

The tale of a front bumper

By Geoff Strachan

(This article appeared in the PCCV magazine, Torque, in April 1977)

I wonder how many Peugeot sales Canada Cycles owed to Bob Holden. Tubman's win was very big while it was news, but Holden's always-immaculate giant-killing 203 was before the public eye at every meeting in Victoria, and many interstate, for year after year, driven by the young man with the infectious grin and a limp ... and the fierce dedication to success so often found in those who have overcome affliction – a doctor's suggestion that cycle riding might build up polio-affected legs led to no small measure of success in the tough sport of long-distance bike riding.

Our paths first crossed when we found ourselves with the same employer. I had a TD and Bob had recently sold his TC ... instant friendship. Bob then had his first 203 – a grey 1953 model – and was just starting to warm it up with thoughts of racing. Peugeots to me then were worthy cars that might have been on my short list if the gear lever had been in the right place. Here are some memories:

- The new circuit at Altona, where duties with the CSCC kept me in Race Control while Bob found out how the 203 went.
- Fishermans Bend airstrip – should one take the short line close to the bales or take it wide to keep the revs up? With the '53 gearbox you always wanted the gear they had left out. So the hot bits found



Bob chases a 2½ litre Riley during the 1957 Touring Car Trophy, Albert Park. Bob Holden collection

themselves being transferred to Joey – GJY634 – a brand new blue-grey 203C with the benefit of the much better gearbox.

- A trip to Adelaide in the TD to watch Bob perform at dusty Port Wakefield – luggage around our ears whenever we braked, too little lubrication on the distributor rotor and too much on the clutch, this TD has to make way for a 203.
- A marvellous trip with Bob to Orange over the Australia Day weekend 1956 – on our way straight from work on Friday, the car being driven gently to run in some new bits – my first experience of seat belts, a fine feeling of oneness with the car and improved delicacy of control – depositing a passenger and looking for petrol at 2am in Jerilderie – finding myself on the rear floor in a mess of luggage, maps, stack hat

– after a spoon drain caught us out near West Wyalong – dawn close to Orange – what a boomer of a circuit – off with the rear silencer and on with the numbers and ready for practice: we had four big discs, one for the bootlid, very Le Mans; but the timekeepers thanked us for it afterwards. The race featured a great dice between Bob’s 203 and a Sunbeam Talbot, which was just lost due to slow traffic in the last lap. Then off home straight after the races – tea in Cowra – through Junee just as the pictures came out; “this bloke in a Holden wants to have a go” – the 203 formed a stable grandstand to watch the antics of a 1955 Holden on the limit, with lighting courtesies Marchal. Wagga already, average town centre to town centre over 80 [mph] – the 203 speedo only reads to 95 and the needle was hard over on the stop – must be genuine 100. Albury for a refuelling stop; “Here is the bloke in the MG we passed up the road”. “Did you see that Bristol go past?” What would you think if a 203 passed you in the small hours doing nearly the ton? Home at 5am after 10 hours’ running time. Our employer didn’t get his money’s worth that day.

- Then there was a run to Bathurst in my recently acquired two-tone blue 203C, with both rear shocker shafts broken before Seymour. Bob and the boys were late getting to Bathurst so the car ran complete with driving lights, looking like an immaculate rally car. The Peugeot won its race but we didn’t find out for months, as the starter made a mistake and let someone go too early.

Back home for the great Albert Park meeting. Those names: Moss, Behra, Parnell, Whitehead (I had seen him in an ERA at Aspendale hillclimb when I was very small). The 203 was presented for scrutineering without a front

**NEW £35,000 SPEED TRACK TO OPEN
RECORD CROWDS
EXPECTED AT
ALTONA ON SUNDAY**

The fastest speeds yet clocked in Australia should be recorded at the new £35,000 Altona motor racing circuit when it opens on February 21. The opening meeting will be conducted by the Harley Club of Victoria. Australia's leading motor cycle stars will compete at the meeting.

A special feature of the meeting will be a time trial race between Stan Jones, crack Australian racing car driver, and Frank Sinclair, national motor sidecar driver.

Jones will race in his Cooper Special and Sinclair on a Vincent Special. Both vehicles are capable of more than 130 mph.

It will be the first time in the world that a racing car and racing bike have competed in a time trial.

The new track, which cost £35,000, was built by well-known racing drivers Stewart and Neil Charge and is the first of its kind to be built in Australia. They have laid more than 2½ miles of all weather bitumen track fully enclosed by a steel safety fence. Modern sanitary conveniences have been installed and future plans provide for stands, changing rooms, fully equipped racing pits and permanent refreshment rooms.

Free parking space is available for 3000 cars.

By rail the track is only a few hundred yards from Altona and Seaholme stations. By road it is off Geelong Road near Millers Road.

Special buses direct to the track will meet every train at North Williamstown station.

— ★ —

Six cases of infectious diseases were reported in January—two of scarlet fever and four of pulmonary T.B.

NEEDLE

bumper, which was being repaired, but the scruters would have none of it. “Fit the one off my car” and off for practice.

So that front bumper you saw circulating rapidly at Albert Park was mine!

In another article in the March 1977 issue of Torque, headed ‘Retrospective recollections’, Geoff Strachan wrote, in part:

In the last few months a number of events have given me cause to look back on some aspects of my life in relation to the Automobile.

The Bathurst 1000 telecast took me back to 1956. That was the year that international motor racing really came to Melbourne. The pre-Bathurst 1000 interview with one S. Moss, and the movie footage of this great driver, supplied by Mercedes-Benz, was a moving experience. To say I was a Stirling Moss fan is an understatement; in fact it was some surprise to our friends that our first born was not named after him.

Going back to 1956 and that event, my memory is helped by the fact that I still have the second-day programme for the Argus International Motor Races, strangely not autographed by Moss, but by the French champion Jean Behra. The Maserati team had

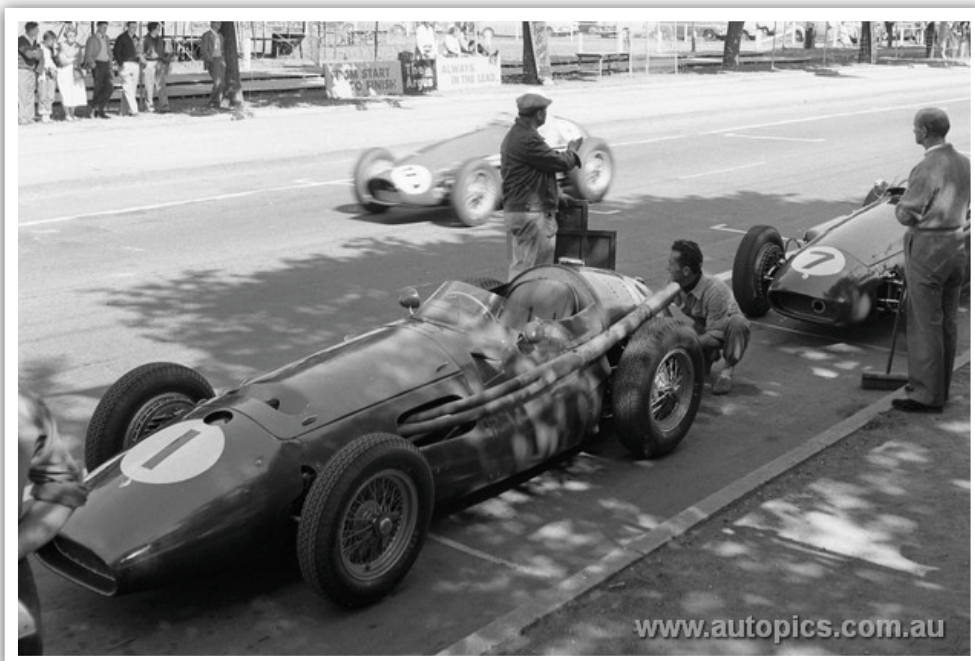
brought out 250F Grand Prix cars and 300S sports cars for Moss and Behra. They were joined by other private overseas entrants such as Reg Parnell and Peter Whitehead on Ferraris and Ken Wharton on a 250F Maserati. Some better known Australian entrants in this two-weekend meeting included Jack Brabham, Reg Hunt, Stan Jones and Kevin Neal driving Maseratis, Lex Davison, Ferrari; Doug Whiteford, Lago Talbot; Jack Myers, Alec Mildren and Len Lukey on front-engined Coopers.

Of course it was the magnificent Moss who won both the 100 mile Australian Tourist Trophy and the 250 mile Australian Grand Prix.

The use of Albert Park was not without controversy and both the Herald and Sun newspapers campaigned against its use. To minimise inconvenience to the public, practice was conducted at 6am on the Saturdays of each weekend. On these occasions I thought nothing of getting up at 4am to pick up my fiancée and be there early enough to see the cars arriving. I recall there was a threat of rain but to drive down to Albert Park with hood or side curtains up was unthinkable.

Whilst I didn't consider it significant at the time; I think there was a certain sedan driver of some note entered. This was Bob Holden, who was driving a Peugeot 203 with some success.

Speaking of Peugeot, I remember riding my-push bike down to Royal Park in 1953 to see the Redex cars come into Melbourne. Of course we all recall Ken Tubman's success in the 203 in that event. One of my mates had a 203 at the time and was very enthusiastic about it, however I couldn't see past British sports cars. Nevertheless the Redex result and Bob Holden's efforts



Car 1, Jean Behra and Car 7, Stirling Moss (Maserati 250F) at Albert Park 1956.
Autopics.com.au

suggested that maybe there could be something to these French motor cars. In 1954 I had been involved in welding up a manifold for Barry Hudson. Barry was helping Ian Mountain build a Peugeot special. Tragically, Ian was killed when this car left the road in a race. Barry was rapt in the Peugeot special and these incidents went a long way towards developing my respect for the marque.

Prior to Albert Park, motor racing was conducted at Fishermans Bend and Altona on a regular basis, with hillclimbs at Rob Roy and Templestowe. At about this time, Melbourne hotelier Lou Molina was driving a Holden powered MM special and later the Holden Monza special. I mention this because we recently spent a very pleasant evening at the Anchor and Hope Hotel in Richmond. Lou has set up the back bar with all sorts of motor sport pictures and car emblems. It's quite an experience and a bit nostalgic for the older types.

Another memory-jogging event was the recent Mercedes-Benz Concours d'Elegance at Lilydale. Being an avid student of Grand Prix racing of the 1934 to 1939 period, I couldn't help being convinced of the Mercedes-Benz supremacy, which was again demonstrated in the late 1950s. Seeing this much-loved collection of Mercs found me searching for the 180 series sedan. This was the type of taxi we used for our wedding, much to the amusement of our motor sporting friends. The short trip in the Merc was hardly enough to be considered a "demo" run and besides I had other things on my mind. Nevertheless I was still convinced that this was the ultimate motor car. After driving a friend's 403 back from Ballarat car races I was hooked on the Peugeot and subsequently bought a 403 myself. One feature of that drive I recall vividly was when attempting to change into overdrive at about 50 mph. I went back into second, the motor revs shot up, but with no protest and absolutely no trace of valve bounce. I was glad this hadn't happened in my little Pommy car.

I was not to drive the legendary Merc until a friend offered his 220. At this time I had the ex-1963 Economy Run 404. Well that ended the Merc infatuation for good, but it was still nice to look at those beautifully kept examples at Lilydale.