

MONTEREY HISTORIC RACES



ARIZONA'S TIM SHARP: A REAL VINTAGE DRIVER IN A REAL VINTAGE RACE

By HR Driver
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Tim Sharp (#91 1938 Austin 7 Special, right) gains on Mike McNally's #171 1931 Riley 4 Portford at Mazda Laguna Seca Raceway. The Riley boasts 3000cc, the Austin 7 just 850cc.

Tim Sharp can best be described as a real vintage race driver. This is not to say that he actually has much experience racing vintage cars. Before Monterey, Sharp had raced a vintage car just once. However, he did win that race, some two decades ago. What is meant by a real vintage race driver is that Sharp has been racing cars for over forty years. By definition he is a real race driver because of his extensive track experience and a vintage race driver by virtue of his 60-year-old age.

I was intrigued why Sharp made the switch from SCCA and NASA road racing to vintage cars. At the Monterey Historic Races, the most prestigious vintage auto race in America, we interviewed this Gold Canyon resident to find out why he decided to go vintage racing. Then we followed him and the other Arizona drivers during their competition at Monterey.

INTERVIEW WITH ARIZONA'S TIM SHARP

HR Driver: "Several years ago you raced a Factory 5 Cobra in a NASA Western States Championship race at Buttonwillow and finished second. That would seem to make you still competitive in serious road racing. Why switch to vintage racing?"

Tim Sharp: "I haven't closed the door on running some SCCA or NASA endurance races. However, being competitive is not the same as being the best. Young Arizona drivers like Ross Thompson and Spencer (Tim's son who won the Factory 5 West Series) are quicker than I. They race more and are in better physical condition."

HRD: "So, what is the level of competition like in vintage racing? Is it easier?"

TS: "Perhaps not easier, but certainly different. With former pro drivers like Bobby Rahal, John Morton, Jim Busby, John Fitzpatrick and Vic Elford running vintage cars, there is no lack of talent in vintage racing. Of course, vintage racing is really less about the drivers and more about the cars. Actually they are rolling works of art."

HRD: "How is vintage racing different from SCCA and NASA sports car racing?"

TS: "Well first, you are racing on the track with irreplaceable automobiles, many of which cost over a million dollars. You must be respectful of their historic and artistic value."

"In addition, their brakes, tires and the suspension systems are archaic by today's standards. Consequently, you cannot drive them as hard as you would a modern sports car like a Porsche Carrera GT3 or Corvette Z06."

"Finally, the rules are geared toward what we used to call 'Gentlemen Racing' in the early days of road racing. You can pass, but not make aggressive passes like you would in SCCA or NASA road racing. The HMSA is strictly non-contact racing. However, the most skilled drivers will drive their cars quite close to their limits."

HRD: "Why did you pick the Austin 7 Special to race at the Monterey Historic Races? Certainly, there are much bigger and faster cars in your Pre-War Class."

TS: "Bigger and faster, yes. However, as an editor with *Classic Motorsports Magazine*, covering the Monterey Historic Races for many years, I have been impressed by how the inexpensive little Austin 7 Specials do against the larger, more expensive cars in their class. An Austin 7 Special finished second several years ago here."

HRD: "Tell us about the strategy of running a little race car like the Austin 7 Special against larger cars like the Chryslers and Alfa-Romeos."

TS: "The Austin 7 Special has only 850 cc's, so it has about one fifth the displacement of a Chrysler 8 and less than half the cubic inches of an Alfa-Romeo. It can be out-powered on long race tracks and up hills; however, the Austin 7s weigh less, so they handle and brake better on tighter tracks like Laguna Seca. Also, my particular Austin 7 has a supercharger, so it generates a lot of power for a little 850 c.c. machine. Probably comparable to a 1,200 c.c. normally aspirated engine."

HRD: "You raced formula cars in the 1970s to the 1980s. It would seem to me you would have bought one of those cars to race. Why did you decide on a 1938 race car?"

TS: "I probably would be more comfortable racing the Caldwell or Ralt Super Vees which I ran in the 1970s and 1980s; however it would just not seem as if were actually racing a vintage car. I wanted to race a car which was older than I was."

HRD: "Are there any other vintage racers from Arizona here at the Monterey Historics?"

TS: "Arizona has bunches of vintage racers. Probably because Arizona is the classic collector car capital of the world! Craig Jackson of Barrett-Jackson Auctions is a name most Arizonans will know. However, Tommy Thompson, Harley Cluxton, Mike Silverman, Bob Lytle, Steven Hilton, Barbara Blackie, Bob Hardison and Terry Larson, a world renowned Jaguar racer and restorer,



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Tim Sharp (#91 850cc 1938 Austin 7 Special, right) aims for the lead against (left to right, rear) #4 Ed Archer's 3500cc 1915 Ford; #21 Fred Bohlander's 3000cc 1919 Miller "TNT" Special; #60 Dick Cupp's 750cc 1936 Austin 7 Special; and #171 Mike McNally's 3000cc 1931 Riley 4 Portford, in Class 1A, Pre-1940 Sports & Touring Cars.

#12 Terry Larson's 3500cc 1954 Jaguar D-Type, racing in Group 4A, 1956-1961 Sport Racing Cars over 2500cc. The author points out that this car is worth about \$3,500,000, versus Sharp's Austin 7 at more like \$35,000.

are all racing here."

HRD: "How do you expect to do in your first vintage race with the Austin 7 Special?"

TS: "Actually, I haven't a clue. Ideally, I would like to qualify decently and finish the race. We are here to see what we need to do to make the car reliable and competitive."

HRD: "Did you prepare the car for the race yourself?"

TS: (Sharp laughs) "No, I am a driver, not a mechanic. I can do some things on the race car, but Ken Schutze of Cowboy Restorations in Gilbert prepared the car. Ken also works on Terry Larson's Jags, so that pretty much says it all. Ken's a professional."

HRD: "Well, Tim, good luck in qualifying and the race."

TS: "Thanks. We can use all the luck we can get."

TRACKING THE AUSTIN 7 SPECIAL IN QUALIFYING

Sharp is no stranger to the Laguna Seca circuit. He has been winning races at the Laguna Seca track for decades. However, how would he do in a pre-war car which is even older than he is? Would Sharp be able to adapt to a machine which was racing thirty years before he put on his first driving suit? We were about to find out.

Qualifying and practice at the Monterey Historic Races were combined into a single session, less than a half hour long. Thus, it would be very difficult for Sharp to adjust to his new car and find the fastest line around the track in one session. Fortunately, Tim already knew the racing line, so adapting his driving style to his new car was the challenge.

On the first lap, Sharp tucked onto the bumper of John Fitzpatrick's 1900cc BMW 328 to get a draft down the straightaway. However, by the second lap, Tim had pulled the Austin out of the draft. By the third lap, Sharp idled into the pits. Not much time to learn about the handling of the Austin 7 Special, so Sharp must have had mechanical problems.

As it turned out, the steep hill before the infamous "Corkscrew Turn" was causing his car to overheat. Not to worry, however, as the car's cooling system would be purged and the engine was still intact. Furthermore, the Austin had qualified seventh out of twenty seven cars despite having only two timed laps during qualifying.

RACE 1A: PRE-1940 SPORTS & TOURING CARS

Since finding a large radiator for the Austin overnight was not possible, Ken Schutze did everything else possible to reduce the overheating: purging, burping and using Red-Line Water Wetter. On Saturday morning, the Austin left the starting grid sounding crisp; however Sharp knew he could not run the race car hard or the engine would self-destruct.

When the green flag fell, the field bunched up at the Andretti Hairpin. By lap two, Sharp had moved up to sixth. However, the overheating problem arose once again, and that was as far as the Austin 7 Special would advance. Sharp coasted into the pits, parked the car and spared the engine.

As the race unfolded, it was Jan Voboril's three-liter Barber-Warnock Ford holding off Conrad Stevenson's 1939 Alfa-Romeo 2.5-liter and David Swig's 5-liter Chrysler CD-8 for the win. Dick Cupp, driving the only other Austin 7 Special in the race, advanced from his qualifying eleventh position to finish seventh.

Alex Curtis of Scottsdale took fifteenth with his beautiful 1660cc 1935 Frazer Nash. Sedona's Al Moss brought his slick little 1500cc MG-TC home in eighteenth. Both drivers put on excellent drives in their small-bore race cars.

ARIZONANS MAKE A STRONG SHOWING AT MONTEREY

Terry Larson finished second in his 1952 Jaguar C-Type, never giving the race winner John Buddenbaum a chance to breathe. Tommy Thompson's 1964 Corvette finished third behind the winner John Morton (ex-Nissan factory driver) who was driving the rare 1963 Corvette Grand Sport.

Other excellent performances by Arizonans were turned in by Craig Jackson (10th, AMC Javelin), Jere Clark (16th, AMC Javelin), Steven Hilton (12th, Lister-Jaguar and 13th, Lola T-70), Bob Lytle (15th, Allard J2X), Chris Hines (14th, Echidna Spl) and Michael Silverman (15th, Lister Jaguar).

Arizonans Owen Gibson, Harley Cluxton, Scott Dames and John Breslow had mechanical problems which forced them to park their cars in the pits and wait until next year. As with Tim Sharp and his first race in the Austin 7 Special, they will return with their vintage machines repaired and ready to race.

Hope springs eternal in the hearts of vintage racers and there is always next year! ■

