Talking of Sports Cars (No. 293)

British racing prestige was at a very low ebb in the early 1930s. The glory of the Bentleys had departed and British drivers were mostly racing foreign cars, for in spite of the critical letters this action provoked in the Correspondence columns they had no alternative if they wished to compete in Continental events with any chance of success.

Then in the winter of 1932 the M.G. company, heartened by its successes with its 747 c.c. Midget, produced a blown 1,100 c.c. car, the K3 Magnette. The new model made its first appearance in the Mille Miglia, entered by Earl Howe, and won not only its class but the team prize as well. This was but the first of a long list of successes, for the K3 has been winning ever since. Most of those still competing have been extensively modified and as a result have grown steadily faster as their age increased.

The two cars described this week belong to Frank Kennington, of Weybridge, whose burly form is often to be seen at Prescott and elsewhere hurrying to the top of the hill to the accompaniment of many revs and a shrill scream from the blower.

This year Kennington won the Baines Trophy awarded for best aggregate time by a visitor at Prescott’s three open meetings. Vizeor.

Although the two K3 Magnettes under review were both complete and distinct entities when they came into my possession,” Kennington points out, “their life story, so far as I am in a position to tell it, is somewhat complicated by the fact that they have been the subject of wholesale merging of identities. The earlier car, JB1269, was the first K3 ever built and served as practice machine for the M.G. works team in the 1933 Mille Miglia. The later one, HJ780, was one-from-last in the K3 series and dates from 1934; it was first registered as late as 1939, which explains its ‘modern’ registration number.

“Since quite some time after its Italian sojourn, JB1269 remained the property of the makers, leading a life of obscurity until its acquisition by Yallop, who in the mid-thirties drove it in the Mannin races and elsewhere. There was a third owner whose name doesn’t strike any familiar chords—he laid it up for the war period—and then the car passed to Jack Bartlett, from whom I bought it in the summer of ’40.

“Without replacing anything except piston rings we ran the car in four 1946 sprint events, scoring class wins twice at Prescott, once at Bouley Bay and running second in the 1,100 c.c. supercharged sports class at Brighton. (To do both these M.G.s justice it should be borne in mind that ‘eleven-hundreds’ run in the 1-litre category at Prescott).

“In the winter of 1946-47 JB1269 was stripped down to the last screw and rivet, a process revealing the fact that the crankshaft had at some time broken and been welded together again; as we had repeatedly run the engine up to 6,500 in the course of sprints and a respectable road mileage (the car being in daily use for general hacking) one may conclude that the welder knew his job. The Mille Miglia edition of the K3, of course, with its comprehensive road equipment and full-width body, was in no degree less habitable than milder M.G. models such as the L-type Magna two-seater, which it somewhat resembled, although the K3 fuel tank, to outward appearance of slab type, actually had a large and invisible forward expansion giving a total capacity of 26 gallons.

“Neither trouble nor expense was spared on the winter rebuild, an operation which can be very briefly summarized as follows: Laystall crank, Martlett pistons and a probably unique set of heavier-than-R-type connecting-rods installed (the base of the bores had to be relieved by interchangeable files to give these rods clearance); water feed to engine drastically revised (standard system employed a single duct to the middle of the block, whereas ours used a four-branch pipe to the off side of the head, leaving virtually static water around the bores; standard blower, a Powerplus No. 10, scrapped in favour of a big Arnott Type 2800, driven at engine speed—as against a small reduction with the Powerplus—and giving a top boost of 23lb; inlet manifold entirely redesigned in conjunction with Robin Jackson and coming into line with Goldie Gardner practice, i.e., blower delivers to No. 1 manifold pipe; that one in turn feeds through one port to pipe No. 2, which in its turn connects through two ports to pipe No. 3, whence the charge enters the head itself (this system effectively corrected an earlier tendency for plugs Nos. 5 and 6 to swamp, because of mal-distribution); head lapped direct to block; E.N.V. self-change gear box fully overhauled by makers, and crown wheel and pinion regrind.

“In its new form the K3 would run happily up to 7,500 r.p.m. and, in addition to being a uniquely exhilarating road car, promised reasonably well. We felt, for the 1947 racing season, incidentally, owing to the difficulty of obtaining Late and Early Examples
The Marshall-blown HJJ 870 has the more streamlined body and the revised braking system.

The big Arnott blower fitted to JB 1269. Note the oil feed to the nose of the blower from an auxiliary oil tank on the left and the large S.U. carburettor.

A single-seater racing car, utilizing the JB 1269 engine but in other respects almost entirely original, is now in the early stages of construction. At the time of writing, however, a few days before Black Sunday, November 30, the one complete K3 in day-to-day service is the outcome of the marriage between this same JB 1269 engine and the 1934 chassis and body. When the single-seater becomes a fait accompli we intend compounding a road car from the Mille Miglia chassis and engine—Marshall-blown with some 15 lb. maximum boost—and the 1934 body.

To date the two K3 Magnetites have aggregated something like 12,000 road miles, and neither engine—discounting the supercharger seizure mentioned earlier—has suffered a breakage of any sort. Starting, except occasionally in freezing weather, is instantaneous, tractability is adequate and many a well-cared-for family saloon produces more mechanical engine noise, admittedly, of course, this mechanical reticence can only be appreciated on the over-run, for under any other conditions the exhaust note, negligibly subdued by a Brooklands silencer and fishtail, tends to divert attention from fainter phon sources.

Fast Motoring

The contemporary K3, pulling the 4.89 to 1 axle ratio, more than once registered 6,300 r.p.m., equal to about 114 m.p.h., in the course of a pre-Abigail run from Weybridge to Dorchester-on-Thames. R. M. Oliver, the Prescott Bugatti man, who once kept station with the M.G. on this trip, spoke afterwards of the "furry black lines" left as our rear tyres went up to a speed of 75 m.p.h. on dry tarmac.

Fuel consumption under road conditions averages a surprising 15 m.p.g. As regards general creature comforts, there is a hood, but as only a Mackey could get into or out of the car with the roof erected, it stays furled. The full-width screen is also kept permanently flat. A passenger-side tonneau cover being a fixture on all solo excursions, it is found easier to take the quickly detachable steering wheel on and off for ingress and egress, rather than unprise the dots. The instruments, reading from L. to R. are an ammeter, oil thermometer, water thermometer, boost gauge, engine oil pressure gauge; second row, blower oil pressure gauge, fuel tank ditto. All the foregoing are small and matching: at the extreme right presides a soup-plate rev counter.