

Flying A

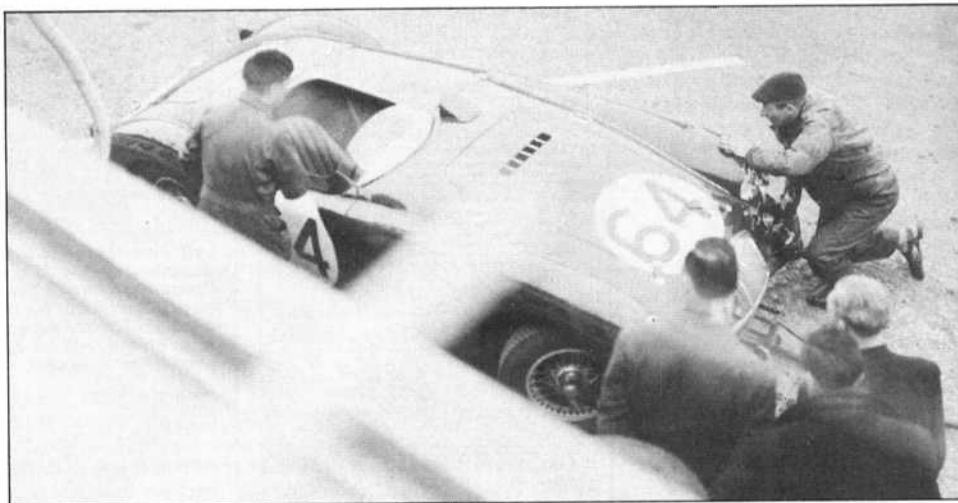
Jeremy Coulter tries Eric Hoult's MGA for size at Silverstone

ERIC Hoult's MGA is a rather understated championship-winning car. Somehow, these days you expect to see decals or sponsors' identification adorning a car such as this but there isn't any of that. His MGA, registration number TRX 999, is plain and unadorned and looks smart but by no means concours. Nevertheless, this car has taken Eric to three wins in last year's MGA championship and altogether he accumulated 51 points to win by a whisker from Doug McClay, the result being decided on the last exciting race at Cadwell Park.

1983 may not have been quite a 'vintage' year for MGA racing but was a good one nonetheless. Grids averaged out at around 15 cars with up to 23 turning up for the prestige rounds. In common with other forms of 'historic' one model racing, MGT-racing or the TR championship for example, MGA racing grew from mixed club events when it became apparent that there were sufficient drivers interested in racing MGAs to support a series solely for them. 1975 was the first year and it's continued strongly and competitively ever since.

From the beginning the aim has been to keep costs down and a committee of drivers maintains a close watch on the cars to ensure that the regulations are adhered to. Paragraph three of these regulations states *The Spirit of the Regulations should be understood to imply that all entrants and others connected with this type of competition are expected to assist in keeping costs within reasonable bounds and not to participate in any action that may cause costs to rise.* In the interests of economy, alloy wheels for example, are banned, while glassfibre wings are allowed as they are cheaper and more readily available than the original steel or even aluminium replacements. Where a part is not specifically mentioned in the regulations it must be to the original MGA pattern which means that even the fully modified cars look not far removed from standard appearance. Races are run in two classes and points awarded accordingly. 'Standard' in this application is something of a misnomer because a certain amount of modification is permitted, including the swapping around of engines — for example a 1622cc unit may be fitted to a 1500cc chassis and later-type disc brakes added to replace the drum units of early MGAs. Up-rated dampers are *de rigueur* and most competitors fit in front anti-roll bars. However, road tyres must be used on standard 4Jx15 wheels and all cars must have a current MoT certificate and have all road-going equipment such as lights, wipers and indicators fitted and working. With judicious purchase of a restoration project and a goodly amount of hard work it should be possible to build up a standard class A racer for well under £2000.

The regulations applying to the 'modified' class cars are more liberal and it is to these rules that Eric Hoult's car has been built. Within the restraints of a 14½ cwt weight limit, competitors are allowed to lighten their cars and one or two aluminium 'specials' have appeared. Eric's car retains its steel inner body, although the wings are glassfibre. Up-rated Armstrong dampers of indeterminate age (and adjustment, according to Eric!) are fitted all round and a clever A-frame assembly has been grafted on at the rear to give more positive axle location. The axle casing houses a limited-slip differential, while the gearbox, also an original casting, has been fitted with a set of close ratio straight-cut gears, one of half a



Above, EX 182, the Le Mans MG prototype that paved the way to the production MGA, looks remarkably similar to some of the MGAs in club racing today some 24 years later. Main colour picture, Eric Hoult at the wheel of his championship-winning car, revealing the familiar MGA controls. Inset, the car at speed at Silverstone, note the TR6 wheels and Dunlop racing tyres which are permitted under modified MGA regulations. The car is sponsored by Financial Advisory Services, Carter, Holt and Partners

dozen sets that MGA racer Roy Macarthy had manufactured several years ago. The standard helical close ratio gears tend to break layshafts with the amount of power that a modified engine can produce, and although some competitors do use them, Eric feels much safer with the straight-cut cogs.

The engine of Eric's car produces around 120bhp which amounts to maybe 110bhp at the rear wheels. The basis of the power unit is a 1622cc block, bored out by 30thou to give 1650cc. All moving parts have been lightened and balanced and a steel twin-cam A flywheel fitted. A full-race 770 BMC camshaft complements the single DCOE 40 Weber carburettor on a free-flow manifold and I was surprised to learn that the pistons originate from a Norton Commando motorcycle. Eric designed and built the engine up himself and it certainly looks a neat installation, complete with coolant pipes and header tank.

The car was originally built up from a basket case for the Thoroughbred Sports racing and after a couple of seasons up against very fast Astons, Healeys and TRs, Eric felt that it was more realistic to concentrate on the MGA championship and this he has done for several years now with ever-improving results. He may well continue racing the A next year, but he admits to casting his eyes towards perhaps more glamorous forms of racing, should his bank balance permit it!

I found, to my surprise, that I fitted into the car quite easily even though Eric is several inches shorter than me. I was briefed to treat second gear with care as it was in a fragile condition after a hard season and given a rev limit of 6000rpm. Eric was concerned about this limit because the final drive ratio wasn't ideal for Silverstone's long straight as I was soon to discover. A single pull on the starter knob was sufficient to bring the engine to a somewhat lumpy idle. With the mirrors suitably adjusted, I eased off down the pit lane, missing out second gear completely in favour of third. After a couple of shakedown laps to check that everything was satisfactory, I became more acclimatised to the buffeting from the wind, the small aeroscreen not affording me as much protection as I would have liked. On Silverstone's

smooth surface, the firmness of the suspension was not too apparent, apart from the bump at Beckett's hairpin that I seem to make a speciality of running over — even though it's off line!

After 4500rpm, the engine really sang with a distinctive high-pitched note which blends in nicely with the whine of the gears. 6000rpm was indicated on the upside-down tachometer a little over halfway down club straight and rather than risk incurring Eric's wrath I lifted off slightly to hold it there up to the Woodcote braking point. The dual circuit brakes — disc front and drum rear — were one aspect of the car that I couldn't quite come to terms with, as I found the required pedal pressure extremely high — far higher than in my own Caterham for example. That said, the car pulled up readily enough, albeit after a mighty heave on the pedal, but I did find that this upset my normal heel-toe and clutch technique and consequently led to some fairly ragged cornering.

The handling was reassuring with just the right amount of oversteer to make pressing-on fun. Only an inept approach to the corner would make it understeer. A simple recipe of turning in at the 'right' speed and then feeding on the power to push the rear end round produced the best results — the limited slip diff working nicely. On the subject of steering, I found its heaviness on a par with the brakes. Yes, the steering was quick and accurate but it really exercised my shoulder muscles and the small size of the wheel didn't help in this respect. My overall impression of Eric's car was that it was a well-prepared, reliable and rapid, yet straightforward machine, factors which, coupled with Eric's skill at the wheel, understandably made it a force to be reckoned with in the 1983 MGA championship.

In last year's Cheshire Cats trophy race at Oulton Park, I enjoyed several laps' dice between my own Caterham Seven and Adam Weisberg's MGA, so I already knew that these elderly MGs can be made to go quickly. My outing in Eric Hoult's car certainly confirms this and the MGA championship generally has much to recommend it. Let's hope they continue to enjoy success this year and entertain the crowds as much as they did in 1983.

