They Said It Couldn’t Be Done

Ocee Ritch writes a “Dear John” letter.

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Dear John:

When we shook hands and parted at Aven 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 ones on Tony Birt of Humbro 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 uncrum your fingers.

The readers of S.C.I to whom you brought the stirring tale of Sebring and your unoconsequential part in it will never know the backstage (or behind-the-plate) drama that was played around the MGA and Sprite teams at Sebring. Nor will they ever be aware of 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 motives, such as writing a story about the race (1,000 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 Googhe Industries (BMC distributor in L.A.) 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 Googhe 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 old hulks 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 castle flight we took by mistake and during the dismal practice sessions under a Confederate blanket-colored sky the ambition 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 cagely scrutinizing 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 paraded along. #30 MGA eliminated itself from my book when it took a rock through the sum but the others and the miniature Healeys looked so smug 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?”

“Oh no!” 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 long, long way off, isn’t it?”

“Three thousand miles,” I stated. “Hum, here, try a bit of my Latakia, I don’t see how you Americans can smoke your flabby 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, Ohio, 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, over and around the cars with notebook and pencil and, returning to a nearby barstool, for privacy we correlated driver impressions, points earned by various mechanics for neatness and devotion to duty, practical tips, race performance, laps covered, average speeds and causes for pit stops, and made a final decision on exactly which of the Holden’s we would select.

As we were gathering our materials to depart, one of the BMC officials came up with Jack Flatley 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 #59 MGAC Twin Cam Coupe. The Sprite had a weak fuel pump and a broken exhaust manifold with a pipe plus a pusified throttle bracket. The A was immaculate.

Back to Sebring, after replacing the fuel pump, we were to our lodgings in the Goodspeed Inn, where we made use of the tools and welding kit of Bill Love (whose AC Bristol had stayed at Alternate list to render the Sprite whole. On Monday, we shook the mud of Sebring from our boots and stored off the 5.000 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 trucks with this type of steering arrangement. At first you do 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.

The experience of driving a sports car in a race is such as the 12 hour grind is not to be compared with putting the same mileage on a cross country jaunt. There are always new situations on the highway and many opportunities to apply 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 is cleverly camouflaged by a sadistic Highway Department, there are undula-

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 relished the race, discussed the technical points of the cars and heard about the local hoosiers. At one Louisiana filling station the crew was able to ask more or less interview questions. In this particular section the trend was to the less informed to whom we kindly asked, “By gosh, how’s it goin’ pretty good, boy?” Charlie replied, “Yes, in class one, 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, but with the bigger ones.”

“Oui,” nodded the native pointing to the Sprite, “you run them in class 4 GT or under appendix C”.

The lack of a fan on the Sprite was no handicap on the roads where the car remained at a constant 180 miles an hour and weathered the wind. We were chilly happy the low carbon dioxide traffic congestion caused us to run a reduced speed geared to fuel consumption. Reviving up the engines in these conditions was inclined to create excessive noise and draw the attention of passing police, so we pushed through a dozen towns and villages.

Gentlemen were drawn to our diminutive car anyway because of the big gabling numbers still on the hood, sides and back, plus the British plates. In one city a city patrolman drew up alongside and engaged in a 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.

without incident we were a couple of times once more, Charlie was absolutely Savilizing about the Sprite when we would stop for coffee, 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 (from an onboard driver, you know) and the little engine’s fantastic surge of power above 4500 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 3000 (about 65 with these gears) seeming unlimited top-end and generous driving comfort. The new (to me, of course) Dunlop K5 tires seemed to be a great improvement over the R5 tires which were the Twin Cam #1 driver on the Coast and corrected the one fault I had noticed in racing at Pomona—tendency to spin the rear wheels when you stand on it coming out of a corner. The R5’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 work 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 particular, Charlie set the alarm for 3 AM and we settled into the stillness. Whatever happened to the farmers that used to get up so early? John! We didn’t see another living vehicle for nearly three hours. By 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 — more or less steeply through timbered country and
have not as yet been marketed on Hifi drives.

Despite various unfavorable road conditions we made 885 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 hagged on to Los Angeles. The aircoop on the hood of the Twin Cam that admits brezes 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.

The A's quick steering and the rear end's absolute refusal to come loose made it like driving the slick 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 RS'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 bantam 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 gauge 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 60 mph. At no time did I see the Twin Cam over 5,000... at least when the tach was working.

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).