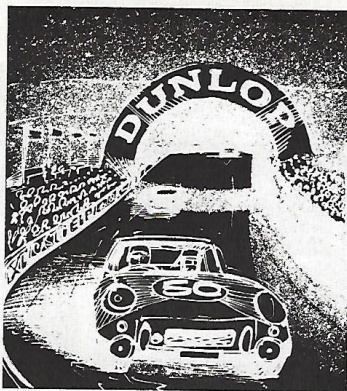


The Wild

In 1965 Paul Hawkins and John Rhodes finished 12th in the Le Mans 24 Hour race, averaging 96.5 mph in their much-modified Austin-Healey Sprite. Their fastest lap was in 4 min. 44 sec, and their recorded top speed was 143 mph. Astonishing, especially when one recalls the original Frogeye Sprite road car, which could only achieve 80 mph flat out. But there was more — in all respects, the racing Sprite statistics are better than those achieved by the race-winning Jaguar C-Type only 15 years earlier!

The Sprite/Midget was a classic 'Underdog', which made good as a competition car, and it proves just how much can be achieved with know-how, and enthusiasm, when a road car has to be transformed for competition. There was a lot of difference, agreed, between the Le Mans cars and the showroom models — the 1965 race car not only having a much-tuned 1,293cc A-Series engine, but a five-speed MGB transmission, and an entirely special fastback coupe body style.

The twin design personalities behind the original Spridget were Donald Healey and his son Geoffrey, who



No. Two:

Sprites and Midgets have proved to be highly successful giant-killers...

Jonathan Edwards profiles the achievements of a gallant British under-dog

schemed up a small new sports car for Leonard Lord of BMC in 1956. When partly developed it was handed over to MG engineers at Abingdon, where it went into production in 1958.

From then on, the 'Underdog' story could get slightly confusing, for in the next few years there were racing Sprites developed by the Healey family at Warwick, Midgets being built, raced and rallied, by the BMC Competitions Department at Abingdon, and great things being achieved by the 'Sebring

Under-dogs

Sprites' from John Sprinzel, and the 'Jacobs Midgets' from Dick Jacobs, to name but two. Stir in the fact that Stirling Moss raced one of Sprinzel's cars at Sebring, his sister Pat rallied one in the RAC rally, and luminaries like Paddy Hopkirk and Timo Makinen all had a go from time to time, and you realise that the Spridget could be a formidable little competition car.

The first motor-sport outing at International level was the '58 Alpine, Sprinzel's private car winning its class. Sprites were to go on to win outright the Circuit of Ireland, make second place on the RAC, and much else. But it is the racing versions that are best remembered.

To mention *all* the exploits of *all* the works-inspired Spridgets would not be impossible, but it would produce an extremely long and complex story. ('Formidable — but its long overdue Ed.) So I propose to concentrate only on the racing machinery. In most cases, incidentally, these were badged as Austin-Healeys, designed, built and campaigned from Warwick, but there were occasional 'Midgets' using the same components, and raced where and when marketing considerations dictated the use of the Octagon! The MG version always outsold the Sprite, so it was the little Healey that raced the most, by and large.



Clive Baker and Keith Greene — who is still in endurance racing, running the winning Porsche at Brands in July — took a 1965 Le Mans Sprite to a class win at the Nurburgring later that year.



Roger Enever's 'works hack' Midget leads John Britton's Spridget — sometimes it was a Sprite, sometimes a Midget — in the late 1960s. Britton won the Amasco sportscar championship outright with this car.



Several former Abingdon employees have clubbed together to run this Sebring Sprite in British historic races.

The secret of long-term development was in the engines — all of the work being done by Eddie Maher's team at BMC Engines Branch in Coventry. It was this knowledgeable band who gradually converted the 42.5 bhp/948cc road car unit into a 110bhp/1,293cc fuel-injection racing engine, which was as responsive, and as reliable, as could be wished. There was a Healey-built 'frog-eye' at the Targa Florio in 1959, driven by Tommy Wisdom and Bernard Cahier, which finished 17th, and there was a wedge-nosed special coupe at Le Mans in 1968, driven by Alec Poole and Roger Enever which finished 15th. Along the way, all were 'underdogs', all were 'giant-killers' and all impressed the crowds with their agility, and sheer reliability. The most notable races to see repeated Spridget entries were at Le Mans, at Sebring, and in the Targa Florio — three widely different circuits, and three widely different types of race.

The first serious effort was at Sebring in 1960, when cars were entered both in the main 12-hour race, and also in the back-up four-hour race which accompanied it. Complete with smooth non-standard bonnets by John Sprinzel's tuning form, Stirling won his class and finished second in the shorter event, Sprinzel himself winning the

class at 12-hours. At Le Mans, in the same year, Healey built a prototype with a Falcon glassfibre body and an enormous windscreen, to meet the regulations the car, driven by Dalton/Colgate it averaged 85.6 mph and finished 20th winning its class. The long-running Spridget/Le Mans saga was under way.

Everything then started to go wrong for Warwick, for a raft of cars prepared for Sebring in 1961 couldn't win their classes, while the newly-built coupe (1411WD, later raced with great success by Mike Garton) burnt a piston and had to retire. A year later, too, much of the limelight was taken by the attractive little 'MG' versions built up at Abingdon, two of which went to Dick Jacobs for him to race as 'under the counter' works cars, and the third to John Milne in Scotland, (who still owns the car.) These cars, with smooth, pretty fast-back styling, and wedge-noses with part-recessed headlamps, had aluminium superstructures, and started life with 75 bhp 1.0-litre engines, but eventually they were re-engined on several occasions, finally inheriting full-race 1,293cc units. For years these were the fastest Midgets in Europe, and when driven by heroes like Andrew Hedges and Alan Foster they were amazingly spectacular.

In 1963, Healey of Warwick went back to Le Mans, this time with another special-bodied coupe, having a Kamm Tail, and driven by Sir John Whitmore and Bob Olthoff. On this occasion, 58 FAC had an oversquare 1,100cc engine, and more than 90 bhp. It lapped at 102.66 mph, with a 117 mph top speed, but unfortunately Olthoff crashed it when blinded by a camera flashgun.



Rauno Aaltonen in action in the 1965 Targa Florio Sprite — complete with coupé body on which he insisted for safety.



John Dalton takes the Falcon-bodied works Sprite to an 1100cc class win and 16th overall at Le Mans in 1960... unusual bodywork was to fit in with the regulations of that year.

From then on, the cars began to look more and more special, and to go even faster. For the 1964, Paddy Hopkirk and Tommy Wisdom were given another specially-styled car, superficially like the 1963 Le Mans model, but with an open cockpit. This, the first Sprite to have a half-elliptic leaf spring rear end, was very light and very nippy, but it broke a half-shaft during the race. The 1964 Le Mans car used the same body formers and styling, and had a coupe top, managing to finish 24th when

driven by Clive Baker and Bill Bradley, but 770KNX was beaten by the surviving Triumph Spitfire (see last month), lapping at 101.2mph, with a 135 mph top speed.

Geoffrey Healey has since written that this car had poor aerodynamics (it was as quick in a straight line as the Triumphs — who were proud of theirs!), and after a series of wind tunnel tests at the Austin works at Longbridge the famous, and definitive, racing Sprite shape evolved, in time for Sebring in 1965. Superficially these cars were rather like the Alfa Romeo Giulia TZs, which had just appeared, with fastbacks and a Kamm tail, lots of rear window 'glass' (perspex, actually), and a long wedge nose, but the Sprites also had four headlamps, hidden in pairs behind perspex fairings. Except for the very last car, built for the 1969 Targa Florio, all cars were closed coupes.

Suddenly, in 1965, it all started to come right again. At Sebring, Clive Baker and Rauno Aaltonen finished 15th, winning their class and defeating the Spitfires, using 1,293cc, in a race remembered for a torrential rain storm which seemed to fill up the inside of every car in the event at one time or another! The 1965 Targa car was not given the new body, but was a cheeky little open car not unlike the 1964 example; Aaltonen and Baker again took 15th place, and lost a class win due to a sticking brake caliper. Once again the willing little engine gave no trouble at all.

At Le Mans there were two of the sleek coupes, the pre-event scrutineering being enlivened by a



Christabel Carlisle (where is she now?) takes the ex-Stirling Moss Sebring Sprite to 11th place in the 1963 Nurburgring 1000-kilometre race

Dick Jacobs' Midget burns up the track... on a typical British summer's day. These pretty Coupés built at Abingdon proved to be remarkably successful.



Pretty coupé from Donald Healey's Warwick workshop undergoes shake-down trials... on opposite lock.

dispute about the cars' fluorescent paint colour! They had to be re-sprayed green to satisfy the scrutineers, but honour was satisfied when the Hawkins/Rhodes machine, completed with 105 bhp 1,293cc engine, won its class, averaged 96.5 mph, and defeated not only the (admittedly homologated) Spitfires, but also the host of French Alpine-Renaults.

The smart little cars then went on embracing success, only in their class, admittedly, but always with great distinction, and always driven with tremendous verve. The combined race/rally driver line-up which BMC made so famous (Timo Makinen and Paul Hawkins on this occasion) again won their class at Sebring in the 12-Hour race, while Rauno Aaltonen and Clive Baker finished 16th in the Targa Florio, with last year's car having been given a coupe top. Even so, at Le Mans in the same year, where the cars ran with overdrives for the first and only time, and where they lapped at 107.99mph (with top speeds of 150 mph!), both cars retired with broken engine conrods, a most rare occurrence.

A year later the same basic style of car was being used, and the team was back among the results again, with Aaltonen/Baker finishing 13th and winning their class at Sebring, though the same driver pairing failed in the Targa Florio when Clive Baker swerved to avoid an errant spectator and crashed into a guard rail. At Le Mans, the race in which the Ford GT Mk IV/Ferrari P4 battle made all the headlines, there was no mistake. Baker/Hedges, driving a familiar coupe (HNX 456D - two years old by this

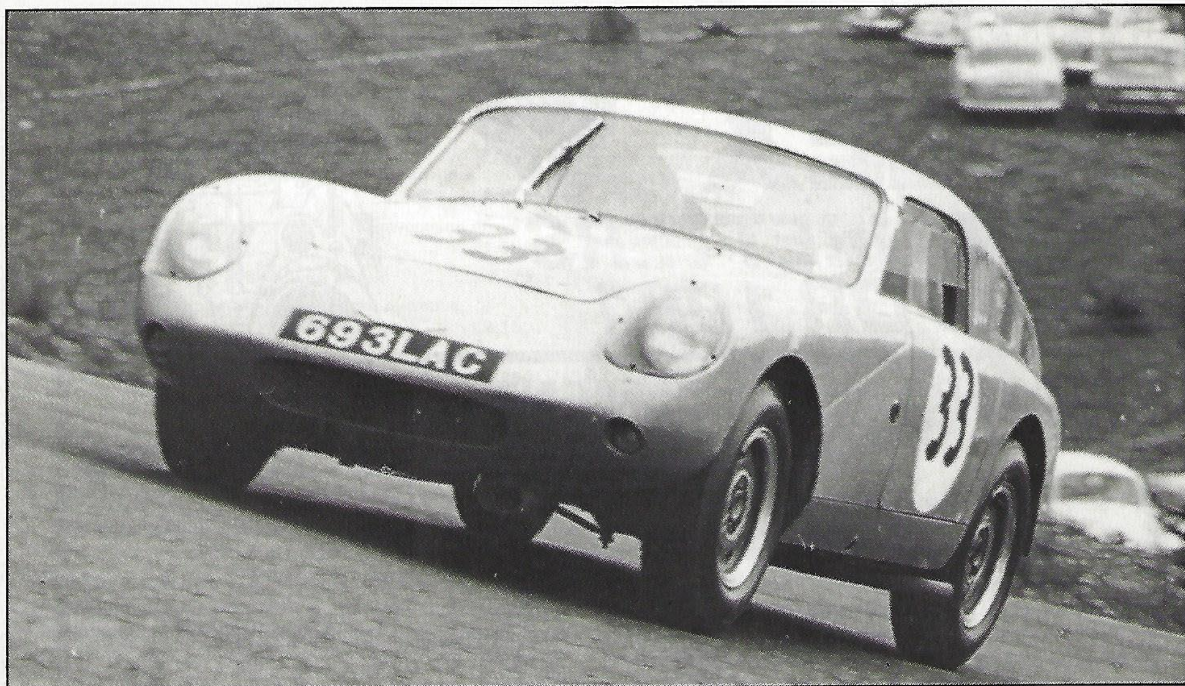


John Sprinzel, regular Sprite campaigner, in action in the 1960 RAC Rally with his famous Sabring Sprite PMO200.

time), finished 15th, and became the first 'works' Sprite to average more than 100 mph on the French circuit, in spite of a time-consuming delay to repair accident damage. Not only this, but it was timed at 146 mph without overdrive being fitted, and it averaged 20.1 mpg of fuel, the best in the race. No wonder the team were awarded the Motor trophy, for finishing best British car on that occasion.

Even though the BMC merger with Leyland had occurred in January 1968, and the new corporations plans were in something of a turmoil, the Sprite racing programme went ahead in any case. At Sebring, the car first seen in the 1967 Targa Florio won its class (this car having podded, but exposed headlamps rather like the Jacobs Midgets) in spite of delays to get water out of the fuel tank, while for the Targa Florio a production-bodied car, driven by Rauno Aaltonen and Clive Baker, had to retire when its engine lost all its water, and burst asunder.





John Moore with his Spridget in action at the Nurburgring in 1964.



They are still going strong in motorsport — a 1500cc Midget having fun.

That car, and the familiar wedge-nosed special coupe which appeared at Le Mans later in the year, were both notable for using special five-speed transmissions, and had special dry-sump 1,293cc engines. At Le Mans, too, the cars were using eight-port cylinder heads allied to semi-down draught trumpets and Lucas fuel injection. For sprint events, 120 bhp at 7,000 rpm was easily possible, but for Le Mans this tune was rolled back to an easy 110 bhp.

On that occasion, it was a wet Le Mans... so this, and the use of the chicane before the pits for the first time, reduced average speeds. The best lap speed was down to 104 mph, but the car finished strongly in 15th place, running like clockwork throughout.

It was obvious, however, that this race programme, and the cars themselves, had reached the limit of their development, for top speeds had virtually not increased in the last three years since the new body style had

been adopted, and the competition, from out-and-out racing prototypes, and was hotting up all the time. The Warwick team's swansong, therefore, was to build up an open-top version of this style, complete with five-speed box and a very light structure, but British Leyland then forbade its use, and it was sold off to the Austin/MG distributor in Florida.

Of course, the cars from Warwick were entered in other races from time to time, including events at the Nurburgring, Mugello, and Nassau, but it was at Le Mans, Sebring, and in the Targa Florio where the racers shone so brightly, and so often. It would be quite wrong, incidentally, to dismiss them as ultra-special machines, for their special exterior styling often hid much production-based engineering. Until they began to use the eight-port cylinder heads, of the type homologated for the Mini-Cooper S, the engines always looked amazingly standard, for they only ever used a single side-draught dual-choke Weber carburettor to suit the siamesed-port cylinder heads. Suspensions, too, were much the same as you and I could buy, except for special settings, though cast alloy road wheels (Minilites, latterly) were always a feature, and four-wheel disc brakes were used in due course.

It was all done, please note, on the minimum of resources. But with the maximum of enthusiasm and enterprise, from a converted cinema in Warwick, by a team who not only loved racing, but had all done quite a lot of it themselves. And *that* is what being a successful 'underdog' is all about!



Peter Riley and Mike Hughes head for a Monte Carlo Rally class win in 1961. The Rev. Rupert Jones, who also crewed Peter Riley in a Monte Midget, has written for 'Sporting Cars' on the experience in edition number three.

Classic trialling in a Midget... with M. P. Wordsworth's example storming Fingle Bridge in the 1984 London-to-Exeter.

