Florida, Land of Sunshine, palm trees, smog, wind, humidity, heat, phosphate plants, more smog, peat bogs, marshes, more smog and heat, and the Grandest Show in Auto Racing: The Twelve Hours of Sebring. How I got to be part of that show is a long involved story which can be told another time. What you are about to read is what your red-headed treasurer went thru to compete there.

by Judy Kondratieff

First off, you must know that my teammates were pros already and that I was a mere "rookie". Rosemary Smith, from Dublin, Ireland, has been driving for 9 years, both at Sebring and Daytona and especially on the Continent in some of the most gruelling contests known to drivers the world over... including the Monte Carlo and London to Sydney Rallies. Janet Gutherie, of New York, has been racing for about the same length of time and has been on the Ringfree All Girl Racing Team for 4 years at Sebring, Daytona, and various other Manufacturers Championship races. Sharlene Seavey, who won the Motor Maid contest, sponsored by the MacMillan Ringfree Oil Co. last year, was the third driver, but due to the ruling that only 3 drivers were permitted to a car, and because she had less experience than the rest of us, she was there only as a relief driver and didn't get to drive during the race. Racing a Sprite for three years followed by a Mini for two more years is not all the same as racing a 1293 cc fuel injected Sprite Prototype for 12 hours against Matra-Fords, Ferraris, Porsche 917s and 908s, and other such exotic 3 to 5 liter equipment. However, here is the tale.

We spent 2 days in Tampa being herded around to radio interviews, TV appearances, and newspaper reporters before we were at last on our way to Sebring, some 80 miles Southeast of Tampa. I was suffering from a very bad hangover from a night of ballyhoo. I wasn't really sure I was going to survive, nor was I really sure that I wanted to. We arrived at Registration and signed in. It was only here that I really began to believe that, "Yes, Judy, there IS a Sebring and you are going to be a part of it". I kept waiting for someone to tell me that there must be some mistake and that I wasn't listed as one of the drivers.

The troubles all began the next day when it came to be my turn to take the car out for practice. Both Janet and Rosemary are very tall, leggy girls and were I leggy I'd be tall, too, but unfortunately when I sat back properly in the seat, my feet didn't reach the pedals and when my feet reached the pedals, my back didn't reach the seat. It was non-adjustable. Guess who had to have a pillow? Next on the list of new things to face was the fact that it was a right hand drive car with a center shift station and five spring-loaded gears forward, neither of which was at all familiar to me. After a little lesson from the fellows while sitting in the pit lane, I was sent out. Horrendous noises assaulted my ears upon entering the course and great flashes of color kept passing thru my line of vision. Good Grief! I was supposed to run against that?!? I couldn't even tell what kind of cars they were going so fast! Well, I poked around the course trying to find out where all these blurs of color were going so I could go there too, and five miles later I found myself back where I started 12 turns earlier. It was then that I started to learn how to drive backwards while moving forward. This is done by instinctual rememberence of the course as you travel forward on it while watching the traffic moving up behind and around you thru the mirrors. My left arm got pretty worn out after three days of steady pointing! I got pretty adept at this procedure after awhile and so turned my attention to learning the forward course, the instrument readings, and the gearing.

There is a hairpin turn that is very similar to our turn 9 at Laguna - - only worse. It's slower. There is no way you can go thru it in any gear except 1st or 2nd. I think I used 2nd twice in all the time I drove the course because somehow I could never find the damn thing. There was always a terrible crunching sound as I came into that turn and I just know everyone cringed when they saw and heard me coming. At one point I was really excited because I thought that I'd finally gotten it, there had been none of those terrible sounds, until I suddenly discovered that I was in neutral and was coasting into the sand bunker at the exit of the turn. **Do not**, I repeat, *Do Not* go thru a hairpin turn in neutral. It simply does not work. After the turn personnel pushed me out of the sand cursing only mildly, I went on my way. About three turns later something started happening to the sound of the engine; it rattled and choked and rumbled a lot and I noticed during one of my split-second glances at the instruments that things were getting a little hot in there. I was on the back straight, about two miles from the pits, when I decided that the prudent thing to do was to just shut the engine off. I got out of the car and looked into the nose section where the oil cooler and radiator live. All I saw was brown sand.

There wasn't much doubt in my mind as to what the problem was, and after scraping most of the sand out from where it didn't belong, I tried starting the car. It absolutely refused to start. Have you ever felt that a car was a little peeved at you? This one most definately was. . .at me. I said, "To hell with you then" and wandered off and waited for 45 minutes until the lunch break happened and someone could come and get the car.



Janet and Jude get the "word" *photo by Brady*

The crew had been told, via one of the phone girls, what had happened so they could get their thoughts straight before they flayed me alive. It was even worse than that. No one said anything at all. I sulked around a lot, waiting for someone to hollar at me for being so moronic, but all they did was look at me pityingly. The mechanics kept coming over and showing me the plugs and telling me about the lowered compression in two of the cylinders and how there was an awful lot of sand in the engine and how maybe it was just a ring that was stuck. I couldn't understand why they were only telling me all this... maybe they thought the other girls weren't interested in engines or something. After deciding that I was going to get my walking papers for destroying an engine, I went over to the pit to see what was going on. The car was just going by at a speed that beat our time by twelve seconds. Bobby, another of the mechanics, and one of the guys who'd driven the car at Daytona, just grinned and said that all they did was give it a good rinse and send it out with Clive Baker in it. Clive was driving the Ring Free Chevron B-16 and just wanted to see how fast the Sprite went. It went fast, and it sounded great. I assumed that they had decided to stop punishing me and my feelings of guilt and shame lessened.

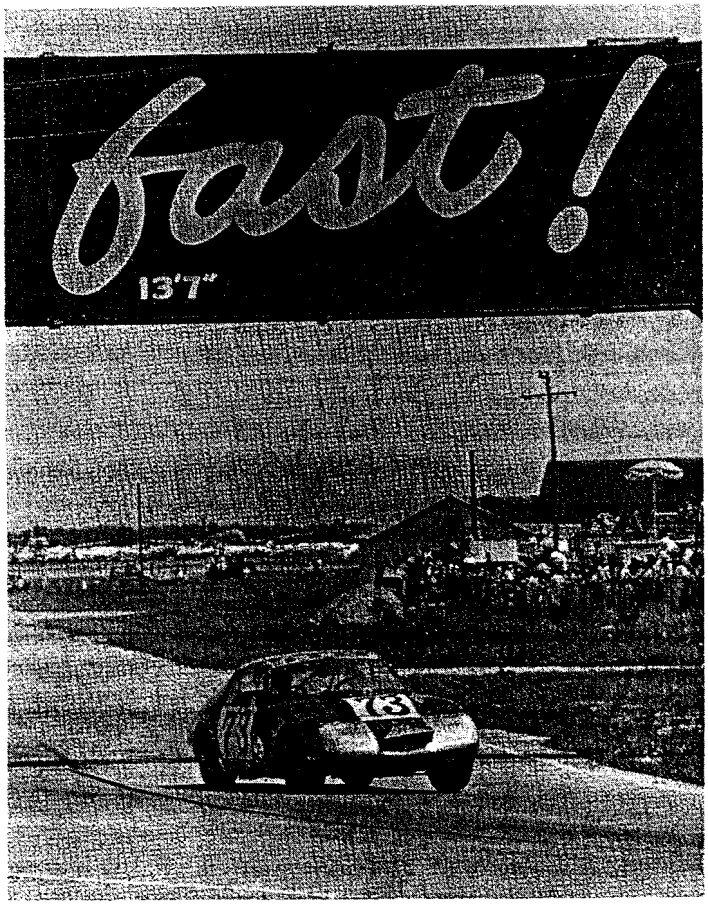
Now we were ready for night practice. For some strange reason I got to be the first one out again. Maybe everyone thought that it would be better if I wasn't out there with so much traffic. Ha Ha! After explaining how the lights worked, they sent me out again, out onto that giant economy sized Cotati race course. Well, I couldn't see a blasted thing and I certainly didn't know that stupid course very well yet, so I spent most of the first lap hunting for the apexes of the corners. Around turn 5, which is a fast sweeper, the hood raised up like a cobra in front of me. Oh great! That's all I needed! It was hard enough to see without that hood in front of me all the way around the track. I didn't dare stop anywhere and fix it because I was afraid I'd get lost. Finally, after getting back into the pit lane and getting everything battered down again, I returned to that spooky black road. This time I went into the second set of chicanes with a Ferrari on my tail with all the lights in the world blazing right into my rearview mirror. I couldn't even see in front of me. Trying to get out of his way I managed to do just that by spinning off into the night. Only slightly shaken, I returned post-haste to the pits where I asked if I could take a break and go to the ladies room. So much for night practice.

Came the day of the race, the weather was hot and muggy and the sky was overcast. There were hordes of people all up and down the pits looking and gawking, particularly at Steve McQueen. We were right next to the Ferrari pits which turned out to be a fascinating adventure in itself. Finally the time came to bring the car to the starting grid and the 'first' drivers got in. Around the five mile course they went as the pace lap unfolded. The line of 70 cars (we were 46th) was so long that the leaders were already into turn 4 before the last car took the green flag. What a sight and sound! It was magnificent and I was thrilled that it was Janet and not I that was out there in that thundering herd. Two hours later Janet came in and Rosemary went out. So far, so good. Two hours later and it was my turn; I was rather aprehensive, to say the least, because everyone had taken great pains to tell me to "Watch the clutch, stay on the road, don't over-rev the engine; we've got to finish, that's the name of the game". I was getting paranoid. Why were they picking on me? After the first 15 minutes everything began to settle into place, the track was finally becoming familiar. The big cars were getting easier to spot and to judge for speed. It was really FUN! WOW! Here I was in front of 57,000 people, driving around the Sebring track and being part of the International Twelve Hours of Sebring!



Judy abandons ship *photo by Brady*

Golly whiz! It was really a wild feeling, especially when the crew started holding up signals indicating that my times were down to competitive and consistant at that. My joy knew no bounds! This was the big time. My excitement was lessened only momentarily when, going around turn 5, a Matra driver indicated by a great deal of arm waving that perhaps I had better leave the inside line to the big cars. The rest of the time I only got nods of thanks and waves from the "big boys". It was fascinating to have cars pass me so I could read such names as Ickx, Andretti, Courage, Siffert, Rodriguez, Servoz-Gavin, Gurney, deAdamich, etc. on the helmets. I was really sorry when, two hours later, I had to come in. Only when I got out of the car did I realize what a toll all those cars had taken on my ears. It was as tho someone had stuffed cotton in them and at that point I wished that I had. The ringing was incredible and it didn't abate until the next morning. At the time, however, it was only a slight irritant. I was so keyed up that I wasn't tired. The only time I got a little apprehensive again was when it was my turn to drive at around 8:00 when it was dark. Pumping up my courage, I headed out into the night. After about an hour, even tho I was gaining confidence at this ridiculous night driving, I realized that with not knowing the track well enough my times were slower than they had been that afternoon and that we



Judy in the Sprite-Protoype photo by Brady

were running 2nd in class to a Fiat Abarth. I had decided that the best move would be to go in and let one of the other girls take over and try to beat the Fiat out of 1st; both of them having a great deal more experience on the track than I. By this time the crew had decided that I was OK and they were willing to let me go the full two hours, but not wanting to play "hero driver" and maybe through lack of experience get into some altercation with a bigger car. I got out. These people had really worked hard and it became the most important thing in the world to me to see that they got a good win out of it.

Janet and Rosemary finished off the last two hours and, by God, we had a class win and 19th overall! There was great joy in Sebring that night and it wasn't just in the Ferrari pits or the victory circle or with the crowds watching McQueen's peace sign. There were almost as many people at the Ring Free pit as there were at the other winning pits; champagne flowed, and there was much laughter and grinning and shaking of hands and hugging and all such goings on. It was a whole new experience, being only one part of a winning effort.

Unlike driving your own car to a victory, we weren't singled out; but we didn't care, we were proud to be a member of the team. Together we had all worked so well that this was the outcome. It is, in a way, even harder than winning alone. There you only have to be responsible to yourself. Here you had to be responsible to a whole number of people. . .all of whom you you come to really care about over the week. We wrote "sold" on the windshield in the dust that had formed there in the last hours of driving. It had been sold even before the race, and it had come thru the week unscathed and was now ready for its new home and new owner. It and I parted friends and I quietly thanked it for helping me to be such a grand part of the grandest show in auto racing. . .the Sebring 12 Hour.



The smiling Ringfree team, gals are (l to r) Janet, Judy, and Rosemary photo by Brady



"One thing for sure, that's the last time I go out with those #$%&@! A Sedans!!"

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