

Geraldine in April

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by Bev Clifton

It is a strange and hostile world when the pundits say that your car is a "lemon" and you know full well that it was the outstanding Aussie family car of its day. They have never lived with one, enjoyed its ability and been impressed with its overall capability.

So, what's this about "of its day"?

To me the Leyland P76's day is "Now", and for all days to come. Naturally all P76 owners and fans will agree but sometimes you have to go out into the world and try to convince the skeptics by doing something different.

That is just what rally legend Gerry Crown and Matt Bryson are about to do - they are running an almost replica of the Evan Green/John Bryson UDT World Cup car in the 2012 "Trans America Rally", a 33-day event across USA and Canada.

This is being run by the Endurance Rally Association of long-distance event fame in Asia, Africa, India and recreations of the epic 1907 Peking to Paris. This was the first long distance international rally and was won by Prince Borghese, in an Itala.

The route is shown in detail on the ERA web site and runs from New York to the Grand Canyon and up to Vancouver and on to Anchorage, Alaska with enough special stages to suit most drivers. It should suit the Leyland P76 and it is going to be interesting to see how the Aussie V8 stacks up against a swarm of Porsche 911s and the like.

It is all my fault, because, for many years, I have been telling Gerry that the P76 was the best two-wheel drive long distance rally car I had ever been in.

Gerry and I have been lucky over the years to scoop up a string of international event trophies in an extremely well prepared EH Holden. In 1997 we were second Classic Outright in the Peking to Paris Motor Challenge.

We decided to try for a win in 2007 but struck a snag when the Chinese reckoned we were both too old to have a Chinese driving licence. Someone had to drop out and as Gerry was paying the bills that was me. We had to get a younger driver for China.

Enter Matthew, older son of John and Sonja Bryson. Gerry had known him for twenty-five years. Best of all, he knew that Matthew was mechanically competent, having built a most competitive LB Lancer for historic events to replicate the one his father had been so successful in with Andrew Cowan for the Mitsubishi works team.

Suffice to say they built a 1940 Buick because Gerry had decided to go a little later than was desirable and the organiser (Philip Young) wanted a pre-'40s car. The new team proved more than competent and set the pace until the differential housing separated where one of the trailing arms joins. Not a good situation.

Matt worked like a Trojan and strapped the two pieces together with ratchet straps, odd pieces of metal and chain so they could get from Mongolia into Russia. This meant they dropped from the leader board, losing a lot of time while Matt welded the housing in Biyrsk. The repair worked and the Gerry/ Matt combination ended up in the high 20s.

Then, one Sunday afternoon, we were talking (as you do) and proving that we get a lot faster as we get older than we actually were when Gerry says, "What about Trans Am?"

Matthew sits up straighter, Sonja looks interested, and John says, "What car, the Holden?"

I am immediately thinking of all that would be needed to prepare the old girl for another run as she is exactly as she finished when they won the 2010 Peking to Paris outright

"We'll take one of your P76s," says Gerry, casually.

Shocked silence explodes. Everyone in the Bryson family is suddenly aware of just what this means. The date is 20th November 2011; the event starts in New York on 8 May 2012. The car will have to leave Australia in February to safely arrive in time.

One of our P76s! Evan Green gave me our Leyland P76 as a reward for running a business called "Competition Equipment" into the ground preparing our World Cup challenge and then recovering a leased van from Tunis when a "service" team member stuffed things up. This was sitting in a shed and it was a tossup whether there was more metal or more rust holding the body together.

Matthew had obtained a "new" body from Norm Julian and was going to resurrect the rally car when time was available. Time is something that motoring enthusiasts do not seem to have as projects just seem to keep happening. At least the shell was painted and is rust free. Our P76 had become a basket case because of two reasons.

One was that it had been deck cargo on P&O Mulberrra from Bombay to Perth. The other was that I had filled all the hollow sections of the body with expanding foam. This is fantastic for strength, but I did not know that foam attracts moisture and encourages rust.

We also had another V8 as a spare and had been given a body from Steve Maher so you could say we were almost in a position to build a car.

In actual fact you could probably go and run a stock standard P76 in good order and do well. BUT if you want to try to win then there is a lot more work to be done.

No one can guarantee a win, ever, but my thoughts are that an event is sport and the idea of competition is to try and win. You don't have to win but you need to try your best.

This means that to build a car to win you need to be particular about every aspect of how the car is prepared - very particular.

One serious consideration is the rules of the event. In this case Philip Young knew that our car was a special built for an event in 1974 with no rules. The fact that our car was essentially stock standard was simply a decision we made because we knew the team who had tested and developed the car in New South Wales had been rally oriented and told us we should have an unbeatable car - if we did not "muck" it up with modifications.

Which was what we built, albeit a P76 which was much lighter than when it left Zetland? Weight is critical and the lighter a car is for rallying the better it goes.

We were leading by hours until one of the "special" shock absorber units built by Armstrong broke the thread at the top of the strut. This was because the "engineer" had not relieved, or radiused, where the thread and shaft joined. When we fitted standard struts, these lasted to Munich and are still in the car and seem to work. We had to roll the car from one shed to another the other day and they still seemed OK.

With Gerry's decision to accept the Trans America challenge we had to go into top gear. Initially we started to prepare Steve's old body until I got a "bright" idea. I wondered if Philip Meyer in New Zealand would sell the replica he had made of our car. Philip had stayed with us and worked out what had to be done and the word was that he had a very competitive car. Matt flew over the NZ and was impressed with the machine.

Buying this made sense as Matthew was off to Thailand to meet with the guy he was booked to drive with in Peking to Paris 2013 and discuss how to build their car. But, worst of all, Christmas was almost on us with everyone likely to be on holiday.

Philip Meyer came to our rescue and all was well until we found out that we needed permission to bring a car into Australia. We were told this could take from eight to eighty days! This was NOT what we wanted to hear.

What do you do when you strike a problem? Work around it of course! To do that we arranged for Graham Wilkins to build an engine, chased up a five-speed gearbox and disc brakes for the rear end to have all the mechanicals to drop in Philip's car when it arrived. We would keep the replaced items to re-build the real-World Cup car.

Benefits we gained from Philip's car were that it had roll cage, sump guard, Terratrip and rally seats plus all the little things needed in place so we save weeks of work and would only have to check everything after replacing the mechanicals.

Matt and I visited the NSW P76 Club and were made really welcome. We were given good technical information. Matt bought two doors for Steve Maher's old body shell, some Force 7 lower control arms and odd bits such as an engine, power steering rack and so on.

Rather than twiddle our thumbs and wait for Canberra we needed to get our suspension under way. The only real choice was a guy called Murray Coote at Landsborough, north of Brisbane. He wanted a car and spare struts to build us something which would not fail in the Sahara as our old items had. Murray is a rally champion and really knows how to make an efficient and long-lasting suspension.

In 1997 I think I replaced tired shocks three times, once at night near Everest at 12,000 ft. I can tell you that the ground was mighty cold, and I only did it because we had to

We were helped out by the Queensland P76 club who saved us much time and travel. Firstly, Adrian Spencer put me on to Reg Jones who agreed to take one of his P76's across to Murray for a week. Then he introduced me to Graham Rogerson (who runs the Queensland club supply of P76 parts). He just happened to have a pair of struts ready for Russ Cumming to pick up. These were given to us by the club to help our effort and gestures like this remind us that there are an awful lot of nice people in this world.

Russ Cumming happens to be my brother in law and was quite a rally driver in his own right. Almost as good as his sister to whom I am married. His other claims to infamy are that he created a diabolical group of people known as "the Killer Mullet rally team" and was an outstanding rally photographer known as "Flash".

With Russ living in Maroochydore he was able to help us by collecting the struts and delivering to Murray so we could get on with preparation in Sydney. We would like to have gone up to Queensland but it was a case of wet one day and drowning the next!

When you are competing, every little item becomes important. How you put the car together is vital. Do you Loctite every nut or do you use locking wires? How are all the electrical wires protected from chafing and moisture - we lost first place in P-P 1997 because I had not siliconed a grommet into place and the cooling fan wire shorted out. This took twenty minutes from us...and back to second place.

Competitors in these long-distance rallies are a mix of serious and adventurer. The serious ones can be hard to beat and usually have the best and latest European technology to help them - all within the rules, of course.

The idea is to make the car as reliable as possible because you don't want to spend time working on the vehicle when you could be resting - or partying. Now, you don't think we only go on these events for the competition, do you? Yes, there is the travel; there are very good hotels and lots of top-quality tucker, and a lot of parties.

As well driving hard on strange roads is very interesting to us

I don't think Matthew had an easy win in Peking to Paris because Gerry talks of how they spent time every night doing preventative maintenance and checking every nut. These rallies run mainly in daylight and have accommodation organised each night. On many nights the stop is a camp site so the only mechanics available are the crew!

Overall the building of the Leyland P76 Trans America car would be Matthew's baby. After all he would be the one fixing problems and he was about to learn all about a car he had only seen parked in a shed for the whole of his life. I guess it is a lot different from having your father say what a good car it is to having to prove it for yourself. It is now December 11th and we have a bit of a task ahead of us so I will keep you posted as the action happens.

Like all the voters of Australia, all we are doing is waiting on Canberra.

Or, maybe, we are like a duck - cool, calm and collected on top but paddling like hell under water! There is a calendar in front of my desk and it does not seem very long before a Leyland P76 has to be on its way to the United States of America. .

John Bryson

If you are not familiar with the background to this escapade which goes back to the 70's contact Don Alexander and request he send you the Bill Bolt Memorial copy of "A boot full of right arms" and enjoy an entertaining historical account of the World Cup Rally as told by Evan Green, driver and author.



If only you all knew how Penzed is put together! I find I have a side to play with so include a photo of the soon to be more famous ex Philip Meyer P76 rally car taken at The Safari Motel in Taihape during November 2000 prior to one of our trips over the Gentle Annie to Napier. In March of that year she was a bare rolling chassis, I know I towed out onto the start grid at Pukekohe to include in the P76 line up. At this point she had competed in two fully fledged

rallies. Goodbye and good luck P38 X 2.

Above we have another photo of Philip's car as it takes shape rather rapidly before departing Aussie for the USA. While we now know the result, we shall leave that for inclusion later on along with the thrilling story

