

RACING MORGANS

Chris Lawrence's Le Mans Winner and His
Coupe That Could Have Been

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The racing history of the Morgan brand is inextricably interwoven with one name: Chris Lawrence. Despite the manufacturer securing a class win at the French Grand Prix with a three-wheeler as early as 1913, it wasn't until the 1950s that Morgan racing was brought back into the news by Chris Lawrence, a young, ambitious engineer.

In the early 1950s, Lawrence had driven a number of national races in a selection of cars, from MGs to Bugattis. At the end of 1958—shortly after Lawrence had gotten married—the Englishman decided to go about fulfilling his lifelong dream of racing at the 24 Hours of Le Mans with a competitive car. At the cost of 650 pounds, he purchased a used 1956 Morgan Plus 4 equipped with a 2-liter Triumph TR2 engine carrying registration No. TOK 258.

At the time, Lawrence was running what today would be called a tuning company, Lawrence Tune Engines Ltd. His aim: to raise the 2-liter, four-cylinder's output from the standard 92 horsepower using a new cam and cylinder head as well as Weber carburetors supplied by Keith Duckworth, later of Cosworth fame.

The result was 138 horsepower in a car that weighed less than a ton. But at 900 pounds sterling, the engine work ended up costing Lawrence more than the entire car.

To reduce drag, Lawrence decided to use a lower Morgan 4/4 body. Another clear departure from the standard car was the aluminium hardtop, built by Lawrence himself and the only Morgan hardtop ever made out of metal. It improved drag and moved the center of gravity farther back, which in turn improved handling.

In the early 1960s, Lawrence attended a number of national races with TOK and even broke a lap record in the 2-liter class at Silverstone. However, his ultimate goal of racing in Le Mans remained.

His first attempt there came in 1961, but not with TOK. Armed with the knowledge he'd gained on how to increase that engine's output, Lawrence had purchased a brand-new Plus 4—registered as XRX 1—with support from the Morgan factory. In 1961, he and XRX made it all the way through the arduous scrutineering process, which took two full days and required no fewer than 24 different tests.

But shortly after an Automobile Club de l'Ouest official placed his stamp



Much of Morgan's postwar motor-sports success can be credited to Chris Lawrence, on the left in the top photo, who gave the brand a class win at Le Mans in 1962. Richard Shepherd-Barron, talking to Lawrence, co-drove the famed Morgan.



on XRX's paperwork, the approval was taken away. Other officials presumed that Lawrence's Morgan was nothing more than a 1930s car technically prepped up with disc brakes and therefore not eligible. To this day, it isn't clear if the disqualification was indeed the result of a protest by Lawrence's competitors at Triumph, who were wary of being upstaged by a privateer.

Just a year later, however, everything had changed. Company boss Peter Morgan had become aware of Lawrence's successes and granted him factory support. Indeed, he was so impressed that he had Morgan produce a limited series of Plus 4 Super Sports with the 4/4 body and Lawrence Tune engines—just like TOK.

The race itself took place June 23-24, 1962, with TOK entering the GT2 class for cars up to 2 liters. The only other contender in this category was the No. 60 AC Ace Bristol piloted by Jean-Claude Magne and Maurice Martin.

At 4 p.m. on the final day of the race, co-driver Richard Shepherd-Barron drove TOK 258 across the finish line on its original set of tires.

In 24 hours, the little race car had completed 270 laps and covered 2255 miles with an average speed of 94 mph.

As Lawrence recalled afterward, TOK performed without any major incidents, with both he and Shepherd-Barron driving 3-hour stints.

On the Mulsanne straight, which was free of chicanes in the 1960s, TOK got up to 135 mph. It even surpassed 140 mph “heading slightly downhill into Indianapolis,” Shepherd-Barron writes in his little book, “Morgan—Winner at Le Mans.”

He adds, “You don't win Le Mans on the track but by how little time you waste in the pits.” A split in the exhaust manifold was TOK's lone mechanical issue, and the team's pit time totaled no more than 28 minutes in 24 hours.

Of the original field of 55 cars, only 18 survived the grueling ordeal; TOK came in 13th overall. The AC Ace did not finish, making TOK 258 the GT2 class winner at Le Mans.

The post-race victory lap? Morgan mechanic Willy Edwards simply drove TOK 258 back to England.

A Lawrence-tuned Triumph TR2 engine still powers TOK 258; the slightly lower 4/4 bodywork helps the car's aero profile.



“Of the original field of 55 cars, only 18 survived the grueling ordeal; TOK came in 13th overall.”



WHAT'S ONE WORTH?

1961 Morgan Plus 4 Super Sports

\$103,600 via Bonhams 2020 Scottsdale

A genuine, Chris Lawrence-tuned Plus Four fitted with the same “low-line” bodywork he took to Le Mans.



BEHIND THE WHEEL

Today, TOK 258, Chris Lawrence's Morgan Plus 4, has it easy. Current owner and collector Keith Ahlers delivered it to our test day at Bicester Heritage—the former RAF airfield in the south of England—in the back of an obscure Ford Transit van.

The whole car looks so familiar, repeated in the 101 factory Super Sport versions of the 1960s as well as in the memorial run of 80 cars in 2002. The dashboard is still a solid piece of wood, even in the race car, and displays just a small number of additional instruments. With the exception of four-point harnesses, the interior doesn't look particularly race car-like at all.

The cabin is tight, and the bucket seats are tighter than the street ones. They pinch more, so you certainly wouldn't do hours in them—especially not a whole day. Any closed Morgan cabin is somewhat claustrophobic, but we found the race car's bespoke hardtop to be worse than the stock ragtop in that regard.

Once seated, Keith's friend and mechanic Billy Bellinger turns a little knob on the outside of the side curtains. "Otherwise, the wind will pull it out," he says with a serious face. Unlikely to happen today, though. Keith gets into our lead car and disappears without another glance, as if to say, "You'll be fine."

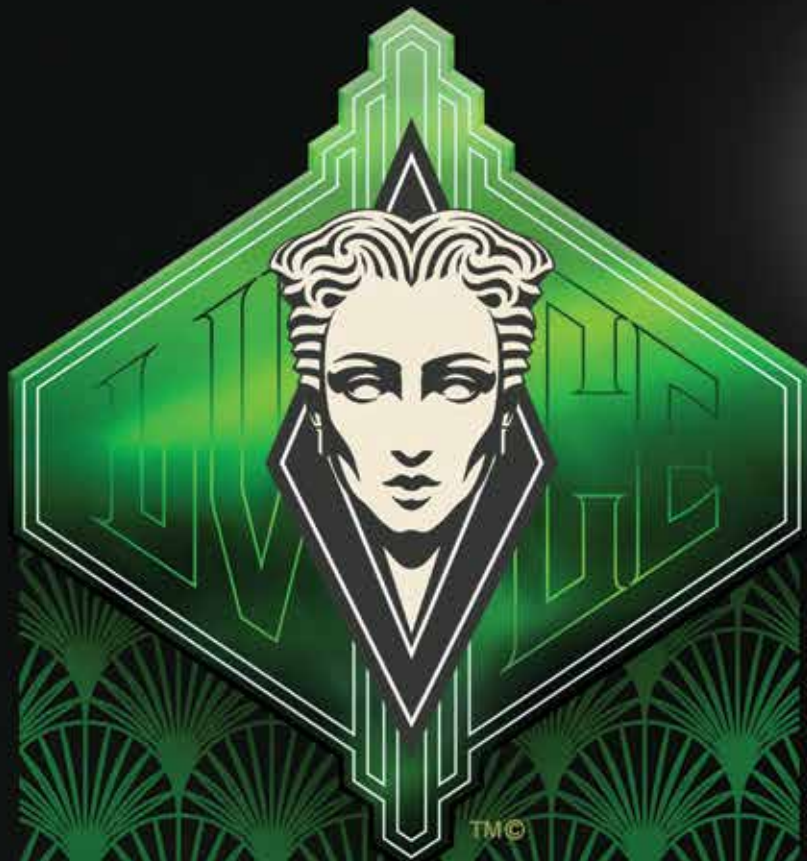
We expected a heavy clutch—difficult off the line, hard to steer, all that—and it couldn't have been more wrong. It was super-easy to drive, clutch and brake. The steering operation was almost docile and *lighter* than a street Morgan's—because stock is 1.3 bar, close to 20 psi, and the race car runs 1.8 bar.

Because of that, the car was also much harder and louder—in the sense of being bangy and the suspension making more noise. Even so, the overall drive experience was surprisingly easy. And today TOK 258 doesn't have to go home on the road.

Despite the Le Mans pedigree, TOK 258 remains easy to drive, down to the light steering feel.



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TOK VS. SLR

What is a Morgan SLR? For most enthusiasts, those three letters scream Mercedes 300.



Keith Ahlers wouldn't be the biggest Morgan collector in the world if he didn't have another ultra-rare example: The SLR, which was the result of a collaboration between Chris Lawrence and John Sprinzel's Sprinzel Lawrence Tune Racing.

It was originally intended as a one-off body for a Triumph TR4, but Lawrence quickly saw the streamlined body as a means to make the Plus 4 more competitive. As luck would have it, the body fit onto the Morgan chassis with only minor adjustments. Lawrence ended up commissioning three vehicles, with Keith's car here being the last.

The green 1963 Morgan Plus 4 SLR carries registration No. 258 TOK, but that's just a later addition. "The plate came up for sale, and we thought we should have it for the SLR rather than anyone else," Billy Bellinger, the Morgan's mechanic, explains with a satisfied smile.

Even hardcore fans of the marque would have trouble recognizing the sleek and elegant-looking coupe as a Morgan. The attractively styled body, with its long hood and short deck, reflects the



Chris Lawrence's TOK 258 won at Le Mans, despite the vintage bodywork. Makes one wonder how his coupe could have performed.

1960s ideal of a sports car imprinted on us by the likes of the Jaguar E-type, split-window Corvette and Daytona Cobra.

At only 12.8 feet long, SLR takes up only a little more space than a standard Plus 4 but weighs considerably less at only 1675 pounds. The handmade body is formed in aluminium, and the lightweight windows are Plexiglas. "TOK 258 is incredibly close to a standard Morgan," explains its owner, "but the SLR in contrast is a real race car."

Bellinger, who has raced both cars in anger, explains the differences: "Driving either car is an enormously emotional experience for me every time. Technically, both cars are surprisingly similar, as they have the same engine, same brakes, discs at the front and drums at the rear, and the same suspension.

"But because of the SLR's enclosed body, it's like racing in a tin bin. It

is significantly hotter than in the Le Mans car and it's noisier."

Since the power output is the same, the performance is comparable. The closed car's top speed is slightly higher on the straights because of its aerodynamic advantages.

Actually getting into the coupe is a challenge, too. Because of the sleek coachwork, the door aperture is even smaller and the sills are higher than TOK's. And then there are those tight seats.

Everything about this car exudes seriousness. TOK welcomes its driver with an almost light-hearted atmosphere, but the SLR leaves no doubt that speed is of the essence here. The 2-liter four-cylinder emits a deeper burble that sounds almost menacing. While TOK is a pussycat, the SLR is a lion.

The SLR's sleek shape—very contemporary for its 1963 build date—hides Morgan mechanicals. Where Morgan interiors typically feature wood, aluminum dominates this one.





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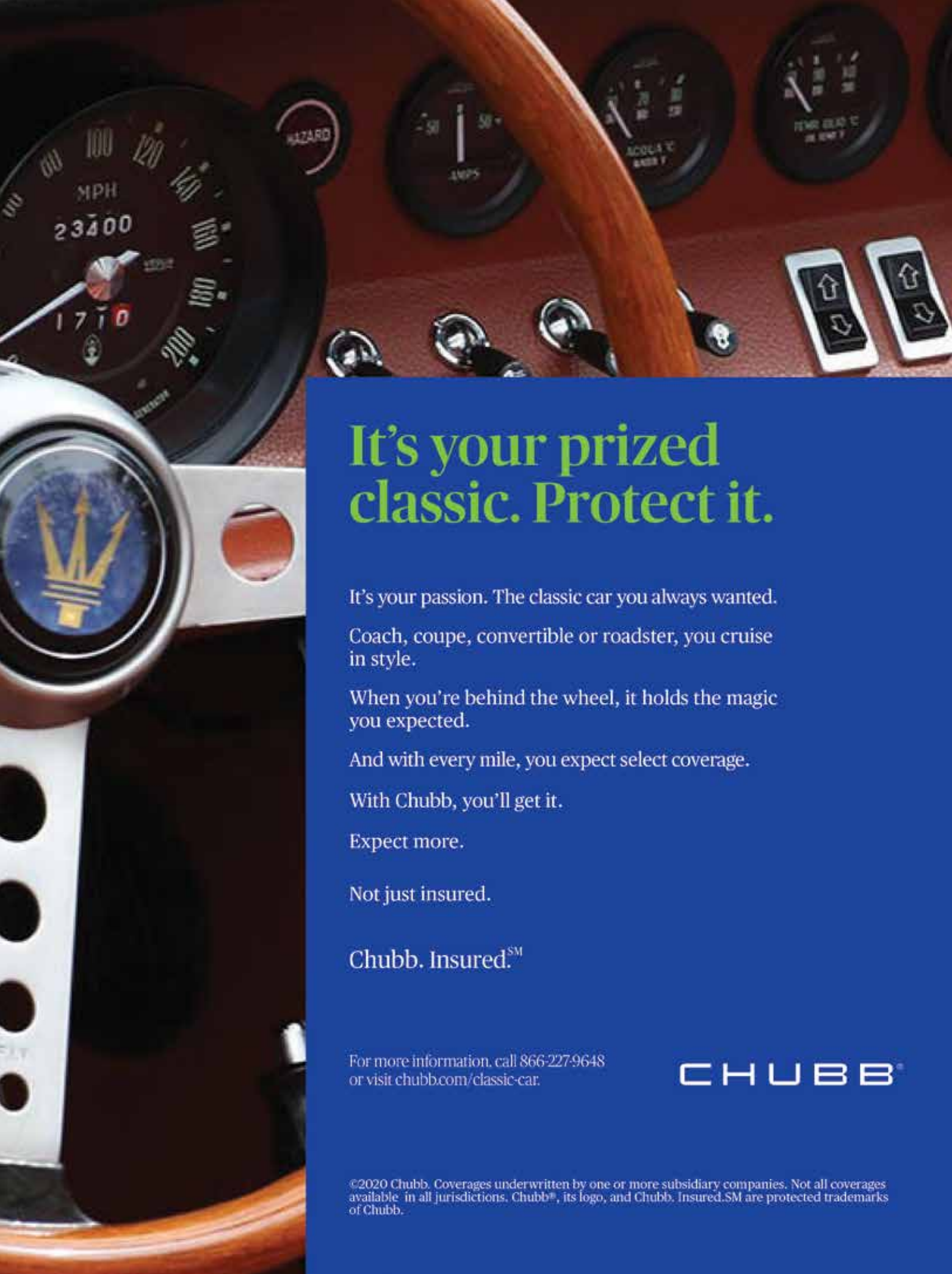
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