

The Deep Sanderson Coupé

by David Blumlein

Something that irritates me a great deal is the way so many race reports on Sports/GT racing tend to focus only on those cars "first past the winning post". Endurance racing has always been characterised by the depth and variety of cars taking part; just look through the lists of runners in the (real) Targa Florio or Nurburgring 1,000 Km races, let alone the richness of each Le Mans race. These days we are so often given little information about those cars that perhaps even fail, but they too are interesting and their part needs to be faithfully recorded.

One such car to earn insufficient exposure was the Deep Sanderson Coupé that actually made it to Le Mans on three occasions – it is worthy of study. It was, of course, the creation of Chris Lawrence, a many-sided motoring figure whom history will record chiefly in relation to his successful activities with Morgan cars. His LawrenceTune business grew out of his successes on the track with his Morgan Plus Four, his competence as a driver winning him a National Championship for Production Sports Cars in 1959. Of 22 races he won no less than 19 of them! Naturally, people wanted copies and so effectively did Lawrence tune the Triumph engine that the Morgan factory recognised and commissioned his engines for their Super-Sports model, this a historical first! History records that he gave Morgan their greatest Le Mans success when, partnered by Richard Sheppard-Baron, the LawrenceTune car won the 2-litre class in the 1962 24 Hour race.

While this and often other international successes with Morgans were taking place, Lawrence was already active as a designer of his own cars, starting with a Formula Junior single-seater which he called a Deep Sanderson. An improbable name, yes, but it combines the name of a song close to his heart and his mother's maiden name, the maternal wealth influential in setting him up as a constructor. Three such racing cars were made, the

last having what came to be known as LawrenceLink suspension, his patented design using trailing arms to procure correct behaviour of the wheels when cornering. The single-seaters (Types 101/102) were not competitive with the front-runners of the time but Lawrence scored a notable success against state-of-the-art opposition at Oulton Park with the one car equipped with LawrenceLink.

More meaningful thoughts turned to the idea of a road-going car and this was the 301 Coupé, an advanced design built around a mid-mounted transversely located Mini-Cooper engine. Just the engine/transmission and wheels were inherited, for the rest was very original Lawrence-thinking. A large diameter backbone tube formed the basis to which were attached steel box-sections to carry running-gear front and rear. Naturally the car sported LawrenceLink suspension and the whole was covered in, first of all, an aluminium body by Williams and Prtichard, and for production a fibre-glass version. These were eventually fitted to the cars in Staines, the work subcontracted to John Pearce as there was no room in the LawrenceTune premises in Acton, west London.

The prototype was fitted with an unusual open body with high "headrests" but this was altogether too flimsy, certainly insufficiently strong for Lawrence's needs. It found its way to the 1962 Nurburgring 1,000 km race where colleague Len Bridge managed to put it up a tree without too much harm to himself after 12 laps of the demanding Nordschleife. The lessons were learned and the 301 Coupé made its appearance at the 1963 Racing Car Show, ready for public consumption.

Lawrence was keen to return to Le Mans after the Morgan success and was granted an entry for the 1963 race. Prior to this the little car had a run at that year's Nurburgring 1,000 km race where it eventually retired with differential trouble. But

Deep Sanderson 301 Le Mans 1964
Kit (MRA640) & hand built
(MRA640M) by Mini Racing



come the big race in June and the little Coupé, bearing race number 44, was hitting 150 m.p.h. down the Mulsanne straight.

Chris Lawrence undertook the first stint and stayed in further until 8 o'clock on the Saturday evening, handing over the car in 37th place to Chris Spender. Alas, Spender overdid things on his first arrival at Mulsanne and put the car into the sand-trap. Fruitless attempts by him to dig the car out were relieved by a considerate marshal who threw a branch from a tree to him, enabling the car and driver to return to the pits after some forty odd minutes. Chris Lawrence took over from an exhausted Spender but found the car's performance compromised by the presence of too much sand, especially in the brakes where overheating led to seals melting and releasing the fluid. This revealed itself by Lawrence finding all of a sudden a brake pedal that went straight to floor. He bravely persevered but by dawn the Le Mans regulations started to catch up with him, for the car had covered insufficient distance at the 8 hour mark. So sad because the car was at 8.30 a.m. just two laps down on the class-leading Alpine of Boyer and Verrier but out came the black flag and that was that.

Undeterred Lawrence sought a two car entry for the following year and planned to increase the engine's capacity. One car was on the reserve list and the weeks leading up to the race were hectic; delivery of the bigger engines from Downton Engineering was delayed time and time again and when the engines finally arrived their capacity was only 1293 c.c., not the planned 1325 c.c. Furthermore various components did not fit, calling for desperate last minute changes.

The reserve car came to the top of the list and was treated as a runner but driver Jim Donnelly wrote the car off in practice at the notorious White House corner and so the Deep Sanderson entry came down to one. This car, number 42, did not last long as the water temperature went off the clock as a gasket failed and the rules forbade water replenishment until a specified number of laps had been completed. This failure was surely a legacy of the lack

of time available to test the bigger engine, certainly not as Lawrence had originally planned the whole operation!

He had one more go at Le Mans, this time in 1968 and with a Deep Sanderson Coupé with an in-line mid-mounted Ford 116E engine, equipped with Telcalamit – Jackson mechanical fuel injection, for which LawrenceTune were the agents. This change of power unit necessitated lengthening the rear chassis, the car becoming a 302. A Hewland FT200 five-speed gearbox complemented the Ford engine. The car had to have conventional front wishbone suspension and a De Dion rear end as the LawrenceLink patent had been sold in the meantime to Rover and permission was not granted for Lawrence to use his former design.

An outing was undertaken at the Spa 1,000 Km race where the car, No 22, finished the race in 20th position, Lawrence being co-driven by John Wingfield. These two were the nominated drivers for Le Mans, the race that year postponed until September after the riots in France in May.

Again, the regulations caught up with the team. While Wingfield was driving, the signalling crew at Mulsanne noticed the car's engine cut out as it disappeared from them: a rubber-toothed belt driving the main fuel pump had come off, but where was it in the darkness? Somehow one of the pit crew located the car easily and a replacement was furtively thrown for Wingfield to re-attach – there was no spare carried on board as it should have been! – but it was noticed that the driver ventured more than the regulation 100 metres from the car; the black flag awaited the return to the pits.

Chris Lawrence was desperate for one more go but no entry was granted for 1969. He had mounted one of Ted Martin's V-8 engines in the car and it actually ran in that year's Nurburgring 1,000 Km race but the engine failed after 21 laps. Thus closed the Deep Sanderson chapter but by this time Lawrence was well involved with creating the Monica luxury car – there was plenty more to come from this talented and determined man!

