
Driving the 'World's Longest Motor Race'

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GRX 307D - the famous works MGB that won the 84-Hour Route Marathon de la Route in 1966

In the August issue of 'Cars for the Connoisseur' Andrew Hedges describes to the Editor, Charles Harbord, more of life as a racing driver during the 1960s. The following is an abbreviated extract from the third part of his story. A free sample of this issue being available to Classic Driver readers at the address below.

AH -“Moving forward to 1966 I took part in what was described as the 'World's Longest Motor Race' which was really a replacement for the old Spa-Sofia-Liege Marathon, last run in 1964. It ran for 84 hours over the full 17.5 mile Nurburgring, but starting and finishing in the city of Liege.

“Again I was in a works MGB paired with Julien Vernaeve, a Belgian BMC dealer who had made a name for himself racing and rallying Group 1 Minis. In the second car were Roger Enever, son of MG designer Syd, and Alec Poole *[with whom I once had a very one-sided motor race in the 1980s - we started next to each other, but at the start he disappeared into the distance! - SW]*, from the family BMC dealership in Ireland, who raced Midgets and later went on to capture the British Saloon Car Championship in a 1-litre Mini-Cooper. Every car was set a bogey lap time according to its group capacity. For the GT cars this was 16 minutes in the day (19 minutes at night) which represented 66mph during the day (56mph at night). This was quite a target for an MGB – particularly for over 5,000 miles! I should say that an extra five minutes was allowed for refuelling every ten laps and twenty minutes for running repairs and service every fifty laps.

“We got off to a bad start when on the opening lap Roger went off where road-menders had resurfaced one of the corners, leaving a treacherous coating of loose chippings on the circuit. He ended up in the ditch but was able to extricate himself and made it back to the pits – the MG having the honour of making the first pit stop. Believe it or not on my second lap I went off at the same spot,

but made a much better job of it – clearing the ditch, ploughing my way through a hedge, and ending up in a field. With smashed lights (we had started at midnight) I had trouble finding my way back on to the track. Eventually I found the hole in the hedge and took a running jump out of the field on to the circuit. I hobbled back to the pits, having lost 42 minutes. Apart from the lights (one headlight was completely missing), all the front jacking points were smashed, bodywork crumpled, and fuel pouring out of a ruptured tank. Amazingly, the gallant mechanics had me back in the race within a couple of minutes, but I was back again later in the night for more running repairs to the fuel tank, by which time we were lying 34th with ‘only’ three more days to go!

“By midday we had moved up to 19th place with the Enever/ Poole car in 8th. The leader was the Equipe National Belge Ferrari setting a pace which nobody could match. Our next problem was the wire wheels which had started to shed spokes. In fact Alec Poole had lost time out on the circuit changing a collapsed wheel. We had a reasonable stock of spares but an SOS was sent to Abingdon for fresh supplies, just in case. In the meantime we were instructed to slow down a little to save wheels and suspension. By now we were up to tenth with the other MG in fourth behind one of the works Porsche 911s, a remarkably fast Swedish-entered Volvo and the leading Ferrari. The second night brought dramas among the leaders with the yellow Ferrari 275GTB starting to look very battered, having been off the road twice and the Volvo dropping back with overheating and water pump trouble. We now moved up to sixth.



“By half time, the second place Porsche had been disqualified for reversing out on the circuit and the fifth placed Alfa Romeo had disappeared off the lap charts. Now we were third and fourth, having clocked up some 2,500 miles. There were muffled cheers in our pit when the second placed Volvo dropped right back and we moved up to second and third behind the Ferrari. However, just behind us danger lurked for the remaining Alan Mann Cortinas had been playing a waiting game with the strong entries of Ickx/Staepelaere and Elford/Neerpasch. During the early hours of the next morning the Elford/Neerpasch car passed us to take third place and Enever and Poole were let off the leash to see if they could bait the Cortinas into speeding up which had the desired effect when Vic Elford’s car started to overheat and finally blow up. The second Cortina gave up the chase and Jacky Ickx decided to drop back and play for a safe finish in the touring category. So with 24 hours to run, the status quo was resumed with the two MGs in second and third spots. Obviously, we had no chance of catching the Ferrari on the road but there was concern in their pit for their less experienced and now very tired second driver. Poor Lucien Bianchi, their number one, had been forced to do more than his fair share at the wheel, driving one spell of over 18 hours. Incidentally, we were changing drivers about every 7 1/2 hours, which gave us time for a proper meal and six hours sleep.

“Then came the big drama of the Marathon! In typical Nurburg style, the heavens opened and within seconds the track, which by now was thickly coated with rubber dust, was turned into a skating rink. The very first casualty was the poor number two Ferrari driver who put the GTB off the road in no uncertain manner. Now we were first and second overall – but not for long – as Roger Enever aquaplaned off the track by the pits landing in a ditch on its side, costing him 18 minutes and a drop to fourth place. At the same time I came in to change to wet tyres, which allowed the Ickx/Staepelaere Cortina to take the lead with Julien and I in second and the Volvo having recovered

to take third place. With 12 hours to run the battle with the Cortina was well and truly on, as Julien took over for the final early morning spell. He gradually whittled away the Cortina's advantage and put the MG back in front. Alec Poole also managed to bring the other car back into second place, so once again it was MG 1-2. But our luck did not hold. As the Enever/Poole car pulled away from the refuelling pits (situated in special bays just before the main pits) a half-shaft snapped and, as the car would have been disqualified if it were pushed to the pits or if a spare had been brought to the car, there was nothing to do but accept retirement. That left just one car running with me to drive the final stint against Jacky Ickx in the Cortina with the third-placed BMW 2 litre BMW seven laps down. Swerving to avoid a carefully aimed champagne cork I crossed the line to take the chequered flag three laps ahead of the Cortina. We had covered 5,620 miles in 84 hours, only 14 cars were still running at the end and the MG was the only survivor in the GT category --one of MG's only two post-war international outright victories. Back in England Stuart Turner, had expected us to win the class, but took some convincing that an MGB had actually won outright.

"The following year, 1967, Peter Browning took over from Stuart as Competitions Manager at the time of the British Leyland takeover and the MGC was announced in October at the London Motor Show. By this time Geoff Mabbs and I had tested the GTS, a lightweight special-bodied competition version, at Castle Combe. In March 1968 Paddy and I were entered for Sebring where the car ran faultlessly to finish tenth overall and third in the prototype class behind the winning Porsches."

Hedges (left) and Paddy Hopkirk take a well-deserved break at Sebring in 1969

Both clearly holding an early form of modern F1 drivers' energy drinks

CH - *During this time you managed to fit in some tobogganing, bobsleighbing and powerboat racing.*

AH - "When I first started racing in the A40 I was working in the family meat business but prior to that in 1954 my father had sent me to spend two years as work experience in Basel with Bell AG, at that time the largest meat firm in Switzerland. It was there that I met "Cha Cha" and Rene Theler, Hans and Robi Kuderli, Gunther Sachs and other lively lads who introduced me to the Cresta and the Bob in St Moritz.

"In fact I raced for the Basel Bobsleigh Club long before getting involved in the British Bobsleigh Association. Robi Kuderli shared the Sebring Sprite with me at the Nurburgring. When you and I first met at Suvretta House in St Moritz in 1959 Bill McCowen and I had just had a prang on the Bob Run and I remember you and your cousin Mike d'Abo took our place in the Swiss Boblet Championship the following weekend. The photograph with the British Bobsleigh Team was taken in 1964, the year of the Olympics at Igls (Innsbruck) when Tony Nash and Robin Dixon won the Gold Medal. You will see on the extreme left Robin Widdows, with whom I shared an MGB GT at Mugello in 1966 when we won our class and finished third overall behind two GTB Ferraris. This would have been 'Wids' first Works MG drive although he had started with a Midget - supplied by me at Jack Barclay and funded by the late Eddie (Viscount) Portman, a great motor enthusiast, to whom, incidentally, I introduced Penny, later to become his wife. 'Wids' went on to Formula 3, Formula 2 and a single Formula 1 drive at the British Grand Prix for Cooper before retiring from the sport. Standing fourth from the left in the photograph is Guy Renwick who also joined me powerboat racing.

"I took up riding the Cresta at the same time, becoming a Life Member of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club in 1966. I took the Cresta rather less seriously than the Bob but in those days one kept fit by riding the Cresta in the morning, having a good lunch in the Sunny Bar of the Hotel Kulm and strolling up the road to the Bob Run in the afternoon.

"My first power boat racing experience took place in the early sixties when I joined Keith

Schellenberg and Norman Barclay for the Cowes/Torquay on board 'Blue Moppy', a great Miami built boat. In those days we stayed the night at the Palace Hotel in Torquay for a night of frivolity and raced back to Cowes the following day. The first photograph shows 'Canadian Moppy', another Bertram from Miami owned by my old Canadian friend and later employer Chuck Rathgeb taken on the London/Monte Carlo. The rest of the crew, apart from Chuck and I, were Tim Powell and Guy Renwick who was navigating when we hit the Mixom Rock off Selsey Bill - putting us out of the race. The second picture is of 'Tramontana' owned by Tim Powell and Norman Barclay and fitted with four Jaguar 3.4 engines. We were practising for the Miami/Nassau and Bahamas 500 races before hitting a submerged wreck in the Solent. That put paid to that although I did the Miami/Nassau with 'Lucky' Lucan (*the missing peer - CH*) in 'Migrant' when we were the first single engined boat to finish."

Powerboating in the early '60s

The British Bobsleigh Team in 1964

Andrew is on the extreme right

Editor, Charles Harbord has generously offered subscribers of Classic Driver a FREE sample of the August Issue. Those interested should telephone his 24 hour hotline : +44(0)1747 830 755

Or e-mail him at: charles@carsfortheconnoisseur.com - mentioning classicdriver.com.

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