

# Sprite Racing USA

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*At Sebring in 1961, Stirling and Pat Moss with Sprinzel's "Sebring GT" Sprites.*

**A**s we enter the 60th reunion of Austin-Healey Sprite production and the 2018 celebrations, it is interesting to see how we have evolved into one of Vintage Sports Car Racing's most recognized race cars.

The Sprite was first placed in production at Abingdon England in the spring of 1958, shortly followed with exports to its largest market, United States of America. These Mark I Sprites were soon nicknamed "Bugeye" in the States due to the unique headlight mounting. Donald and Geoff Healey both knew the importance of marketing through racing, which worked well with the Sprite's bigger and older brother, the Austin-Healey 100, resulting in great success at USA's premier international event, "The 12 Hours of Sebring." They followed their experience and chose to do the same with the Sprite at the 1959 Sebring.

They were entered in the GT 1.0 race in a Speedwell Blue Bugeye with a white bonnet and large white roundels. These cars were only moderately prepared when compared to today's racing Sprites and these cars became known as "Sebring Sprites." They were pretty stock sports cars when compared to competitively raced Sprites today with a slightly modified engine, straight-cut gear close-ratio transmission, suspension, wooden steering wheels, wire spoke wheels and four-wheel disc brakes, race prepped at the Healey Cape works in Warwick, England. When the checkered flag dropped they had the bragging rights for the first three positions in class, which was a great marketing tool and a surprise knowing how little development time they had. One of the three racing Sebring Sprites was then driven 3000 miles to Los Angeles, California, for additional bragging rights and durability marketing!





*A SAAB chasing a Sebring GT and a Bugeye at the 1961 Sebring race.*

Sprite works cars returned to Sebring in 1961, and new safety precautions for speed differentials of lower displacement cars eliminated them from racing the 12-hour event. Consequently, a four-hour, under-one-liter race was initiated. This allowed top drivers to compete in the four-hour event, so Sprites benefitted from the publicity of Stirling Moss, Bruce McLaren, Steve McQueen and Walt Hansgen at the helm. Moss placed first in class. A special-bodied "Falcon" Sprite prototype driven by John Sprinzel and John Lumkin was driven in the 12-hour race S1.0 Class.

In 1960, British Rally Champion John Sprinzel's new company, Speedwell Performance Conversion Ltd., created the Speedwell GT with help from co-owner Graham Hill's aerodynamicist friend Frank Costin. This attractive streamliner had cues of the Lotus Elite, for which Costin was also responsible. Two of these Sprinzel Sebring GT Sprites were entered in the 1961 four-hour race with Stirling and his sister Pat Moss behind the wheel, along with five other standard-body Sebring Sprites, placing first in class. The 12-hour race had two Healey Streamliners entered in the S1.15 Class with an impressive 15th overall finish.

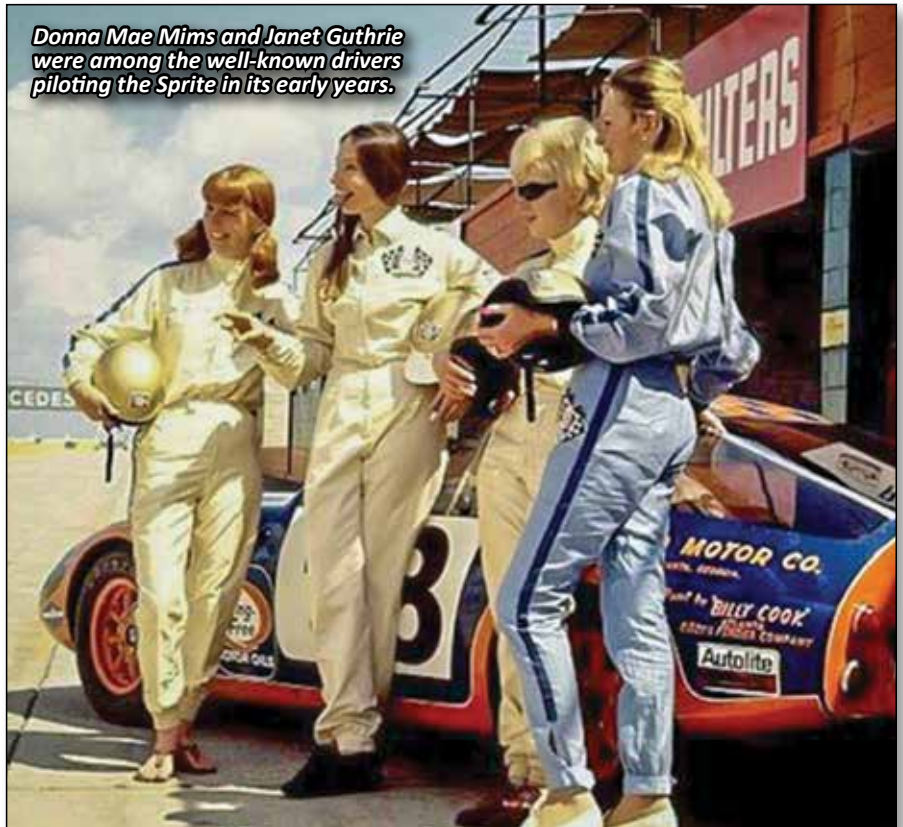
The Sports Car Club of America allowed Sprites to race as Showroom Stock with a 948cc engine and began to fill their H Production (HP) Class quickly with Sprites by 1960. It was a cheap way to get into racing with an inexpensive sports car and quickly dominated HP by removing hubcaps and taping off headlights and viola, you were racing. As good as the handling was on these cars they had lots of body roll and would even roll over from time to time, earning the nick name "Tipables" from some in SCCA including Fort Wayne Region racers. The British Motor Corporation along with the Healey Speed Equipment Division were offering more performance parts and SCCA allowed some of these parts to be used on Sprites, but this bumped these modified cars into GP

while continuing HP for the street cars.

Eventually as Sprites were increasing SCCA race entries and demand for better performance racecars were the norm, they dropped the more modified GP back into HP. Sprites, like many sports cars, increased displacement from 948 to 1098 to 1275cc. The 1961 Mark II Sprite, with straighter lines and now referred to as a "square body," evolved from 948 to 1098cc engine simultaneously making an MG version named the Midget, all produced on the same assembly line. The 1098cc-engined Mark II

Sprite and the MG twin, the Mark I Midget, were now placed in SCCA's GP class. There are many drivers that enjoyed Sprites as their entry into sports car racing with some making it into the professional ranks.

The Sprite and Midget continued to fill the majority of HP, GP and FP SCCA events with modifications going exponential with fiberglass, flares, semi-space frame coil over variants, and new unique classes established. SCCA has been encouraging more current production cars such as Honda Civics and VW



*Donna Mae Mims and Janet Guthrie were among the well-known drivers piloting the Sprite in its early years.*

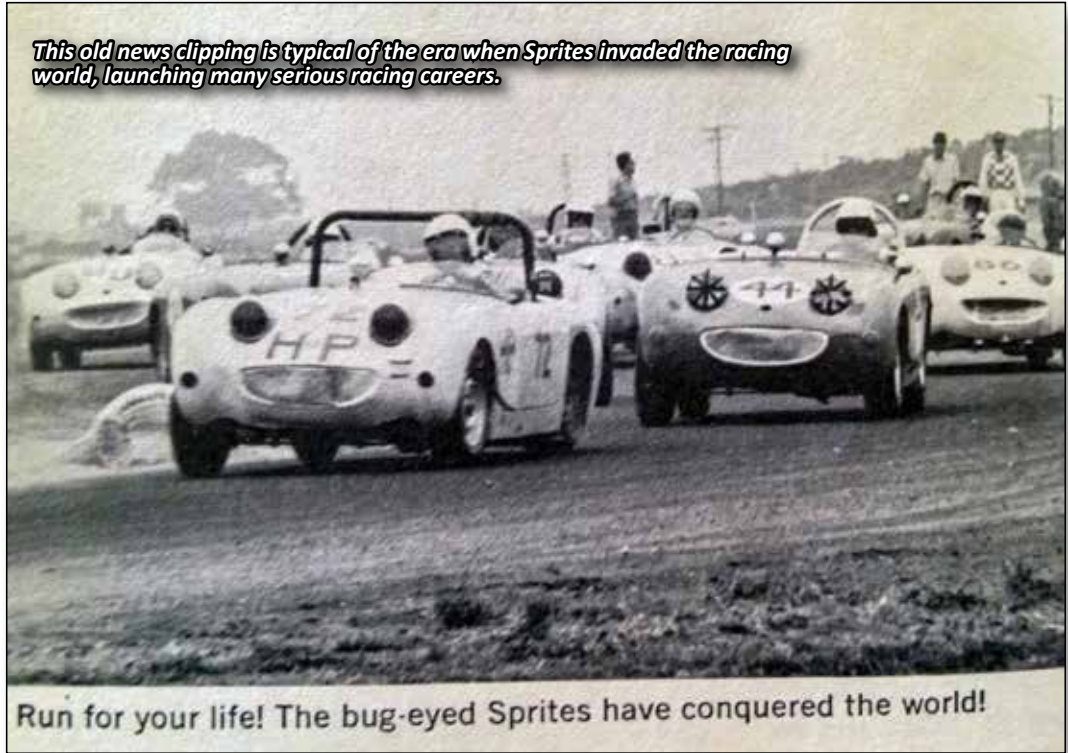
GT1 into H Production while discouraging the older 50-year out-of-production British cars. The result is less Sprites and Midgets seen in recent times when compared to the past.



Vintage Sports Car Racing has found many of these former SCCA cars in our events today with many modified back to their original 1960-70 SCCA specifications. The VSCDA Sprite Midget Race Series has produced large number of entries racing wheel to wheel with many individual classes for most forms of modifications rivalling SCCA's bountiful years.

It was 1961 when an Austin-Healey Sprite first won the SCCA National Championship with Rod Harmon in an H Production Bugeye. Sprites and Midgets remained the National Champions for many years past their intended life.

Now, a special 60th Sprite and Midget Reunion is planned on September 14-16, 2018, at Road America with VSCDA's Elkhart



***This old news clipping is typical of the era when Sprites invaded the racing world, launching many serious racing careers.***

**Run for your life! The bug-eyed Sprites have conquered the world!**

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*Sprites are still numerous in club racing, as seen here at Grattan in 2014.*

Lake Vintage Festival with special street and race Sprites and Midgets on and off the track for a complete Spridget Fest including car shows with 20 world-class Sprites and Midgets entering the concours, exclusive Sprite and Midget races along with a banquet that includes *Road & Track* magazine's entertaining Peter Egan. We will have special awards and

honor SCCA Sprite and Midget National Champions for the anticipated 100 Sprites and Midgets as the largest gathering of these cars in the US for a combined event.

Contact me for more information and tickets at StanBMason@AOL.com. **HM**

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