



Lotus at LeMans - 1956

report by Ian Smith from Lotus - the First Ten Years

Despite the adverse criticism in the Daily Press following the tragic accident in 1955 and gloomy forebodings about the future of Le Mans, the classic 24-hour race was held a year later on Saturday and Sunday, July 28th and 29th. A great deal of work had been carried out on the circuit in order to improve the safety factor -- the pits had been rebuilt and set back so as to increase the width of the road at that part, modifications had been made to the fast corner under the Dunlop bridge just past the pits and also to the turn at *Arnage*. There had also been considerable resurfacing in the "*Maison Blanche*" area. Very strict rules now existed concerning entering the pits and drivers had to pull in well before the pit area to the right of a yellow line painted on the road -- any infringement of this regulation would entail immediate disqualification. In order to reduce high speeds the engine capacity of "prototype" cars was limited to 2 ½ litres and fuel tanks to 130 litres, which could not be refuelled before a minimum of 34 laps had been covered. One item of interest to Team Managers arising from the modifications was a decrease in lap distance of 8/100ths of a mile -- just over 140 yards. This meant new lap speeds and theoretically faster ones than the year before.

Team Lotus had definitely decided to go all out to make up for their bad luck of the year before and entered



three cars. Two of these were of 1100cc capacity and the third was powered by the single overhead camshaft 1500cc version of the Coventry Climax engine. All three cars were accepted – a pleasing indication of the high esteem in which the marque was held by the French organisers.

It was obvious from the requirements of the new Regulations that considerable modification would be needed to make the existing Team Lotus cars eligible for the race. The main alteration of increasing the interior width of the cockpit being virtually impossible without completely rebuilding the cars, there was no alternative but to build three new cars.

Basically the special cars were very similar to the production Elevens but the chassis frames were wider at the centre section and swept in abruptly just ahead of the rear wheels so that the track of these remained at the standard width. Bucket seats were fitted, as were twin spot lights, each side of the frontal air intake. These additional lights were fixed behind plastic covers which kept the front contours of the car perfectly smooth. The new Regulations called for a full-width windscreen of a minimum depth and a windscreen wiper. The screens fitted to the Team cars sloped backwards so as to maintain the aerodynamic shape of the car and they also wrapped round on each side to provide extra protection for the driver — the side portions being fitted to the drop-down doors.

It is no exaggeration to say that when completed the three new cars looked beautiful. The turnout was immaculate. The little green cars sparkled in the sunlight, proudly displaying their large numbers 32, 35 and 36. They were even endowed with a thin yellow line on their flanks which broke on the door section to show the words TEAM LOTUS.

A very favourable impression was created at scrutineering and the French press began to ponder on the chances of a Lotus win on the Index of Performance and the Porsche Team became very interested in these perfectly streamlined little cars. The official "verification" did not bring many headaches — certainly nothing which was to cause the mechanics much trouble. Colin Chapman must have felt very proud as the three identical little cars passed along the row of Scrutineers tables. His pride however did not help him at the Drivers' medical, where, for the second year in succession, the presence of a pretty nurse was too much for him to be able to oblige in the bottle provided !

Team Management was again in the hands of John Eason Gibson aided by his timekeepers of the year before. A new regulation concerning signaling was to still further add to the burdens of the Team Manager this year, for now all signaling had to be carried out from special pits just after *Mulsanne* corner. These secondary pits were connected by telephone to the main pits and anyone who has used a French telephone might well be excused having doubts about the effectiveness of this arrangement. However, Team Lotus found the system satisfactory — thanks in no small measure to Lotus driver John Lawry, who ran the signaling pit with great efficiency.

Colin was to drive the 1500cc car with "Mac" Fraser and the 1100s were in the hands of Team drivers Reg Bicknell and Cliff Allison. Last year's member of the Team, Peter Jopp, rejoined the fold to partner Reg, and private owner Keith Hall was invited to partner Cliff. Again the *Auberge de St. Nicholas* was Team headquarters and M. Mica was called on to supply even more Coca Cola for the enlarged equipe. The courtyard behind the hotel was too small for three cars so the Team virtually took over a small garage at the opposite end of the little town. This provided excellent working space but had one drawback — a glass roof. How the sun beat down during the days before the race, and how the mechanics sweltered.

Unfortunately the fine weather did not hold, and at 4 p.m. on the Saturday a light drizzle was falling as Stirling Moss rocketed into the lead in the Aston Martin and only the blue Talbot-Maserati was left motionless on the line. The crowded pits were amazed to see Colin flash through in 16th position, just behind Cornet in the 1500cc Maserati and leading Behra's Talbot-Maserati. The 1500 was going magnificently and Colin was well up with the "works" Porsche coupes. At 5 p.m. he was 17th overall—lying fifth in his class behind three Porsches and the Maserati. Cliff Allison was driving very well and was in 22nd place, leading the 1100cc class. Then the Maserati dropped a valve and the Team Lotus 1500 moved up a place in its class with the "works" Porsches in line ahead formation in front.

The first refueling stops were all completed without any undue loss of time and the three No. 2 drivers were soon settled down on the damp, slippery, circuit. As the light began to fade, valve trouble struck at the Storez/Polensky Porsche and "Mac" Fraser found himself with only the Herrmann/Maglioli and Frankenberg/Trips cars ahead of him in his class. After the second pit stops, the lone American-entered Cooper, of Hugus and Bentley, was just ahead of the two 1100cc Lotuses, which were now six laps behind the flying 1500.

At midnight the weather was worse — a cold wind accompanied by continual showers had thinned the crowd who now huddled in the shelter of the booths, stalls and tents which make up the unique atmosphere of Le Mans. The bad weather could not stop all the fun of the fair with its blaring hurdy-gurdy music, shouts of vendors and clatter of dishes trying to compete with the gabble of the public address loudspeakers and the roar of the cars on the circuit.

Driving conditions were terrible. Cars shot through the pit area in a wall of spray and the three Lotus drivers became wetter and wetter. Behind the wheel in the Lotuses the drivers had a nightmare ride, for their cars were traveling at "in between" speeds — a very hazardous experience under bad conditions. It meant a continual look out for the tail lights of a slower car ahead and the ever-present worry that the headlamps behind were of a much faster car which must be given plenty of room to overtake. Tough though they were, both Colin and Mac later admitted that the conditions were frightening. As he drove through the night into the lashing rain Colin began to long for an excuse to visit the comfort of the pits, but nothing happened and on he had to go—fighting back the nagging desire to invent trouble and pack it in. Soon after he took over during the night "Mac" experienced bad cramp in his right leg—the cramp was genuine and most painful. As he tore down the *Mulsanne* straight, counting the markers on his right so he knew when to

pull over the wheel to take the invisible swerve at the end of the straight, he fought the desire to call at the pits. His reasoning was rather the reverse of Colins' — he dare not stop as he was sure everyone would think he had invented the cramp in order to quit the cockpit !

As day began to dawn and the tricky mist which always settles on some part of the circuit in the early hours of morning began to drift and drop in patches, Cliff Allison came swooping down the straight from the Hippodrome cafe and without warning a large dog rushed into the road. Cliff did not have a chance — killed the dog stone dead and badly crumpled the front of the Lotus. On inspection it was found that the damage was extensive and so the car had to be retired — a cruel blow as it was running perfectly.

With the coming of full daylight the rain ceased and the road began to dry. The remaining 1100cc car was still locked in combat with the Cooper. The leading Porsche had retired and so now the 1500cc was in second place in its class but a long way behind the remaining “works” Porsche, which was still lapping very fast. Then just after midday, with under four hours to go, fate struck again and the 1500 coasted to a halt — a big end bolt had broken — tragic luck after its brilliant progress for 172 laps.

Consolation was in the fact that the remaining 1100cc car was steadily winning its duel with the Cooper.



With three hours to go the Lotus passed the Cooper, moving into eighth place overall. Peter Jopp was now at the wheel and slowly drew ahead of the Cooper. A pit stop by the latter put Peter just over a lap ahead — then the Cooper began to catch up again. John Eason Gibson and his timekeepers were convinced that Peter was a lap ahead of the Cooper, but Colin Chapman was not so sure and insisted that the “Faster” signal be given. Peter tried to increase speed but this only resulted in a spin so with just over an hour to go, the car was brought in and without oil or fuel being added, Reg shot back into the race. Refreshed by rest, the new driver began slowly to draw away from the Cooper. The chase was on — a chase which was not

necessary. The little green car flew round faster and faster, and soon the stop watches in the pit showed that he might catch the Cooper, but it would be a close thing. As the two cars flashed past the pits just before 4 p.m., there was still quite a gap between them. At the start of the *Mulsanne* straight, Reg suddenly saw the Belgian entered Jaguar of Laurent and Rouselle in his mirror. By frantic arm waving he conveyed to the driver of the larger car that he wanted a tow past the Cooper in front of him — response was immediate. The little Lotus tucked in behind the tail-finned car and was sucked along down the long straight, the driver of the larger car being very careful not to get too far ahead of his charge. It was a shock to the Cooper driver to be passed at speed at the end of the straight by the Lotus- still nudging the tail of its benefactor !

The pit personnel could hardly believe their eyes when the Lotus crossed the line well ahead of the Cooper. They did not stop to “reason why” for they were too busy congratulating each other. So, after two unfortunate retirements, the third car “brought home the bacon” with a win in the 750-1100cc class at an average speed of 87.97 mph, fourth place in the Index of Performance and seventh place on general classification. The little car had completed 252 laps in all and had enabled Colin to keep his promise of the year before that he would be back again to win. It transpired that both the charts and the timekeepers had been correct, and that the last hour's drama had not really been necessary, as was confirmed later by John Cooper, who couldn't understand why the Lotus — a lap ahead — should suddenly start driving as if it were a 5-lap club event.

A very elated Team returned to Mayet and M. Mica, after 24 hours at the circuit, providing for the entourage worked miracles and provided a wonderful celebration dinner. The drivers and mechanics after their hard work and the inclement weather were tired and dirty, but the wine that flowed soon revived them.

The second visit to “*Les Vingt-Quatre Heures*” had added much to the experience of the Team in long-distance racing. When the official figures were published, they told the pleasing story that over the measured kilometre on the *Mulsanne* straight, the 1500 had averaged 128.2 mph and the class-winning 1100, 119.44 mph -- concrete proof of the aerodynamic efficiency of the Hornsey cars. However, Colin and Mike were looking at the 138.09 mph recorded by the fastest Porsche and were wondering if the new 1500cc engine being developed by Climax's would enable them to comfortably exceed that figure in 1957.

There was no need for Colin to assure M. Mica of his return the next year — that was obvious. The proprietor of the *Auberge de St. Nicholas* was very proud of his visitors from England and was already assuring his friends and the local press that next year Lotus would return to win even more prizes.

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