



The sports car offers a return to the days when driving was a pleasure. It is a car that is a servant more than a master, and can be placed on the road in exactly the required position. From the moment you leave the curb, it is at your command.

Should You Buy a Sports Car?

The increasing popularity of sports cars stems from the feeling of cohesion between driver and machine that the little jobs impart

PHOTOS BY ANDY KNIGHT

By M. E. STUART

THE great present-day boom in enthusiasm for the sports machine in the United States is attributed to the desire of an ever-expanding group who wish to recapture the pleasure in driving. The popularity of the European car is due to the fact that the American manufacturer has failed to supply a car that gives the same satisfaction in positive accord with the automobile as the European producer has been able to do. There is little feeling of command when one sits at the wheel of some of our latest Detroit products which incorporate all the accessories that make driving easier; these cars no longer respond to the intimate demands of the toe or fingertip, and power steering and automatic transmission do not counteract the high-ratio steering or lack of acceleration at critical points.

You may be one of the many persons who have either wondered what all this sports car business is about or are contemplating buying one, and it is for such persons that this article is intended.

We are not going to try and define a sports car, for many authorities have already tried and failed, but for this article, suffice to say that we are dealing with a small open car that has good performance and good roadability. At this stage, we are not going to deal with racing (which is a special subject in itself), but more with the ways and means by which the new owner of one of these cars can get the most out of his cherished purchase.

In spite of all the advances made in the design and performance of the smaller sports car, nothing has yet dis-

placed the MG from its established position as the sportsman's nursery car. It is strongly advised that the MG should be the first sports car you buy and the car on which you relearn to drive. Pricewise, nothing approaches this product of the Nuffield Organization (the initials MG stand for Morris Garage—a unit of the Nuffield concern).

For performance, this car is quite sufficient for the beginner without getting him into too much trouble. Mechanically, it is very sturdily built and will stand quite an appreciable amount of abuse. It is not a car that you are going to take all three children out in as well as your wife, but your wife will love to be taken out by herself. It is a comfortable car for both driver and passenger, and, once and for all, let us dispel the absurd idea that you can't take it on a long trip.

From personal experience we have found there is far less fatigue experienced by both driver and passenger in a 500-mile drive in an MG than there is in battling a large domestic vehicle along the cluttered roads. With regard to baggage, the addition of a luggage rack fitted above the spare tire gives ample space to carry sufficient cases for two persons for three weeks—provided a little discretion is used in what has to be taken.

Let us, therefore, assume that you are interested in purchasing a new sports car. The dealer, and there are many about these days, will tell you the basic price of the car as it stands on his showroom floor, ready to drive away. The only accessories that are likely to be needed, and these are by no means essential, are two exterior rear-view mirrors to fit on the front fenders, a lug-

gage rack, an ashtray, a tonneau cover for the fastidious (a cover that zips up over the seating compartment and steering wheel when the top is not in place), and for those who live in an area that is subject to fog, a fog lamp.

The installation of a heater is not really necessary as, with the top up, there is ample heat thrown back from the engine to warm even the coldest pair of feet; a radio is not advised as it will always be in the way, and with the top down, no one can hear the thing, and with the top up the noise of the motor will more than likely kill the melodious notes—anyway, no one can concentrate and drive properly to the strains of either Beethoven's Fifth or Eartha Kitt.

If you haven't already examined one of these jewels of the automobile tiara, you will be amazed at the overall finish of the cars. The seat and panel coverings will most likely be of leather and the instrument panel probably covered with similar high-grade material or made of polished mahogany. The paintwork will be noticeably thick, and a further investigation into the general construction will reveal rigidly manufactured vehicles. Under the hood, the engines will at first appear small, but at the same time very accessible.

When looking under the hood, the beginner's first thoughts will probably be skeptical, unless he already knows about the powerfulness of such small units, but the response of these engines will most definitely surprise the driver. While the enthusiastic dealer is expounding the virtues of the car, slip into the driver's seat and leave your wife to listen to the sales talk. The seat probably feels strange—you are placed low and



Ease of maneuverability and smallness of size have great advantages. There are many spaces which are barred to the normal car that can accommodate a sports car with room to spare. These facets of the sports car become obvious in city traffic.

looking at highway life from a new angle. But don't worry about that; you will very soon get used to seeing the ribbon of road stretch out ahead and feel as though you are pointing an arrow at a target which stretches into the far distance.

Let's get comfortable first—and you can really get comfortable in this type of car. The seat on which you are sitting is adjustable by means of the usual little gadget conveniently placed for your left hand—get it adjusted for your leg length. Don't be disturbed if you are over six feet; there is plenty of room, for if the steering wheel is in the way, you can adjust that. A small nut in front of you lengthens or shortens the steering column and you can have the wheel just where you want it. Having fixed the seat and the wheel in the right place, the back may feel somewhat strained—then alter the back by loosening the wing nuts behind. Juggle about with these adjustments until you feel really comfortable. And a word to the wise—where are your hands on the steering wheel? They should be on the lower half of the wheel and placed like the hands of the clock at twenty to four, with the elbows well into the sides. Sports car driving is a precision business and everything about it is neat—no elbows waving in the breeze or hands wandering casually over the top of the steering wheel. Don't forget there is positive steering in sports cars.

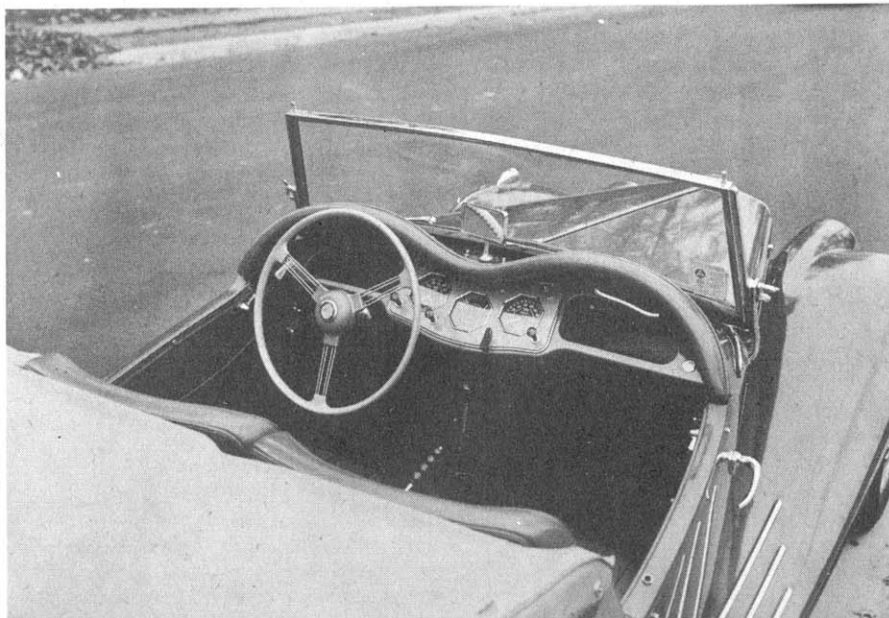
You will by now have realized that it is a most comfortable car to sit in and that you can see everything around

you as well as the clearly defined lines of both fenders. Now that the salesman has probably put your wife in a receptive mood, coax her to sit beside you. Her first reaction will be to object and complain that it seems totally impossible for her to get in. But the system is quite simple and can be executed with the decorum of a debutante being presented. Merely have the little woman back in—seat first—with her legs still on the showroom floor. Then slowly lift the left leg in and then follow it with the right.

To get the debutante precision, it needs a little practice, but the involuntary showing of nylon is no more than normally displayed when entering or leaving a domestic sedan. Her first remarks will also be about the lowness to the ground and a feeling that she will be jarred by every small stone along the

way—this is only the voice of inexperience. The passenger seat is adjustable in the same way as the driver's, and a little juggling will result in complete comfort for a long drive—and we mean long. The seat is so designed that its curved back gives remarkable support, and the depth of the seat gives proper support to the knees so that in spite of the apparent lack of space there is no urge to squirm about and stretch the legs at odd angles.

You are now both sitting comfortably in the car. As the driver, look around; it's probably the first time you have seen exactly where the back end of the car is. Look over the side and see the front wheels—you are in a position to guide the wheels right over that cigarette butt on the floor that has somehow escaped the eye of the cleaner. Look at the instruments; they are clear and easy



The cramped look of the cockpit is only an illusion as it is very comfortable.

You must know your sports car before cutting loose . . .

to read and the one that is going to command most of your attention is the tachometer or rev counter—although you are going to have to keep a sharp eye on the speedometer for it will take a little time to mentally convert rpm. to mph. Behind the back seat you will notice room for placing luggage and there is a special compartment for storing the sidescreens.

We haven't mentioned the side screens before, but don't get alarmed for they can be put up and lowered in a short time. But don't wait until it rains before you try them! Once you have put them up a couple of times and put them down again, you probably will have devised your own system. The top is no great bother, either, and although it's easier when you have a little help, it is by no means a difficult task.

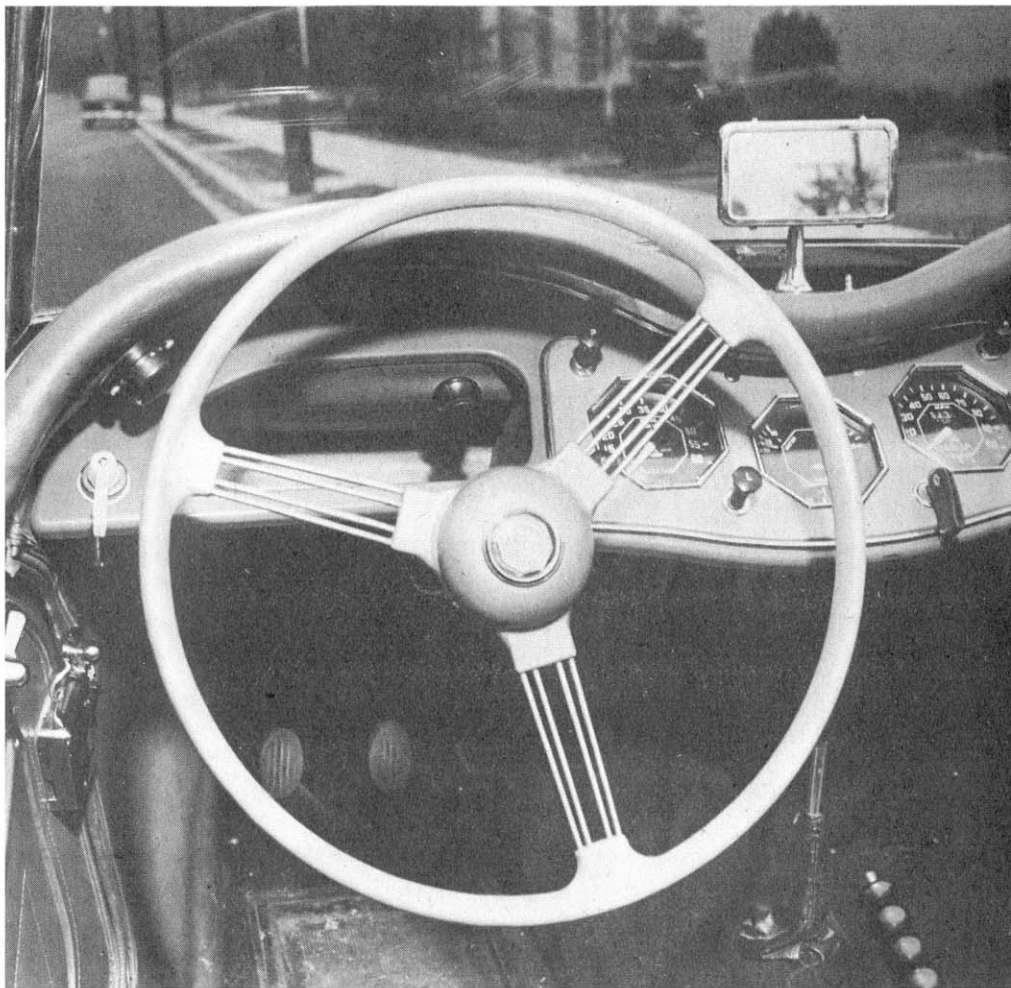
If you are still sitting in the car and your wife has not said something about puddle jumpers or toy cars (therefore showing her feminine ignorance of things that really matter), you are on the way to experience some real pleasure in motoring.

We mentioned accessories previously, but don't worry if the dealer can't supply them. Such additions are easily obtainable from the many agencies that fully appreciate the rapidly growing interest in the small sports car.

Skipping a few days, during which time you have expounded all the virtues of the car to your wife and completely obliterated the small and insignificant arguments that she has advanced, you are ready to take delivery of your 1955 sports car. Don't leave your wife behind you when go to pick it up, for she is going to drive the car, too—that is, when you can be forced away from the wheel. And a word of advice—the woman invariably turns out to want to drive this small car in preference to the larger sedan. This is a fact, not assumption.

More than likely the dealer will have taken you out for a run in the car before you had made up your mind about buying it, and it is also likely that when you were offered the wheel you felt none too happy. That's understandable, as no one can step into a new car and drive it off like Chuck Stevenson or Manuel Fangio. But this is your day, and once the check has been laid on the sales manager's desk, you become the master of an obedient servant.

You have been told how to start the engine, where all the switches are and the meaning and use of the instruments. Now gently rev the engine up to around 2,800 rpm. and let it warm up. Don't rush the procedure, as you are going to have plenty of opportunity in the



The instrument panel and controls are scientifically designed and sited, for they are of vital importance to expert control and driving of any sports car.

future to try a racing start—but not now! Check all the gauges—temperature, oil, fuel, ammeter, etc.

If all looks right, put it in first gear and gently let out the clutch. It has a positive clutch that is either in or out. There should be no half measures so don't worry unduly if the car bucks considerably the first few times you start off. The mechanism is sensitive and after a bit of practice you will find that the gentlest toe pressure on the clutch will be all that is needed. It may take a little time to become familiar with the steering if you have been driving a domestic sedan for any considerable period. The one thing to remember about any true sports car is that it will do exactly what you ask when you ask it—therefore, a slight turn on the wheel will immediately bring a change of direction of the car.

Don't be too eager to get out of that bottom gear; in fact, stay in it until you really have the *feel* of the car. Don't, however, take the engine above 2,700 revs when in bottom gear. You will find that this bottom gear is very low, indeed, and speeds of over 15 mph. should be discouraged. As soon as you feel you have more confidence, move up into second, into third, and finally to top. There are four forward gears and reverse on most sports cars, and they

are all there to be used. The most serious damage that can be done to a sports car engine is invariably caused by persons hanging on to top gear and not shifting down. These small high-performance engines do not have the torque of the larger American power units, but have a well-designed gearbox to compensate.

For the first few weeks, don't be too upset if a crashing of gears is experienced. This is due to unfamiliarity with the gearbox and the delicacy of the clutch. At this stage, don't try to do any fancy tricks like double-declutching. All that will come later. The gearbox has synchromesh on second, third, and fourth gears, and there is no need at this stage to use a racing change when going down through the gears.

As the first few days will doubtless be spent driving around the block, use the time getting accustomed to changing down to second gear. The correct gear shift is made when it is heard and not felt, and with the modern day sports car this is a comparatively simple operation. You are probably going to readjust your appreciation of driving as a whole once you become familiar with the car.

The lack of acceleration after going around a slowish corner will indicate that you should have changed down be-



Erecting the side curtains and lowering the top is by no means very difficult.

fore you entered the corner, and that you have been hanging on to top gear too long. The principle of changing down for a corner should be followed fairly rigidly unless the corner is a wide curve and can be turned without diminishing speed.

When approaching a concentration of traffic, it is always advisable to select third gear, just in case you need the extra pick-up offered by the lower gear later on. In fact, a very good axiom is "when in doubt, shift down." The braking caused in shifting down can often prevent a nasty situation as well as placing you in a better position to deal with any unforeseen eventuality.

The first real trip in a small sports car is an exhilarating experience, and then you will realize all the things you have been missing for so long.

Let us presume that it is a fine day and that you are going for a run into the country; not along the dull and unchanging turnpike, but along the country lanes for which the car was designed. The picnic case is neatly stored behind the seat and all is within easy reach. Your wife, having found the passenger seat more comfortable than she ever thought a passenger seat could be, is beside you and you are ready to take off.

Getting out of town is easy, for you already have found that while the larger cars are fumbling at the traffic lights, you can slip into bottom gear, then into second, on into third, and slacken off if the speed limit is being exceeded.

A correct driving position is of great importance at all times when driving.

The spaces in the traffic that are impossible for the sedan traveler are more than sufficient for your car, and in a very short time you realize that driving in traffic can have its pleasures. But don't be taken in by the taxidriver who looks down at you and then scoots off from the light just to show you how much more powerful his car is than yours—he will be waiting for you at the next traffic light and probably stuck behind four similarly bodied cars while there's probably ample space for you to creep down on the side and get to the head of the line.

Leaving the populated areas behind, the road becomes yours. Now try swinging the wheel slightly and note the response. If you have the seat and wheel set in the right position and your hands are placed on the wheel correctly with the elbows in, by leaning the body from side to side you should find that the car will steer to the right or left without moving the hands on the wheel. Once this has been experienced, you will understand why it is that good horsemen and good skiers invariably make good drivers. You are developing a feeling for the car and you are starting to become as one with the car—the same way in which a good horseman becomes part of his mount.

After experience, it will be discovered that the slightest variation in road condition, whether it be a change of camber or a change of road surface, is indicated to your hands by way of the road wheels and steering wheel, while at the same time there is no violent reaction from a bad surface with the car taking its head and following a line undesired by the driver.

It is more than likely that you will want to put your foot down to the floor

boards to see how fast the car will go. This is most undesirable until the car has been well broken and has at least 1,000 miles behind it. However, should a long stretch of road be available and the car is in a fit state to be opened up, the response to the accelerator will be staggering. Although speeds of over 75 mph. are beyond a small sports car, the relation of speed to the vehicle makes it appear as though one is traveling much faster than is shown on the speedometer. Then, after a little while, 75 mph. appears to be slow.

Experiment with accelerating from various speeds and see the effect. You will be most astounded to discover the appreciable push in the back when accelerating from 40 or 50 mph. Also, but gently at first, try accelerating while the car is negotiating a gentle curve; the effect will be surprising and once one has mastered the art of cornering under power, you are progressing rapidly to the proficiency and pleasure of sports car driving.

But don't be mean during this period of self-tuition and experimentation. Let your wife get behind the wheel. Encourage her, for by now you will have realized that the only difficult thing in driving a sports car is to fully appreciate the fact that the car is going to do *exactly* what you want it to do when you operate the controls properly.

The more patient you are in learning the finer points of driving a sports car, the more pleasure you are going to derive from it and the more faithfully it is going to serve you. Provided you don't abuse it by forcing it to carry too heavy a load, or *attempt* to climb Pikes Peak in fourth gear, it will become a very faithful friend and give you many thousands of miles of joyful motoring. ☆☆

