



The Can-Am Mini Challenge 2014

A Race, A Reunion,
A Rollicking Good Time
says our roving reporter
George Olson...

■ Story & Photos by George Olson



Nick Swift lived up to his name in the Mini Challenge race, driving Andy Nelson's beautifully-restored, Swiftune-powered A-Series Mini Cooper S to a 2nd place finish behind Joe Huffaker's Sprite-powered, rear wheel drive, tube-frame national champion "Mini."

It was the drive of the day, and Swift's M3-class car also finished ahead of FIVE other M5-class cars like Huffaker's, as well as the top qualifiers in other classes in the 38 car field that took the green flag on the 2.2 mile road course the weekend of June 28-29th.

The Mini Challenge race was one part of an SVRA (Sportscar Vintage Racing Ass'n) weekend, The Mechanic's Bank Vintage Grand Prix of Ohio.

The Mini race is put on every five years by Canadian and U. S. Mini owners, and is officially called the Can-Am Mini Challenge. This year it was organized by Rachel and Andy Nelson, and Mike Kearney, whose Seven Enterprises (www.7ent.com) was the prime sponsor. The late

Charlie Pollett was instrumental in organizing the race as well; his name placed in memorial on several of the cars.

Classes were established to reflect modern SCCA race-prepared Minis as well as the simplest early race Minis, and modified cars between those two classes, with racers from nearby states, and those from the western states and territories, making 49 total qualifiers.

Rachel and the Ohio Mini Owners welcomed all the Mini folks with a BBQ and there were t-shirts in the crowd celebrating—or poking fun at—every-



thing Mini. During the drivers' meeting before the race, there were raffle prizes for the drivers, thanks to the event sponsors.

The event brought out several Minis with racing history, including five Minis that raced in the 1967 ARRC at Daytona. Four of those cars raced at Mid-Ohio, and the fifth, now owned by John Hedeem, Jr., was on display. John had owned the car for five weeks at the time of the race, and tells the story.



"I was at Import Carlyle talking to the (then) owner and he showed me pictures, but he didn't know the history of the car. I started researching because John Colgate's name was on it," John noted, explaining that Colgate was indeed part of the toothpaste family. "I contacted Colgate, and he responded right away, not having heard of the car in 46 years!"

Colgate was so interested in helping the new owner that he went into his attic and found all the records and photographs and mailed them to Hedeem. Downton Engineering (*fully detailed in MC2 issue #28*) had prepared the car, and even painted it white with a blue stripe, the American racing colors some adhered to back in those days. Having entered four races in '67, with four wins and four track records to his name, Colgate was more than just a rich gentleman driver.

This now-restored #45 race Mini is not the only oil spot in Hedeem's garage though; he also owns a '65 Austin Cooper S, a 1967 Austin Cooper S, a 1969 Austin Cooper S, and a 1964 New Zealand 850. His first car at 16 was a 1960 Austin Seven.

The others from that 1967 ARRC race at Mid-Ohio were #68 driven by Andy Nelson; #37 driven by John Wittenauer; and the Purple People Eaters, #51 driven by Michael Pinney and #61A driven by Robert Hoemke.

One long-time Mini racer made the Mid-Ohio Challenge event his retirement race and is hanging up his helmet after racing since 1960 and in Minis since 1967. Bob Beauchemin drove that first

RESULTS

Class M5: (First Overall) Joe Huffaker

Class M4 Bob Beauchemin

Class M3 (Second Overall) Nick Swift

Class M2 Greg Wold

Class M1 Rodger Soucy

49 cars qualified; 38 cars finished

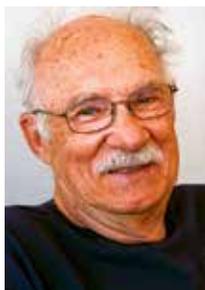


Mini to the track, raced it, and drove it back home again. For this race, he built a Mini Sprint just for this event, sporting a paint job as wild as the 2" chopped and 2" channeled Mini body, and bringing it (towed, not driven) from Kamloops, BC.



"That paint job was inspired by Jeff Koons's BMW Art Car," Beauchemin explained, "It took 150 hours to do because each piece is cut individually." And he added, "It's my last race, so the car is for sale. I'm 75 and I'm tired."

Asked his best memory in his years of racing, Beauchemin reflected and said, "Winning first overall at Laguna Seca was pretty thrilling," but then added with a twinkle, "At Thunderhill I started last and lapped the field, and THAT was quite a thrill!"



As for his retirement plans, he first said, as all men do, that he'll do some things for his wife, but then he smiled and said, "I do love to build stuff, so I'll probably build a street Mini because I don't have one, and I've got a couple laying around."

So how did 75-year old near-retiree Bob Beauchemin do in the race? First in class and tenth overall ahead of some other well-known names best left unmentioned.

Now back to Nick Swift and the car he drove to second overall behind Huff-

faker's monster Mini. Nick says he's been racing Minis since he was 16, which with a little prodding he allowed was 30 years ago, and currently races regularly in England in FIA "Appendix K" racing, and has won the Goodwood Revival race for Minis.

He came to Ohio especially for his race, and to help tune Andy Nelson's car. Its first test was the Thursday before the meet and resulted in only some damper and suspension adjustments.

"If a customer

buys an engine, I'll help him set up the car," Nick said. "It's not just about horsepower, it's getting the power to the ground." Asked what effect his testing experience behind the wheel had on the car owner, Nick responded positively, "He (Andy) raised his game because I set the time first."

In assessing his racing in England and his first-time visit to Mid-Ohio, Nick was very complimentary, "Compared to British tracks, this track is the best! The surface is fantastic. It's a Mini track and it's brilliant, and it's challenging. It's the best kind of track."

As for Swifttune, it will be 50 years old next year, started by Nick's father who was a research engineer for Ford.

The owner Nick drove for is Andy Nelson, and Andy started restoring the car a year ago, with the experience gained from 12 years as an auto mechanic and painter (though he now flies for FedEx.)

He and his wife Rachel, the organizers of the Mini event, are long-time Mini owners, and Andy says his first one was a 1961 850 that he drove home before he even had a driver license. Referring to the current car, he said, "We had numerous Minis over the years, and we just went for higher quality with each one."



The class-winning car is certainly high quality. Andy explained it was Bob Kimes's Ohio car and had always been a race car and ran in the 1965 Monte Carlo Rallye, prepared by Arden Engineering. "We got it in Dayton (OH) and (the late) Charlie Pollett found it for us. It's now re-painted in Kimes's racing colors."

Even with a year to plan, Andy and Rachel still found there were last-minute things to do—such as receive a huge crate from England and install the complete engine and gearbox a week before the race! So in the car's very first race it finished ahead of every other front-wheel drive Mini!

And one of those other Minis was Andy's sister vintage car, the #68, in which he finished 4th in class and 14th overall. That car's first race was the Mini Challenge event at Laguna Seca in 2006.

Among the other racers was Sarah

Kahn, probably the youngest driver in the field, at 23. Of her racing, she says, "I started when I was 18, in an Alfa GTV, but I got a lot of track time in my dad's Mini, and it's always been my favorite car to race, hands down." At Mid-Ohio, she and her father were part of a group of four racing Minis, hers being #57.

As Sarah tells it, "My dad and his good friend obtained four Minis and sent them all to Huffaker to have them turned into matched Minis. This makes racing more fun since it's really a matter of who is the better driver, rather than who has the faster car." She added, "My mom actually thinks I'm safer in the race car with the harness and safety gear than I am on the road, and my dad just loves having a gearhead for a daughter." And gearhead Sarah is, with a Mechanical Engineering Bachelors degree and an Automotive Engineering Masters degree!

After driving a Ginetta and then the Alfa, she says of her Mini race car, "I



love that Minis are front-wheel drive! It makes turns much more fun and counter-intuitive. In my mind they are these little boxes that break all of the rules of a typical race car. The Mini Challenge was my first time driving Mid-Ohio and I absolutely loved how technical the track is, and its several turns keep things more interesting than long straights."

With that kind of enthusiasm, it's no wonder that Sarah Kahn was awarded the President's Choice Award for the SVRA's favorite Mini "because of my father passing racing down to me, which embraces the spirit of the Mini Challenge."

One of the significant highlights of the weekend was the group picture made on the front straight, with 50 Minis and drivers lined up in front of a couple photographers on ladders. Most racers, as one would imagine, are pretty competitive, and one of them, Keith Degauque, from Ontario, Canada, put it best when he joked to one of the photographers, "You managed to get fifty Type-A people to line up and do what they're told. That was amazing."

In the end, 38 cars finished the race, and every one of those drivers was a winner for having attended the 2014 Can Am Mini Challenge race, with memories to last, and improve with age, as all racing memories do. ■

