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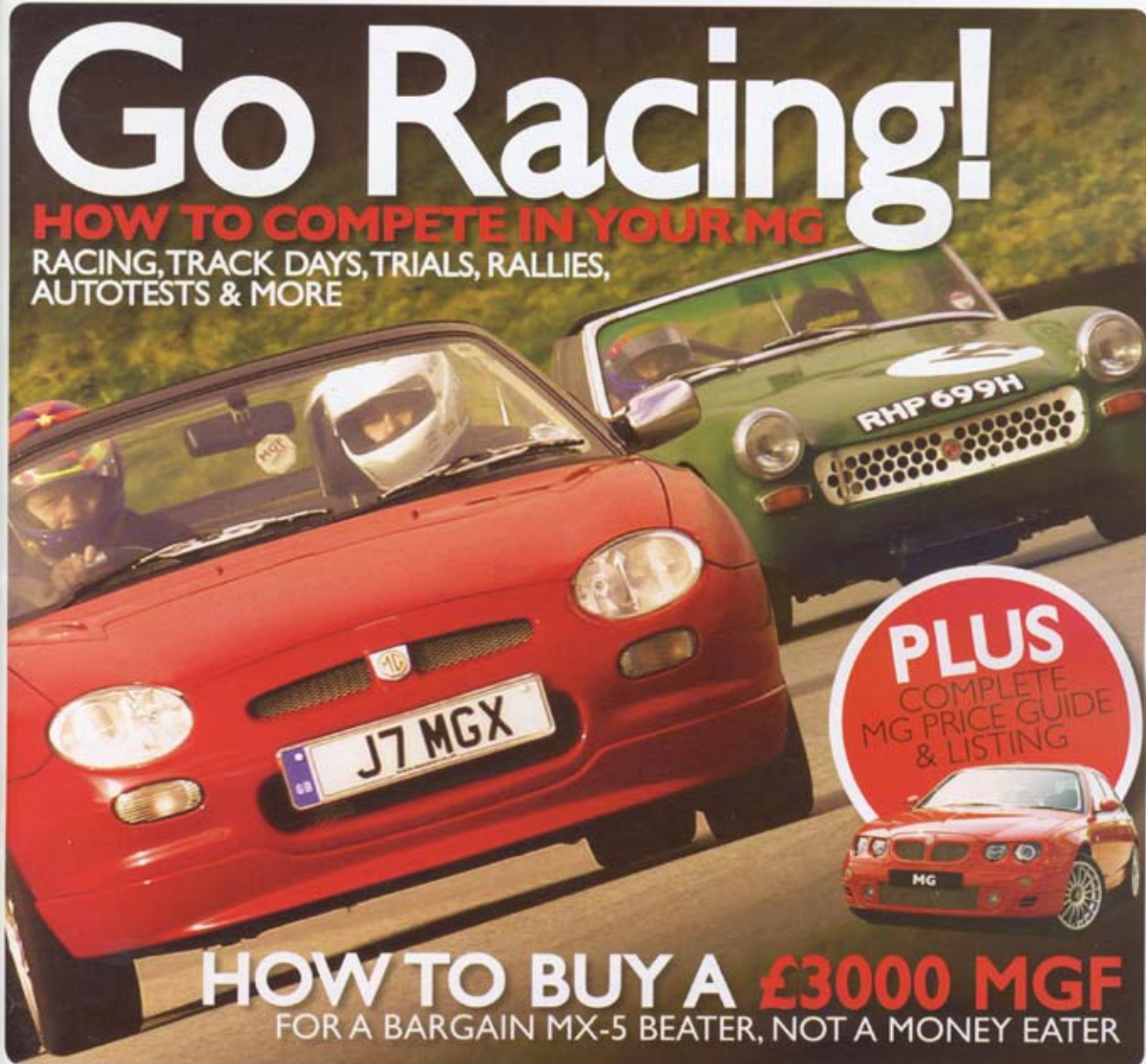
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Motto-bodied TD

THE MG FROM ITALY

When racing MG TDs started resembling moving chicanes ahead of faster rivals from OSCA and Porsche, one man decided to do something about it. Inspired in the USA, built in Italy and powered by Britain, this is the story of a unique survivor

Words: Simon Goldsworthy Photographs: Richard Owen, The Creative Workshop





Left and below: Handful of period shots proved invaluable in recreating the car, including the missing emblem.



MG's T-series can lay claim to a long and illustrious career in motorsport. Initially it was the renowned Cream Cracker works entries who won major successes in both trialling and endurance racing with the TA. But the XPAG engine that debuted in the TB was a more promising base for tuning and post-war it was used by a number of budding engineers to power their specials, men such as Colin Chapman, John Cooper, John Tojeiro and Brian Lister.

By the beginning of the 1950s, George Philips was doing great things with a special-bodied TC at Le Mans, so much so that the factory built him another for 1951: the EX175 prototype that was featured in *MG Enthusiast* (January 2006). This, of course,

showed the way forward to a new generation of MGs with the MGA, but internal BMC politics delayed its arrival until 1955. In the meantime, with its cars often outclassed on the track and with the tragic events at Le Mans, Abingdon pulled in its competitive horns and it was left largely to privateers to carry the MG torch in national racing.

Nowhere was this torch carried more enthusiastically than in the USA by men such as John Edgar (who got a reliable 148bhp through supercharging) and Ken Miles (whose R1 special was for a while almost unbeatable in under-1500cc events). And then there was David Ash, a driver of note who worked for the East Coast MG importers Inskip Motors in New York. Ash was determined to prove that the TD running gear could still be competitive against the Osca MT4s and Porsche 550

Motto-bodied TD



Clockwise from top left:

The Motto as delivered; bonnet removed during disassembly and documentation; transmission and floor pans also during disassembly and documentation; engine out; car completely disassembled with paint stripped by hand as the skin is paper thin and can easily be damaged; fixing incorrect holes and damaged edges; fixing more holes, dents and cracks; reskinned door being fitted.



THE INTERVENING YEARS HAD NOT BEEN KIND. THE MOTTO HAD OBVIOUSLY BEEN HEAVILY USED AND SUBJECTED TO A NICKEL-AND-DIME RESTORATION AROUND 20 YEARS PREVIOUSLY'

Spyders that were trouncing standard-bodied TDs on the track. To do that, he needed a lightweight aluminium body and in the early 1950s, that meant almost by default a trip to the carrozzerie of Italy.

Ash contacted Rocco Motto of Carrozzeria Motto in Turin. Motto was justifiably famous for producing beautiful bodies that incorporated fine balance and great attention to detail, and he didn't let his standards slip for this commission. His first effort was mated to David Ash's own well-used TD chassis, at which point it presumably became clear that although this was a great improvement, something even more drastic would be needed to beat the opposition.

So chassis master Gilberto Colombo (Gilco) was commissioned to create two chassis for the second and third bodies built by Motto, with the mechanical package being sent out specially by Syd Enever at MG. One of these Gilco-chassied cars was delivered fully trimmed (lusso) as was Motto's style, while the

The three Motto-bodied TDs were then raced extensively throughout the Midwest and East Coast of America, often as a team, at places such as Watkins Glen, Elkhart Lake, Marlboro and Giant's Despair hillsclimb. But perhaps the Motto TD's greatest triumph came at the Twelve Hour Grand Prix of Endurance, an event better known today as the 12 Hours of Sebring.

This has always been a highly prestigious event, with the elite of the European manufacturers sending their strongest teams to contest it. In 1954, the lusso Motto TD was piloted around the gruelling course by Gus Ehrman and Fred Allen, finishing 11th overall and fifth in class. To put this fine result into perspective, the overall winner was an Osca MT4 driven by no less a luminary than Stirling Moss with Bill Lloyd, but trailing in the Motto's wake were two other Oscas and a pair of Porsche 550 Spyders.

Ash and Inskip had achieved exactly what they had set out to prove, and also lost MG's

off shortly after the Sebring success. The TD-chassied car has recently found its way to Japan and could be seen competing in the Japanese 2004 Mille Miglia, while the Gilco-chassied car with the stripped out body was crashed and destroyed in the 1950s.

The Sebring car was sold initially to a chap called Stanford S Milow, who used it for some casual club racing as well as on the road. It then disappeared for a while, before resurfacing with Sid Giabardo, who also used it on the road as well as displaying it in the Long Island Automobile Museum collection.

When Sid passed away in the 1980s, word got out about the car and that it might be available. There were plenty of interested parties sniffing about, but it disappeared from under their noses when the Motto was sold without warning, rolled out of its garage one night and onto a dealer's trailer. From there it passed into the current owner's hands.

At which point, not a whole lot happened. The owner is a true enthusiast with a fleet of

in Florida (www.TheCreativeWorkshop.com) for restoration. The Motto had to take its place in the queue and didn't reach the front of the line until 2002. Then, at long last, the Motto got the kind of treatment that its beautiful lines and proud history deserved.

The intervening years had not been kind, and the Motto had obviously been heavily used and subjected to a nickel-and-dime restoration around 20 years previously. The nose from the wheels forward was crumpled and full of filler while all the aluminium trim both inside and out was either missing or destroyed. Holes were drilled everywhere for things like indicators and a roll cage, while a supercharger was plumbed in to boost performance. This was not a professional installation, and the chassis was rather crudely chopped about to make it fit. An Austin-Healey screen had also been fitted (which, incidentally, had given rise to false rumours of there being another Motto body built on a

Healey chassis). At least the Gilco chassis had survived well, apart from the missing chunk by the supercharger.

Jason and his team didn't have a whole lot of reference material to work from, little more in fact than half a dozen old photographs. These and a dose of intuition helped them recreate the lines when they replaced the front 1/8 of the car and all the bolt-on panels, leaving them happy that the shape was faithful to its racing condition in the 1950s. The pictures also came in handy as reference points for the front grille, which had gone missing. Not that building a replacement from scratch was straightforward: there are over 30 slats in the design, every one is different and has to be individually made.

Despite the help of those few surviving pictures, the team still spent many hours staring at the car, trying to put themselves in the place of the original fabricators to decide on some of the hidden details. It was three

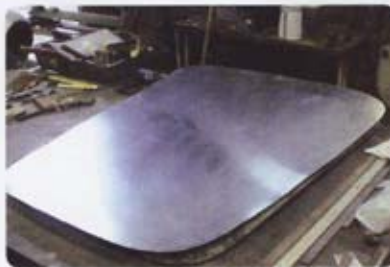
weeks, for instance, before they decided that yes, they really had been crazy enough to run the exhaust underneath the belly pan! But perhaps to illustrate the lengths they went to get it right, a small detail like the emblem is representative. This was missing from the car, but a charcoal rubbing of it was tucked inside the history file. This was scanned into a computer, cleaned up to provide a working picture and then cross-referenced with known entities in the period pictures such as tyres and lights to ensure it was sized correctly. This profile was then cut out of aluminium and shaped to fit the nose of the car before being sent to a casting company who recreated it in bronze. This was then shaped in turn to match the aluminium profile... and that's just for one badge!

In contrast to the bodywork, the mechanical side proved far more straightforward. The creators' plan had always been to prove that the MG running gear could be made



Motto MG at the inaugural New York City Concours d'Elegance, autumn 2005.

Motto-bodied TD



Clockwise from top left:

Rebuilding the nose section of the car; new bonnet as flat aluminium sheet; new bonnet being English-wheeled into shape; completed grille assembly fabricated from scratch using pictures as the only guide; finished body being cleaned, freshly painted car; assembly of the car well under way; finished just days before the Amelia Island Concours.

Bottom: A proud Jason Weng in New York.



'A COMMON REACTION FROM PEOPLE AT THE SHOWS HAS BEEN TO SAY: "WOW. I KNOW MGs AND I THOUGHT I KNEW THEM ALL, BUT I'VE NEVER SEEN THIS BEFORE. IT'S FANTASTIC!"'

competitive, so most of it was relatively stock. In contrast to some rare cars where everything has to be hand-made, very little on the Motto was more than a phone call to Moss away. Having said that, it should not be forgotten that on a special like this, even stock items were rarely bolted where you'd expect them to be and the car had been subjected to over 50 years of people futzing about with it.

As with any racing special, it was important to remain as faithful as possible to the original without restoring out all of the original idiosyncrasies. The car was hand-built, so any metal-basher in the Motto works could have been working on it at any time. That could explain why the passenger door was 1½in shorter than the driver's door, for example, and why no two rolled leather trim finishers around the cockpit were identical. Like any Italian coachbuilder worth his salts, Motto would have been concerned to produce beauty in motion, but so long as the design flowed and the car raced, then perfection was not on the prerequisite list.

Eventually both Jason and the car's owner

understood this and the finished result is not an over-restored art piece destined for a return to the museum showroom. Perhaps it is partly because of this attitude that the car was painted in such a stunning shade of yellow. Originally it had been white, but Jason felt that the lines were so magnificent, they suited a much bolder colour. The owner needed a little persuasion, but eventually they settled on green leather interior and a vibrant yellow exterior. That paint is an Italian shade from the correct era. This might seem a bit hard on MG but, with the coachwork and chassis being hardcore Italian craftsmanship, Jason views the car more as a Motto-bodied MG and the choice of an Italian colour is entirely appropriate. Certainly it met with nothing but approval at its inaugural outing to the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance in 2005, where it won a Blue Ribbon.

The eye-catching colour has probably helped to raise the car's profile too, no bad thing given that the Motto-bodied TDs are still a largely unknown chapter in MG's racing history. A common reaction from

people at the shows has been to say: 'Wow. I know MGs and I thought I knew them all, but I've never seen this before. It's fantastic!'

And now a lot more people can get to know this American-inspired UK-Italian hybrid. The plans are to show it for a year or so, and then go vintage racing. Nothing too competitive and dangerous mind you, just some gentlemen's events to stretch its legs and show the crowds what it is still capable of doing. And for any MG fan lucky enough to be there, that is sure to be a real treat.

