

Bob Watkin, a Quiet Man from New Jersey

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By Bob Vitrikas

If you are reading this, you are likely an MG enthusiast. Take a moment to think back on how your affinity (perhaps love affair?) for the marque began and how it has impacted your life and the lives of so many others. Who hasn't been approached at a gas station or stop light by a complete stranger who says to you, "I used to have an MG!" and goes on to recall some long ago memory with the marque. Always with a smile on their face and a friendly departure. Many would agree MG is the marque of friendship.

Bob Watkin was my friend for over 35 years and a lifelong MG enthusiast. Bob passed away on 11 October after a long illness. Despite the 'fog' that obscured his memories, his recollections of things MG shone through bright and clear! Let me share some of my fondest memories of Bob in an attempt to illuminate the MG life of this "quiet man from New Jersey."

Bob's love affair with the MG is linked to his love affair with his lifelong partner and wife, Carol. As Carol recalls, "I met Bob in the summer of 1971. He owned an MGA then, and has never been without an A." A little "MG MaGic I'd say! That simple statement says it all but please let me elaborate.

Fast forward 10+ years through marriage, college and jobs that brought Bob and Carol to Washington. They joined the MG Car Club, Washington D.C. Centre in the 1980s and actively participated in MGCC events. In 1990 Bob's enthusiasm and leadership skills were recognized by his election as President of the Club in 1990. Bob continued to contribute to the Club over the next 20 years, perhaps no more so than in 1993/1994 when he served as Co-Chairman of MG '94, arguably the biggest and most challenging event in the Club's history. That three day event involved 18 working groups and over 75 club members working diligently over a period to 18 months to put on a truly memorable event that brought together MG clubs, enthusiasts and over 350 MGs from the U.S., Canada, the UK and even South Africa! The event kick started the North American Council of MG Registers which has organized all-MG events every five years. Perhaps you attended the latest event in June 2021 in Atlantic City, NJ. Ironically that event was not far from where Bob grew up in the Trenton, NJ area.



The “Three Bobs” vintage race team! Left to right, Bob Schoeplein, Bob Vitrikas and Bob Watkin. This picture was taken at Virginia International Raceway on April 2015. Fittingly, Bob’s t-shirt commemorates 50 years of racing at where else, Watkin’s Glen!

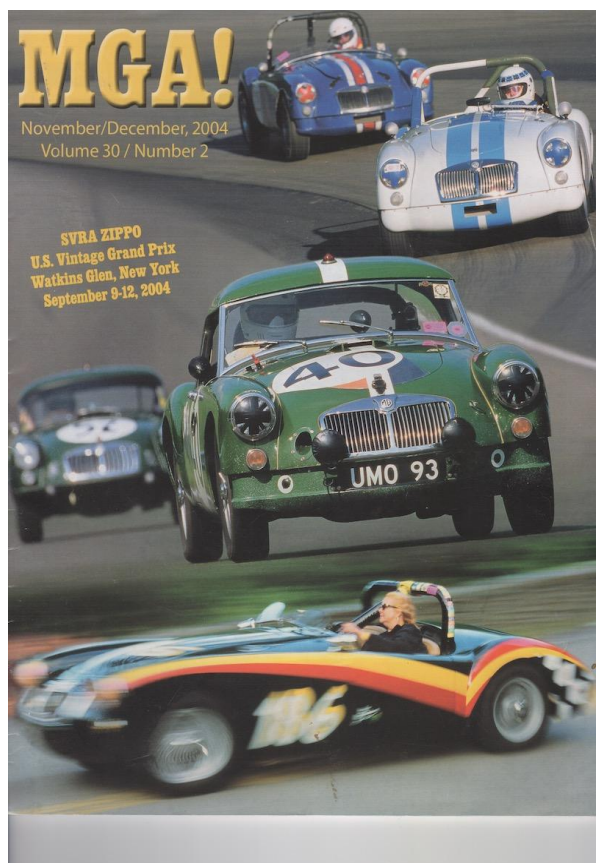
In 1992 Bob joined Bob Schoeplein (Bob S.) and me (Bob V.) to form the Washington D.C. MG Car Club’s “three Bob’s” vintage race team. Ironically, Bob’s race car of choice wasn’t an MG but rather a Triumph Spitfire. His choice may seem a bit incongruous but considering the Spitfire was an ex-SCCA race car it made sense for Bob to start with a tried and tested race car rather than build one from scratch like Bob S. Turns out it wasn’t that simple.... SCCA rules allowed modifications to the car that weren’t entirely legal in vintage racing so some minor (?) body and other modifications were necessary. To obtain his vintage racing license, Bob chose to attend a Sportscar Vintage Racing Association drivers’ school that was held in conjunction with their Fall event at the historic Watkins Glen International race track. Bob invited me to come along and be his crew for the drivers’ school and the vintage race weekend that followed. I was only too happy to oblige! SVRA generously provided garage space at the track, sheltering us from the weather. We were stabled with a genuine “vintage” Indy Skoal Bandit race car previously driven by John Andretti in the 1988 Indy 500. Wow! Watching the Indy car crew go through the pre and post race car preparation was a real education, making our job on Bob’s Spitfire look tame in comparison! True to form, Bob calmly, quietly and skillfully made it through the drivers’ school, earned his racing license and was literally off to the races at the Glen the next day. Hurray, let the dream begin!! When the “Three Bobs” were racing, occasionally all of us would be in the same race together. What a blast that was!

Like any racing career, Bob’s had its highs and lows, but always an emotional experience that made it all worthwhile. Shared memories. Isn’t that what life is about? I recall Bob generously

sharing his Spitfire at a vintage endurance race at Summit Point Raceway. As sometimes happens, the engine gave out on us early on and our weekend plans looked like they were going down the drain. But then fellow racer Tom Broring stepped in and generously offered to help us swap the motor from his Spitfire into Bob's ailing Spitfire. Tom's car and a warm workshop were just a few miles from the track, so we loaded Bob's Spitfire onto the trailer and off we went to Tom's shop. It was a long night as I recall, but we persevered and together we got the engine swap done and Bob and I were able to return to combat at the track. Thanks Tom! FYI, Tom is still racing his Spitfire and his wife Carolyn still races her VW Rabbit in SCCA regional events.

Bob has always had a soft spot in his heart for the MGA coupe and like me, he had an unfilled desire to race an MGA. Queue up the MG MaGic please! The late Hugh Burruss owned the #52 MGA factory racer coupe that competed in the 1962 Sebring 12 Hours. I was fortunate to be asked by Hugh to drive his car at the 2002 Sebring 12 Hours historic races. You may recall the story told in these pages. After racing the car at Sebring and Watkins Glen I reluctantly had to give up my seat due to an unforeseen problem with a newly installed roll over bar that prevented me from safely sitting in the driver's seat. A shorter driver was needed and as I considered prospective drivers to recommend to Hugh, Bob Watkin's name popped into my head. Perfect! Bob loved MGAs, especially coupes, and was an accomplished, experienced vintage racer with a spotless record who truly respected and appreciated the history of number 52. Needless to say Bob was delighted to slip into my vacant seat piloting Hugh's car which he did for several seasons. When Bob was no longer able to continue racing, he handed his seat over to Larry Smith, a veteran vintage racer with a history with number 52 going back to its modern day debut at Sebring back in 2002.

Also in the early 2000s Bob purchased a red MGA Twin Cam coupe vintage race car from a fellow MG racer (probably Ralph Steinberg) and continued his vintage racing adventure, now at last with his very own MGA coupe! Like many Twin Cams, the twin cam engine had been replaced with a pushrod motor. It retained the four wheel disc brakes which were a significant advantage on the track and the knock off disc wheels were virtually maintenance free compared to wire wheels. He raced his MGA coupe another ten years or so until retiring from racing. Bob was a slender fellow with zero body fat so he was usually cold when the weather was brisk. I can recall Bob braving the cold at the Summit Point Turkey Bowl race Thanksgiving weekend.



One of the 'good ol' days at Watkins Glen. Bob Watkin is driving Hugh Burruss' number 52 MG factory Sebring race car following me in John Wright's number 40 MG factory Sebring race car. Is Bob setting me up for a pass?

He was eating an apple (Bob always followed a healthy diet) and was shivering so badly he could barely talk. Fellow vintage racer Larry Smith tells this amusing story about Bob. “When Bob and I raced, we would usually paddock together. I remember one year at the VDCA Season Finale at Roebing Road (mid-December for those who don't know) Bob was wearing his whole kit of Nomex under and out wear and everything else he had to try to stay warm.” Bob loved his MGs. For many years he had an MGB GT that was his daily driver and a gorgeous black MGA coupe now owned by our mutual friend and Washington D.C. MG Club member, Mike Hughes. After retiring from racing, Bob was still eager to attend vintage races and spectate. Washington D.C. MG Car Club friends would frequently take Bob to the races when he was no longer able to drive. Bob's condition affected his memory, especially certain areas like geography. He might not be able to tell you where Kentucky was but he knew the upcoming calendar of MG and vintage race events!

According to Bob's wife Carol: “A few years later Bob sold his coupe to Jeremy (Savage), a young law student whose father was also a vintage racer. (They were part of the Oxford Motorsports Group. https://mgaguru.com/tales/oxford_motorcars.htm) Shortly after starting his racing career, Jeremy sent Bob a wonderful note telling him not only how much he enjoyed the car and how well it handled, but also talked about just how many fellow racers he was introduced to and friendships made through this car. He said once racers saw Bob's car, they would try to seek Bob out. Jeremy would introduce himself as the new owner and the stories of Bob and good times at the track would ensue. The note was lovely indicating that while Jeremy was pleased with the purchase of the car, the car came with the generous gift of friendship! And, as we all know, that can't be bought!” Well said Carol!



Bob doing what he loved best, (apart from his wife Carol of course!) driving his beloved MGA Twin Cam coupe entering the dreaded uphill at Lime Rock Park race track. Bob looks completely at peace with a relaxed driving position going into one of the most treacherous turns in vintage racing.

In 2014, shortly after retiring from racing due to his illness, Bob was presented with the MG Vintage Racers' “Big Copper Kettle” award following the all MG Collier Cup race.

Appropriately enough Bob received it at Watkins Glen where 12 years earlier he had enjoyed his first vintage race. It is officially known as the “MG Spirit Award”, voted on by fellow MG Vintage Racers and given to the person who best personifies the MG Vintage Racers spirit. The inscription on the trophy reads, “MGVR Spirit Award; We Few, We Happy Few, We Band of Brothers”. In his wife Carol’s words, “I know he was thrilled with his Copper Kettle award which we so proudly displayed in our home.” Carol continues:

“Bob was pretty quiet about his racing accomplishments. When coming home after a race I’d ask how he fared and he’d simply say, he may have placed, but never hung around for the awards ceremony. A few weeks later something would arrive in the mail, a medal, a ribbon, some little trophy. He never made much ado about it. What made him happy was simply racing. Getting out on the track. It was never about winning or losing. He simply loved the sport and his MGs.” That says it all. Safety Fast! Bob. We will miss you.