

YA PAYS YER MONEY AND TAKES YER CHOICE

BY GORDON JENNINGS

HERE'S A RACER THAT LEAVES IT ALL UP TO YOU.

There was an undeniable feeling of improbability with me, as I hopped around on one foot inside the Kastner-Brophy Racing van, struggling into a Nomex and Dr. Denton's long-johns. We were gathered in the bleak pit area of Willow Springs Raceway, a road course located about 100 miles from Los Angeles and directly over hell's hatch-cover. My surroundings were unpleasantly familiar, as it was at this very track that I began my truncated career as a motorcycle racer so many years past. The only jarring notes in the scene were the Nomex outfit, and a pair of white Kastner-prepared Triumph Spitfires. The battle-dress because while I could have dragged out my old motorcycle racing leathers for the occasion, I remembered all too vividly that wearing leathers at Willow Springs is a kind of self-inflicted version of the old Indian torture where the redmen stitch the young cavalry trooper inside a cowhide and leave him staked-out over an ant-hill. Definitely ungood. And the two race-ready Spitfires? Ah, therein lies this tale.

My long-time friend and occasional confederate, R.W. Kastner (known as "Kas" to his intimates and "that conniving son of a bitch" to the SCCA's rules committee and sundry racing competitors) was waiting outside the van with directions ("drive the white car") and advice ("if you crash it don't come back. . ." and "don't tell anyone where you are"). So I pulled on my helmet as Lee Mueller, who has made a pig of himself at a number of SCCA trophy presentations with this same Triumph Spitfire, cackled nastily.

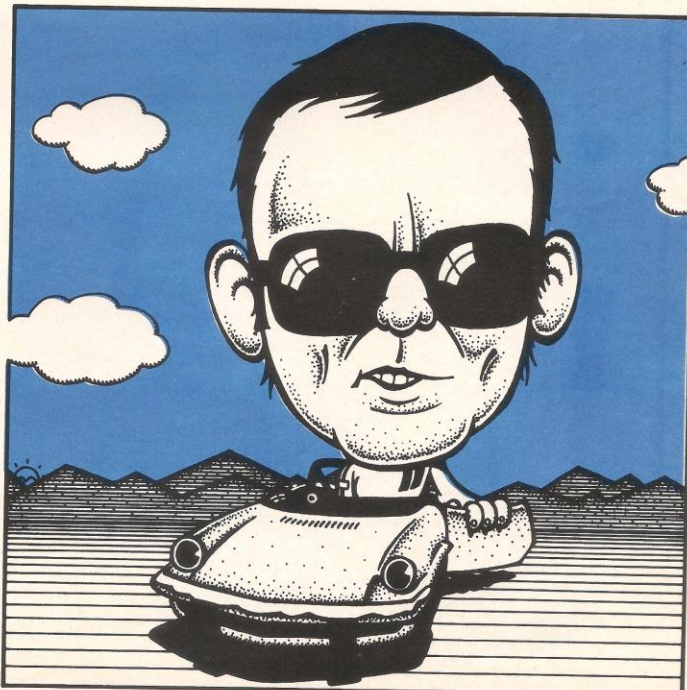
Kastner's Spitfire is, even at a glance, a creature somewhat removed from the showroom article. It has these great, fat Goodyear tires, and hunkers

down against the pavement like it is feeling for a toehold even when parked. Flat discs cover the holes where most Spitfires have their headlights, and a darkly-tinted plexiglass windscreen reaches back to shroud much of the cockpit, contributing further to the already squat appearance.

Anyway, there it was and there I was, so I squirmed my way down into the form-fitting bucket-seat, pulled the four straps of the safety harness together, secured the clasp, fumbled at the gear change and pedals for a moment to get them positioned in my

mind, and then gave the key a twist. Mueller had been out flogging the Spitfire, so it was warm and started at a touch, whuffing and rasping and balky as hell until I blipped the revs higher and fed in the clutch—which snatched the car into motion toward the track.

Out the pit road I went, with the engine barking and the chassis heaving in that stiff-legged manner of all racing cars. I should have been convinced right then, but I wasn't. Chuffing exhaust and stiff springs do not a racing car make, and this sort of thing from a Spitfire did nothing to reduce that feel-



ing of improbability that I had been experiencing. In truth, I had to suppress an urge to giggle. There I was, a once if not future big-time motorcycle racer, going out to hum around in what is widely regarded as the sporty car set's open-cockpit primary trainer.

Once I got the Kastnerized Spitfire pointed and stabbed it hard it let me know that the giggling was over. The engine lost its lumpiness and began a surprisingly solid surge at about 5500 rpm, and it pulled crisp and hard right through to the 7500 rpm limit Kastner had placed on my exuberance. Even more surprising was its smoothness, which is near-total through the range from 4500 rpm (where gas flow begins to catch up with the valve timing) right up to 7500 rpm. You listen, and you know it's a Four—but the lack of vibration tries very hard to convince you that there's at least a Six up there.

Sorting out a proper line around Willow Springs was a simple matter of going where I had gone so many times on a motorcycle, and making minor adjustments for the extra width of this conveyance. But the rest of it was hard work, as I tried to cope with a vehicle that wouldn't stop quite as fast as my old Yamaha but cornered a *lot* faster. Whatever else you might find to say about Kastner's Spitfire (and its sheer

sprinting capabilities might seem rather small potatoes to a racing Corvette driver) you'd have to admit that it handles like a real racing car. Its steering is light and precise, and when you ram it into a turn it leans down against its outside tires and takes a very impressive bite. Kastner has been fine-honing the Spitfire's suspension (and the rest of it) for seven years, and he has its spring rates, shock settings, camber, caster, etc., sorted out well enough to have dispensed with both the once-essential camber-compensator *and* the car's early tendency to snap into a spin. As it now stands, you can do your worst and the Spitfire just squeegees sideways, scrubbing off speed until it has slowed enough to recover its grip on the track. The one time the car's tail definitely swung out, trying to get away from me, was when I tossed the Spitfire into a downhill (which is to say, off-camber) left-hander too briskly, and then a twitch of none-too-expertly applied opposite lock saved the situation. Over the years, at infrequent intervals, I have had opportunities to drive other racing cars, and I can recall only one—the Lotus 23—that worked as hard to flatter its driver.

Around and around I went, enjoying myself almost sinfully, feeling for what I fancied to be The Limit. Kastner's dire

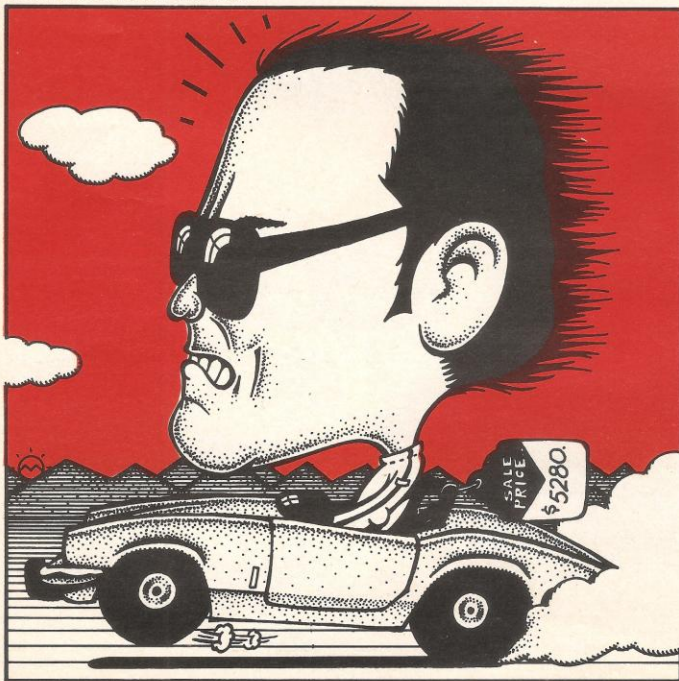
warnings were quite forgotten, as I swung into a passable imitation of Mr. Toad, of *The Wind in the Willows* notoriety. And with all these exertions I didn't get closer than six seconds to Mueller's 1:42 lap times on Willow Springs' heat-proof 2.5 miles of asphalt in the same car. And, I can't honestly cop out with, "I was being careful of the car." I tried hard, and couldn't do it. I think I know where I left four of those seconds, and probably could shave them off in fractions here and there, but that still leaves two seconds per lap hanging in the air between me and Mueller and they're likely to stay there.

No matter, I wasn't there to ease Mueller out of his ride. In truth, my purpose wasn't even to drive the Spitfire I've been talking about. There was this *other* Spitfire present, and it provided the reason behind these jolly games. You see, Kastner has been selling Team-Triumph's cast-off racing cars, at the end of each season, for *years*. People stand in line to buy them, and the customers have always outnumbered the cars. Now, since Kas has resigned his job at Triumph and gone into the race-shop business with John Brophy, he has both the time and shop facilities to build cars for anyone who wants them and has the money to back their wants. And that other Triumph Spitfire, a 1450-lb. finished race car, built for cheerful Jim McCashin, is the first of what Kastner hopes will be a whole series of ready-to-race cars from the Kastner-Brophy shops.

McCashin has the honor of being the first of Kastner's replica-racer customers; you can be one too, if it suits you, but before you get overly excited at the prospect, let me tell you all the details of the only deal Kastner—a Simon Girty reincarnate when it comes to money—will make: First, there is what he calls the "Easy, two-payment finance plan; half now, and the other half when you reach for the key." What he means is that you give him half the total purchase price when you place an order, and the rest before you drive the car—and, as he says, "All sales are *final*."

That may sound harsh, arbitrary and fraught with financial peril, but I ask you to reserve judgment on Kastner the Car Merchant until you hear the rest of the deal. Kastner's shop will need about 60 days to get your car constructed. When it is ready, and after you've made a couple of trips down to the Kastner-Brophy factory for fittings (so that the seat, etc., are positioned where *you* want them), the car will be

ILLUSTRATIONS: MARVIN MATTELSON





KASTNER-TAKE-IT-OR-LEAVE-IT SPITFIRE

Safety Items

Rollbar (welded and machine fitted—some call it a sub frame)	\$250.00
Fuel Cell (Allen)	140.00
Scattershield	65.00
Windshield (your choice of tint)	55.00
4-point Seat Harness	30.00
Racing Mirror	10.00

Engine Accessories

Engine (Kastner-modified plus usable trade in)	
Headers and Exhaust System	\$ 87.50
Fuel Pump	20.00
Radiator and Header Tank	90.00
Oil Cooler	87.50
Racing Wiring Harness	10.00

Driveline

Close Ratio Transmission Gear Set	\$185.00
Limited-Slip differential (your choice of ratio)	139.00

Suspension

Koni Shock Absorbers (@ \$26.50)	\$106.00
Front Coil Springs	38.50
Rear Leaf Spring	40.00
Rear Axles (forged alloy with oversize U-joints)	328.50

Brakes

Competition Pads and Lining	\$ 40.00
Steel-Wrapped Hoses	40.00

Wheels and Tires

Minilite Wheels	\$425.00
Racing Tires (Goodyear 4.75/8.50 x 13)	180.00

Miscellaneous

Bucket Seat	\$125.00
VDO Tachometer (calibrated and modified cable drive)	65.00
Oil and Water Gauges	30.00

Price of new and replacement hardware \$2587.00

Engine

Racing engine (Kastner-modified, price plus trade-in engine)	\$1300.00
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Base Car

Triumph Spitfire ('71 Model)	\$2742.00
Over-the-counter price (less labor)	\$6629.00

Kastner Ready-to-Race Friendly price	\$5700.00
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taken to Willow Springs and you'll take delivery after observing a short but absolutely convincing demonstration of its race worthiness by Lee Mueller. Your car will be there, and the Spitfire Mueller uses for a trophy net will be there. Mueller goes out on the track in his own car and cuts a few laps in the race-winning time brackets. He then returns to the pits, switches to your car, and duplicates those lap times. And at that point, after forking over your second and final payment (cash or certified check, Kastner isn't choosy) you can take either car. *Either* car. You can drive both, and take your pick—unless you crunch one of them, in which case you have just bought that one. Basically what Kas is saying is that if you think all the good, secret stuff is in Mueller's Team Spitfire, you're welcome to load it on your trailer and drive away.

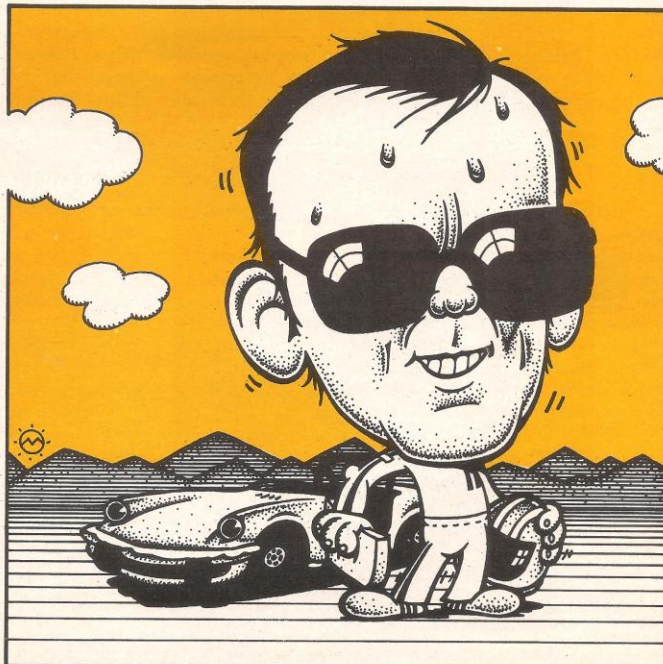
The price? McCashin ordered his Spitfire back before the import surcharge and before the dollar was cut loose from our dwindling gold reserves to find its own level in the world's money markets. He paid \$5280 for his car. Now Kastner wants \$5700 for his race-ready Spitfire, and if you know as little as I did about the prices of racing car hardware, that probably shocks you considerably. Indeed, when Kas hit with it, I accused him of outright profi-

teering. I mean, I *knew* Kastner was a rascal, and not to be trusted with a fellow's wallet, woman or bottle—but selling a \$2700 car for \$5700 seemed excessive even for him. I was indignant.

My indignation turned to sad wonderment as we went into Kas' office and he started rattling off the prices of parts (see sidebar) for his Spitfires.

Total everything, and you find that it comes to \$2587, just for the special hardware—and that's before you've spent a penny on the engine. Kastner has for some time been building engines, Spitfire engines among others, and in the case of the Spitfire his price is \$1300 and a good engine, one suitable for a racing rebuild. The price may seem high, and it is, but unless you have the Kastner-Brophy shop facilities (which include a dyno) and their years of experience, you won't match their results for \$1300 and you probably won't be able to match them at all. Fork over the \$1300, and you'll get an engine that has dual carburetors, tubular steel pushrods, a tried and proven racing camshaft, valve springs with aluminum collars, and all the sundry small related hardware. You'll also get a block that has been machined "true" with bores trimmed out to take pistons from the GT6, a polished and balanced

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crankshaft, rods that have been lightened enough but not too much and then polished, shot-peened and their balance and overall weights matched, as well as being zeroed for on-center lengths. The cylinder head will have been carefully and knowledgeably ported, and the valve heads reshaped. It will be a complete transformation of touring hummer into racing zapper, and you won't get close to it out under the shade tree in your backyard.

So you add the \$1300 for the engine to the \$2587 you've spent on chassis hardware, and the investment becomes \$3887. To that, you have to add the price of a new Spitfire Mk IV (\$2742), because Kastner starts from that base, and the total bill is \$6629 and you are just now ready to pick up wrench and hammer and start the job. Without, I hasten to add, knowing that the stock suspension's rubber bushings won't do and you need replacements in Oilite bronze. Neither would you know, without Kastner's experience, that various tubes and wires should be routed a certain way and protected against chaffing at certain points. Or that there's an Autolite alternator that is lighter and more reliable than the original generator; and an ignition coil from a certain Ford is dead reliable and puts out a stupifying spark. The most im-

portant thing you buy from Kastner is a car that has been completely sorted out, a car that works.

There's another thing you get with the Kastnerized Spitfire, too, now that I think about it: You get a racing car that won't let you tell yourself any big lies. You buy Kastner's car, and you have to know that if you're good enough to beat Lee Mueller, you're going to beat Lee Mueller. And if you don't? Then you just go to work on your driving, without wasting a lot of time and money on trick engine parts and such, because you know you have as much car under you as anyone. If the replica Spitfire will just keep you from kidding yourself, it's worth the price.

All of that was in my mind as I climbed out of Kastner's Team Spitfire and into Jim McCashin's replica. The replica felt different from the original: in part because the seat was placed for McCashin and not for Mueller; but there was also a newness, a tightness to the replica that Mueller's forceful driving had not had time to remove. And I don't know quite where the difference was, but the replica handled just a touch better; kept its wheels down against the track more solidly.

Why? I don't know. I asked Kastner as we were standing around drinking champagne (McCashin has class) after Jim had handed Kas the final payment and had gone out for his first ride. Kas smiled his

tight-lipped smile and said, "We learn something every year; this car has next year's improvements." I glanced over at McCashin and he smiled smugly and didn't say anything. And in subsequent weeks his F/Production racer took two firsts in SCCA regionals, a second in a national, and one DNF (water pump).

And there I was with another improbable situation: the head of a racing team building and selling a replica that was clearly, if slightly better than his own equipment.

I don't think he cares, terribly, if he sells a lot of these cars. Building them is a way of keeping his shop crew busy between bigger jobs in the jerks-and-spurts racing business. Profits? Kastner never does anything unless there is at least a dollar in the doing, but he can't get rich on replica Spitfires. He couldn't build them for \$5700 at all, with his shop payroll, except by recovering part of the \$2700 he pays for the car by returning some of the new parts he doesn't need to Triumph for a credit, and by buying the other hardware at wholesale prices. Still, in the end, all he's doing is spreading the shop overhead, and maybe netting enough to buy a new sail for his boat.

So why does he do it? I think it may be, half of it anyway, that he's doing it just to get drivers in cars that won't leave them any room for excuses. The bastard is just that ornery. ●