

## **Sweat, Grit, Determination, Resolve, Tenacity ... Sort Of**

*Sebring Celebrates The MGA & American LeMans*

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It turned hot, then cold, then hot, like our practically dripping shower water. The nightly log-sawing and random world-champion belching of four (five counting me) really mature (say old) guys were distracting, while the scarcely moving atmosphere reeked of high octane gasoline and burned engine oil. Carnivorous bugs flew unmolested, and the pillow sucked (if you got one). Empty stale Black & Tan bottles were stacked here and there, among the piles of sweaty, greasy shirts and soiled sneakers.

“Someone turn off that damn high-beam spotlight aimed at our RV window, and turn that loud-ass music down. Seven ‘*Born To Be Wilds*’ in a row gets really old after midnight, especially when you have a 7am racing grid.”

Did I mention we loved every minute of it?

So went the IMSA (International Motor Sports Association) and SVRA (Sports Vintage Racing Association) managed annual Twelve Hours Of Sebring endurance race, held March 2007 ([www.sebringraceway.com](http://www.sebringraceway.com)). It was a celebration of 55 years of high-speed racing on a 17-turn, 3.7 mile abandoned WWII airfield, and the venerable and always attractive MGA, which made its debut 50 years ago.

I was invited to participate as crew chief (I had made more mistakes than the other blokes over the years, hence I was the most experienced) for MGA number 222, owned and supported financially and spiritually by Mr. Dick (*Don't even go there*) Powers of Rochester, NY. My long-time Binghamton NY racing and imbibing buddies Gerry (*I've only had nine*) Foster, Dano (*Wow, what size are those*) Faddon, and Gordie (*It's just great to be breathing*) Ruston all joined me, Ed (*That's all there is*) Kovalchick, in the unique entertainment of keeping a 46-year-old sports car functioning on a major race track. And what unique enjoyment it turned out to be.

### **Day One:**

After a quick trip from Cleveland and a stop in Birmingham to re-repack, I landed in Orlando at 2pm thinking I had plenty of time to motor to Sebring and pick up my crew credentials by five, primarily so that I wouldn't have to snooze at the gates in my rental all night. Southwest Airlines did its usual great job of getting us to the other airport on time, amidst wailing Disney-bound babies, snotty children, and even crankier mothers; however, from the landing moment forward my original plan began changing.

Thrifty Rental and staff, well-known for their lower prices and even lower grade point averages, screwed up my paperwork, which took some tedious twenty minutes to construct in the first place. So, after I retrieved and cleaned my vehicle (nothing makes itself more known than left over Burger King in a hot car), I navigated the ridiculous parking lot obstacle course, waited in another line of frustrated Thrifty patrons, and then at the gate I was abruptly advised to go back and do it all again by Fidel Castro's twin, Castoff Castro. I remembered why I preferred Hertz and a poke in the eye.

## **A Time To Kill**

After killing another 20 minutes, I entered the daunting Florida highways, known in the circles of those who actually can drive as "Driver's Hell." I was now a little behind schedule and determined to make haste to my destination. Not so Joe. I have now speculated that it is an obscure Florida law that a blue hair manipulating an over-sized, white, door-dinged, low-tired-pressured Buick has to drive 40 mph in the passing lane, as an arbitrary plan to slow four-lane traffic to a snail's pace, and secondarily to piss everyone else off so that won't come back and create so much traffic in the first place. There, I said it.

Almost two hours and 80 not so delightful miles later, I finally arrived at the track entrance, so jacked up on adrenalin and dreadful coffee, I nearly ran over the ancient gatekeeper. It was four minutes to five and I still hadn't made it to my pickup spot. I decided to "create" a parking spot right up front and jogged gingerly to the credential's window, where two of my faction were stationed, hoping to sustain enough conversation with the credentials girl so that she wouldn't notice the clock. I was the last paddock entry of the day. Too close for comfort.

At the hauler, my frustrated crew related not-so-good news. Our little red modified MGA sat dejectedly, suffering with a case of engine diarrhea. Our grim driver was dreaming of how else he could have wasted the "grand" it took to get his baby towed here from snow country. My current, reasonably competent, and still sober crew members had tried all the normal field checks the day before I arrived, but nothing had turned up. After a quick review of what they had tested, adjusted, replaced, and otherwise beat with a handy wooden mallet, I took a SWAG generated from a similar past experience and put in a new distributor condenser. Walla, the little 1622 blood-red engine started running-choking-spitting-puking immediately, but not so well that it was ready to get near the racetrack.

## **SU Must Stand For Suck Up**

Tell-tale as in large amounts of black smoke poured out the exhaust pipe, so checking the carburetors was next up. I removed the jugs and discovered SU (Skinner's Union) pistons with racing needles jammed up in their container hole where the "sun don't shine", since some specialist had calculated a way to plant these delicate brass beauties in with a ten-pound sledge.

After I finally got them loosened and out, the clock hit O'beer Hundred, and it was getting quite dark so I quit.

Later our group, and MGA racers we didn't know but became immediately intimate with, discovered we could squeeze, squash, and otherwise jam eight racing aficionados in a new Chrysler 300, as long as two got volunteered to utilize the trunk. The Italian guys said no freakin' way. (This vehicle is truly a great Mafia car.) Fortunately the evening festivities were less than ten miles away, but the trip was filled with encouraging these trunk monkeys to quite squawking by reciting to them the infamous parental chant "no we aren't there yet."

We mingled several hours with the locals at a town-sponsored driver/pit crew/ local dignitaries/groupie look-at-me party. Free food and booze is a magnet for racing bums like us, and we were joined by a few hundred similars. After partaking of the local fare and sights for an hour or so, we sauntered back to the track before anyone got pretty.

### **Day Two – Race Day:**

The next morning, I jumped back on the gasoline conductors, adjusting every internal and external spec back to normal settings for start, and thankfully the little G loved it. We were finally in business. A former national champion MGA racer and engine builder, Kent Prather ([www.pratherracing.com](http://www.pratherracing.com)), lent me some sage advice, so I adjusted the jets to 80 thousands depth (basically the thickness of the President's ear lobe) to better accommodate the slim racing needles over 5000 rpm. Things were really looking up and the car was finally performing closer to racing form.

### **Poured Out Of A Boot**

As the world and Florida weather turns, our late day one-hour marathon race co-mingled with what I am told Sebring is most famous for: Pouring rain like a cow doing you know what on a flat rock. Note: sweaty wet Nomex is akin to the aforementioned Burger King we later learned.

Our emperor/benefactor/driver, Dick, did get a few meaningful and fun laps in before a dripping black flag fell, and he said the warmed up engine had performed nicely up to 6500 rpm's; even though we were concerned that the exhaust temps weren't reaching our desired 1250 degree target (the manifolds would sizzle the skin though) .... We blamed the very rich toothpick needles for want of a better idea at the time.

It was a long commute and lot of struggling for a lousy three-lap race, but when six inches of water puddled on the pit straightaway within minutes, everyone needed racing oars, not racing slicks. For safety's sake the race was quickly stopped, which created a sad bunch of forsaken wheel-men, indeed.

Evening festivities included multiple adult beverages, table racing, and a large dose of national politics. Fortunately there were no guns present so everyone survived. Actually, we from the South were armed appropriately, but the highly educated Northern folk knew this and reacted accordingly.

### **Day Three:**

It was show time at 7am; time for parading (hold back then punch it hard) all the race vehicles around the track a couple laps, then dash cautiously (yea, sure) to the historic downtown Sebring circle around 11, while the cops are at the doughnut shop. Most participated, and the thunderous burbling sounds of souped up cast iron fours, whining/screaming aluminum sixes, and nasty/grouchy V-8s echoed off the fully-laden Orange trees lining the way. I swear I witnessed ripe fruit jumping from tree limbs because of the massive roadside vibration.

### **When Men Where Men ... For Awhile**

We had a wonderful SRVA luncheon featuring two very successful and most interesting Sebring MG drivers from the 1950's. Mr Gus Ehrman, who also set records at Bonneville in an Austin Healy, made my favorite comment for the day. "They call me experienced. I say the great thing about being experienced is that you can recognize your mistakes almost immediately." He brought the house down with that comment regarding mistakes made on the track, where any mistake is too late.

Gus and I were discussing BMC and he noted to me that MG wholesale buyers (dealers) paid many different prices for MGs in the 50's. "It depended how long they were on the transport ship. BMC paid daily rent for shipping time and it was added to the cost. Might be one or three weeks or more."

Mr Jack Van Driel, our first orator, began driving at Sebring in 1950, and he raced many types of MGs including an Offy-powered "G" at Bridgehampton. His vast racing repertoire includes winning a 1951 New York to Indianapolis rally in an MG TC, well known for its stage-coach ride, flapping front fenders, penchant for quitting, and furnace-like cockpit.

### **The End Is Near**

Saturday featured 12 hours of an endless drone of massive engines, screaming their 10,000+ rpm songs. Clean up, wipe up, and drink up was in order and all SVRA transporters were loaded for vacating. After the 10:30pm fireworks celebrating another Audi (who knew?) victory we settled down just before midnight to sleep a little before our 4:30am wakeup plan ..... and it was relatively quiet except for the drunks and punks in the spectator areas, screaming/weeping? yet again over another set of flabby .. well you know.

A couple minutes before the strike of midnight, the assigned track-announcer-meister proclaimed loudly that the paddock gates would be closing momentarily and not reopen until sometime in the morning. Yikes, we have early flights two hour drives away. There's trouble in River City (our new track name).

So, we unbuttoned all-of-the-just-performed button up RV preparation. I threw on some clothes (not sure whose?) jumped in the now vacant (Gees, I forgot to check the trunk) 300 and skedaddled toward the gate. The same clock was ticking again, as when I had arrived.

In any event the nice gatekeeper, for a monetary gesture, and me parked in the way, waited until our lumbering RV came forth over the track bridge. We found a convenient field nearby which appeared to be redneckless as well as snakeless, so we crashed without even one brandy shot.

It was about 1am but we were still smiling and we didn't know why.

### **About The Main Event**

The feature 12-hour race is among the group of vehicles which participate in the grueling 24 hours of Lemans in France each summer. Christened LMP1 and LMP2

cars, these are fundamentally high-tech race-purpose prototypes, capable of speeds in excess of 200 mph. These ground-rockets participate in a 12-race series held throughout the U.S. beginning with Sebring and ending at Laguna Seca in October.

We did note that these machines were faster than our quickest MGA, but we weren't surprised because their drivers weighed so much less.

Will we do it again? See ya at Seibkens Bar in July at Road America. I'll be the one with the spanner in my breast pocket, right over the MG logo.

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