

From Barn Find to Paddock

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In 2007, I authored an article in Healey Marque magazine about an Austin Healey 100-4, which I found in a barn and restored over several years. A year after that article was published, I began the process of converting that car into a race car and myself into a race car driver.

The Austin Healeys that we drive are sports cars and I'd always referred to mine as a race car but my focus during the restoration was to make the car as original as possible, and even though the 100-4 is sparse on comfort there are certain things that need to be modified and streamlined for vintage racing. This is a story about the modifications to a vintage car which are required and desired for racing and the process and challenges I went through myself to get involved and compete in the sport of vintage racing.

I have two friends to thank for stirring up the racing bug in me. Duane Walzer, a Healey enthusiast who spotted my blue 100-4 driving through town one day. Duane has attended the Lime Rock Historic race event for the past 35 years. Jeff Hardin is the previous owner of my Healey and loved British cars of all marques. Duane convinced Jeff and I to watch the Lime Rock Historic races in 2004 and camp out in the infield with his gaggle of friends who inhabit "Thunder Dome" for this annual event.

During that weekend, Jeff and I mused as we watched the races, at the uphill turn, about life on the other side of the fence, racers instead of spectators. We already knew some of the drivers. Jim Smith of Avon, Connecticut driving a fast blue 100, just like mine wearing the number 102. Bob Girvin who lived near to us in Massachusetts and drove an Allard GT coupe. Bob and I had our engines worked on by the same engine shop, ABT Machine, in Holliston, MA. Rich Maloumian from Fort Washington, PA, driving a heavily modified white over red Big Healey. Jim would later say of Rich, that he was a great driver but was a bit aggressive. I've since, had the pleasure of being driven off the track by an overtaking white over red Healey at the Thunderbolt track in New Jersey.



Figure 1: In Racing, There's Gonna Be Some Damage

Before I met Jeff, he had gone through a bout of cancer. In 2007 it had come back. I decided that it was time to stop dreaming about being a race car driver and do something about it. But what was I going to do about a race car? I had a pretty show car in my garage. I'd worked so hard to restore it to show room condition. I'd driven my Porsche 944 at Lime Rock and other tracks in the area. The track can be brutal on a car. Would my Healey even hold up after 50 years?

Jeff and I attended the Historic from 2004-2007 as spectators but sadly, Jeff, due to his illness, couldn't make that event in August 2008. But he did see his old Healey "speed" down the Sam Posey Straight at the July 4th VSCCA Club Races and that was a treat for the both of us. Jeff passed away in 2009. I will always remember him wearing his red-white-and blue 4th of July cowboy shirt standing in the timing tower at Lime Rock watching the Healey he drove to UMass Amherst, way back in 1968.

Lime Rock Park is a great race track affording unprecedented fan access to the paddock area. The perfect setting for a Historic Race. It is also the home track of the VSCCA, the oldest vintage racing club in America. In early 2008 I began the process of joining that club. I contacted several members including Jim Smith, who volunteered to be my mentor, a requirement for joining. I also needed to get several letters of recommendation from other members. Good thing I spent all that time walking the paddock as a spectator. Several racers came to my aid.

As all vintage clubs, the VSCCA requires that members' cars must have certain safety features installed on the race car. However, the VSCCA is less restrictive, offering a more original configuration and at the same time, tempering the enthusiasm of its drivers. Which was great since I didn't need to do some of the things that more restrictive clubs require, such as install a roll bar or a fuel cell. Although, eventually I would.

My Philosophy

Every vintage racing club's rules have a certain ratio of originality vs competitiveness. I looked at the requirements of several clubs but basically decided on my own philosophy of what constitutes originality. I needed to make changes to my car to conform, but I'd spent so much effort making it as original as possible that I didn't want to be drilling and cutting holes in the body although some drilling would be necessary. Also, how much was I willing to change "under the bonnet" to be competitive? There is a lot you can do to go fast and some modifications can get you into trouble. Three issues come to mind. How good a driver are you? Are you modifying a car so much that your skill level won't be able to keep it under control? These cars are old and you don't want to modify the motor to the point that the brakes are woefully inadequate or that you create stresses in the suspension that cause these 50 years old parts to fail. I decided that I would gradually modify the car in a reasonable way over time. This would certainly help my racing budget. I also decided that I would not modify the car in a way that couldn't be done by a club racer of the day (1950s-1960s). So, no five speed Toyota transmission. This anti-modernization did not include safety features nor any components that have no effect on performance like lap timers and cameras. Lap timers are essential to measuring improvement and cameras, well, there's a lot of off time over the winter and racing videos help get you through some cold afternoons. I decided that I would also let my driving skills determine the level of performance upgrade. There's no sense in blowing the budget on speed if I haven't developed the talent. That would take time and it did.

Year One, 2008 (Number 502)

I had to conform to the basic safety requirements of the VSCCA. For my Healey that meant catch cans for the radiator overflow and the engine breather. A cut off switch for the engine that a safety worker could operate from outside the car. A fire extinguisher and a sticker to indicate the tow points for the tow truck and a five-point harness. I managed to do this with very little drilling and I even managed to hide the catch cans, to the point that during just about every pre-race inspection, I have to point them out to the Tech Guys. I particularly like my implementation of the cutoff switch mounting. Most people drill a hole in the bonnet just ahead of the windshield. This is how Jim Smith did it. This was not for me; I just couldn't drill what would be a ¾ inch hole in the bonnet. Also, it's impossible to reach once you're in your seat harnessed up. It's common to flip this switch off while you're working on the car in the paddock and you often forget to switch it back on until you're in your seat, strapped up, ready to go. I decided to put mine in the rear cockpit area behind the passenger seat. I fashioned a piece of aluminum to fit the inner curve of the rear cockpit corner using the same radius bends as the front dash. I painted it yellow so it would stand out. I ran the wires through two holes in the rear bulkhead down to the axels, where the batteries reside in a 100-4. Essentially, I just moved the battery cutoff switch from the boot area and located it where a corner worker could reach it and I painted it red instead of the original black. I also located a fire extinguisher in that general area right at arm's reach.

In late April 2008, I was ready for my indoctrination into the VSCCA and I would be attending driver education at the Pocono Speedway. Wow this was a big deal! A huge stadium, empty of spectators of course, but still impressive. We got an early start and arrived at the gates of the track around 4pm. It was so exciting to see all the vintage cars waiting in line, most on the backs of trailers and some even driven. I remember one Porsche that was driven by Ed Hyman, the VSCCA club's photographer. Ed has since taken many fantastic photos of my car over the years. My wife, Nancy and I arrived at the track earlier than most and I managed to get my car off the trailer and acquire a primo space in the track's garage. Those that arrived later would have to set up outside, except for one guy who arrived late and asked if I could move my car a bit, so he could fit his Healey inside, out of the weather. Kind 'a *ballsy*, I thought. I naturally accommodated his request. That guy was Norm Berk. It turns out this was his first



Figure 2: End of Day Track Walk with Fellow Racers

foray into vintage racing and he was in the driving school as well. We have since come to be great friends. The VSCCA allows students to drive just about any car during the driving school and Norm decided to bring his BJ8 since his Elva Courier was still being painted. It would be ready later that year, just in time for the Pittsburg Vintage Gran Prix, where he won his class as a rookie. I guess he got more out of driving school than I did. Rich Maloumian and the Maloumian Clan were there as well. I remember he provided donuts for the drivers meeting--paying it forward for later indiscretions. Rich is a great driver but he knows nothing about cars. I remember he developed a coolant

leak in his newly rebuilt engine. I took the opportunity to rub elbows and gave him a suggestion on how to deal with the issue. I have since become Rich's go-to-guy for advice on everything from trailer accessories to video surveillance. But, when it comes to the cars, Norm is "the man."



Figure 3: Rookie Stripes

In 2008 I drove my car at events in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the season culminated at the Lime Rock Historic in Connecticut. Throughout that first season, I'd been driving on a set of street radials that I purchased from Pepboys for 26\$ each. I drove in the Preservation Class, so it's basically just running laps, getting seat time and developing that muscle memory for each track. For the Historic, I decided it was time to step up to a set of Vintage Racing Dunlops at \$380 each.

Best Lap Time in 2008 - 1:42. I

think Rich lapped me four times in that race.

I guess that performance was as expected. I'd read a few books on how to drive faster. I had a general understanding of the physics of grip and momentum but I just couldn't imagine how I would be competitive since I couldn't even manage to pass anyone. As I drove home from that first year of vintage racing, I thought about how rare and fantastic the opportunity was to be on these historic tracks, and I wondered how impossible it was for me to actually do well and win a race. But I did have fun and I couldn't wait to get back for my second year.

Year Two: 2009

In 2009 I decided to join a second Racing club in order to be able to drive at additional tracks in the North East. This required the addition of a roll bar and a fuel cell. I had the roll bar done by a professional and I configured it so that it could be easily removed. The impact to the look of the car was minimal. Results at the Lime Historic were considerably better. Best Lap Time 1:15ish.

The final race weekend of the 2009 season was a club race called the VSCCA Fall Finale. On the last lap, of the last race on the last day, "IT" happened! I wrecked. Yes, if you're going to go racing, eventually, you'll "run out of talent." On the upside, it was the final lap of the season and I was racing for first place. This gave me the entire winter to fix the car. With the help of some great friends. I borrowed a significantly better welder than what I owned and my friend Mike Richmond drew the entire front frame section in 3D CAD so that we could fashion repair sections. A little body work and paint and I was ready for the spring of 2010.

That second year I did manage to pass a few cars and even though I was racing for a win, that was only by virtue of a limited field, Healeys and Morgan only and that just about every other car dropped out for mechanical reasons. To me it seemed like I was always driving right on the edge. I spun out several times that year. A win still seemed impossible.

Best Lap Time for the 2009 Fall Finale, before the crash, 1:13.7.

Years Three-Five: 2010-2012 (Now #102)



Figure 4: Pittsburgh Vintage Gran Prix

ver the 2010-2012 seasons I added three new track experiences - New Jersey Motorsport Park, Watkins Glen and The Pittsburgh Vintage Gran Prix. Pittsburgh is one of the few vintage events that takes place on actual city streets. You are very close to the spectators and they let you feel it. In 2011, I installed a set of new brake pads with uprated friction material. By mid-2012 my engine, which was uprated to 100M specs with an 8.5:1 compression, was getting tired and began to leak a lot of oil. I pulled the engine and had what is called a *refresh* done. I had the guys at ABT put in new rings and honed the piston bores. I also had an

aftermarket Denis Welch rear engine seal installed. This was a significant improvement to the condition of the floor in my trailer. It was close, but the boys responded and that work was turned around in two weeks and I was ready for the 2012 Lime Rock Historic.

Best Lap time 2012 - 1:12.89.

That third year was a lot of fun. I actually was doing quite a bit of passing and now strategy came into play. I started to learn my regular competitors' style of driving and the capability of their cars and I began to choose the right point to make a safe pass. Drivers started coming by after a race and thanking me for a good *dice* and complaining that I got them on the last lap. Another big change came during this period. The Healey was now number 102. This was my mentor's, Jim Smith's number who had retired. A club member offered the number to me and I accepted it with honor. "It was only fitting" that another Blue Healey would wear that number, Jim's son, later said to me.

There were few big Healeys amongst my competitors. Generally, I would find myself in with Morgans', MGA's, and Alfas. Occasionally, during a festival race, where there are many cars that are not in the club, I would dice with Porsches, 914 and 912's. There are faster and slower cars in each of these makes depending a lot on the driver but also the extent of modification. Gradually it became less about measuring my improvements via lap time and slowly became more about improving amongst these competitors. Catching them, passing them and staying ahead of them.

Year Six: 2013

2013 was an off-year for me. During a race at Watkins Glen, I had a violent spin in Turn 10. No damage to the car but the off-road excursion did something to my neck. It took me a while to figure out but I managed to pinch a nerve and had to undergo vertebrae fusion. The operation was an instant success but my doctor wouldn't let me drive in the Historic that year. So, no track time for me. But the Healey didn't miss out. My friend and chief mechanic for the #102, Mike Richmond, stepped up and drove for that event. He had been driving it throughout that season and he did a 1:13.8.



Figure 5: Thompson, CT - 2014

In My Car, as a rookie! I have to admit - that was a serious call to action for me. I was only making small advancements in my performance since my crash in 2009 and most of the advancement was at the end of the season. I was not carrying over my best performances from previous falls to subsequent springs. This would all

change. In 2014 the VSCCA would be back at Thompson Connecticut. This was the track where it all began for the VSCCA. The circuit was originally a road course that was shortened to just an oval for NASCAR but in 2014 the track had been rebuilt to the original road course and they invited the VSCCA and VRG Race Clubs back for a combined vintage event. This was great for me. Only 45 minutes away from my home. Mike still didn't



Figure 6: Lime Rock CT, 2014 - Rick Vs. Cone

have a car of his own so my car did double duty and there was lots of track time. Earlier in the year, at the first event of the season, at the Lime Rock Spring Sprints. I improved my time to a 1:11.4. This was significant, I was finally maintaining what I'd learned in the previous year. Mike's performance was definitely the kick I needed to get some "giddy up". By year's end I would do a 1:10.3 at the Fall Finale. There's a fantastic picture taken by Ed Hyman, the club photographer. It's of me exiting the west bend turn - a bit off-track, enough to take out a cone. That turned out to be my best lap of the year.

Years Seven and Eight: 2015-2016

Over the 2015-2016 seasons I made several changes to the car. I did a complete engine rebuild, which included increasing the compression to 100-S specs. I also modified the stock single master cylinder brake system to a dual cylinder, required for the VRG club races. Both of these changes resulted in problems. The dual cylinder brake system meant that it would require a bit more foot pressure to achieve the same deceleration but it was safer and that's why the VRG requires it. The higher compression eventually damaged my original steel head. I never did compute the actual compression ratio, before racing the car. This turned out to be almost 11:1 – Not recommended by the folks at Denis Welch. Repetitive deck surfacing to both the block and the head added to the overall engine compression. I'd also been running with the original brass radiator. These factors contributed to overheating. I replaced the head with an aluminum Denis Welch unit that many drivers have been using and I installed an aluminum radiator. This time I measured the compression and it was 10.4:1, just where I wanted it to be. I was ready in time for the 2015 Historic.

This new head made all the difference. I was making some significant passes in many places on the track that I'd never thought possible and one pass that I probably shouldn't have. It was late in the race and I was attempting to pass some of the back markers to keep up with the guys I was racing with. I came up on an MGA. Over the years I'd progressed steadily and I was comfortable passing the Morgan's and the MGA's. I had progressed up to the Alfa's of which there are many. Some of them, new drivers who are a little slower than me but some are very fast. During the past year I had been working within the middle group of the Alfa Giuliettas. A great bunch of racers and we all know our driving styles and are comfortable in close quarters. It's a lot of fun and it's the best part of the sport. Well, this MGA didn't race with us that often. He wasn't in our club and I made a late pass at the end of the straight. He either didn't see me or didn't care, but he *chopped* right down on me and I was going to run right into his door if I didn't do something quick. I found a clear piece of grass at the end of the straight on the inside to escape to, but I lost control and ended up back on to the track. Cars were going all around me, my driver's side door opened for a second (I regretted chuckling the many times I saw Healey drivers do this during a Gymkhana) and I finally came to a stop on the outside of the track along with a couple of my buddies. We were unscathed and there's a fantastic picture of me sides ways in the track to prove it.



Figure 8: New Head



Figure 7: Sideways at Lime Rock Vintage

Best Lap time 2015 - 1:08.92 - but best of all I was solidly among the Alfas.

Years Nine and Ten: 2017-2018

For the 2017- 2018 seasons, I seemed to be putting things all together. The motor was sorted with the Denis Welch head and the transmission was converted to a non-overdrive configuration with Sebring close gear ratio. I made up for the lack of over-drive with a faster 3.5 rear end. Small things like the aluminum radiator and aluminum louvered bonnet were keeping things cool in the engine and I was consistently carrying over my improvements from previous Falls to subsequent Springs.

Best Lap Time 2018 - 1:07.3

Year Eleven: 2019

My first race weekend for the 2019 season was the VSCCA Spring Sprints at Lime Rock. This race over the years was a good benchmark for me to see how much I had lost over the winter and a good indication as to how well I might do in the coming year. This is a club event. Mostly VSCCA members whom I've become familiar and confident racing with as my fellow competitors. The races begin with qualifying heats on Friday and these usually set your position in the grid for the weekend. On this occasion, the stewards were not doing this and it was a first-come-first-serve for every race. Unfortunately, I was a bit late to the grid on the Saturday morning race and I got positioned in the back. I contemplated, this was going to be a lesson in passing and from the start, got down to business. I quickly made my way past the rookies and slow back markers, and past the MGAs and Morgan's that I diced with back in 2014. I could see the Alfas ahead of me and within a few laps I was beginning to make my way through the slower Giulietta's and up to the middle group of Alfas'. I was trying to catch up with my friend and closest competitor Jim Stein driving his Porsche 356 but alas, the race ended and I finished fourth behind Jim and the two fastest Alfa's in the Club.

That race was remarkable in that it replayed my progression in the sport over the past ten years. Passing cars in similar ways as I had done over the years. Remembering their weaknesses and my strengths and taking advantage and making the passes where it was safe and effective. But the weekend wasn't over.

I was not going to make the same mistake for the afternoon race and I arrived early to be gridded 2nd. I really wanted to be gridded 4th, but at least I was up front. The two fast Giulietta's, driven by Roger Cassin and Stephen Lehrman were gridded in 3rd and 4th and I figured they would be on me from the start and probably would dispense with me rather quickly. The race began with another Alfa, a coupe driven by Sandy McNeil who started at poll. We ran the first lap with little drama. Sandy kept the lead. She is difficult to pass. At the start of the second lap I pulled way left to let the two fast Alfas get by. Now I had three Alfas in front of me. Within a half a lap one of the Alfas and I found some day light on the inside and made a move-up leaving Roger in fourth. Roger has proven many times to be the fastest of all of us. Unfortunately for Roger, a car had gone off on the main straight and there were tow trucks deployed. This meant a yellow flag on the main straight. The prime spot for Roger to overtake. I made my move in West Bend and made my pass under the bridge, before the yellow flag zone. Within a lap I caught and passed the lead car driven by Stephen. What was happening? I was in the lead! Roger had gotten stuck behind the slower Alfa and couldn't make the pass on the straight because of the yellow. But soon that would change and he was on a tear to catch up to us. On the final lap, I saw him coming. I basically surrendered and pulled wide left again to let him go. But then I thought wait a minute, he's carrying way too much speed. I let him *zing* by and made the perfect under move in the Big Bend right hander. I always wanted to do that. He was carrying so much speed, he had his hands full and I made the perfect late apexing turn and carried a lot of speed through the turn and exited with good separation from Roger. I was back in the lead! Now I only needed to turn the perfect lap. A well-versed mantra passed through my head and I got to work. Muscle memory came to bear. All efforts were made to avoid the brake. I made the final turn on to the main straight. I'd done it! I was going to win. Roger had done his best to catch up but the day was mine. I took the checker and had a glorious victory lap. I waved to Norm who watched from the top of his trailer and Bob and Jim, big Healey fans on

Spectator Hill. Exiting the track, I got a thumbs up from Roger. He knew what I was feeling. He'd felt it many times.

Best Lap Time – Final Lap -- 1.07.99

On my ride home, I thought about my first ride home from a race weekend, roughly 10 years ago when I questioned, was I ever going to win?

I will be at Lime Rocks Fall Festival in Lime Rock, Connecticut, Labor Day weekend. Please stop by the paddock and look for the Blue #102.



Figure 9: Team: Black Flag Racing (Rick, Norm, Richie, Duane, Mike)

Photos Credits

RickWithHelmutAtThompson, -Ed Hyman

RichieHitMe, -Mike Richmond

RickRichNorm2012(Rick, Rich, Norm), -Mike Richmond

RookieStripes, -Ed Hyman

RickAtPittsburgVintageGP2011, -Ed Hyman

Thompson2015, -Ed Hyman

FastestLap2014(RickVsCone), -Ed Hyman ***

NewAluminumHead, -Rick Neves

RickSideways2015, - Bearded Mug Media ***

TeamBlackFlagRacing(Rick, Norm, Rich, Duane, Mike), -Michelle Burman ***