

Second Oldest, Still Racing

by George Michael "Mike" Harmuth, Poughkeepsie, New York
With Assistance from Dave Belden and the NY-SCCA

I am researching the history of my racing Spitfire. I'm working with the NY-SCCA region to find out when the original logbook was issued for my 1963 Spitfire4. My family is also into Spitfires, my wife and oldest son both have 1980 1500s. My other son has a '72 MkIV that he rebuilt the engine in last winter. Besides the '63 Spit race car, I also have a '75 1500, my first Triumph, and a '70 GT6 which will emerge this spring after a two year restoration following a sideswipe.

During my research on the racecar, I received a letter from Dave Belden, a former owner, about some of the car's early history.

Hi Mike,

Well, I can answer some of your questions. Of course off the top the car is like your father's axe, much replaced from back in the day. The fiery crash in Big Bend that shows in one of your pictures resulted in a lot of new stuff. I was concussed and didn't take the car home; it was taken by two Spitfire racing friends (Buddy Norton and Steve Johnson) and was disassembled at Steve's shop before I ever got to Providence to see the wreck. The car was rebuilt with a new (used) rear body. The tranny, diff., and nose were original though after that resurrection. I believe this was in '77.

I purchased the car in late '68 or early '69 for the '69 season from Jim Shellington. The car was originally built as a race car by Charlie Rainville, one of the really key people in New England racing in those days and was for his own use. Supposedly it was the first Spit into R.I. and Charlie, as service mgr. at the dealer, got his hands on it right away. As it turned out Charlie didn't use it a lot and I have no record or recollection of his outings with the car. At this time he was an active official (he later was Competition Director for IMSA), changing wives, and going into business for himself. And in '65 and '66 he picked up a paid ride with Team Starfish, the Chrysler Barracuda team in the early Tran Am. Needless to say the Spit was not high on his priority list.

I don't know when he sold it to Shellington or anything about it what Shellington did with it; my impression is not too much, but I don't know for sure. When I purchased the car it was a ways from being fully prepared. Of course the rules were changing at that time so what seemed underprepared to me may have been all that was allowed a couple of years earlier. I fairly quickly (in the first year or two) put on the Minilites and lowered the car and started in on the rear end. It became a decent car and by '71 I could win with it.

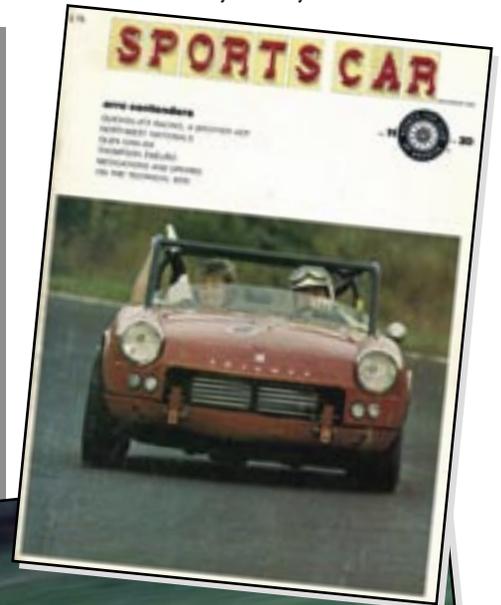
I won the NAARC (then Area 1) championship once only. Having won the NAARC Championship, I decided to move up and concentrate on Nationals for '73. Unfortunately I picked a bad year because in '73 I was elected New England Region RE and we had some real "issues". Additionally my job was stressful and on Memorial day I ran the car into the woods at Thompson for no good reason. I was ahead of Joe Hauser when I went off though. Turned out maybe there was a good reason because later that day I collapsed and was in the hospital for a week getting two pints of blood a day to straighten out a bleeding ulcer.

My racing for the rest of the year was minimal and after my wife (on the Sports Car cover) was killed in a car crash in Nov. my '74 was pretty quiet also. Finally in '76 I got serious and ran enough Nationals to finish 4th in the division and go to Atlanta. During that season I won at least two Nationals at L.R. and Bridgehampton and did well elsewhere. I was going well at Atlanta, in the top ten early on, when a rocker broke. I was in good company here in the NEast that year; the other three guys who I ran near all season finished 1,2 and 4 at the run-offs. The two Hausers were 1 and 2 and Bernie ? in a Spit was 4th.

After the car was crashed at the '77 early LR National my season was dead stop but I did get out with the rebuilt/new car for the LR Labor Day National and beat Alan Sadwin for first in a great fight. Probably the best race I've ever done. I didn't do much in next couple of years, local nationals and the occasional regional; I remember one real good race with George Dennis (Spit) and Joe Hauser at the Glen and this and that but I don't recollect that I won any Nationals. I was ready for something else and sold the car to Lee Auclair around the end of the decade.

So that's it for me with the car the first time around. I didn't keep much in the way of records unfortunately and my memory could be better. Obviously I also had it for some years later, backdated and running usually the SVRA Glen race where I think it won its class six or so years in a row. I occasionally wonder how many engines went into that car in the time; well into double figures. I should also say that almost to the end of my second time with the car it always had an 1147 GProd engine.

Dave Belden





▲ The garage full of Spits
▼ Red#7 ready to race.



Dave Belden sold the car to Terry Smith of Sherman, CT. Terry updated the roll cage, changed the engine to a small journal 1296. He ran some track day events with it, as well as a driver's school but he never raced it. His new business started taking up all his time so he put the car up for sale.

I was racing an open wheel formula car in the SCCA F5 class. The F5 car was fun but required too much work so I was looking for another type of race car to play with. My brother had a '68

Mk3 Spitfire in '74, my first exposure to the breed. I bought a '75 1500 Spitfire in 1981 and drove that for a few years (still have it).

Looking on the internet for car options, I came across Terry's ad. It had been ten years since I'd driven a Spitfire but I had mostly fond memories of them. The car was only 40 miles away, the price was right and it included a trailer, which sealed the deal.



Red #7 supported by a great team!

I started racing it the following spring with the SCCA, in the Historic Racing Group (HRG) <http://historicracinggroup.yolasite.com> and in G, later H-Production class. My first event was the spring race at Pocono. Halfway through the race I started smelling smoke but I was having a good, close race with a Corvair and thought it was the oil smoke coming off his car as he shifted. When we slowed down for the infield section of the track, the smoke turned into flames. I was on fire, but the engine was still running. I drove it to the nearest flag station. The wide eyed corner workers ran to me and put it out. When the smoke cleared, there was a six inch hole in the block where a connecting rod had become a dis-connected rod and left the car. Even with the damage, the engine kept running. I was impressed and disgusted at the same time. What did I get myself into? I dragged the car home and did my first of "I've lost count" engine swaps.

My first year with the HRG I won my first championship, in the Group 1, under 1300cc class. I've won four more HRG Group 1 championships. After the first year, I started racing in production class as well as the HRG. Some weekends I was in eight sessions or more, four qualifying and four races between the two groups. I'd finish a session and change from treaded tires, required for HRG, to slicks for the prod class. I went through three tire guns in two seasons, but the amount of track time I got allowed me to really learn the car and how to set it up. In 2008, I won three championships HRG group 1, NJ Road Racing Series and the North Atlantic Road Racing Championship (NARRC).

In 2009, while racing at Limerock, the first HRG event of the year, my differential broke a tooth and jammed going down the main straight. The car twisted the driveshaft like a pretzel, the universals sheared off the rear axles. The car spun in traffic, and went head first into the guardrail.



Repairing the car took the rest of the season, the new Russ Moore axles were the longest lead item. After hearing about Dave's problems with stock axles, I wasn't going to run with anything else. 2010 was a development year, I spent lots of track time getting the chassis tuned back in, as well as engine problems. It all paid off, in 2011, the team won three championships, HRG, New York Road Racing Series and my second NARRC.

2012 is starting with a trip to Road Atlanta for the Mitty and Triumph celebration. I'm hoping for a clean sweep and four championships this year, the three we won last year and NJ, I only lost it by six points last year.

What I love most about my car isn't the winning, it's racing and preserving a time capsule from the golden years of sports cars. People are always coming up to me at events and talking about their experiences with a Triumph back in the day. They had one or their friend did and the stories just flow for hours. The common themes are how much fun they had, what "tweaks" were made to them or what they had to fix on the side of the road. 🏁

