RALLY RETROS



John Sprinzel hung up his stringbacks almost twenty years ago. Now he's managed to find them again...

When I finally stuffed the stringback gloves into the bottom drawer and threw away the cork-lined skid-lid that today would have every scrutineer throw a fit, I never thought I would want to sit in a rally car again.

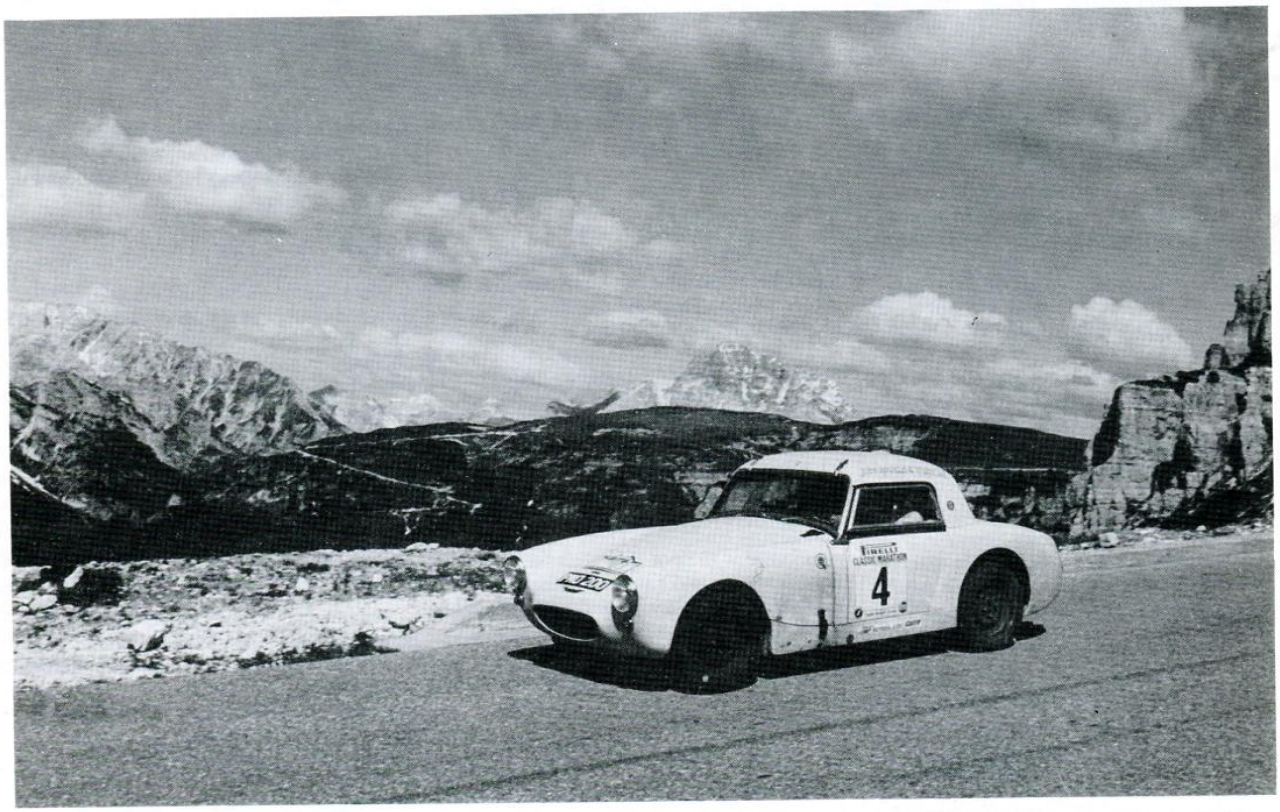
I could look back on more than 100 international rallies in what is now regarded as the "golden era" in literally dozens of different types of car, with a first overall on the London Rally, a second overall on the RAC, a third on the Liege, and a fourth on the Safari, and the British Rally Championship to boot, so, not a bad innings.

Then Historic rallies turned the wheel full circle. Just when every rally car appeared as a white hatchback running on a megabucks budget, with only the windscreen and doorhandles relating to what you can buy in the showroom, suddenly it really did seem as if the deeper attractions and ethics of a sport that had lost its way were now going to be revived with authenticity.

There was only one way to find out - jump back in the pool and see if we can still swim. It was 1973 since I last drove a rallycar - a Porsche 911, and some years since I had even driven a car, following an operation on both eyes that had meant I had to give up any kind of driving.

So, when I found myself on Tower Bridge, behind the wheel of an under-powered little skateboard shaped like a Sebring Sprite, with all these familiar sounds and old smiling faces, it was like a time warp - the start of the Classic Marathon could so easily have been the flagging off of the 1961 Alpine Rally. Goodness, is that Don Morley, the only man to win an Alpine Rally Cup that year, waving from the crowd? Can't you get over here, and help us drive this thing?

It started gently, easy closed road stages, the one in Belgium with a village right in the middle with people sipping



Top, miles away from his home in Hawaii but still characteristicallly cheerful, John Sprinzel (waving) with Willy Cave and the Sprite, at the top of the Gavia during the Classic Marathon and above, hurrying up thhe Tre Cime for a late breakfast in the sunshine

beers and coffees right beside the road, yelling or booing, depending on the degree of slide round the village fountain, was straight from Targa Florio days and made me feel 19 all over again.

A long concentration run to the Alps. Frustrations aplenty - who wrote the silly rules that allowed 90 cars to clean the Spa test, when the track was so narrow overtaking would have been difficult. More chicanes and cones? Not in my book - fine for Hastings sea-front, but this is an Alpine Rally spirit being revived. Then we learn that the organisers have been hand-cuffed to ensuring that everything is 32mph. In my day it was 40mph, and then the distances, or the clocks would be fudged! (We really knew it meant go like hell.). But this was more restrained. "Bet a third clean the Stelvio," says I. Sadly, I did not hang around to collect my dues.

It was a good event. Sure, there were problems. You want to try moving 300 people across six countries every day for a week, keeping things competitive, with a nightly meeting with Stewards who are there to keep the lid tightened down. But did it succeed?

Rattling through villages at two in the morning was anti-social then and is anti-social now. It was a sting in the tail to decide things, on fudgy maps. That sure sorted the men from the boys, and the boys who lost out will be feeling sore for months to come. But full marks to that chap with the military maps, spot height detecting altimeter and compass! But this was not supposed to be the a Targa Rusticana with pasta. Surely the governing bodies can see that?

My little car ran in the top ten for most of the week, then slipped back on the infamous last night, but we took home an Alpine Cup. We felt we had worked very hard for that. And I for one would like to come back for another ..... Willy Cave worked hard on the maps. That was a good thing - navigators should be just that on Historic rallies. If Alison Woolley, certainly not an oldtimer, can get Adrian Boyd to a Gold Cup, the maps can't have been that bad.

Yes, it was like a Fifties style Alpine Rally. Some cars failed scrutineering, that is a good thing. The cars must be authentic. the roads certainly are. The meals which brought us all together were wonderful - more of that, please. The camaraderie was second to none, just like the old days. Cheats, with mates up country lanes to do a quick spot of illegal servicing got thrown out - yes, really!

You change you brake shoes yourself, or ask the Unipart lads to help. Is there any other International Rally in the world offering six days of competition with no team managers, no pace notes, no practising , servicing, chase cars, tyre dumps, helicopters, radio relaying aeroplanes, and every single partcipating car related closely to the manufacturer's model. And press and television galore, providing more coverage back home in dear old Blighty than both Le Mans, and the Monte Carlo Rally, put together.

What's that I see over there, a layby marked out by "Rootes Factory Team Cars Only" banners, opposite a trolley jack with a BMC rosette, marked "Works Healeys Only." Some time warp.

It's a heady cocktail, this formula of Historic rallying. The fact that so may youngsters who were not around when these cars were being rallied are now so hungry to find out what the real days of rallying were all about, and are getting stuck in, is wonderfully gratifying.

There is so much goodwill, so much momentum behind this revival, the governing bodies who want to keep it in a straight jacket of uniformity are somehow going to have to come to terms with it all, and allow Historic rallies to be run much more in keeping with the pages of history.

Do I want to come back? You bet. I've already asked Stuart Turner if he would like to revive an old partnership - oops, what I forgot to say was that we will of course be driving Stuart's newly restored MGA....won't we, Stuart? I am not taking No for an answer. Now then, when do I get the regs for the Monte Carlo Challenge? After so much heat, we should all cool our heads in a snowdrift. *

THE HOT SEAT

Zoe Heritage reflects upon tackling the Classic Marathon with Stirling Moss



WHEN Stirling Moss first asked me to navigate for his attempted second Gold Cup drive (unique in rally history) my answer was an emphatic "No!" I'm no fool - I too had seen the infamous video where Stirling was busy biting Chuck's head off at the end of a Special Stage on the '90 Marathon. Sit beside that for 2000 miles? No way!

My unreserved thanks go to Barrie Taylor, who persuaded me to change my mind. When he pointed out the honour, opportunity and sheer privilege it would be to sit beside the greatest driver of all time for seven days, I realised that this 'chance of a lifetime' was not to be missed.

Stirling proved to be delightful company all week. I had always thought that 'in car entertainment' was a Blaupunkt radio/ cassette before listening to the Moss repertoire of jokes and personal anecdotes, 12 hours a day on the headphones. Despite the dramas leading up to the start on Tower Bridge (36 hours before 'off' we didn't even know if we had a car to compete in), the trauma of discovering the Healey's teething troubles within minutes of the Start Ramp, and our well publicised mishaps (due entirely to locking-up brakes), Stirling and I got along famously.

We quickly sorted out the problem of the gear jumping our of first and second - he changed gear then held on to it for dear life; the Stelvio was therefore an exciting 10 minutes. Apologies go to John Wolley and Nick Wright when we tried to overtake on Hairpin No34 , and I missed catching the damned gear just at the crucial moment. Sotoguda was another eventful Stage, as between gear holding, I also wiped the windscreen clear as it had steamed up in the deluge. Of course, tension mounted between us towards the end of the week when the Gold Cup was still on the menu; when the Halda packed up minutes before what turned out to be the longest Regularity on the event, the marshalls were amazed that the crew of car No 7 were not only still talking to each other, but literally thrilled at losing 30 seconds. That Gold Cup was still there for the picking.

The Final Night section loomed, and so did our respective partners. A dramatic farewell saw Susie Moss and Barrie waving handkerchiefs at TC60, with promises to meet 12 weary hours later. Unfortunately, we were back before they had even finished dinner. that Gold Cup will just have to wait another three years.

Barrie was right on all accounts - it really was an privileged experience not to be missed. And the biggest surprise? I thoroughly enjoyed myself! *