

## SIX HOUR ENDURANCE – 21 May 1998

by Gari Jones, Liege

This was to be a novel format for a circuit event, with both driver and co-driver on board throughout giving a mixture somewhere between a rally and a race event with the co-driver controlling the pace of the car in conjunction with the pit crew - in our case son Nathan and his mum. The objective was to complete exactly 37 laps of the circuit in each hour, timed to the minute with all pitstops and as many driver changes as possible to be accomplished within that time.

We were kindly loaned a car by the Liege Motor Company who entered us in their 850cc Reliant Robin engined Liege. Leeza Rose, a motoring programme and chat show presenter with Channel 1 cable TV was to be my co-driver. Never having met Leeza until we arrived at Mallory Park, I had visions of a Ruby Wax-type character jabbering away about colonic irrigation while we thrashed endlessly round and round the track for six hours. In actual fact, Leeza turned out not only to be very beautiful but also a very accomplished driver. She also turned out to have driven at Mallory Park before, a fact she kept to herself until self-preservation drove her to giving desperately needed driving lessons over the intercom during my erratic first stint.

The memory of sitting alongside Leeza when, trying to make up time later on, she drove our little car in a full blooded drift around the *outside* of a big 3.9 litre Cobra at some 75mph on the long, long Gerrards bend will remain with me forever.... as will the grey hairs that suddenly sprouted as I tried desperately to disappear down into the passenger footwell. The other incident that springs only too readily to mind was bawling my head off as we charged down into the hairpin at about 70mph, overtaking cars on the inside as they braked and we didn't. With solid armco barrier rushing up dead ahead I only opened my eyes again when I heard Leeza falling about with laughter over the intercom - she'd made it. Red faced under my helmet, I just wished I'd switched the intercom off before loosing control of my vocal chords. But at least I hadn't lost control of anything else.

We were surprised to learn that our car was actually leading the field of 27 cars at the end of the first hour, not because we were the fastest on the track by any means, but, having completed the 37 laps we had enough time in hand to accomplish more driver changes than anyone else.

Then disaster! Before the start we had checked everything over on the car except one minor little thing - fuel. We had started out with only half a tankful and, nearly sharing one whole brain between the two of us, fairly soon realised we would have to build up time in the second hour to squeeze in an extra fuel stop. We decided to run through without a driver change for the first half of our second hour, then refuel and change drivers and once back on the track we would try to build up enough time in hand to get in another driver change before the end of the hour if possible.

So we stopped as planned only to find we hadn't got a bean between us to buy fuel at the paddock pumps! The best we could scrounge from a highly bemused spectator was £10 which would only give us another half tankful. We grabbed the money gratefully, sloshed some fuel in and stormed back onto the track with Leeza at the wheel. The best excuse we could come up with afterwards was that, out of all the Formula One races we'd watched on TV, not once had we noticed Michael Schumacher getting out the small change to pay for *his* fuel during a pit stop....

After the crazy pantomime we were nearly 8 minutes down with only 25 minutes to go in the hour. The planned driver change was drooped and Leeza set to with a vengeance pulling time back hand over fist. After some laps at this pace we thought there might even be a chance of squashing in a driver change just before the end of the hour, then...disaster number two.

A competitor had gone off the track at Gerrards, the yellow flags came out and then the safety car came out slowing us down to 40mph while they cleared the car away. That took nearly 15 minutes and this time we were well and truly stuffed. By the time the safety car pulled off the track we had just 8 minutes left and there was no way, so at the end of the hour we were 3 measly laps short of 37. Unable to make up for the deficit in the next hour, we were no longer in overall contention although we subsequently managed to get in all our laps, driver changes and refuelling stops (and Leeze's two visits to the loo!) over the next four hours with only one or two minor dramas.

We eventually finished a little euphoric that we had made it to the end but annoyed at our unnecessarily early fuel stop and the subsequent yellow flag incident which had ruled us out of overall contention so early on. The car had run faultlessly right through although checking the engine after the event, we found the dip stick hadn't been made long enough to reach the oil. Happily, after adding a few pints, it grew to the correct length. Next time (if there is one), we'll try and remember to check the oil, to take some pennies along AND fill up with fuel BEFORE the start.

Gari Jones.