

The Bob-Tailed Bomb and The 1440 Minutes



Author in the Bentley-Hugus Cooper Climax at Tertre Rouge. Light rain made circuit hazardous.

by JOHN BENTLEY

"Un pilote", at Le Mans, is a driver who for no reason at all elects to drive an automobile very fast around the classic Sarthe Circuit for as long a portion of 24 hours as he can stay on the road or keep the wheels turning. The urge to meet this grueling challenge is a strange phenomenon. It is useless to ask a driver why for 24 years he and his predecessors have "diced" their way through the mad scramble of the Le Mans start, into the late afternoon and the glare of a summer sunset that throws a blinding screen of molten copper over the tricky Indianapolis and Arnage turns; and have defied the confusing shadows of waning day and highballed through the downpours, the mist and fog of an unpredictable night until the pale dawn of another day slowly rises to greet them. Then, tired, dirty and half-hypnotized, have pressed on into the following afternoon until at last — at long last — the checkered flag greets the survivors. "Un pilote" simply knows that it is the most intensely exciting and dramatic experience he can undergo.

At any rate, when I was in England last March and John Cooper offered me a ride on the official Cooper team at Le Mans, Ed Hugus and I decided to take a crack at it. It was something we had long wanted to do: more important, something both of us believed we could carry through to a successful finish — given any luck. The team consisted of two cars: our 1100 machine and the new 1500 model with the bored and stroked Coventry-Climax engine. At the last moment, however, Cooper was unable to obtain a 1500 engine and we found ourselves alone against two specially built and formidable Lotuses, an 1100 Osca-engined R. B. (Py and Dommée) and an 850 cc V. P. machine with a Panhard engine driven engine by Dumazer and Champion. Since neither the R. B. nor the V. P. offered any serious threat, the Class G battle involved our Cooper and the Allison-Hall

and Bicknell-Jopp Lotuses. On Index—no illusions. The issue lay somewhere between the DB-Panhards, the two phenomenal new Porsche coupes and possibly the remarkable 1500 Lotus of Chapman and Fraser which in practice circulated at close on 100 mph. The 1956 fueling regulations restricting gas capacity to 130 liters (34.3 US gallons) on which at least 34 laps (283.3 miles) had to be covered, with subsequent refueling limited to 120 liters (31.7 US gallons) did not favor the big cars. Their drivers had to run strictly to pre-determined rev. limits to save gas.

John Cooper had done a fine job converting the "mono-posto" frame of the Cooper to meet the new Le Mans ruling which calls for two usable seats 20 inches wide. "Over a pint of beer," as he put it, John got rid of the upper longitudinal members and replaced them with a center tube under tension. He added some ingenious bracing to strengthen the frame behind the seats, moved the steering wheel to the right and put the shift lever in the center. The car also had a full-width windshield complete with wiper blade, but as the top of the windshield came level with our chins, it was merely a token affair that soon caked solid with mud. Other modifications included an oil cooler and the 1500 clutch installed to cope with the 87 bhp (at 7,000 rpm) of the Mark II Coventry-Climax engine. We thought the 3.64 axle low for Le Mans, but Cooper was right. This ratio gave us 21.15 mph per 1,000 rpm in fourth and we could just hit 6,000 (with tire expansion nearly 132 mph) towards the end of the four-mile Mulsanne Straight. The Lotuses were lower-g geared and their acceleration was superior, but they had to turn well over 7,000 rpm to equal our lap speeds — and 24 hours is a long time. With odds of two to one against us, our ratio appeared more suitable and in practice we kept the revs around 6,000 through gears to give the engine a chance to settle down. Our practice lap times were

and The 1440 Minutes

There's only one way to see the real Le Mans — from the bucket of a race car. Here is the log of the only American entry in the 1956 24 Heures Du Mans

Sun brightens morning after an all night rain. Flockhart in the winning D-type Jag barrels through turn at White House on way to victory.

appreciably slower in consequence, and while our watches caught the opposing team well extended with laps of 5:07 and 5:08 (94.98 mph) they had no idea of what we could do.

The story of the 24-Hour race as seen from our pit and over the top of No. 33 Cooper's muddy windshield presents such a complex and humid pattern (it rained for about 20 hours) that it is best told in log form.

SATURDAY, JULY 28 — 1 pm: Dropped P. D. (Parker Davis) and Stan Nowak, two of our crew, at Mulsanne Corner pit where all signals must be given. Their cubby-hole is like South Sea Island hut with rattan walls, and a packed earth floor. They are linked by phone with main pit but otherwise marooned for 24 hours. Left them chase lounge, food and crate of Evian water. Poor guys are in for a rough time as we can't spare any relief.

2 pm: Our pit Commissar, an impatient type, made us line up on pit counter every tool, part, nut and bolt we are carrying in car. Check form filled in triplicate. Sealing of gas tanks presents major problem. Commissar insists gas caps must be sealed — not trap doors of body. Says we can reach gas caps by loosening five Dzus fasteners; body seals therefore useless. This means at least two minutes wasted at each refueling stop while Commissar fumbles with wire and seals in narrow opening giving access to gas caps.

2:30 pm: Inspection and sealing completed. Spotless Cooper, bearing blue and white American colors looks fine, parked diagonally in front of pit. Crowds milling around. Pit straight like Fifth Avenue on Easter Parade morning. Our crew consists of John Cooper, chief; namesake John "Court" Cooper, mechanic; Joan Hallock, stopwatches; Lucille Davis and Dixie Nowak, spotters; Flight-Lieutenant Bill Lamb, and RAF jet pilot and slide-rule wizard, chart-



The checkered flag is about to fall on the Frankenberg-Von Trips Porsche marking it winner in the 1½ litre class.



They're off! Number 8, Moss-Aston-Martin, led the field, but Hawthorn in number 1 overtook the Aston by the end of the first lap, and set the pace until fuel injection trouble forced a pit stop. The Walker Aston then led briefly.



The Aston Martin pit early Sunday morning—raining hard. The 2.5 prototype is in for a routine stop as Reg Parnell waits at right to take over.

keeper; Pat Vanson, an Englishman living in Paris (also fluent with lingo) in charge of refueling pump.

4 pm: They're off! Scrambled patter of crêpe soles. Whirr of starters. Crowd of 200,000 exhales with a wild yell that almost drowns explosive snarl of engines. Moss (Aston-Martin) first away as usual; but when howling pack completes first lap, Hawthorn's D-Jag leads, followed by Moss, Flockhart (D-Jag), Walker (Aston-Martin), Frère and Fairman (D-Jags) and de Portago's Ferrari. Seconds after they vanish around Dunlop Bridge Curve — spectacular crack-up. Frère spins in the slippery Esses, wrecking Jag. Fairman slithers clear of team mate but de Portago bangs into him. All three machines, including two of three works Jags, are out. Ed motors Cooper smooth and steady, working way up field behind two Lotuses. Time for 10th lap: 5:27.3 — 89.3 mph. Bicknell-Jopp Lotus No. 36 heads class; only seconds separate three cars. Rain has stopped; track drying.

6:27 pm: Ed's 27th lap is fastest in 5:06 — 95.29 mph. He's found "groove." Glancing over Bill Lamb's battered hat as he squats in pit corner with slide rule, I see Cooper was officially timed through Flying Kilometer at 120.46 mph on 25th lap. Bill's chart is a dizzying thing of sheer genius. Besides recording time for each lap, it shows progressive time, Index time, difference between two, lap speeds, cumulative race average, position in class, overall and on Index, plus columns for pit stop details and running log. Our Index figure has climbed from 1.08 on lap 5 to 1.17, but John Cooper thinks we're going too fast, too soon. He's about to call Mulsanne to put out SLO signal when downpour starts. That does it. Ed eases off to 5:33, then 5:53 and all's well. Leaders: 1. Moss-Collins Aston; 2. Flockhart-Sanderson "Ecurie Ecosse" Jag; 3. Walker-Salvadori, Aston. Hawthorn, in and out of pits with fuel injection trouble, many laps behind. Henry's 4th lap crash in No. 51 Panhard at White House unfortunately proved fatal. Only two days ago we were talking to him at Hippodrome Cafe.

7:11 pm: Phone rings from Mulsanne on 36th lap — one before Ed is due in. Cooper leaps from pit counter to phone. "The car's hit the sandbank at our corner," P. D. tells him. "Don't know how deep in he is." All our hopes buried in a sandbank? No one speaks for three minutes until phone rings again. "Ed's digging himself out," P. D. says. "Nothing serious. He'll soon be on his way." Pity we couldn't make a tape recording of our collective sigh of relief. Lap 36 costs Ed 10:11 before he comes by, but no visible damage.

7:27 pm: Cooper in and so is downpour, seemingly for good. I stand on pit counter ready to jump in when refuel-



Cooper in for a routine pit stop is about to roar out with Bentley behind wheel. Ed Hugus is in pits giving latest road conditions, and hazards to refreshed driver. Time: noon Sunday; condition: dry road; lap times: fast.

ing completed. Used 51 liters of gas; half pint of oil. Averaged 24.7 mpg. Pretty good. "It's slippery out there," Ed grins at me through his visor. "Take it easy." John and "Court" Cooper work like beavers but tank sealing takes forever. Move out after 3:54 pit stop. Brother, is it wet! Through Esses, Frères No. 2 D-Jag stands battered and forlorn at right; on outside of left loops stands the Zehender-Lucas Talbot No. 18, also clobbered and abandoned. It spun half an hour ago. Cooper rides fine along Mulsanne despite high tire pressures recommended by Dunlop which were *not* for rain: 40 lbs rear, 35 front. Standing lap in 6:00; Stan and P. D. grin at me as I inch around tight and nasty Mulsanne Corner past their pit. P. D. wears red cap. Stan a checker job. Despite downpour, see signal board clearly. As I get "groove," time drops to 5:28. That's better than 88 mph average. "OK" sign comes up. Around lap 45, catch and pass Lotus No. 35 along Mulsanne. We move into second place. Don't see him any more. Lap 49, cut off too deep at Mulsanne. Realize at No. 1 marker I'll never make narrow right. Use escape road, do a loop and get back on course. Boys clap with joyous irony; that lap takes 4:48. Serves me right.

9:20 pm: Dusk sets in early and darkness comes quickly due to heavy overcast and continuous rain. Switch on headlights — and can't see a thing. Right light is cocked skyward, left also out of focus, creating mass of confusing shadows that add to rain problems. Can't figure it out. Lucas set lights during night practice. Then I get it. Ed's trip into sandbank bent body front out of shape. Gets harder all the time to maintain laps between 5:30 and 5:40, fast left-right kinks between Arnage and downhill section to White House zig-zag become a menace. Four wrecks partially block road, one of them blazing. No. 21 Meyrat-Tavano Ferrari spun out of White House and No. 26 Porsche coupe of Nathan-Glockier crashed into it and overturned, catching fire. No. 52 Stanguellini (Faure-Foury) hit Porsche and No. 50 Panhard of Chancel-Beaulieu piled into wreckage. No one seriously hurt but heat of burning Porsche is like blast furnace. Brings back memories of that terrible crash last year. On lap 72, with two to go before stop, take Dunlop Bridge Curve at 110 mph and nearly come to grief as Cooper starts crazy slide towards apex. Next lap, treat Dunlop Bridge with more respect but shift too far downhill to Esses and can't quite make left curve. Slide into wrecked Talbot and bounce off with nasty crunch, smashing recognition light but escaping disaster. Enough for now.

11:13 pm: Pull in on 74th lap for refuel and driver change. Take in 55 liters gas, two pints oil, a little water. Only



Tony Brooks, fresh out of the hospital after the Silverstone accident, corners in the 2.5 Aston. Car went out 10:00 A.M. Sunday with broken rear.



The 1500 cc winner, Porsche number 25 of Von Trips and Frankenberg takes the graveyard turn at the entrance to White House.

body damage to Cooper. Gas consumption: 25.6 mpg. We're now leading both Lotuses, or as a British magazine later puts it with injured pride, we have "somehow managed to get by" our two rivals. Index position, 5th; overall, 16th. Twelve cars have dropped out. Dixie hands me cup of coffee; go off to take hot shower (100 francs) with soap (25 francs) and towel (free), then change into dry clothes. Bill Lamb still squats like Buddha over charts, figuring away to three decimals. He's seen nothing of race. It's pouring rain. Driving conditions and miserable lights are reflected in lap times: fastest, 5:38. John Cooper, cheerful, tireless as ever. Our crew at Mulsanne holding out like stalwarts. Feel guilty thinking about them when I slip over to hospitable Lucas' balcony for hot "cupper." Heaps of cold meat and chicken in our pit but no bread. P. D. and Stan have all the bread at Mulsanne. Relax on air mattress but sleep

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Sandwiched between a Gordini and the Gendebien-Trintignant Ferrari the manx tailed Cooper keeps an easy pace around turn.

Le Mans

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impossible. Phone rings constantly. Public address system blares endlessly in French and English. Grandstands almost empty now. Overall leaders:

1. Flockhard-Sanderson; 2. Moss-Collins; 3. Gendebien-Trintignant Ferrari. Hawthorn-Bueb Jag has moved back to 20th place, going like a bomb.

SUNDAY, JULY 29 - 3:40 am: Ed coming in. Rain tapering off and course drying. Again stand ready on pit counter but gas hose won't pump. Cooper blows his stack while a kink is unravelled. Still no gas. Someone shut off the valve! Take in 63 liters and 2 pints of engine oil. Check gearbox. Car looks as though plunged in bath of muddy water, but tires still perfect. We are not 12th overall. Away after 4:17 pit stop that should have been 2:17 but for those seals. In the Esses, second wreck has joined Talbot. No. 18 Frazer-Nash spun and hit Talbot around 2 am. Car runs fine but can no longer get 6,000 on Mulsanne. Limit is 5,800. Valve springs getting tired. Dead dog on road halfway down Mulsanne. At Mulsanne pit our boys still there, pale but on job with board. Wave to them. Next lap—what's this? No. 35 Lotus lies broadside and battered on shoulder of second bend in Esses. Another spin. Only one rival left:

4:00 am: Halfway mark. This could be finish at Sebring, but here we're just getting second breath. It's lonely on Mulsanne with only cockpit light to keep you company. Check gauges; temperature 68° C; oil pressure 70 psi. Everything fine. Rain has stopped. Already, 27 cars out of race, but this stint I'm out for 41 laps. That's over 365 miles. Through Esses, more trouble. Yellow light blink warning. Porsche No. 34 of Bourel and Slotine, our pit neighbors, has spun out. Though slow, this 1300 stock Super coupe has gone well. Hope he restarts. Two laps later he is gone. No. 35 Porsche coupe of Frankenberg and von Trips passes me coming out of Terte Rouge; tremendous acceleration. Can't stay with him though I wind to 7,200 in second. Ding-dong scrap between Flockhart-Sanderson Jag and Moss-Collins Aston. Believe Moss now leads by scant margin. Drivers very polite. Each time I wave them by they acknowledge "Thank you" by raising right hand.

5:00 am: Dawn breaking at last. Swarms of gendarmes marching along

Mulsanne to appointed posts. Patient, ghost-like crowds already packed three deep behind bulwarks through Esses and Terte Rouge, at Mulsanne, Indianapolis and Arnage. Sarthe Circuit's 8.3 miles resemble junkyard with battered machines scattered all way around. No. 35 Lotus pushed to shoulder of road on Mulsanne. Also Frere's Jaguar. Further along, a DB-Panhard, Gordini and Porsche Spyder line road either side. At Mulsanne Corner, yellow Ferrari No. 20 (De Changy-Bianchi) which flipped earlier through steering failure while leading two-liter class, lies on right shoulder. At No. 1 marker, Mulsanne Corner, go to dump Cooper into second when gear lever knob comes off in my hand. Use escape road and do orbit. Our crew grins and waves. Well, the best of them have done the same: Moss, the Jags, many others! On lap 151 with ten to go and course wet only in patches, open taps wider. 5:22 says our board; 5:20.1 — finally 5:13.2, about 93 mph. At 7 am it starts drizzling again. Indianapolis banked turn skittish. A shade too much gas in second and tail wiggles. Watch it.

7:35 am: In for refuel in a downpour. Walker's Aston zooms by and seconds later crashes badly at Dunlop Bridge Curve. Bill Lamb figured this one pretty close. Tanks hold 70 liters and we take in 68! Only a little over half a gallon left. "I was worrying about the gas," I tell Bill, but he only smiles. "With three extra teacups full you could have done three more laps," he says. John Cooper and I exchange glances. Bill is an emotionless calculating machine. Nothing phases him. Upstairs on terrace above our pit, Desmond Titterington and a bunch of the boys are jack-knifed over parapet, rooting for us. Poor Desmond lost his ride when Frère crashed. Phil Hill also came by while I was out. Too bad his Ferrari quit in early hours. We've been leading Bicknell-Jopp Lotus for 10 hours... since last night at 11 pm. On Index we're sixth; overall, 10th. Ed is away in 3:38; all okay. We have almost a lap on Lotus.

9:41 am: Ed doing fine job circulating Cooper. Whittled lap time down to 5:13.1 when phone rings on lap 181. P. D. from Mulsanne: "Ed just signed to us his oil pressure's gone!" "Slow him down," Cooper barks. "He's got 12 more laps to do." Climb pit counter to watch for No. 33. Soon, blue and white car streaks up pit straight, sounding healthy as ever. Ed gives no sign. "5:22.7," Joan calls out. "He hasn't slowed much." We're all trying to figure out the trouble. A bearing? Loose oil line? Faulty gauge? If the gallant little engine quits now—it doesn't bear think-

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ing about. Cooper isn't too alarmed. "He's probably low on oil and it shows up at the corners." Nonetheless, I run upstairs to Lucas' booth locate Windsor Smith, chief engineer of Coventry-Climax. We may need advice. For six more laps the Cooper continues running evenly. No expensive noises. Far from slowing, Ed does 190th lap in 5:19. We're breathing again when that ominous phone rings. Stan Nowak. "It's not oil pressure but the brakes. He just indicated it as he went by." Ed's time shows it. On lap 191 he takes 6:02.4; next lap he pulls in unexpectedly. "No brake pedal," he shouts to Cooper. "Nearly pranged it!" John shakes his head. "You've still got four to go for the minimum 34 laps. Cruise around and use the box." Ed is off in 27 seconds but Lotus is closing in fast. Too fast for comfort.

11:05 am: Car in. Fractured brake line to left rear wheel. No spare. No hammer, either. Cooper grabs spare generator and flattens broken pipe, sealing it off while "Court" rips up floor panel and refills empty brake fluid container. Brake pedal firm again. Gas: 49 liters; half gallon of oil. (we were low). Fuel consumption, 26.4 mpg. Takes 7:15 before I pull out. "Watch it on right-hand corners!" Cooper yells. Lotus now leads us by nearly a lap but I'm taking no chances until I feel out the brakes. Better second spot than smash-up after coming so far. Gear lever handle gone but manage first lap in 5:28.5 and brakes held, but shudder badly. Right-handed Mulsanne and Arnage are danger spots with only three drums working. As confidence returns and busted line still holds, time drops to 5:13.5, lap 214. Regaining three to five seconds a lap on Jopp in Lotus. Might still do it. But at 1:30 pm Jopp called in and replaced by works driver Reg Bicknell. Catch Bicknell at Terre Rouge about lap 218. Unscheduled stop has reduced Lotus lead to 3:37. Due for disappointment, though. Along Mulsanne, Lotus pulls away and at Mulsanne Corner is 100 yards ahead. Try every trick, cutting off later, revving to 7,500 through gears and taking White House at 5,200 (114 mph) but nothing helps. Sad sight of Talbot No. 17 abandoned at Arnage is counteracted by smiles of pretty French girls who wave—but I can't do a thing about the Lotus. Lap times shrink from 5:13 to a steady 5:08 (nearly 95 mph) but best I can do is lock gap between us. Can't gain a yard. Bicknell must be winding near 8,000 to hold this average. Wonder if he can last? Lap 233, with one to go to refuel, see Lotus in pit, gassing up. Wish our tanks held few more liters. We might just make it without another stop.

2:28 pm: In for last time. Take in 61 liters in 2:21 — our fastest stop. Ed off in a hurry. Grandstands now a sea of heads. Leaders: Flockhart-Sanderson, Moss-Collins, Gendebien-Trintignant. Hawthorn-Bueb Jag has climbed back to sixth place. We're 9th overall; 6th on Index. Cooper sounds crisp as ever though unbelievably dirty in belated sunshine. Lotus now has one lap plus 1:28 on us, but anything can happen with 1½ hours to go.

3:35 pm: It has happened! Lotus in pit. Our crew in uproar. Friendly scout reports Lotus generator hanging by shred of one bolt. Bracket fractured. Cooper calls Mulsanne. "Tell our bloke to GO!" Ed responds at once but Lotus crew decides to gamble on generator holding fast for last few laps. No. 36 quickly pulls out. We're now less than a lap behind. Bicknell tails Ed by 7 seconds, but despite everything our "bloke" can do. Lotus closes gap and on lap 250 passes Cooper, restoring full lap lead. "Just one of those things!" somebody intones. We're feeling pretty good, despite 32 hours without sleep. Unfortunate retirement at 2 pm of the Brooks-Parnell Aston-Martin at Mulsanne has moved us up another notch, both on Index and overall.



4:04 pm: (approx) Ed gets checkered flag. *C'est finis!* Everyone in pit jubilant. We've lasted 24 hours on our first try and we're the only American drivers to finish. The game little Cooper covered 2,102.58 miles at an average of 87.6 mph including all stops. We're fifth on Index, ahead of three D-Jaguars (including the winners,) the Moss-Collins Aston, the Gendebien-Trintignant Ferrari and the Bourillot-Peroud 1½ liter Maserati. Overall we're eighth, nearly 56 miles ahead of the Maserati. As for Class G, the Lotus beat us by only 8.8 miles and had to put in crack factory driver Bicknell to do it. Anyway we held class lead for 12 hours out of 24 and if that brake line hadn't busted, if we hadn't wasted a good 12 minutes when refueling, due to those gas seals . . . Who cares? Bicknell is a great sport: John Cooper a wonderful crew chief. All our pit crew gave us magnificent, tireless support. We'll be back next year with bells on!