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From the Archives...

Spa – May 9th to 11th, 2008



Looking back, I see that I last visited Spa-Francorchamps last August – nothing had changed when Mauro Borella and I showed up last Friday for driver's briefing in the CER tent and first practice; except that the circuit authorities had now instituted a strict "park your road car outside the circuit and walk" policy. Hey ho, how to get your physical exercise each morning, lugging your racing gear approximately one mile to where the CER paddock was situated. At least the weather was on our side, simply glorious with not a cloud in sight. Hurrah! I can imagine racing at some other circuits in the rain but the prospect of plunging down to Eau Rouge from La Source in the wet I find positively terrifying.

Again, the CER entry was very good, both in number and the quality of the entry; The usual cars were there, accompanied by no less than three Lola T70s, one Mark II Spyder and two coupes, plus Marc Devis' glorious Gulf-Mirage Spyder and numerous Chevron and Lola two liter cars, all of which appear to be indecently quick (or am I just too slow?), plus the usual BMW squadron for five M1 Procars (that have a hundred plus horsepower on us and are in our class – Bah!). One in particular, driven by Sean McNerney from England is unbelievably quick, besting the nearest other Procar by some five seconds a lap. I'm pleased to say that this is in a car that I sold from America some years ago, an ex-Jim Busby "Ocean Motors" M1 that Jim had tube-framed in around 1980. He did tell me recently that he'd beaten all the 935s but one at Mid-Ohio once.



Spa is a fantastic circuit, one of my very favorite tracks to race on. It's long, about 4.2 miles around and is a combination of elevation changes and fast corners. From the start, now taken before the La Source hairpin, everyone funnels into the tight right hairpin. For some reason, a lot of people duck over to the right here so, by staying to the outside, you can drive around quite a few cars at the start, as Mauro told me! Then it's change up through the gears into

fourth as you hurtle down the 1 in 4 hill to Eau Rouge. Stay over to the right against the pits wall, turn into the slight left hand bend, dab brakes to settle the car and then apply full throttle as you climb what appears to be a mountain, the 1 in 4 climb, first to the right, then to the left over the top onto the straight leading to Pouhon. Change up to fifth gear here and then change down again to second gear for the right-left-right bends that follow.

Accelerate into third gear, brake and change back down to second for the 180 degree turn that follows, down hill to a third gear right hander, change up to fourth, brake and turn into a double left hander, which is taken as one curve in a most satisfying sweep. If you make a mistake here, all that will happen is that you go over the curve onto the tarmac paved run off here (which I did on one practice lap!). Next it's a short straight to a third gear right hander, another short straight of a third/fourth gear right hander and now it's flat out into Radillion 1, a fast left hander and then into Radillion 2, another fast left hander, which requires a slight lift of throttle before the apex. After this it's brake smartly and change into second gear for the 90 plus degree right hander and same left hander onto the start-finish straight.



Mauro was standing in for George, as he had a family engagement back in Virginia and so, after briefing, Mauro took the first practice session. Despite the fact that this was the first time that Mauro had driven the RSR, he posted a very respectable 2:54 lap. I took the first qualifying later on the Friday and did a 2:57, which at least was three seconds a lap faster than I'd managed in September, so practice and familiarity with a circuit does pay off! Sadly, Marc Devis went off

the road avoiding a slower car and damaged the front bodywork of his Gulf-Mirage, so had to start in his "spare" M1, in which he finished second in class.

We now have telemetry fitted to the RSR and so, after Phillip Brun had downloaded the information onto his laptop, Mauro and I spent thirty minutes going over it with Phillip. Net result: I'm braking too hard, taking off too much speed through corners and taking some of them in one gear too high. Food for thought and then action.

Friday evening saw Mauro and I join some of the other CER racers for an excellent meal at a local restaurant and I find that several of them are very interested in



doing the Daytona 24 Hours and the Sebring 12 Hour races. I'm working on it!

And so to race day. Saturday morning saw Mauro take the majority of the second qualifying session and he did a 2:51. He came in for me to do a couple of "familiarization" laps for the afternoon's race but I got in and drove like a total 'plonker' for some reason (thrown into final qualifying at the end of the session?) and, to cap it all, the throttle broke halfway through the very fast Radillion 2 curve, leaving me stranded on the side of the track until the session finished. The Marshals duly ran over and shortly after an Audi pace car came along, the crew fitted a tow strap and off we went back to the paddock with me "covering" the brake pedal to keep the strap tight! One interesting comment from the Chief Marshal, when I told him that I'd raced at Spa many times, always in good weather was: "Yes, we are always wet here; either with rain or sweat!"



Heiko and Dimitri set to and the offending throttle connection was soon repaired and replaced in time for the start of the race. Mauro took the first half and led most of our regular competitors with around a seven lap gap to the nearest. Problem was, when he came in and I got in, I couldn't get the straps buckled up fast enough and, by the time Heiko and Dimitri had sorted it out, I had lost twenty seconds in the pits!



I set off and quickly got into the groove and only Phillip Brun passed (lapped) me (to be expected – he was doing 2:44s!). So all was going well until an RS with an RSR engine caught up to me towards the end. After a lap behind me, he overtook me through Radillion 2 but I got him back into La Source. I stayed ahead of him until the straight after Eau Rouge, but was then presented with a white Chevron/Lola limping slowly back to the pits in the middle of the track at around fifty mph maximum.



Of course, at the speed that the RS/RSR and I were going, there was only a moment to make the decision of where to pass. I went for the left and the driver of the RS/RSR went for the right and, at the last moment, instead of staying where he was, the slow car moved to the left, forcing me to brake hard and, quick as a flash, the other guy was past. Damn! I fought back and closed the gap but, exiting the chicane on his tail, the checkered flag was waved and that was it. As Steve Matchett says: "Game over."

Returning to the paddock, we were delighted to find that Phillip had finished third in class, beating all but two M1 Procars. Incidentally, the 1966 Lola T70 Mark II Spyder led the first few laps (combination of a good driver and 6.3 liters!) but sadly had an accident later on in the race, finishing up in a gravel trap.

Never mind. The RSR is in good form and it's on to Classic Le Mans 11-13th July. Hotel booked, flight booked and very much looking forward to it!



