

CLASSIC DRIVER

Interview: Roy Salvadori, works Aston Martin racing driver



Roy Salvadori's flamboyant driving style, his versatility and his sheer 'press-on' bravado made him a familiar figure at racing circuits in the 1950s and '60s. Now, at the age of 80, he looks back on the drama and exhilaration of motor racing in the years when racing cars were truly cars and the men who drove them were the popular heroes of the public's imagination.

Charles Harbord's monthly publication [Cars for the Connoisseur](#) has been featuring interviews with the legendary driver, and the following excerpts are reproduced with Charles' kind permission from the March 2003 Issue.

Charles is asking Roy to describe some of the more unusual events in his years at the top of World Championship racing.

There were great opportunities to see the world. No sooner had we returned from Casablanca than we were preparing to travel to Argentina. I remember the Argentinas Aerolineas flight to Buenos Aires being unexpectedly routed via Lisbon where we spent the night while they found a radio operator! This and a series of stops on the South American mainland did not as you can imagine amuse John Wyer [*the famous Aston Martin Team Manager renowned for his 'death ray' look - Ed*]. The whole trip took about three days, by which time we ran out of booze - Ecurie Ecosse were also on the flight. To while away the time we were invited onto the flight deck where the crew made us most welcome. I think it was Ninian Sanderson, the captain and I sitting on the floor playing gin rummy, with the 'plane on autopilot, when I walked John Wyer! That certainly put a dampener on the proceedings, particularly as John had already fallen out with the skipper. I could write a book about that trip.

It was on this flight that I palled up with a scruffy individual whom I took to be an Italian mechanic who surprisingly spoke several languages. It turned out to be the international horseman and playboy - the Marquis de Portago. He was there to drive a private Ferrari with Harry Schell.

What did you think of Sebring?

We had a run in with the sheriff there. Carroll Shelby and I had parked our car - loaned to us by Briggs Cunningham - where there was a No Parking sign. We were only there for half-an-hour, but on our return - no car ! We were told to go to the sheriff's office where he gave us a rollicking, no fine, but he wouldn't release the car unless a representative of the Aston Martin Team made an apology. So, off we went to see John Wyer, explained the situation, and brought him back to see the sheriff, whereupon an almighty row broke out with John calling him a 'hick sheriff'. It was finally left to Carroll to smooth things over and eventually the car was released with a frosty reception awaiting us from John back at the hotel.

It was in New York on the way back that I got to know the lighter side of Rob Walker, having previously regarded him as rather reserved - the perfect English gentleman. It all started in the Gay Nineties Club, as guests of Esso, when I noticed Rob getting increasingly lively. Having grabbed a policeman's helmet on leaving, he escaped in a trash can which we rolled down the street, engaged in a wrestling match with Reg back at the hotel, tore up a series of telephone directories and finished up at three in the morning with a glass of Gin and Eno's - apparently his favourite tonic for that time of day !

On a more serious note I was of course a member of the Aston team at Le Mans in 1955 co-driving 63 EMU

with Peter Walker. At the start I led Peter Collins and according to team orders race positions should remain with us in eleventh and twelfth place - we were no match that year against the new Mercedes, 'long nose' D-types and the new 4.4 litre Ferraris. I knew there had been a bad accident after about two-and-a-half hours but had no idea how bad, and as far as I could tell no spectators were involved, for the accident seemed to have happened in the pits area.

Every time Peter and I came past the pits we were slowed down by the marshalls to around 50 mph, but round the back of the circuit we were having the most tremendous dice, constantly swapping positions and then sorting ourselves out so that we reappeared at the pits in the correct order. On one lap I spun at Arnage - and Peter waited while I restarted and caught up with him. He laughed and waved me by so that we could keep the order right as we passed the pits. Typical Peter - he really was as nice as they come.

Of course as soon as I came in to hand over to Peter Walker I was made aware of the magnitude of the accident and we all know the rest. On a personal note we were staying as usual at La Chartre where we were well known to the villagers who used to watch us playing gin rummy outside the hotel. They would come to the race and try to get a position in the stand opposite our pit; it was here that Levegh's Mercedes crashed taking some of the villagers with him.

Stirling Moss had joined the team in 1957, how did you rate him at that point?

The greatest British driver of the time and unquestionably the best in the world after Fangio had retired. When Stirling made up his mind to set a really fast lap in an Aston we knew that his lap time was the ultimate for the car on that circuit and the benchmark for which we should be aiming. His driving always stimulated me to greater effort. The only drawback as far as I was concerned was that I felt that the Aston design team had built the car with Stirling's measurements very much in mind. The cockpit of the DB3S was particularly uncomfortable for a tall driver such as myself, but fortunately, I was paired with Carroll Shelby for Sebring as he was about the same height as me, simplifying the pedal and seating arrangements.

That must have been your last season with the DB3S before you moved on to the new DBR1 - how did they compare?

The DBR1 with a 2.5 litre engine was a vast improvement in almost every respect. Initially, the engine remained the same capacity before being enlarged to 2.9 litres to take advantage of the 3 litre capacity limit in the Sports Car World Championship. It had neutral handling with a slight tendency to understeer that I liked, much more stable, particularly in the wet, with even better brakes. Its one weakness was the new David Brown five-speed 'crash' gearbox which had a heavy change and a tendency to stick and jam.

Our first outing with the car in 2.5 litre form was the British Empire Trophy at Oulton Park in April 1957 in which I led initially, before being slowed by gearbox trouble and letting Archie Scott - Brown with the new Lister-Jaguar through. In fact I could never have competed with the superior torque of the Lister - in fact Archie passed me on the opening lap.

It was on my way up to Chester on the eve of the race at the wheel of a hotted up Morris Minor that I caught up with Archie's distinctive Ford Zephyr painted green with a yellow stripe, just like the works' Listers. I chased him really hard and we had a hair-raising dice down the dark Cheshire roads, as I struggled to pass Archie and he fought off the unknown driver at the wheel of the Minor. Eventually, I managed to scrape by on the grass, almost losing it, and leaving Archie to sort himself out. When we stopped at some traffic lights in Chester, Archie got out of his car, came to the driver's window of the Minor and said 'You are an absolutely fantastic driver, you got out of line once, but recovered. You ought to try motor racing.' 'But Archie' I replied 'That's what we shall both be doing this weekend.' When he recognised me he was absolutely livid.

The early days of the DBR1 were plagued with gearbox problems. I see from your records that things didn't get much better in 1958 with just two second places at Aintree and Goodwood, but 1959 was a great improvement with your famous win at Le Mans.

Because of Aston's preoccupation with Formula One it was originally intended to compete with the DBR1s at Le Mans only. As things turned out I drove the cars in three races.

For Le Mans we fielded three cars driven by Moss/Fairman, Trintignant/Frere and myself/Shelby. Much development work had been carried out, and extensive testing had ensured that the gearboxes, if still not pleasant to use, would prove reliable. The Moss/Fairman car had a slightly more powerful engine. Carroll and I had the right mental approach for winning and decided to put all our effort into late braking and fast cornering in order to save the engine and gearbox as much as possible. For the same reason we kept practice to the minimum and after achieving a competitive time on the Wednesday we decided not to go out at all on the Thursday to save the car.

I started the race and deliberately kept out of the initial 'Grand Prix'. At the end of the first hour I was eighth, moving up to fifth at the end of the second hour. Meanwhile Stirling had been fighting it out with the Ferraris and was leading the race before retiring with engine failure. He had done a magnificent job as pacemaker for the team and had probably lured the Ferraris into over-stressing their cars. The leading 'Testa Rossa' of

Behra/Gurney had lost its oil pressure and was lapping slower and slower, making several pit stops, and after about six hours I moved up into the lead.

We held the lead for about four hours until I stopped at the pits with rear-end vibration. The mechanics could find nothing wrong and I was told to carry on for several more laps until the car became eligible for refuelling. By this time the vibration was so bad that I thought the rear end was about to fall off and I lapped at a crawl. When I finally came in the car was jacked up and Reg Parnell got underneath to find the offside rear tyre damaged with part of the tread missing. By the time Carroll took over we were down to second place, three laps behind the Gendebien/Hill Ferrari and two laps ahead of the other Aston driven by Trintignant/Frere.

How very disappointing.

Particularly as I was criticised for not diagnosing the vibration as tyres. We had never had trouble with the Avon tyres and it seemed to me to be more likely to be gearbox problems - as usual. There was a very tense atmosphere in the Aston pit as it seemed that we could never recover the lost time. However, John Wyer tried to calm us down saying that the Ferraris were dropping out like flies and there was no reason to suppose the leading Phil Hill/Gendebien car would be any different. The plan should be to keep maximum pressure on the Ferrari.

When I took over again I started to motor fast to make up lost ground, while trying hard to conserve the car, keeping the revs down, changing gear as smoothly as possible, and getting down to really late braking points. We did close up to within just over a lap when at 11a.m on the Sunday morning we had the luckiest possible break. The Ferrari came into the pits steaming, did another lap and was retired soon afterwards. I eased back and began to worry about all the moans and groans, imaginary or not, from the engine and transmission. Fortunately the car held and we scored what was probably Aston's greatest victory.

In fact you had done the majority of the driving?

Before the race Carroll had suffered from a stomach bug and had been very sick so we were always worried whether he would last the distance. In the end I drove for the maximum allowed under the regulations.

There must have been great celebrations.

Not for me! I had burnt my right foot very badly from the heat of the exhaust of the DBR1 which for this race had been re-routed under the car and overheated the footwell (I still have the scars) I was so tired that all I wanted to do was sleep and deliberately missed the presentation at the circuit. It was all rather an anti-climax.

(With their victory and 2nd place at Le Mans the Feltham Team decided to enter the British round of the World Sports Car Championship at Goodwood; the TT. Despite a fire in the pits - Roy's car unfortunately - Moss was able to win the race and clinch the 1959 Championship for Aston Martin.)

I believe the works then withdrew from sports car racing to concentrate on Formula 1?

Precisely. At long last the team had fulfilled David Brown's two great ambitions - to win Le Mans and the Championship. Although, as you say, the team withdrew from sports car racing it was not the end of my career with the DBR1, for the team cars were sold to private owners and I drove them again at Le Mans.

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