

SPRITE-MG MIDGET OWNERS HANDBOOK

of Maintenance and Repair



SPECIAL SECTION:
INCREASING POWER & PERFORMANCE



PUBLISHED BY
FLOYD CLYMER
LOS ANGELES

INCLUDES FACTORY
OPTIONAL COMPETITION
ACCESSORY LIST

\$4.00

THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE

Ocee Ritch writes a "Dear John" letter.

Los Angeles, April 1

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Editor, SPORTS CARS ILLUSTRATED
1 Park Ave.,
New York, N. Y.

Dear John:

When we shook hands and parted at Avon Park, Florida, I'm sure you noted the slight tremble in my limbs and I appreciated the extra emphasis you gave to the conventional "good luck" as you mumbled a farewell. The thought that you were actually participating in a scheme where an old friend, such as myself, would attempt to drive a car across the continent that YOU had raced for 12 hours must have weighed heavily on your conscience. Of course, I had only myself to blame, I couldn't even put the onus on Tony Birt of Hambro who usually thinks up these things... but I thought you'd like to know that everything came out all right and that you can now uncross your fingers.

The readers of SCI to whom you brought the stirring tale of Sebring and your not inconsequential part in it will never know the backstage (or behind-the-pit) drama that was played around the MGA and Sprite team cars. Nor will they ever be aware that two of the sturdy entrants (cars, not drivers) were fired up after the big event and driven, virtually untouched, through rain, heat and gloom of night all the way to Los Angeles.

Charlie Weber and I flew to Sebring this year with the express intention of enjoying ourselves and with no ulterior motive, such as writing a story about the race (1,500 other press people took care of that). So, knowing that we would otherwise be having a good time and with no responsibility, Bill Pringle of Gough Industries (BMC distributors in LA) called one day and said,

"I say, old Bean, you won't have anything to do at Sebring, how about seeing that our cars get shipped home properly?" It seems that Gough had purchased a Sprite and an MGA to be delivered after the race. Pringle, as Service Manager, was scheduled to make the trip but last minute events canceled the bit.

"All right, Bill," I said agreeably, "what do I do?"

"Oh, just pop the little bears onto a

transport or a flatbed that's coming this way and insure them heavily."

"What could be simpler?" I asked, rhetorically.

"Nothing," Bill murmured, "just be sure you get two that have the least body damage. Those oil drums at Sebring leave nasty dents."

"Right, ho!" I imitated his Aussie accent, "leave it to me. I'll get the best of the lot."

Fatal words.

All during the cattle flight we took by mistake and during the dismal practice sessions under a Confederate blanket-colored sky the admonition to seize the best surviving cars from the teams bounced around my brain like a ping pong ball. I buttonholed the drivers under the pretense of learning more about driving techniques and tried to determine which pairs were the most conservative. Mechanics fell under my eagle-eyed scrutiny and, after posting Charlie on the details of the plot so he could help judge, we made careful notes on which cars got the most tender loving care. During practice we timed the different vehicles, rushed back to the pits to see why each was called in and kept a detailed log on performance.

During the race, of course, we were pretty busy just taking in all the sights and sounds but we managed to keep close tabs on the A's and the Sprites as they purred along. #30 MGA eliminated itself from my book when it took a rock through the sump but the others and the miniature Healeys looked so stout that an idea began to form as the race progressed.

"Charley," I said cautiously, "why don't we just drive a couple of these cars back to the Coast?"

"Why not?" Charlie answered with a sidelong look, "they should be well broken in after this."

Marcus Chambers, Healey team manager, was less sanguine. "Why, the cars will finish in great shape, I've no doubt, but Los Angeles is a jolly good bit off, isn't it?"

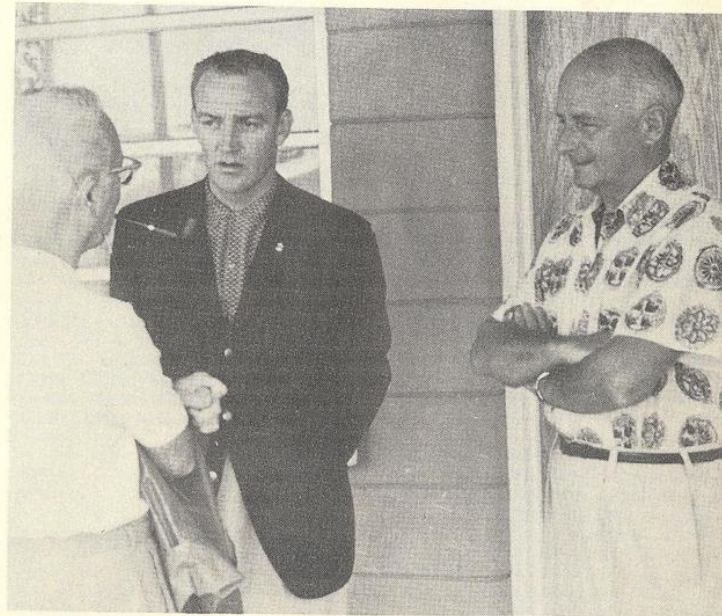
"Three thousand jolly miles," I stated.

"Hm. Here, try a bit of my Latakia. I don't see how you Americans can smoke your flaky pipe tobacco."

I chewed on my pipestem. "Marcus," I said, "I must have two sound automobiles



Sebring Sprite in action. Following the grueling race, this car was driven from Florida to California.



Donald Healey, designer of the Austin-Healey Sprite (rt.) listens as Charles Weber (back to camera) discusses proposed cross-country trip in ex-Sebring Sprite with Jim Parkinson, member of BMC racing team.

to drive back. Can't you give Christy the Slow Down signal? He's going entirely too fast."

On Sunday morning after the race we gathered at BMC headquarters in Avon Park, a few miles north of Sebring, to celebrate the fine performance of the teams and to say farewell all around. By noon Charlie and I had been in, under, over and around the cars with notebook and pencil and, retiring to a nearby *bierstube*, for privacy we correlated driver impressions, points earned by various mechanics for neatness and devotion to duty, practice times, race performance, laps covered, average speeds and causes for pit stops, and made a final decision on exactly which of the bolides we would select.

As we were gathering our materials to depart, one of the BMC officials came up with Jack Flaherty in tow.

"I say, chaps, Jack here is to pick up a couple of cars too, why don't we toss a coin to see who gets which ones?"

Jolly!

So it was that at One O'clock on Sunday that we took possession of #55 Sprite (Ex Hayes/Christy) and #29 MGA Twin Cam Coupe. The Sprite had a weak fuel pump and a broken exhaust manifold downpipe plus a jury-rigged throttle bracket. The A was immaculate.

Back to Sebring, after replacing the fuel pump points, then to our lodgings where we made use of the tools and welding skill of Bill Love (whose AC Bristol had stayed on the Alternate list) to render the Sprite whole. On Monday, we shook the mud of Sebring from our boots and stormed off on the 3,000 mile road test.

Neither Charlie nor I had driven the cars previously, of course, so our first couple of hours were spent in getting used to the machinery. Right hand drive was not strange to either of us, but we had forgotten how easy it is to shake up truck drivers with this type of steering arrangement. All you do is approach closely behind the rig and gradually edge out so that just the left side of your car is visible in the trucker's rear view mirror. Then he can see there's nobody driving the funny little car behind him.

Sport!

The experience of driving a sports car in a race such as the 12 hour grind is not to be compared with putting the same mileage on during a cross country jaunt. There are always new situations on the highway and many opportunities to assay braking, acceleration and handling under varied conditions. For instance: The highway up the west coast of Florida looks nearly as smooth as the blacktop at Sebring but, cleverly concealed by a sadistic Highway Department, there are undula-

tions and transverse ridges which would do credit to a proving ground. After traversing a hundred miles or so of this washboard, we called a rest stop to let our eyeballs settle in their sockets.

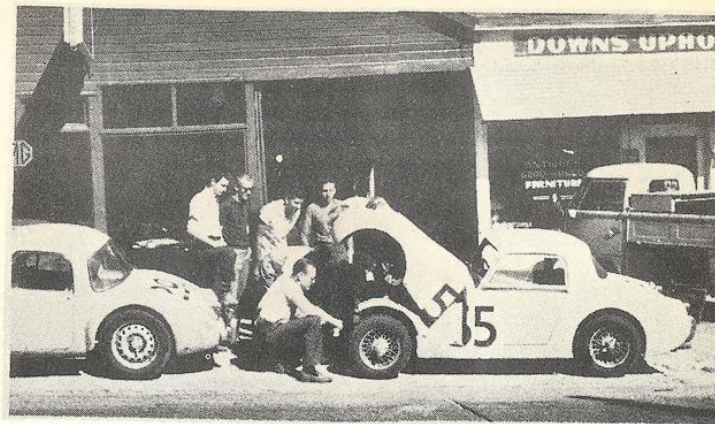
"You know," Charlie said, "we ought to put some soap and water in the rear deck space and do our laundry."

With the extra stiffness in the front suspension on the Sprite, it is easy to see why Charlie chewed through two pipe stems in a half day on this stretch. At 70 mph, indicated, (my tach had left me within 10 miles after getting underway) on this surface, the Sprite appeared to be a handful to hold in a straight line. The A, on the other hand, soaked up the pounding pretty well and only the inherent tight shock setting caused any discomfort. Actually I preferred the short, quick jolts to the slow-motion elephantine wallowing we could observe in the conventional cars we met and passed.

Once we left this piece of paving, we barrelled into Mobile, Alabama in style. At the end of our first day we were not nearly as tired as we had expected but were ready for the sack. The Motel we chose at random turned out to be in the middle of an old Civil War fort. A sign proclaims that the last battle of the conflict was fought behind these breastworks. "Look, Charlie," I pointed to the plaque, "tonight you are going to sleep on hallowed ground." "Fine," he said, "but tomorrow night let's get a bed."

The only tuning change we had made in either car (and the only attention they really had except an oil change and a lube job) was in changing the stock spark-plugs from the racing type used in the enduro. Even this might not have been done if the engines had fired up easily when cold, but we were happy for the switch when the morning in Mobile turned out to be quite cool. Then we proceeded along the Gulf at a restricted pace and we were doubly happy because a constant traffic congestion caused us to run at a reduced speed guaranteed to foul electrodes. Revving up the engines to clear them out was inclined to create excessive noise and to draw the attention of passing police, so we putted through a dozen towns and villages.

Gendarmes were drawn to our diminutive caravan anyway because of the big Sebring numbers still on the hood, sides and back plus the British license plates. In one city a cycle patrolman drew up alongside and engaged Charlie in conversation for ten blocks in "rush hour" traffic (15 mph). It seems he used to own a TD and was eager to become a Sprite owner. Another officer kept pace with me for a while, asked about the race and invited us to a Drive In for a cup of coffee.



Making a trip in a race car is somewhat like making a trip in a sports car was ten years ago only more so. Wherever we stopped, a crowd of enthusiasts and curious gathered. We rehearsed the race, discussed the technical points of the cars and heard about the local hotshoes. At one Louisiana filling station the usual group congregated to ask more or less informed questions. In this particular section the trend was to the less informed so when one lanky Cajun asked, "By Gar, heem go pretty good, hey?" Charlie replied, "Yes, in its class. You see, these cars race against other cars of the same general type. They are separated by the size of the engines and compete with each other, and not with the bigger ones." "Oui," nodded the native pointing to the Sprite, "you run heem in class 4 GT or under appendix C?"

The lack of a fan on the Sprite was no handicap on the road where the gauge remained at a constant 180 but in slow moving traffic or when trapped behind big busses, the needle would swing over alarmingly. In midday we were forced to halt once to cool the radiator with a stream of water from an amiable service station operator's hose. Oil pressure stayed healthy, however, so we pushed on and detoured around the centers of large cities when possible.

Up to this point we had treated the cars in an extremely conservative fashion. First of all because, even though outward appearance may indicate that all is well, a little more abuse such as incurred in the 12-hour thing could push some part over the brink of failure. Secondly, the general air of skepticism that we could make the Coast in the unaltered racers without trouble had its negative effect on our thinking. However, by the time we had put 1,200 miles on the odometers

without incident we were a couple of tigers once more. Charlie was absolutely raving about the Sprite when we would stop for chow; the tremendous ease of stopping with the disc brakes ("you don't push harder on the pedal, you just push a little farther") its ability to stick like glue on the turns (and he's an old Lancia driver, you know) and the little engine's fantastic surge of power above 4,500 rpm. My own impression of the A was that this is a superb Gran Turismo car: Plenty of power where you want it for a road car, coming on strong at 3,500 (about 65 with these gears) seemingly unlimited top-end revs and generous driving comfort. The new (to me, at least) Dunlop R-5 tires seemed a great improvement over the R-3 type which were on the Twin Cam I drove on the Coast and corrected the one fault I had noticed in racing at Pomona—the tendency to spin the rear wheels when you stand on it coming out of a corner. The R-5's just don't want to break loose under the same conditions.

So, with renewed confidence, engendered by the fact that nothing had blown up so far, and a chance to wring out a couple of factory-prepared and demonstrably successful pieces, I suggested we get up early and try to pick up a little time on the semi-deserted roads of East Texas. Nothing loath, Charlie set the alarm for 3 AM and we sallied into the stillness. Whatever happened to the farmers that used to get up so early, John? We didn't see another moving vehicle for nearly three hours. In that time we had established that it would take a very good car indeed to stay up with these two on anything but a long, straight highway, or, possibly a near-vertical uphill bit. In this section of the country the road wanders over rolling hills — some fairly steep, through timbered country and



farmland where the road builders followed rather devious methods to get around Smith's barn. It all added up to exhilarating driving—sudden, unexpected bends, reverse camber turns, 4 or 5 mile unobstructed straights—real fun.

The A's quick steering and the rear end's absolute refusal to come loose made it like driving the cliché car "on rails" . . . until the rain began to fall. Then we had it! With the same tire pressure that the car had finished the race—28 lbs.—the glorious R5's were slicker than a greased doorknob. In the dry, the Twin Cam had been as tractable as a pet collie, now it was like trying to drive a boar hog across a frozen pond. I don't know what pressure you people used during the rain at Sebring, but I did know that Richie Ginther was down to 7 lbs. all around in the Ferrari so, here was a decision: To valve or not to valve some gas? Unfortunately neither car had a tire gage in the tool kit and to release pressure by guess is a little risky. Then, too, this was nitrogen . . . and inert gas in the tires would be a real boon when we hit the desert, later on. After some mental gymnastics around the gas laws, coefficients of expansion, time lost in refilling the tires once we found an open service station and so on, I made an arbitrary decision to save the nitrogen . . . and ease off a bit.

To give you an idea of how slick it was, I nearly looped out while leaving a stop sign in a small town when I hit second gear. In spite of such conditions, we drove for 254 miles before stopping for breakfast at an average speed of just over 64 mph! At no time did I rev the Twin Cam over 5,200 . . . at least when the tach was working.

Out through here you see the wonderful roadside signs such as "Illegal To Track

Mud Onto Pavement" and the various warnings of the fines levied for depositing litter on the right of way. This varied from \$100 to \$50 then when we hit one place that had only a \$25 fine, Charlie suggested we throw out our beer cans because this was as cheap as it would ever get. Here too, is where the hotrodders are taking up sporty cars and they are building their own out of old Hadacol signs. You'd better watch out around New Orleans, too, a couple of fellows there are disguising a Chrysler dragster with a TD body.

Fierce!

The fuel pump which I had revised in Florida needed adjustment in Ozone, Texas, and Charlie pointed out the Sprite's selling points to a couple of Indians who lounged against their Coupe deVille while I sprawled under the jacked-up rear end, fuel trickling down into my armpit, and reset the point clearance.

"How do you like those disc brakes?" Charlie asked.

"Ugh," answered the Indian in traditional fashion.

"Engine has the latest mods. Turn 8,000 . . . over 100 in top gear."

"Ugh. Where-um one for other foot? Hah!"

The rough detours we encountered later in the day were a test of suspension we hadn't counted on. Big holes in the torn up paving or dirt road would practically lose the Sprite's 13" wheels and the pounding completely conked out its tachometer. My seat belt didn't work at all and the sensation was somewhat akin to being inside a churn. In spite of this treatment, the only damage was to the tach. At one point huge signs warned "DANGER. BLASTING. Turn off All Radios". We later surmised that this was so you'd be sure to hear the blasts and enjoy sounds that

have not as yet been marketed on HiFi discs.

Despite various unfavorable road conditions we made 863 miles before knocking off and completely sold ourselves that these two cars would run to the moon if somebody would build the necessary bridge. We switched the Sprite's spare to the left front simply to equalize the rubber on the two steerable wheels and barged on to Los Angeles. The airscoop on the hood of the Twin Cam that admits breezes to the driver's feet came in handy crossing the wastes between Phoenix and Riverside and this looks like a modification that might catch on with the racing fraternity.

Otherwise, there is no change I can suggest to BMC that would in any way make the MGA coupe a more desirable commodity.

At the end of our trip we had covered exactly 3,000 miles, incurred no measurable wear on the tires of either car, averaged above 50 mph for daytime driving time (including all stops) and got 43 mpg on the Sprite, 32 mpg on the Twin Cam.

That's about it, John. As far as we are concerned, anyone else can take the bus. Leave the race cars to us.

Best Regards,
OCee

On the following pages will be found a reprint of the *Driver's Handbook* issued with each Sprite or Midget. The reader will note that page numbers follow the original publication's index which will be found on page 309 of this book, (page 62 of the *Driver's Handbook*.)