped with a fire extinguisher, pumping fluid into his oiled up clutch. He slid through the chicane with the extinguisher held before his eyes, reading the instructions on how to work it while the Sprite was wound up to 100 mph... both Stirling and Pat drove my cars free of charge, and gave the "works" teams a run for their money.

During this race, I wandered around the very long circuit with scribe Henry Manney — one of the funniest writers in the world. Wherever we happened to be, Stirling would invariably give us a wave, even in the midst of a hairy corner, or close duel. Whenever he had time, he was even kind enough to signify which gear he was using, so that I would be better able to cope with the Sports Sprite in the next day's racing. He really does have a very wide field of vision — and this also enabled him to spot exactly where the best birds were seated all around the track!

Half of the circuit is conventional airfield, Collector's Car, June 1980

with wide runways and turns marked with cones. (Stirling had put up one very fast practice lap by simply going outside the cones and virtually eliminating two quite sharp corners.) The other half of the track is on quite narrow service road, with some extremely tight corners and passing here is difficult at any time. With the widely differing speeds of Sprite and Birdcage Maserati in the main race, the queues which built up to take the hairpin were quite maddening and one double corner in particular, Websters, had two right angles through a cutting barely twelve feet wide.

The Sprites were getting up close to 120mph (with 998cc engines) and the Ferrari's and Masers must have been edging on 170, which does make a horrendous differential on a narrow 'S' curve. Still, we did get used to racing with two wheels in the dirt.

hard going, but the marshall who strode alongside — ostensibly to see I didn't get any outside assistance — kept me regularly supplied with cold orange juice from the various kiosks, and when I got back the head was quickly fitted. John Lumkin took over and we were luckily leading the class — as everyone else had blown up too.

Later on in the twelve hours, a valve dropped, so chief mechanic Roger Menadue — a super Cornishman just fished around and wired up the offending valve, leaving us to be an even bigger hazard to the race which was now ending in total darkness!

The following year we returned with a brace of the newly homologated Sebrings — with Pat and Stirling driving for my team against the might of Healey, BMC and Fiat.

Unfortunately we had a great deal of clutch trouble, and although it was a fantastic four-hour race, with everyone up



Ian Walker and Sprite — class lap record holders at every English circuit during 1961.

I got to know the circuit very well indeed, for after four terrific hours, the head gasket melted. I walked back to the pits for some tools, and took off the head only to find a deep burn between two cylinders, so leaving my enthusiastic pals to find another head (which they did, by borrowing one from an enthusiasts parked Stock Sprite) I proceeded to shove the car back to the pits. Four miles of shoving in that heat was a bit

each others exhaust, the Sprites finished 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th behind the Abarths, and Moss showed the huge crowds just what close racing was all about. The razamatazz too, was something else, with high-kicking majorettes pirouetting up and down the straight in front of the grandstand, and Sebring's high school band puffing and banging behind them. Sebring certainly was a larger-than-life weekend of motor-racing. □