

Racing MGAs at the 12 Hours of Sebring

By Jim Plowden

The 12 Hours of Sebring race, in central Florida, is America's oldest and most prestigious endurance race. Sebring is known as preparation for the 24 Hours of Le Mans. The track's extremely rough surface, combined with south-central Florida's hot weather, is a test of a car's reliability and endurance.

In its early years, MG primarily built and sold cars to private customers for racing but did not directly sponsor racing cars until the establishment of the Competitions Department in 1955. The factory's entry of three MGA prototypes at the 1955 Le Mans was among the first of the true factory racing efforts in the modern era. Unfortunately, after the tragedy of Le Mans 1955, which killed 89 people and injured 120 others, a factory ban on racing was subsequently enacted and the Competitions Department turned its focus to the major European rally circuit events. However, where there is a will, there is a way, and the factory continued its back door support for privateer racers like Dick Jacobs and the famed Octagon Stables from 1955 - 1958. Additionally, keen to support the MGA in the U.S. market, the factory provided covert support for the dealerships that entered the first MGA teams at Sebring in 1956 and 1957.

With the ban on racing lifted in 1958, the Competitions Department started preparing full factory race efforts for Sebring. For each year from 1959 to 1962, the Abingdon factory built and entered fully supported works teams of MGAs specifically for the 12 Hours of Sebring. A total of eleven cars were entered over that period of time, three each year except 1961 when only two cars were entered. Only one of the eleven cars failed to finish the 12-hour race, a testament to the careful preparation done at Abingdon.

Car #51 is one of the three Works sponsored MGAs built in 1962 for the expressed purpose of competing in the 12 Hour endurance race in Sebring, Florida. For 1962, the cars were numbered #51, #52, and #53 and they were officially entered by "Ecurie Safety Fast, England." Car #51 was driven by the team of Jim Parkinson (USA) and Jack Flaherty (USA). Jim Parkinson and Jack Flaherty were Sebring veterans, having previously driven for the factory in the 1959 Twin Cam #30, the 1960 Twin Cam #40, and the 1961 Deluxe #44.

For the final appearance of the MGA at Sebring, the MG Works went all out. The 1962 cars were built on the Mark II Deluxe chassis and featured a highly tuned "XSP" prefix engine. These were 1622cc blocks that were

bored to 1588cc to stay within the 1600 class designation. Other modifications included a special close ratio transmission, limited slip rear end, four wheel disc brakes, lightened body, enlarged gas tank, twin fuel pumps, dual coils, special air ducts, Plexiglas windows, fiberglass fenders, and a stripped interior with Microcell racing seats. They were the most highly modified and lightened of the MGA Works efforts to date.

By 1962, Sebring was in its heyday and attracted the top international talent. Drivers such as Stirling Moss, Phil Hill, Briggs Cunningham, Graham Hill, Roger Penske, Bruce McLaren, Dan Gurney, and even Steve McQueen were just a few of the drivers entered in the 1962 12 Hours of Sebring.

In 1962, all three of the team MGAs completed the race. MG was the only team to finish intact. While just finishing the 12 hour endurance race was an accomplishment in itself; of 72 cars starting the race #52 finished fourth in class and 16th overall, #51 finished fifth in class and 17th over all, and #53 finished sixth in class and twentieth overall.

Life After the 12 Hours of Sebring

Following the 12 Hours of Sebring, the three cars were sold to private individuals. Car #51 competed for another 25 years in many SCCA races at Daytona Speedway, Palm Beach International (Moroso), Tamami, Sebring, and Road Atlanta until it was retired in 1986 with a blown engine. My first encounter with #51 was in 1979 at a West Palm International SCCA event. It was love at first sight when I saw Lucille, as #51 was to become known. I was pitted next to John Kelly. Kelly had just purchased #51 from Emery Vass. Vass had raced it extensively in SCCA competition. It was my first time SCCA racing as well as Kelly's. I was driving a 1966 Shelby GT350H (which was also my daily driver).

In 1980, SCCA declared that our cars would have to be modified to meet the new SCCA rulings. In order to retain the originality of our cars, John and I, plus a number of vintage race car buffs, dropped SCCA racing and started racing SVRA.

John and I became good friends and teamed up to race at West Palm, Sebring, and Road Atlanta. John and I had many fun times vintage racing and our biggest victories were just to be out on the track and finish a race. During our race at Sebring in March 1980, we dubbed John "Parnelli Kelly;"

For years, I searched for one of the sister Sebring cars to buy, but to no avail. #52 and #53 had disappeared. I made John promise me that if he ever decided to sell #51, I would have first crack at buying her.

In 1985, having reached my mid-life-crisis milestone, I quit my job with Crane Cams where I had been the Assistant Treasurer and Data Processing Manager for twelve years, sold my 1966 Shelby to my "crew chief" and best friend, Joe Costantino, and moved to California where I am now retired from IBM and volunteer as a docent with the Petersen Auto Museum and the Auto Driving Museum.

Kelly continued to race #51 for a number of years until the engine broke a piston ring in a race at Tamami in 1986. The car stayed stored in his garage for the next twenty eight years.

In March 2012, the #52 and #53 cars showed up for their 50th anniversary at the 12 Hours of Sebring. Unfortunately due to the blown engine, and John's health, #51 was unable to make the reunion. (Articles on #52 and #53 were published in issues May/June 2002, March/April 2003 and March/April 2005 of *MGA!* magazine).

On the Road to Sebring Again

For 33 plus years, I have stayed in touch with John Kelly, never failing to ask if he was ready to part with Lucille. Finally, just prior to Christmas 2012, John agreed to part with her. I spent the next nine months trying to decide what to do with the car now that I was able to buy it. November 2013, I flew to Florida and drove with my daughter and grandson to Lake Worth to pick up the car. My longtime friend Joe (who still owns my Shelby) and his son-in-law met us at John's house to pick up the car. We rented a trailer and towed the car, along with a truckload of spare parts, to Panama City Beach, Florida.

I was pleased to find the body of the car in excellent shape having been garaged its entire life. With the exception of the engine and seats, most of the original car and factory modifications are intact.

My current plans are to rebuild the engine install the original transmission and get it into safe, reliable driving condition. The body is in very good condition and it has much of the original equipment, therefore, I am inclined to preserve it in its current state, which is as I remember it from 34 years ago. I hope to have it in shape to take to Sebring in March 2014.

Recently, I contacted Jim Parkinson, one of the original 1962 Sebring factory team drivers of #51. He currently lives about an hours drive from me here in Los Angeles.

We are planning to meet for lunch one day. Unfortunately, Jack Flaherty, the other driver of #51, has passed away. I am grateful to John Kelly and the current owners of #52, Hugh Burruss, #53 John Wright, and other MG owners who are helping on my journey to getting #51 back to Sebring again. I would appreciate any assistance from NAMGAR members in locating engine number XSP - ???, some 1961-1962 era Microcell racing seats, information on any previous owners, original photographs, and any other information on the 1962 Sebring cars.

Recent update:

We were unable to make Sebring 2014, but the car will be at the 12 Hours for 2015 along with one of the sister cars #52. At the Sebring track, the car will be displayed in the Hall of Legions and is registered to enter the vintage sprint race on Thursday and will possible enter the enduro on Friday. At this time, we do not plan to race #52.

We originally thought the engine had a broken ring, but later found a broken crank shaft. We rebuilt and balanced the engine to replicate the original XSP engine which was lost back in the 70s. The remainder of the drive chain, chassis, body, electrical, fuel system, etc. are original components. The car was repainted in 1976 the seats replaced and recently new tires. All cylinders, fuel system, brakes, transmission, front end, cooling system have been rebuilt. No body work has been done.