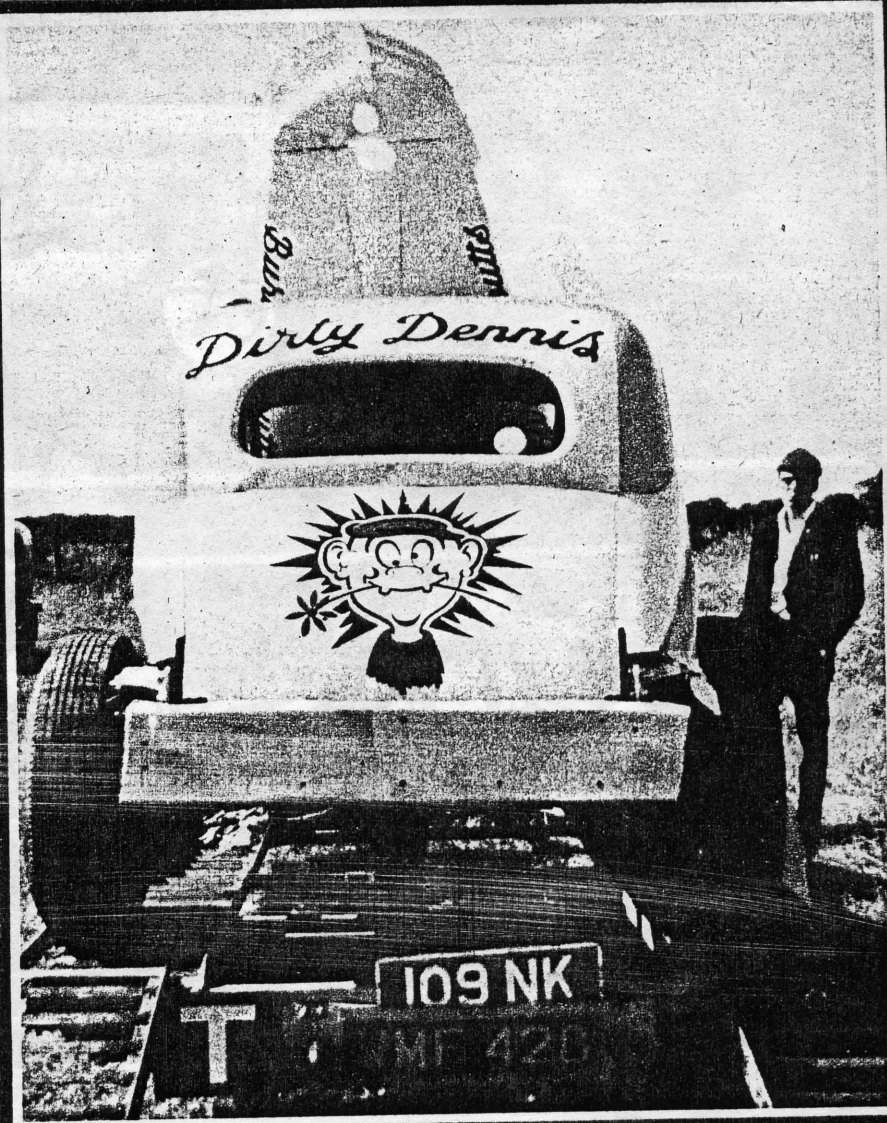


● Story and pictures : D. R. KIPLING

STOCK-CAR RACING



BACK in the early 1950s the sport of stock-car racing took its first unsteady steps in this country. It was new, disorganized, and acquired an unfortunate reputation that still lingers in the public mind whenever the words "stock-car racing" are mentioned; which is seldom, for no newspaper or radio coverage is ever afforded it. The hazy impressions are of deliberate car-wrecking, crazy stunts, primitive cars and similar driving. Suspicion and doubt still discourage a great many people from finding out just what goes on.

When does it all take place? Stock-car racing follows the normal motor racing season, from March to October, although some drivers go to South Africa during our winter, to compete in that country's own championship. Meetings in Britain are held mainly over the weekend, on Friday and Saturday evenings, and on Sunday afternoons. Most tracks hold from 12 to 15 meetings each per season. The tracks vary in length from 330 to 440 yards, oval or oblong in form. The surface is often loose shale or cinder, although hard concrete and asphalt are popular because of the higher lap speeds obtainable. Steel girders, cushioned by old tyres and linked by steel hawsers, form a sturdy track fence, and ensure the spectators' safety. The spectator barrier runs about 20ft outside the track fence, so the onlooker is obviously well catered-for.

Who races stock-cars? Anyone can, anyone who owns and can handle tools, who prefers to adapt and build, rather than merely to assemble parts. Many of the sport's drivers are garage-owners, or people connected with the motor

trade, although there are a number of men-in-the-street, who find in the sport a stimulating and profitable way of using week-end spare time. What is there in it for the impetuous enthusiast? More experience, safety, entertainment and financial return that would grace his first day at Silverstone. The drivers are paid starting money, in some cases travelling expenses, and for the main race at any meeting, £25 for a first-place prize is not uncommon.

Organization? Very efficient under the helpful eye of the British Stock Car Board of Control, with licensed tracks, registered drivers, driver grading, stringent safety rules and slick race organization. Drivers are graded according to the number of place points they score over a certain period, so that everyone starts off in the lowest grade, and begins his racing from a fair start. A driver's grade is the proof of his ability; it does not put him in a different event from his fellows, but enables the handicappers to arrange fairer racing. Each grade is identified by the colour of the car's roof, and the grades and colours run thus "C"=White, "B"=Yellow, "A"=Blue, "Star"=Red, and the World Champion sports a gold roof. Each driver has his own registered competition number, which he retains permanently, and carries on his car on the bonnet, sides, and roof-mounted fin.

It is the stock-car itself that attracts the eye. It may belong to either of the two classes—Junior or Senior. These classes run under identical rules, share the same gradings and championship regulations, but their actual races and championships are separate. Some drivers race both a

...ANOTHER KIND OF MOTOR SPORT

Above left: Not perhaps what we are used to seeing on Grand Prix cars. Above: Fiat 500 bodywork, with the door cut away to allow the driver to escape after a crash, tops this Senior stocker, while an A.35 roof panel caps the lower car. Part of the massive roll cage can be seen

Junior and a Senior car, to vary their racing, to get in more practice, and to have a chance at extra prize money.

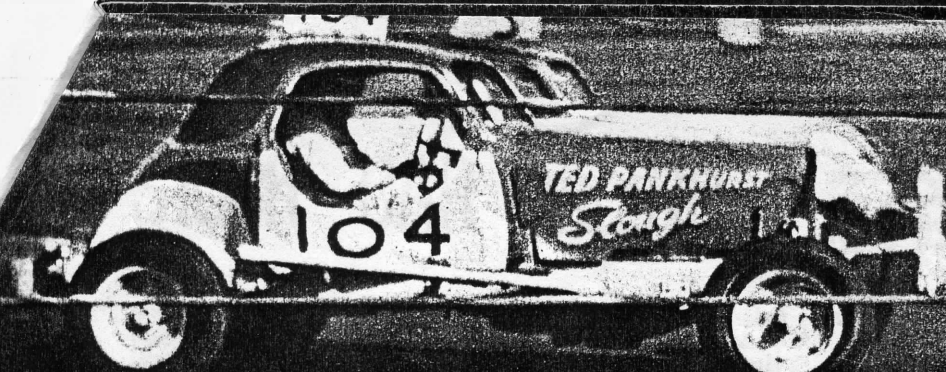
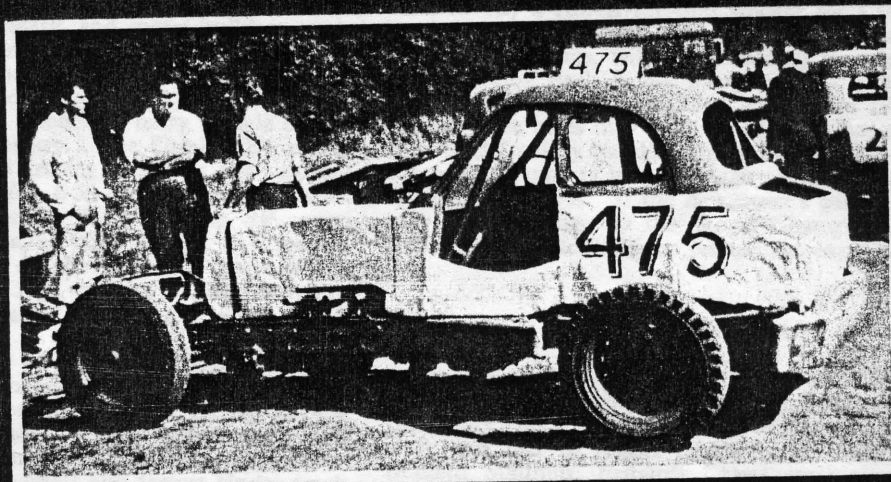
Although one of the fine points of the sport is the ingenuity and individuality of each car, one element is common to all stock-cars. The interior of the saloon body is bare; gone are all seats and upholstery, all fascia and trim, except for a few necessary gauges and a single bucket seat for the driver, mounted centrally. All the windows are removed, the screen is generally replaced by a wire mesh or plastic, and a large padded rear view mirror enables the driver to see out of the empty and often enlarged rear window. The steering wheel and column are often offset and padded, while a full safety harness, secured to the floor or chassis, is compulsory. The regulation steel roll-cage is also strategically padded, supporting the front pillars, roof, and running above the driver's head. All doors save one must be permanently welded or bolted shut, and a portion is often cut from one to enlarge the window space into an emergency small exit. These features, together with the shielded battery, rear-mounted fuel tank of 6½ gallons maximum capacity, and a sturdy undershield, make the stock-car one of the healthiest competition vehicles anywhere. From the outside, the alterations are quite apparent. All lamps are removed, as are wings, and unnecessary trim. Strong bumpers front and rear plus reinforcing bars along the chassis sides, ward off chance blows, and keep the need and cost of repairs to a low level.

Inspect a Junior stocker, and you will find a red-hot 1-litre "banger," from the Ford and Morris of the '30s, up to

the last side-valve models with perhaps an Aquaplane head, twin S.U.s or Amals and minimal stub exhausts. To help in the handling department, there may be small modern disc wheels, fat tyres, telescopic heavy-duty dampers, hydraulic brakes—in fact all that can be done to keep the car on the track, even to boxed and space-framed chassis. Junior racing is highly competitive, popular with the racing public, and ridiculously cheap. A winning Junior stocker can be bought or built for £70.

But study a Senior and you will appreciate the essence of the words "stock-car." The Senior stock-car is the off-spring, the creation of the sport; it is rugged, very powerful, and terribly potent. As long as the car uses a once-standard saloon body, the builder may do as he wishes—and generally does. The body is merely there to cover the driver and chassis, so why not make it entertaining for the people who pay to watch the cars? The dumpy Fiat 500 Topolino is popular for its neat compactness, but you may see Morris Minor, early Ford, Fiat 600, Volkswagen, Riley, name your choice, you'll find it on a stock-car.

In addition to the competition number, driver's name, roof colour, the car may sport bizarre but neatly and colourfully executed designs, cartoons or advertisements of the garage or sponsoring firm concerned. Other external features show how the builders cater for the left-hand-corner only racing, with as much ingenuity as the Indianapolis kings; accessories transferred to the left-hand side, larger wheels and higher tyre pressures on the outside, maybe the inner front wheel set back an inch to two. Why such attention to



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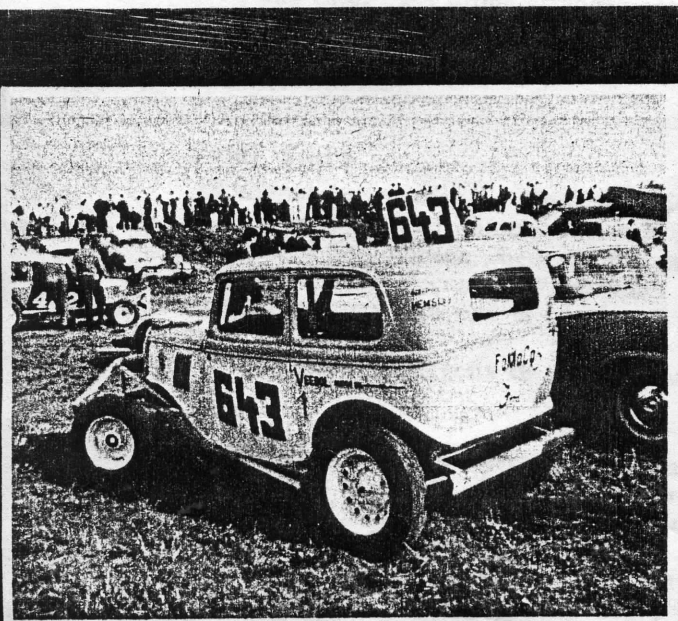
detail? Here is the power unit formula:—Any type of engine may be used, and the only restriction on modifications to improve performance is that superchargers may be fitted only to side-valve engines . . . When was a competition driver ever afforded such wide scope? As cubic inches mean power, the large American vee-8 is the usual wear. The Oldsmobile Rocket is popular for its ruggedness and availability in this country, although you can see Chrysler Firepower, Cadillac, Buick, Chevrolet, Pontiac and several Jaguar 6-cylinder units.

To contain this sort of muscle, a strong but inexpensive and available chassis is necessary, and many builders settle for a humble 15cwt commercial or ex-W.D. one, although even here there is variety, and you may see combinations of two chassis, or home-brewed space-frames of heavy-gauge tubular steel. To keep these splendidly hairy vehicle on the track various extras are necessary. The Dunlop R6 racing tyre is popular for the hard tracks, and it is not unusual to see a Senior wearing fat 6.50-15in. R6s all round, although some drivers prefer the longer-lasting SP cover. Two dampers per wheel, maybe large Konis, well-located axles, and the driver's skill, do the rest. As many of the engines produce 250 to 350 b.h.p., and the maximum weight limit is 26cwt, the potential of the Senior stock-car is apparent.

Take for instance, the car of ex-World Champion Jock Lloyd, with its Jaguar XK chassis, Panhard and radius-rod located rear axle on coil springs, the full racing C-type engine with three double-choke Weber carburettors, and R6 front tyres. The finish and construction of this silver bombshell make it one of the finest and fastest cinder-track machines in the country.

It would not be fair to mention only cars whose specification looks good on paper. There is a huge number of tremendously successful stock-cars whose construction is apparently unexciting, whose appearance is normal, and about which little can be written. But it is these cars that often win the top honours, that make extremely close racing, and consistent performances. Driving skill is most

This junior stock car has a practically standard Ford 10 bodywork. The large "nerfing" bars at the front can be seen



important, and anyone who doubts this should watch the stars in action, the stylists whose manner deserves and receives fullest applause; Doug Wardropper and his son Alan, Trevor Frost, Willie Wanklyn, Chick Woodroffe, George Ansell, Ted Pankhurst, Roy Goodman, Aubrey Leighton, these are the Jim Clarks and John Surtees of the sport, all master tacticians and mechanics.

But to return to the cars themselves; most of the really competitive Seniors are garage-owned or sponsored, and raced continuously. This is because, as in any sport, to win top honours means making a professional approach, devoting all spare time and money to that end, non-stop racing and practice, sacrifices above those which the casual competitor is prepared make. A crack championship Senior may be worth up to £600, and is a sophisticated racing machine, kept in immaculate condition. But it is possible to buy a run-of-the-mill stocker for £160, to compete at the local track when spare time allows, racing more for the lower placings, without extending the car or oneself.

The racing itself is not complicated. There may be up to 12 events during a meeting, with up to 18 or 20 cars to a race. The races may be from 12 to 25 laps of the quarter-mile track, mainly standing starts, the field leaving in groups, the red-top experts last, although some less important races have rolling starts. If the newcomer's entry is accepted, he may be racing against the World Champion and the stars, and this will teach him to pursue the experts.

On The Job

Now that we understand a little of what happens, let us make an imaginary trip to a meeting, and watch the action. Imaginary, because the average stock-car race is far too close and fast to report faithfully, or describe in detail. Brafild Stadium, Britain's fastest stock-car track, set in rural Northamptonshire, is a popular circuit with both spectators and racers, who travel from all parts of the country to watch and compete. Leave your car in the park, pass through the turnstiles, buy a programme, and you are off.

With the first warning rumble of exhausts the cars begin to roll on to the track, clutches slipped, quick blips on throttles to clear eight gaping throats; they edge up to the line, the thunder rises to a crescendo, the flag drops . . .

Off roars the first group, the second, third, fourth, the whole field howls into life, and the race is on. You are witnessing around 5,000 b.h.p. in action, propelling some 30 tons of steel round a quarter-mile track, and the spectacle is stunning. Words cannot convey the impression of speed, as the cars rip past again, throwing out shock-waves of sound and air, moving up, dropping back, gaining an inch or two on a corner, gaining a foot or two on the straights. A sudden cloud of white dust and a heavy thud startle the crowd, a car slides wide, dives back into the pack, nudging another into the infield, hurling a marker barrel skywards. No-one is hurt, no trace of damage to the cars, the chase continues, its fury unabated. One or two cars cry "enough," and their drivers coax them on to the sheltering infield, and sit on roof or bonnet, watching the progress of their fellows.

This is close racing of a kind not experienced on the vastness of Britain's aerodrome circuits, and it builds up an exciting tenseness in the atmosphere. Still side by side the leaders hurtle, sometimes mere inches separating them, sometimes nothing at all, brute engines blaring defiantly, drivers intent and wrestling with their cars. Tyre smoke, dust, the reek of oil and hot metal hang over the stadium like a cloud, as the final stages are fought out without quarter given or expected, the whole arena alive with noise and speed. The cars strain their last reserves of power, howling together out of the last corner, leaping towards the flag, edging up and back and, amid a monumental blast of sound and speed, the race is won. . . The cars and drivers unwind, the stragglers finish, the winner collects the chequered flag and circulates on his lap of honour. This has only been the first race, and there are more to come. Such an afternoon's racing is, for the "first-timer", something not to be forgotten easily, and still distinctly cheering for the all-knowing regular.

Stock Cars

Additional Information. Congratulations to D. R. Kipling for a very graphic and informative article "Stock car racing" (*Autocar*, 3 September); where did he get all those adjectives?

However, very factual and thorough though his article may have been, there are just a couple of points I would like to make.

D. R. Kipling suggests that anyone who doubts the driving

skill of these stock drivers should watch, among others, Aubrey Leighton in action. Sorry, but Aubrey, together with that permanent "grin" of his, retired from the track last season. Also the author informs us that "some less important races have rolling starts." Last year the world semi-final, run at Belle Vue, was a rolling start—hardly an unimportant race?

Otherwise thank you for a very interesting article.

Blackburn, Lancashire.

F. SHARP.