

MGAs at Sebring

by David Blumlein

As I write these words, the 2009 Sebring 12 Hour race is being run in Florida. Initially Sebring was a Six Hour handicap race in 1950, won by a little Crossley Hot Shot, owned by but not driven by Gus Ehrman, and an MG T.C. came fifth driven by John van Driel. I mention these two names because they came to play a very active part in M.G.'s racing activities as the decade unfurled. There was no race in 1951 but a Twelve Hour race, moved to March from the original December date (!), was held in 1952 and a year later the event achieved international status as Round One of the then newly-formed World Championship for Sports Cars.

Thence there was no turning back and, as America had hitherto not had any long distance sports car race of note, it quickly became the stage for manufacturers to showcase the reliability and performance of their cars. No more so than the British sports car makers who were doing everything they could to exploit that lucrative and hungry market for two-seaters. M.G. and Jaguar led the way and Austin-Healey and Triumph among others could not join them fast enough! I mentioned in the previous FSW how the Sunbeam Alpine, a comparative latecomer on the scene, saw the M.G. as its most obvious rival.

By the mid-fifties the traditional M.G. two-seater, as epitomised by the TD and TF, was becoming outpaced especially as the Austin-Healey 100 and Triumph TR2 were in the same price-bracket, and Abingdon became aware that something more up-to-date was needed. The first public showing of this project came at the 1955 Le Mans race when three EX182 prototypes ran in that tragic event, these cars being quite simply the forerunners of what became known as the MGA. Two of them finished competently while the third suffered a fiery crash at the White House bend when driver Dick Jacobs was distracted by the huge column of smoke ahead that told of the appalling disaster which had just occurred - Jacobs fortunately recovered from serious injuries. The

delay in launching the MGA was fortuitous in one respect - the new B-Series B.M.C. engine which had debuted in the Magnette saloon became a worthy successor to the famous XPAG motor which had no more to give.

Production got underway late in 1955 with what was to be 80% of total output going across to the U.S.A. to earn valuable currency. But the Le Mans disaster had very wide-reaching effects: B.M.C. decided to withdraw from any more racing and turn their attentions instead to rallying. Once again M.G. was not allowed to compete on the tracks, just as was the case twenty years earlier in 1935 but there were ways around even if "help" was not openly encouraged by the factory!

Such was the case when the MGA made its debut at Sebring in March 1956. Three almost standard cars were selected from American stock, each being given to a different dealer to prepare. Three cars were entered, finished in white with blue stripes to represent American racing colours, taking race numbers 49, 50, 51. The first of these was prepared by Inskip Motors of New York where regular M.G. exponent Dave Ash worked. He was invited by M.G. to share the wheel of the M.G. EX179 record car in August 1957 on the Bonneville salt flats when international records were broken and when a tuned 57 b.h.p. A-Series engine intended for the forthcoming Austin-Healey Sprite was given some running, achieving an average of 118 m.p.h. for twelve hours with a 49 m.p.g. fuel consumption - most impressive.

Ash shared with Gus Ehrman and their car no.49 was fitted with two extra lights, one either side of the grille and, unlike the other two, no bumpers. No.50, prepared by Manhattan Auto in Washington for Bill Kinchloe and Steve Spittler, carried one extra light on the left hand side of the grille. No.51 had lights both sides of the grille and the rear-view mirror was faired in; it was prepared in Warren, Pennsylvania for Fred Allen and John van Driel.

The cars did well in the race, 49



MGA Sebring 1956
4th in class - Kinchloe/Spittler
built from K&R kit KAR104

being a bit short on brakes by half-time, 50 needing the throttle-linkage fixed (don't forget that Sebring was a rough-surfaced car breaker!) and 51 spun into a sandbank but was extracted thirty-three minutes later. 50, 49 and 51 was their finishing order, representing 19th, 20th and 22nd positions with 4th, 5th and 6th in class behind Porsche Spyderys but M.G. proudly took the Team Prize!

A year later a similar team of three cars did even better although the pace of the out-and-out sports-racers relegated these genuine production cars to 23rd, 27th and 36th positions overall, but M.G. finished 1st, 2nd and 4th in class and won the Team Prize again, thanks to Alan Miller, Ed Leavens and Rowland Keith in no.49, Ash, Ehrman and van Driel in no.51 and Kinchloe and Spittler in no.50. These all-American drivers were chosen partly because they represented different dealers in different areas but they were all very active driving M.G.s in national events.

No M.G.s came to Sebring in 1958 because the new Twin-Cam car was not ready for public consumption, but Abingdon prepared three of these new models with hard-tops for the 1959 race. It turned very wet after a dry start that year and Ehrman and Ray Saidel scored a second in class behind a Porsche Carrera. Jim Parkinson and John Dalton managed a class third despite losing over an hour with starter-motor trouble. Less fortunate was the third car of Pickering, Flaherty and Sherman Decker which stopped with serious engine trouble and had to be pushed over the line in 45th position.

Abingdon set to work by providing three specially built Twin-Cams with alloy hard tops for 1960. They had no bumpers, extra twin driving lamps and wing vents to aid cooling. Alas the Ted Lund/Colin Escott car was out after only two laps with a broken valve spring, these drivers gaining the drive in recognition of their efforts in a private entry at Le Mans the previous year. Fred Hayes and Ed Leavens, representing Canada, took a third in class ahead of Californians Jim Parkinson and Pat Flaherty. These two cars needed attention to fractured brake pipes during their pit-stops - the rough Sebring track at work again!

1961 saw battle with the Sunbeam Alpines. M.G. resorted to push-rod 1600 c.c. engines to run in the GT category and their two entries were based on Twin-Cam chassis with four-wheel disc brakes. They had coupé bodies in 'British Racing Green' and Parkinson/Flaherty, no.44 with a white painted front, scooped the class ahead of Peter Riley and John Whitmore. Behind came the first Sunbeam with Harper and Proctor beaten this time.

Revenge for Rootes came in 1962, the last Sebring appearance for the MGA. Although two Porsche Carrera Abarths led the class, the Sunbeam led home Jack Sears and Andrew Hedges, Parkinson/Flaherty and Whitmore/Oltoff in similar push-rod 1600s.

Clearly after seven years the MGA was itself being outpaced and in 1962 it had to step down and leave the stage for the MGB, but what a splendid innings the MGA had!

REVIEWS



Tamiya - New 1:24th plastic kit

TAM24310 Sauber Mercedes C9 1988 AEG £29.40 £26.46

Etched parts ACU2481 & SKU8113

The basic kit parts here first saw the light of day in 1990 when Tamiya modelled the 1989 Le Mans winning C9 (TAM24091) and now we see them return with a few additions. The original kit parts are well detailed with a removable rear body section revealing a full engine and gearbox. This new release also includes a small selection of etched detailing parts with seat belt furniture, wing endplates and various small fixings. The decals are also all new and offer the choice of two team cars. The fine stripes of the design will make this an interesting and potentially challenging decal job and done well will result in a fine looking model.



AOSHIMA

Aoshima - New 1:24th plastic kit

AOS37683 Mazda RX7 Bonneville LSR £16.45

In 1986, engineer & journalist Don Sherman took this modified Mazda RX7 to over 238mph at Bonneville, setting a class record that still stands today. The kit captures the outside of this car very well indeed, with a nicely proportioned bodysheet and clearly printed decals. Internally, things are largely based on the road car kit that Aoshima have previously released so there are some inaccuracies, most noticeable being a complete lack of any roll cage which is not acceptable. With work it will make a reasonably accurate model and there is plenty of information on the car on the internet. At the price it's not too bad, but it really is frustrating when manufacturers just throw decals at a road car.

