



Assembly point for the evening race

## A SPRITE RACING AT LE MANS (SEEMED LIKE 24HRS)

by Clive Cocks

Having visited Le Mans as a spectator on more than one occasion and having the iconic 1960s poster on the garage wall with the GT40s lined up and drivers sprinting to their machines the opportunity to race there was not to be missed. The WSM sprite 210 has now done about 30 races in the UK, but this would be the first time she would race abroad with me as owner, we know she competed abroad with her previous owner including Spa in 1997 and finished well but that is all. So decision made we would race her at the "Le Mans Story" a racing festival held every other year to the now famous Classic Le Mans. In the GTS Equipe race series consisting of TVRs, MGBs, Elvas, and Lotus Elites all running in period specification.

We would have untimed practice on the Friday, Qualifying on Saturday with a 30minute evening race and a further 30 minute race on Sunday. With the race booked decisions had to be taken on spares back up, this was easy except there would be no room for us or luggage, gradually the hopefully not needed were left behind (ie Engine, gearbox, dynamo!! etc). So with four people, luggage, spares and WSM 210 on the trailer we went to Le Mans, driving from Calais to Le Mans is straight forward with typical French motorway however the journey seemed to take forever, finally our hotel was reached, leaving the wives with a cool beer (temperature was in the low 30,s) we ventured to the

circuit to deposit the car. Getting into the circuit was very simple with no-one even stopping the car at the gate, with only a few other competitors there the whole area had a very deserted feel and appeared vast compared to the crowds and bustle of the Classic or 24hour. With the car safely deposited we returned to the hotel for some French cuisine and a few beers. Next morning hearing the French sparrows (I am sure they have an accent) we breakfasted and drove to the circuit, more competitors were arriving and the paddocks were beginning to fill. Signing on was very easy and arranging our practice sessions was quite straight forward the only rule seemed to be if you were French you paid a cheaper price.

There is no doubt being in full racing suit and helmet, belted tight into a closed cockpit car is always a warm experience but with the temperature again at 32 degrees waiting to go on track was almost unbearable and with the French efficiency of keeping us in the assemble area for 20 minutes it did not help. However entering the track pit lane and seeing the towering stands either side did give me a welcome shiver, although we were on the Bugatti circuit I was surprised at the length and complexity and driving up the straight swinging to the right, a reasonable sharp left, an immediate right

under the famous Dunlop bridge is a great feeling. 15minutes later with the car running well and me suffering from the heat we returned to the paddock, few adjustments were made and vehicle checked over, the afternoon session also went well for 210 but her sister car WSM 208 suffered front wheel bearing failure and of course this was an item deemed unnecessary to bring with us. After plenty of searching a donor Austin A30 car was offered for wheel bearings, this however was nearly 2 hours drive away, so decision was made we would go into Le Mans for a Casual evening meal while Tony drove to the A30 remove the front hub bearings and return so they could be fitted first thing Saturday morning before official practice.

The meal taken outside in typical French Restaurant in the old town with warm gentle breeze and the swifts (or maybe swallows) darting about was interrupted only twice by mobile for instructions on "how do you get the \*\*\*\*\* split pin out the hub" and then "the \*\*\*\*\* hub wont come off the \*\*\*\*\* stub" at least we had a meal that night. Next morning we returned to the circuit fully refreshed, official practice was only an hour away, the simple job of replacing wheel bearings had turned into a disaster and while I joined the cars in the paddock 208 was far from ready. Official practice went well and I qualified fastest in class (only just) 208 had

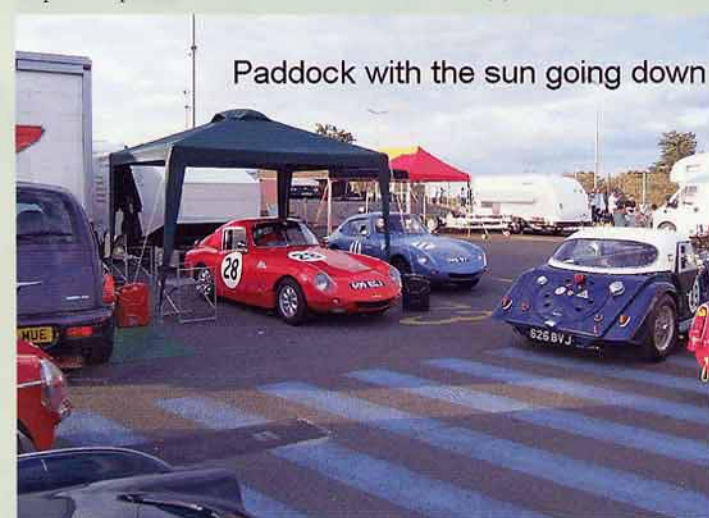


failed to get out but with some persuasion and a little English Charm the officials agreed 208 could race that evening using the previous days practice as qualifying. The remainder of the morning was spent in bright sunshine overcom-

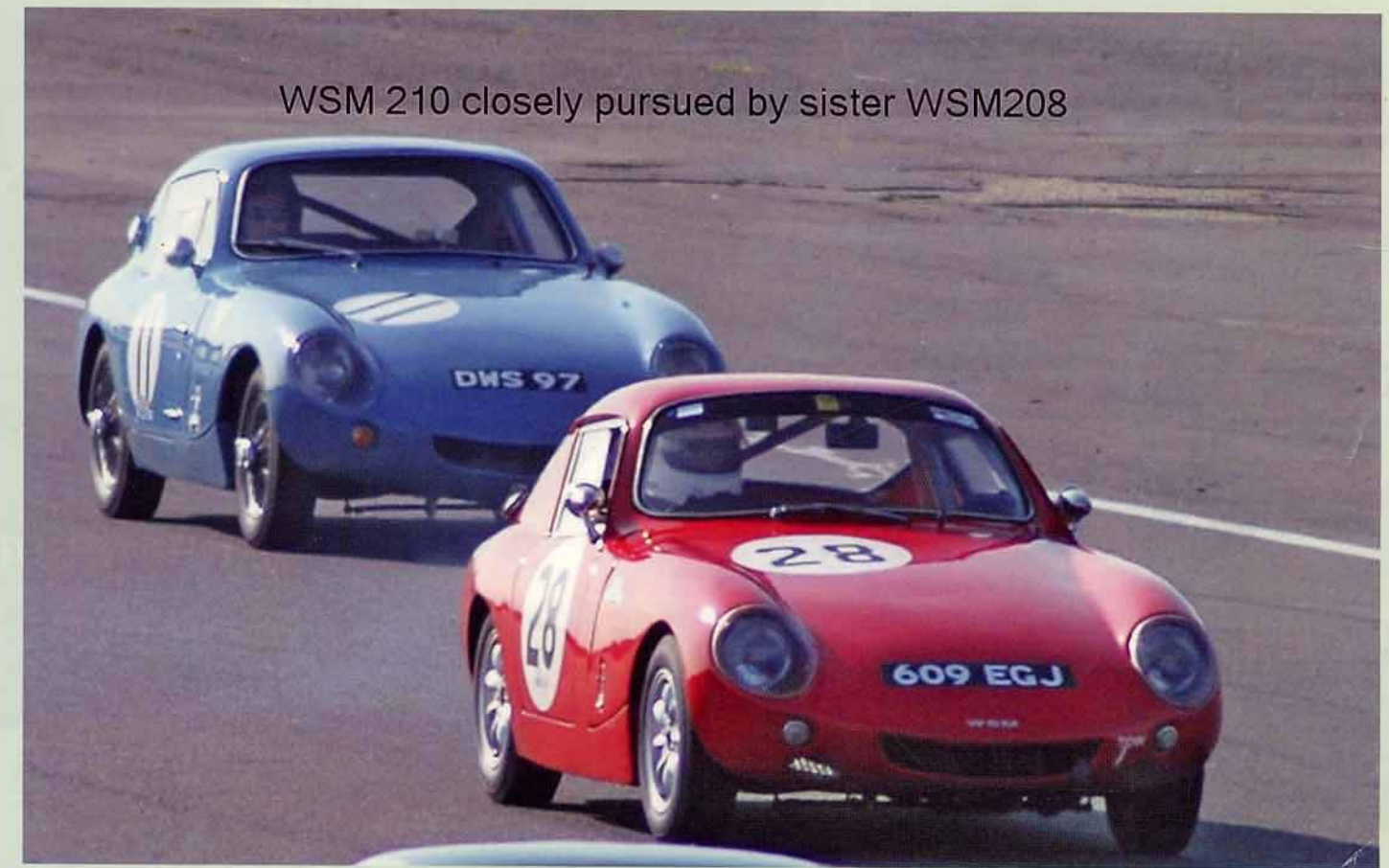
ing the wheel bearing problem and general checking, ironically a fault was found with the dynamo on 210 the rear bearing had overheated and damaged the armature and the dynamo on 208 was making some strange noises. We rebuilt and re-oiled both dynamos hopefully well enough to get us through the evening race. After an afternoon of rest and early evening meal we returned to the track our race was to start at 10.05, this was not to much of a problem all the cars were fitted with lights and they all worked (or should have) by 9.45 we were in the paddock still quite light however when we finally got to grid 10.15 it was getting dark however the track temperature remained at 24 degrees. So with headlights blazing (you could tell none would pass an MOT due to poor adjustment) we were off, perception of distance and time were all out of proportion, the track only had flood lighting at the corners so darkness to light then the glare from the stands. Brake lights were like flares going off and thoughts of why is he braking there?? should I?? is there a problem he can see and I can't? The pace seemed faster than in daylight (it wasn't by 10 seconds a lap), my battle to keep a Lotus Elite at bay was constantly reminded by the glare of his headlamps in my mirrors. All was well until about 15mins in when the dreaded red light of a failed dynamo or fan belt

shone from the dashboard within 2 or 3 laps a misfire appeared at high revs. presuming it was to do with voltage the emerging plan was turn off the headlights, rely on a MGB in front, keep the revs lower than 6500 and prevent the Lotus from taking the Class win. Of course it didn't work, the MGB began to pull away, my blocking tactics worked up until the last couple of laps when the Lotus attempted an outrageous overtaking manoeuvre on the tight corner at the beginning of the main straight, I could not defend and along the main straight with the misfire holding me back the Lotus pulled away, although always in my sight I could do nothing more and within minutes the chequered flag appeared. Annoyingly 2nd in class but what an experience, after removing a sweat sodden racing suit, downing a beer and the usual race post-mortem we declined the invitation from the French to join the Pop concert and party being held in the stadium that carried on until the early hours of Sunday and made our way back to the Hotel. Sunday morning while investigating the dynamo problem we decided that very little could be done, re-pack with grease, repair some wires clean up the remaining brushes and hope, with the battery on charge we waited for our race to be called. The sun was still shining and racing at midday would prove to be another hot

event, on the way to the holding area all seemed good, the dynamo was behaving itself, the initial lap and then the green flag lap and then we were ready, 2 minute signal was out a quick check oil pressure ok, water temp. ok and a bright red light staring out of the dash but too late the race lights were on and we were off, not a bad start but it was obvious the misfire was still there, working hard to avoid falling back to far it was inevitable that improving my position was not going to happen. Nevertheless there were a few battles along the way and considering the misfire we managed to come in 19th out of 32 starters slightly disappointing but that is racing. After the race and presentations the packing up began the trip back seemed even longer than the trip down although broken by a very nice meal and stay at a small hotel near Abbeville. So WSM210 now proudly boasts a Le Mans Story sticker, a week later (with dynamo replaced by an alternator and lots of electric bits replaced we took part in MG Live although no mechanical troubles an unplanned diversion with a couple of twirls at Luffields, although apparently entertaining, did nothing for my quest to impress the many Austin Healey Club members watching. Apologies for quality of some pictures (also pictures of night race were rubbish)



Paddock with the sun going down



WSM 210 closely pursued by sister WSM208