

## I Want To Go Racing.....

By Jim Allen,

Team 51 Vintage Race Driver

Have you ever been at a race track, watching your favorite old British car navigating a hard right hander and thought to yourself “I can do that”? Well, you very likely can do that! There have been many articles and stories printed in popular automotive magazines that tout the Vintage Racing opportunities and the process of entering this sport, leaving the impression that almost anyone can do it. And, in many cases this is true, but read on folks.....

Once you convince yourself that you would like to join the other drivers on the track, it is critical to put yourself in their place, literally. Mooch a ride with an accomplished driver in a Vintage prepared race car. Do this if you can on a sanctioned track, and use the experience to gauge your comfort in the car, in a racing environment. Watching and participating are two remarkably different experiences. The “You Can Be A Racecar Driver” stories are full of examples of people having invested thousands of dollars in cars and equipment only to find out that they are petrified, or at the very least, very uncomfortable when immersed in the sport. Actually being in the mix, on the track sorts ones level of comfort out very quickly.

For the balance of this piece I will direct most of my comments at the Vintage Racing experience, where I have participated for nearly twenty years. My entry into organized racing was when the sport was just beginning to get a foothold across the country. There were still pockets of “Club Racing” in existence but these tended to be very localized and limited. SCCA was starting to trend to semi-pro activities, bypassing the early sports cars in favor of the growing trend to embrace the modern cars. The guys with the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s era sport cars were looking for an opportunity to run their cars in a controlled environment on major tracks. Organizations such as the SVRA came along to fill this void. Since that time the sport has grown exponentially with sanctioned venues all over the country.

As you begin the process look outside of the sanctioning associations where you will find several Racing Experience Schools that offer one and two day driving opportunities to get that hands-on feel for the sport. You can use one of the school cars or in many cases they allow you to bring and use your own car. This is a very safe and secure way to be put into the racing experience under the tutelage of a professional driver on a real track. These are very controlled events where the desired outcome from the Schools position is for the student to walk away with a smile on their face and the desire to go to the next level. The operative word here is “walk away”. If nothing else any of these schools will improve your day-to-day driving skills.

Okay, you have survived the on-track experience, you're still excited and are committed to move on. From this point forward one of the largest dictators to your level of comfort and participation in any form of Racing is what you can afford, or more to the point, what you are prepared to spend. Let's all understand right here, "it ain't cheap"! An entry-level package for Vintage Racing for example can run from a low of \$10,000 to many times that number! So many factors play into this, but suffice to say if you are reading this and want to get on board, especially at the lower cost end, be prepared to do a lot of the basic prep-work yourself. As with any major undertaking have a budget and stick to it! You may be tempted to go for all of the bells and whistles right out of the box but pace yourself here! You can always add stuff and upgrade equipment later. Focus on the basics and the safety aspects at the beginning, the rest will follow naturally.

Now, go join an accredited sanctioned club or organization. All of these venues have a very strict set of rules and regulations on car preparation, safety standards and driver qualification requirements. Some tend to be training grounds for those inclined to be professionals. Many are geared toward amateur "club" racing. You will be light years ahead on the learning curve if you prepare properly. Most of these organizations offer or promote Driver Schools and Rookie Driver Programs for all entry level participants. If you followed my original advice you will have already attended a Race Weekend program and going back to these very same people will give you a leg up on the learning process. Pick up a copy of Vintage Motorsports or any similar publication dedicated to the sport and you will likely find a list of the Racing organizations that match your interests, which are convenient to your area, and even to your specific type of car.

Another piece of advice that I should offer at this point is to buy a race-prepared car. They are out there, lots of them... offered by disillusioned people, who unadvisedly got into the sport, or have run out of money, or are getting out because of life's conflicts. Just take a look at the classifieds in the back of that Vintage magazine you just bought. The rule here is to know and understand how to get the race history and configuration of the car or cars you are considering. This is very important when pursuing this option. All Sports Racing venues track race history with "log books" or other data to substantiate and authenticate the car. This is the primary item to look for when buying a car ready to race.

Also, now is the time to seek the help of an experienced Race Shop, experienced driver or mechanic to aid in evaluating all aspects of the car during the purchase process. The sanctioning organizations and clubs are very helpful when approached on this subject. All of the sanctioning race groups have a Competition Director that will be more than glad to help with a car history as well as offering future preparation tips. Another option here is to rent equipment for awhile during the sorting process. This choice may also allow you to try varying styles and types of cars, allowing you an opportunity to further narrow down the direction and path you take in the sport.

Early on in the process enlist friends and associates that are also interested in the sport. They may not be inclined to be behind the wheel but are usually eager to work in a support role. A mechanic or a bodywork guy would be a good choice here, and they don't have to be professionals. Believe me when I say this, people will be glad to get on

board and pitch in with all kinds of help. Track support guys (and gals for that matter), are always ready to work for free passes for Race events and other perks associated with a race weekend. Often times the promise of a free meal, fancy event patches and passes to the paddock or pits will have people lining up as volunteers. This is a good thing and everyone wins!

Remember I mentioned Rookie programs? Well, that is the next step you must take as you go down the “I want to go racing” path. This can be done with your own car, school car or with a friend’s race prepared car. Each Vintage Racing venue has a strict set of rules to allow the new driver to begin the immersion process. Some clubs or organizations have “buddy” programs where you are assigned to a veteran member of the club that will mentor you through the Rookie process. You will attend mandatory track-talks, rookie orientation days and ultimately monitored on-track time. Your car will be tech’ed prior to any official track time. Your safety equipment will be evaluated and approved at this point as well. If your racecar is new to the sport, or the particular venue offering the rookie experience, you and the car will go through the process of approvals and the creation of a log book during this time.

As a side bar here, Sports Car Racing is certainly not an all boy’s game! Some of the best drivers in the amateur racing venues are women. Many wives and girlfriends often end up in support roles in the garage and/or at the track. I often cite Julie Allen, owner of DWD Racing, and my daughter-in-law as a perfect example of women drivers in our sport. ([Link to her web-site from www.southsidebritish.com](http://www.southsidebritish.com) - DWD). I can list a dozen gals that are equal or better drivers than some of the best of the guys in the Vintage Racing sport. I know; I’ve been behind them!

Vintage Racing as a sport is **real racing**, with all of the same hazards and responsibilities as professional racing. This should **never** be passed off as just weekend fun with the guys. At this level of racing safety is always the first and foremost consideration when any car is on the track. Many modifications to the original car are permitted in the interest of safety. Roll bars or cages are required and specifications for configuration, materials and attachment are available and strictly enforced. Braking, suspension and handling modifications are also allowed and endorsed. In-car fire suppression systems are also encouraged and in some cases mandatory. Racing seats, 5-point safety harnesses and fuel cells are but a few of the additional modifications that will be required and scrutinized during the technical inspection of the car.

And beyond these mechanical concerns are the personal safety considerations. Fire suits, helmets, shoes, gloves and, yes even underwear will be necessary purchases. And it will be no surprise that racing apparel and producers of these materials are carefully monitored and licensed by the sanctioning organizations. The new “Hans Device” now being considered as standard or required equipment is a perfect example of the concerns for safety. This was invented to address the frequent and often disabling injuries to the neck and spinal column. No matter how good you become as a driver or your present level of skill and experience sooner or later you will be involved in some kind of on-track event that leaves you out of control. You may be overdriving the car, there may be a

mechanical failure or another car in front of you spins on the track. It will happen...and when it happens you need to be safe.

Let's revisit the statement I made earlier, and this is often directed at Vintage racers; "is this real racing"? I can say from years of experience in the sport and assure everyone that asks the question, **it is real**. In describing the experience let's consider a typical Vintage race. The cars are generally grouped by engine displacement, car type and configuration. Nine times out of ten the cars are fairly well matched in each of the race groups. The car preparation, driver skill and equipment modifications become the intangibles that sort out the winners and losers. But, trust me on this one point; everyone is out there to race and to win! The most aggressive drivers with the highly modified equipment will usually be on top of the leader board. The back-of-the-pack cars are often the rookies or generally slower cars, but they are all racing real time!

The normal process of sorting out the cars is accomplished by running practice laps, followed by qualifying races and ultimately "feature races". To further clarify the process each race group will be further broken out into unique Classes, again by type and displacement. Let's assume we have our AH Sprite with a rated engine displacement of 1098 cc's. This car may be slotted in Group 1 and Class B. You will initially be on the track with cars rated from 800 cc's to 1300 cc's of engine displacement. Initially your Group may be a mix of some thirty cars with all classes in the Group on track at any given time during practice and qualifying. All the classes will be mixed together and in no particular order in these early sessions.

Once into the qualifying races the field begins the natural sorting process and during this time you may find your car involved in a race within a race. And when ultimately the checkered flag drops for your Group there may be several race "winners". You can be a mid-pack car and still win in your individual Class. There is always an overall group winner, but also bracket winners are recognized during the event. The results of every race are published within a few minutes of the actual event and posted for everyone to see. This information is developed by the Timing and Scoring group and the data often comes from electronically monitored timing devices on the cars. This is very accurate information and becomes the standard measure of individual performance and your position on the grid for the Feature races.

Although most cars do have speedometers as original equipment in actual racing they are seldom used for more than a curiosity. Racing is measured in lap times and how long it takes to get from start to finish lines. Often the set of instruments that mean more than your speed indicator is the tachometer, oil pressure and temperature gauges. And finally there is no single point of feed back that is more telling or important than the steering wheel. Everything about the cars set-up, handling and performance will be telegraphed back to the driver through the hands on the wheel.

Terms like under steer, over steer, push, trail braking and apexes will quickly find a place in your lexicon. These terms are critical to understand and eventually will be embraced by you and your support team as a way to improve the experience. As you master the

elements of the racing process your appreciation of the sport will become apparent. Your driving skills will naturally improve and winning races will come but these filter into the background of the overall experience. You will know when you are there; and it is at that point is when you join the very select circle of Vintage Racers where the next time you say, "I want to go racing..." it will have a new and profound meaning. So, go ahead, go racing....good luck and have fun!