

Holden versus Holden at Bathurst

By Philip McCumisky

I have been asked to write about the 1963 Bathurst Armstrong 500 from a driver's point of view, as it was a major motoring experience for me at the time, as I was probably one of the youngest drivers, if not the youngest, and had only been in competitive motorsport for some five years.

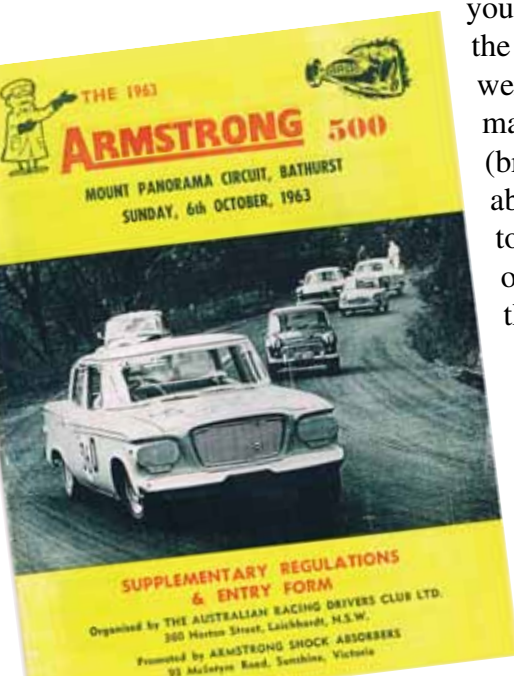
The car that I was driving belonged to Lex Brailey, a friend of mine in Sydney. We tossed around the idea of entering the race and were undecided as to what car we would run. I had a quick bug-eye Sprite at the time that I had been racing at most Sydney circuits with varying degrees of success under some lucrative sponsorship.

We could not afford to buy a car for the event, so we ended up entering Lex's car, a pink-and-grey 1960 FB Holden Special.

We retained the sponsors that I had and Lex was able to obtain some as well, so it was not a big cost to us to actually enter the race.

All the preparation was done, as far as the rules would allow us to do. Some readers would not be aware that in those days you virtually "run what you bring"; you took the hubcaps off, pumped the tyres up and went racing! No modifications were permitted except for the organisers' mandatory race-sponsored inclusions, (brake linings, engine oil catch tank), and absolutely no advertising on the cars, even to the extent where they regulated the size of the mandatory entrant/driver names on the RHS front mudguard of all cars.

You were not even allowed to leave the lube sticker on the quarter window of the front door. These were cars as they came off the production line. All cars were absolutely bog standard.

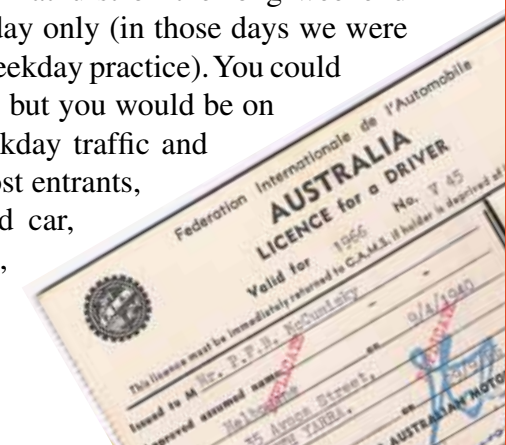


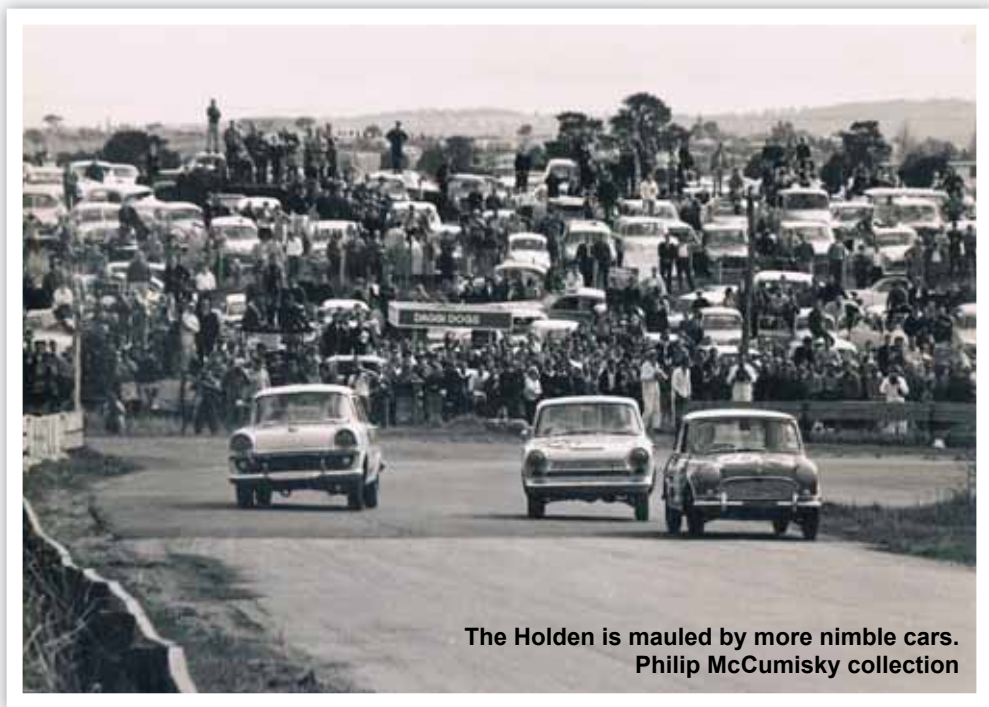
Phil McCumisky in the 1963 Armstrong 500.
Philip McCumisky collection

(In hindsight, it's true to say this was the very birthplace of the current supercars, with the fast Ford Cortina GT and Holden EH S4.)

The track was a normal public road, and the event was for normal cars available for sale to the public, this was the concept of the whole race idea and this was the first time the race had been run outside Victoria. The Phillip Island track was most unsuitable, having hosted the event from its inception the track was by now an absolute wreck and required to be re-built before any other motor sport could be run there.

And so it was that we fronted up at Bathurst on the long weekend in October 1963. Practice was on the Saturday only (in those days we were all experienced drivers and did not need weekday practice). You could practise during the week if you wanted to but you would be on your own and have to contend with weekday traffic and the police. Practice was a bit hairy for most entrants, with no communication between pit and car, some flag marshals who were colour-blind, badly needed road works on the track,





The Holden is mauled by more nimble cars.
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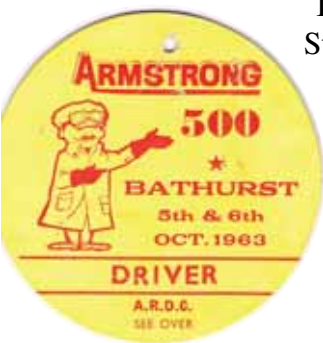
minimal crowd control in some places, kamikaze photographers and press crews.

After two laps of practice some drivers found out the hard way that their prized entry definitely required some serious suspension modifications before they could get serious with their driving, never mind their braking power.

We were quite happy to motor around, learn the limits of the FB under pressure, and determine where those limits were. The FB was quite “flexible” actually; it probably looked a bit scary on certain corners at the Mount, but it never frightened us in the handling department, and we were very enthusiastic in the way the car was driven. The photographs taken at the time verify that.

In those days there was no chicane at the end of Conrod Straight, and the FB did not like stopping at all. It took Lex and me a few laps to determine a permanent landmark to start the process where the FB needed to be coaxed to start slowing down.

Entrants like R8 Renaults and Peugeot 404s (one driven by Bob Holden and Bill Marsh) would rocket past us as we threw everything out the window to try



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18C	H. BUDD H. Budd, TBN.	HOLDEN EH 225M-5.4.179 (Light Blue/White)	£1,160
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WINNER.....		SECOND.....	THIRD.....
Number of Laps.....		Winner.....	Race Time.....
			Average Lap Speed.....

to stop the FB before almost two-wheeling around pit corner at the end of Conrod Straight.

Mind you we would then “rocket” past them and other lesser cars, going up Mountain Straight, where the absolute raw power of a 2.1-litre OHV six-cylinder was unleashed. This went on for many, many laps between us and we were joined by the Morris Elites, standard 850s, Simca Arondes, Triumph Heralds and VWs, as well as Bob Holden in his ivory-and-black 404.

The two big assets for the Peugeot were good economy and excellent brakes, making a big difference overall.

The 404s were relative newcomers to the Australian car market then, but Bob had experienced their stamina and reliability in previous rally and race events and was a well respected operator in these cars and others.

The standard of driving in the race was very good, and I was surprised by the way the FB went generally. Although it was no powerhouse, it handled well, but it would have looked scary and some photos show that going through the Dipper, around Hell Corner and Pit Straight Corner perhaps did not give that impression.

Otherwise the car was really easy to drive hard. I guess in hindsight it was all about balance and smoothness in what you were doing, (I was also a lot younger then). My job was essentially to survive the start and the hectic laps after that, settle down and gain the best position I could, hold it and try to better it, depending on what would happen on the track to other competitors.

Lex's task during his stint at the wheel was to try to regain the spot after the pit stop and hold it. Lex did a very good job at his first start at Bathurst, and I am grateful to him for giving me the chance to enter an event that would remain a lifelong memory for me.

The fatality rate of entrants was fairly high, the S4 EH Holdens were ripping RHF wheel centres out, (cornering hard, wheel strain etc). The EH runs the same road wheels as the FB, but the FBs were not as fast, therefore did not have the same problem (although we were concerned at the time as the race wore on). The S4s were also dropping tail shafts at the universal joints (part of the S4 mods were tailshafts out of automatic Holdens, which were thicker and stronger than the standard manual tailshaft, but the S4 used the standard universal joints instead of heavy-duty ones to match the tailshaft,



The FB Holden in the 1963 Armstrong 500.
Philip McCumisky collection

hence the failure). Quite a few of the S4s had the problem until they worked out what was wrong.

Watching Triumph Heralds and the VWs cornering was really scary: the inside rear wheels would almost be parallel to the road going through the Dipper or other sharp corners. The R8 Renaults were not quick but picked up their times by being unmatched in the braking department, slipping underneath the doorhandles of the Studebaker Lark, our car, and others only to be re-passed at other parts of the circuit.

Considering the more powerful cars we were up against we did not do too badly: the winning Cortina GT, driven by Harry Firth and Bob Jane, was only 15 laps in front of us after 500 miles. We did more laps than a great many others who also finished the race, and we would have done it harder than most of them as well, due to the fact that our car was already three years old.

Bob Holden and Bill Marsh finished the race four laps ahead of us completing 119 laps in total and finished in position 18, whereas we finished in position 24.

More than 60 cars entered the race, and there were a lot of DNFs.

The results are available on the web under "The real Mount Panorama" site.

At this event at Bathurst, there were some drivers who had not previously competed at Bathurst, the Australian Racing Drivers Club (the race organiser) decided that cars being driven by a driver who had not been to Bathurst before would wear a black strip on the boot lid of the car to warn other drivers approaching from behind that the driver in that car could be a Bathurst rookie. I had driven there before, but Lex had not, and this gave me some small advantage as I could let the FB "hang out" on some corners, even at the risk of a bit of correction, and be left alone to regain control before I was swallowed up by one of the "big boys". The same advantage was available to Lex and he was very good in his stints in the car. Our prime task was to finish the race, we knew at entry that we had no hope of getting a good placing, we were simply outgunned, so we adopted the line of finishing in the best position we could for our sponsors and give them the publicity and the thanks they deserved for their faith in us to do the job.

The FB performed very well, it had already done 35,000 miles (56,000km) on the road before making its racing debut; maximum speed down Conrod Straight was 96.2mph (153kmh) before we were drowned out by excessive tappet noise, we then had to feather the throttle until we had to start braking.

We only used one set of tyres throughout the event, Olympic nylon premiums. The Michelin rep came up after the event to marvel at this fact. He was in the pit next to us with Brian Muir/Spencer Martin in an S4 Holden and was watching us all race, and could not believe that we were only refuelling and changing drivers all day long, even though we had two full sets of balanced spares there in case we needed new rubber.

The amount of good-natured rubbishing we received from a lot of competitors about our choice of car turned around to bite them as the day wore on and many more fancied competitors sat there watching as we pitted, changed drivers, refuelled and drove on. Bill Tuckey, a noted motoring journalist, came up to us after the race and shook our hands and said he would never have believed it if he had not seen it for himself. He gave us no chance of finishing the race let alone gain a class position.

In his post-race story later in the month in the magazine he was writing for at the time, he made comment that “the FB Holden is still going around”, and at the finish of the article he wrote “and the FB Holden finished”.

I still have a book written on that race, the original driver’s arm band that we all had to wear, many photos of the car taken at the track by Peter D’Abbs, the noted photographer of the day, and my driver’s pit pass.

I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Lex Brailey for taking me on board for this once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

Thanks also to our race sponsors, Maurie Good, Fred Douglas of BP Warwick Farm service station, Armstrong shock absorbers, Bankstown Hobbies and Trains, BP for fuels and oils, Carburettor Service Company of Parramatta Road Burwood, Hardie Ferodo brake linings, and Olympic Tyres.

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Ad for Armstrong shock absorbers, 1963.