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"...the Sebring story of the third prototype Sprite, Serial number XSP 24262. It was heady stuff for a couple of college students back in 1969."

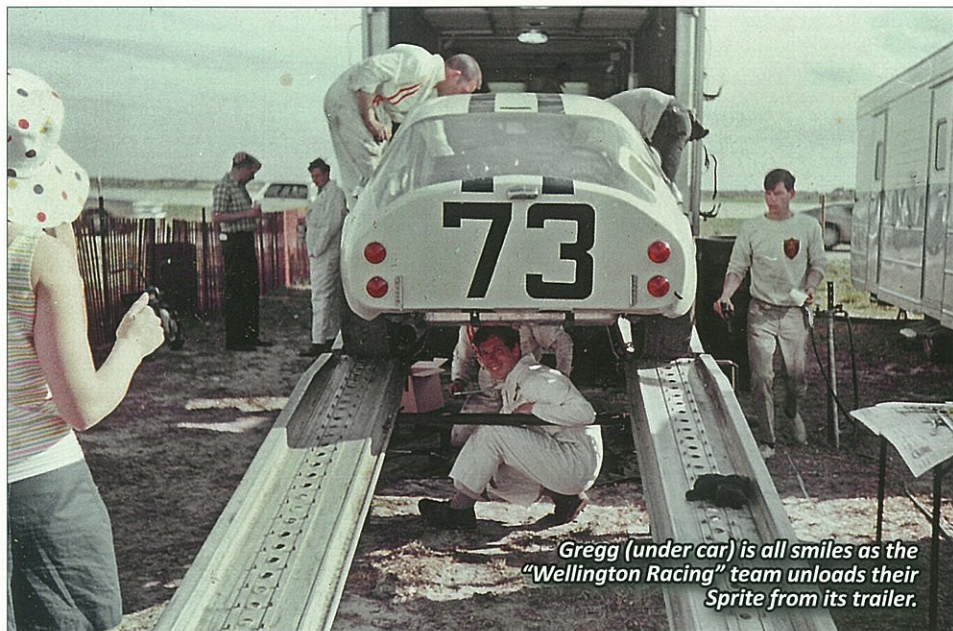


THE THIRD SPRITE PROTOTYPE

In March 1968 I was a junior at Monmouth College in Long Branch, New Jersey, and already had three years of SCCA racing experience and a national license. We lived in student apartments near the school, and every Thursday night was champagne and cigar night for my roommates and friends. During one such episode in early March, we were talking about sports cars and I happened to mention to fellow student Art Tuckerman that it would be neat to drive a Bugeye Sprite down to Florida and race it in the Sebring 12-hour race.

Now, if this seems a bit sophomoric when you look at racing today, I would have to agree, but back in

1968 one could actually do this. Art, as I later found out, was a person of considerable means, and his reply was, "Yes, but let's do it right." By the end of the evening we had hammered out the basics of what would become Wellington Racing Ltd, and a week later we officially entered the 1968 Sebring 12-hour race.



Gregg (under car) is all smiles as the "Wellington Racing" team unloads their Sprite from its trailer.

The real purpose of the "entry" was actually just to allow us to gain access to all the pit areas and meetings for informational purposes. We would not actually field a car in 1968. Art and I flew to Sebring for the 12-hour race with clipboards and cameras in hand. We learned a lot, and perhaps most importantly we learned that a Bugeye Sprite was probably not the way to go. We needed something



The scene in the pits before the race.

a lot more sophisticated, and as luck would have it, Sprite prototype XSP 24262 had recently returned from the Nassau Speed Weeks and was for sale. Art completed the arrangements to purchase the car and we rented a three-bay shop in an industrial park in nearby Wanamassa, New Jersey.

Art was a first-class person. During our trip to Sebring we ogled the tractor-trailers of Ford, Ferrari, Porsche and Penske Racing. Not to be out done, Art purchased a very nice 40-foot trailer, complete with a generator and an observation deck on top. Next, we designed a logo for Wellington Racing and had the trailer painted up with the new logo. I should mention here that there was no Mr. Wellington. Art thought the team should have an English name rather than Tuckerman Racing.

The Sprite prototype was originally painted day-glow orange with white doors where the numbers were. Frankly this was not an eye-pleasing combination, so we decided to paint it white with blue stripes, the American racing colors.

Prototype XSP 24262 was one of the less exotic of the prototypes as far as the engine and transmission went. It had a 1293 cc dry sump engine with a single Weber 45DCOE 15 carburetor. There was a ten-quart oil tank and it held twenty gallons of fuel. The transmission was a standard

Austin Healey

four-speed unit with close-ratio gears. The car came with four-wheel disc brakes, an underbelly pan, and special Healey magnesium wheels. It was light and fast. The rear disc brakes were a hand-fabricated floating caliper unit that was very troublesome. We changed it to drum brakes from a Nash Metropolitan. They were larger than the original Sprite units and worked very well. Art purchased several sets of Minilite wheels for the car, two sets of slicks and a set of rains, all mounted. The original Healey wheels wound up on my Bugeye racecar. We had the car wired with redundant circuits and circuit breakers so if anything went out there would be a backup. Call it a case of Lucas-a-phobia.

At this point, we needed a crew and another driver. I called upon Ralph Kemmerer, a friend with whom I had successfully teamed up for the Marlboro six-hour race the previous year. He brought two friends, Ron McCauley as crew chief and a person we referred to as "NASCAR Don" as a crewmember. The rest of the crew consisted of my fraternity brothers Al Balnicki and Doug Fox, my roommate Ron Casterline, along with long-time friends and fellow racers Dominic Gentilcore and Bob Phillips. We pressed our girlfriends, Lynn Papp and Barbara Lis; and wives Cathy



Teammate car number 71, driven by Clive Baker and Jim Baker.

Phillips and Sandy Tuckerman, into service for timing and recording lap times, preparing meals, taking photographs and providing moral support.

The crew practiced fueling, and tire-, brake- and driver-changes in mock pit stops at our shop. We rented Bridgehampton Racetrack for testing and sorting out problems. We listed Bob Phillips as a third



Teammate car number 72, driven by Janet Guthrie, Donna May Mimms, and Liane Engemann.

Sprite prototypes to become part of the Ring-Free Oil Racing Team. This would qualify us for the Falstaff Trophy, which would be given to the three-car team covering the greatest distance in the 12-hour race.

Practice went well until the night before the race. Our fresh race engine and new transmission were installed. We were going to do a few laps just to check things out, but the transmission locked up in pit lane. The crew, bless them, worked all night replacing it and checking everything out prior to the race. During the night, the car slipped off one of the quick jacks and the jack went through the windshield. The other Ring-Free Sprite prototype team members looked on in horror saying, "What are you going to do?" Art Tuckerman calmly walked over to the trailer's side compartment and retrieved a new prototype

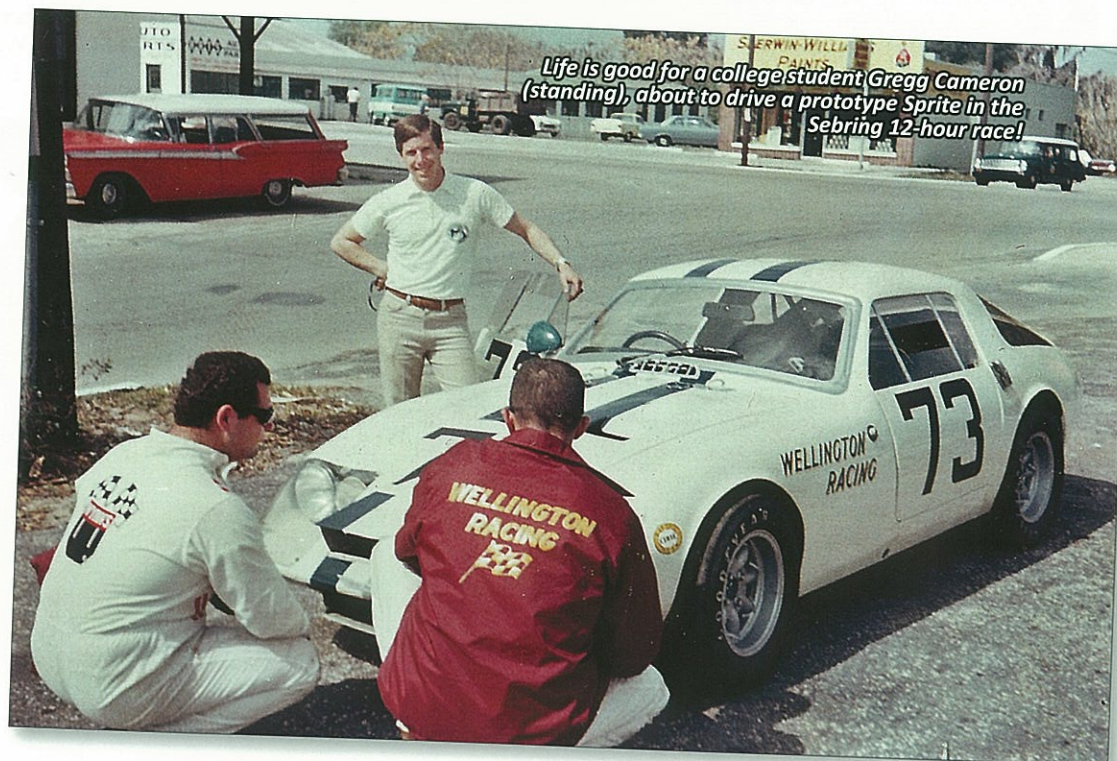
windshield. It was perhaps his finest moment. The crew replaced it and the car was on the grid the next day for the start of the race.

driver, but he wasn't meant to drive unless there was an emergency.

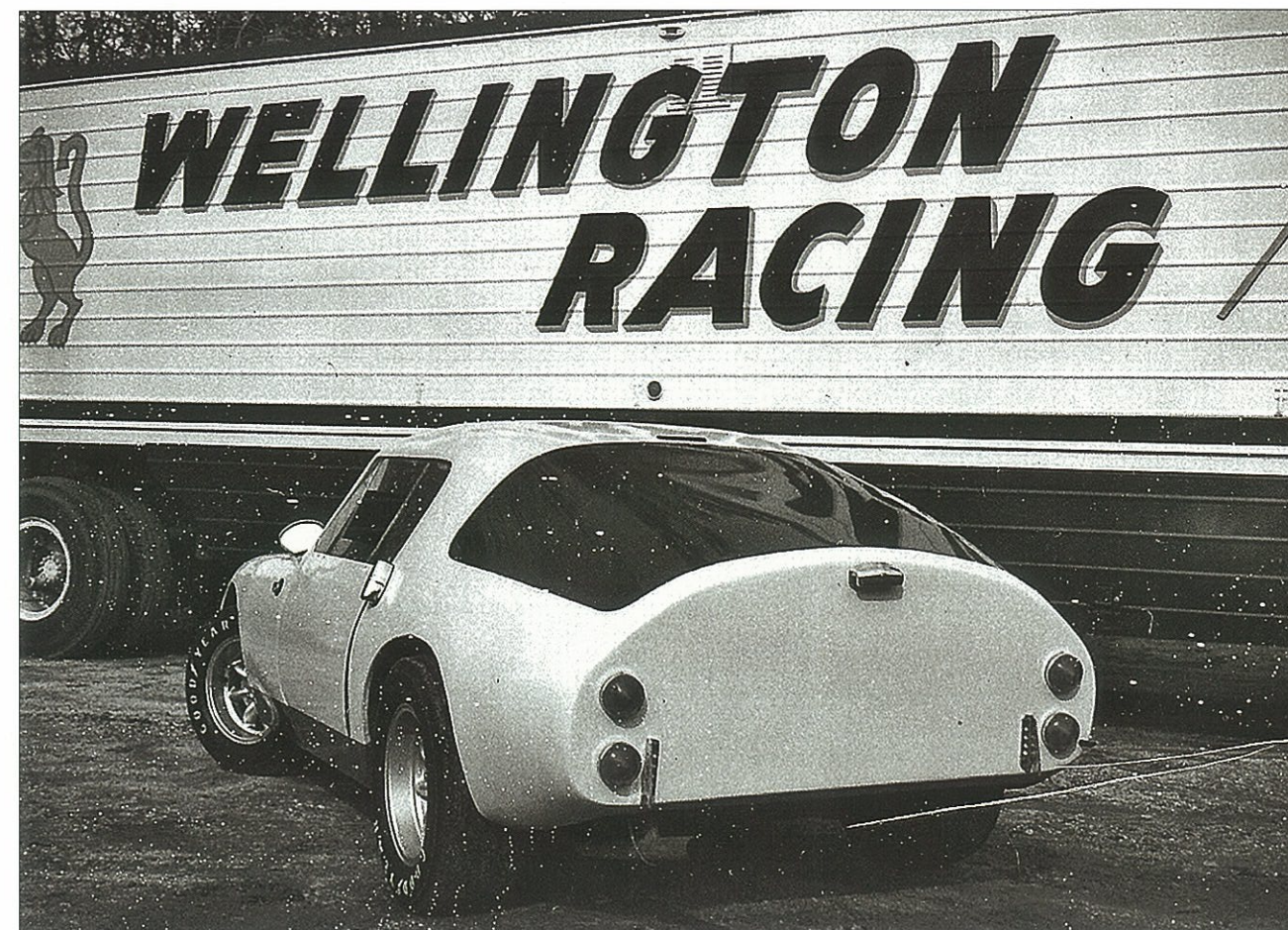
When the time came we all headed south to Sebring. The prototype rode in the tractor-trailer driven by a hired professional driver named Lonnie. The 40-foot trailer carried a spare for every part on the car, including the very special prototype windshield. Inside the trailer was a complete shop including a lathe, drill press, arbor press, cutting torch, and arc welder along with all the normal small tools and equipment required to field a racecar. Art and I, along with some of the crew, drove down in a new Chrysler station wagon towing a camper, which we would use at the track. The rest of the crew followed in Ralph's van. The girls flew down a few days later.

We were the first team to register for the race and were pictured in the Tampa Tribune, March 18, 1969, issue along with Chief Registrar Sunny Young as we all signed in.

The day before the race we teamed up with the other two



For safety reasons, the 1969 Sebring race was to be the last race with a Le Mans start. Ralph was to start the race because Art felt I would try to go off too quickly,



and not buckle my belts until I was on the long back straight. He was probably right, as I would have wanted to be the first car away. We qualified Sprite number 73 with a time of 3:48.21, ahead of the Sprite number 72 of Janet Guthrie, Donna May Mimms, and Liane Engemann who turned in a 3:49.80. Clive Baker and Jim Baker turned in a 3:30.28. It should be mentioned that both the other Sprites, car numbers 71 and 72, were faster cars with fuel injection and special five-speed transmissions.

We were about 30 minutes into the race when Ralph was suddenly a no show. Minutes passed; they seemed like hours. Ralph finally walked back to the pits saying the car was overheating and had no brakes. What a start. We gave him some water to carry back to the car and finally, the Sprite came limping back to the pits. Track debris had punctured the radiator and the wrong brake pads had been installed. The crew fixed both problems, but we lost about sixteen laps.

I was the next driver and would drive for over three hours to get us back on schedule. During my stint I passed "The Girls" in car 72 several times and I remember Clive Baker in number 71 passing me once. Back then, we had no "cool suits" and Sebring, Florida, is a hot place in late March. Over three hours of driving a racecar, wearing a helmet, Nomex suit and long Nomex underwear in a coupe with not enough ventilation, is very difficult. After I came in, I went directly to the trailer and fell asleep. It seemed like I was only there a few minutes when they were waking me to drive again. We were back on the two hour shifts and the car was running like a Swiss watch. As scheduled, I would drive the last two hours and finish the race should all go well.

I remember the last lap. Jackie Ickx in the John Wyer Ford GT 40 passed me just after I came onto the main straight under the bridge. He was the lead car and the entire world lit up with flash bulbs. We finished, and the Ring-Free Oil Racing Team's three Sprite prototypes had beat out Ford, Porsche and Ferrari, winning the Falstaff team prize. We covered 536 laps and a total distance of 2,787.2 miles in twelve hours. The big boys all lost a car and did not even come close.

Later that year we entered the Sprite prototype in the Watkins Glenn six-hour race in July 1969, but due to a safety rule change at Watkins Glen, requiring all cars to be within a small percentage of the pole sitter's time, the Sprites were not able to qualify.

That is the Sebring story of the third prototype Sprite, Serial number XSP 24262. It was heady stuff for a couple of college students back in 1969. Art Tuckerman eventually sold the prototype to someone who raced it in SCCA in C Sports Racing under the CAE Racing banner for several years. I believe that Gary Kohls of Royal Oaks, Michigan, now owns it.

I went on to race for another 24 years with many podium finishes including winning the North Atlantic Road Racing Championship (NARRC) twice and the Area Two Championship once in a Bugeye Sprite as well as the NARRC Championship in an XKE Jaguar in GT-1. I also drove in the Trans AM series in a 427 Corvette. At the end of my career in the early 90's I was a guest driver in several vintage races at Road Atlanta.

Sadly, both Art Tuckerman and Dominic Gentilcore have recently passed away. **HM**