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# RIDING THE *BRONCO*

Former racer Jack Sears gets back behind the wheel of the ex-Keith Schellenberg Angolan Grand Prix 1964 Cobra – and once again rides a ‘bucking bronco’

WORDS IVAN OSTROFF PHOTOGRAPHY GLENN LINDBERG



THE STORY OF HOW KEVIN KIVLOCHAN rebuilt his AC Cobra to how it was when Bruce Ropner bought it new in 1964 and Keith Schellenberg raced it at the 1965 Angolan Grand Prix has been well documented in *Classic Cars' Our Cars* pages. But there's another twist in the tale of this remarkable car – without its help ‘Gentleman’ Jack Sears (left) wouldn't have won his first race at Croft in another Cobra 48 years ago.

To explore the story we've turned back time, reuniting all the key characters with the car at the North Yorkshire circuit. First Sears pulls up with ex-Willment mechanic Mike Brown as his passenger. Then Ropner arrives driving the same Jaguar XK140 he drove there in 1964. The scene is completed when Schellenberg arrives – it's as if we've just stepped out of the Tardis.

These men defy their years; they are back in 1964 as they gather round the Cobra waiting to hear it fire up. Kivlochlan obliges and the morning air is ripped apart by 4727cc of V8 thunder. Once the car is warmed up Sears slips behind the wheel. Then Kivlochlan says: ‘Go on, Jack, take it for a run.’ Sears smiles: ‘Would you mind if I take Mike along for the ride?’ Brown climbs in and the AC pulls gently away.

It's a spellbinding moment. At the age of 81 Sears has lost none of his delicate touch. After accelerating down the pit straight he sets the Cobra up to clip the kerb and drift through the right-hander before going left and right through Hawthorn. The car sounds magnificent as Sears selects a higher ratio after accelerating out of the chicane. After exiting Tower Bend he accelerates briefly then brakes for the 90-degree right that will take him back past us. He double-declutches down smoothly, and the tail hangs out gracefully, Sears correcting with a touch of opposite lock before thundering past us. Clearly enjoying himself, he gets quicker and quicker until he brings the car back after five laps. ‘My word, that takes me back,’ he says as he climbs out.

Now it's Ropner's turn. With Schellenberg as passenger he attacks the track like it's 1964 all over again. We've been told by Croft's manager to keep the noise down and stick to the short circuit – but Ropner seems to have been left out of the loop and hurtles along at full chat on the full

circuit. The noise bellowing from the V8's twin side pipes is awesome as Ropner hurls his old car through the corners. He puts his foot down hard through the Jim Clark Esses and Barcroft, and as he comes back into view the circuit manager comes running out because the noise meters are going off the scale. Ropner pulls back into the pits: 'Keith kept giving me the thumbs up telling me to go quicker,' he grins. 'It's so perfect – the car handles like a dream. I was driving it very gently to start with, but I really liked the noise so I decided to get on with it a bit.' Schellenberg hasn't driven for the last 18 months, but it's obvious he was happy to have been in his old Cobra again.

'This Cobra was a very quick car,' says Ropner. 'I once left Hyde Park Corner at 3.40am and drove home 220 miles up the A1, which was single carriageway then. I did it in 2hr 18min. There was a section called the Grantham Dip, where the road dipped down followed by a long straight. I clocked 167mph on that straight and enjoyed it so much that I turned round, drove back to the top of the dip and did it again. If it hadn't been for that I'd probably have done the journey in 2hr 13min.'

Ropner was a keen club racer in the Sixties and tried to buy a race-prepared Cobra from Carroll Shelby in America. Having previously raced Cadillac-engined Allards, Shelby created a variation on the theme by uniting a Ford V8 with the lightweight and agile AC Ace. He also gave his cars oil coolers, a larger sump, harder brake pads and a heavy-duty clutch. Rack-and-pinion steering replaced the original worm-and-sector after bolts came loose at Nassau in 1962.

Shelby set about proving the Cobra's competitiveness in the Sports Car Club of America's US Road Racing Championship for Class A production cars, where it was mainly up against privately entered Corvettes, which were easily beaten. But his grand plan was to take on the might of Ferrari and other leading marques in the FIA World Manufacturers Championship series. To compete he needed to create 100 FIA-spec cars for homologation. He knew no more than 20 would ever race, but hoped to sell some as road cars to keep the cash flowing.

The competition cars had bigger fuel tanks, a roll hoop, stiffer ball-jointed suspension and extra instruments including a larger tachometer. Shelby also polished and balanced all engine components, gas-flowed the cylinderheads and changed the valves, camshafts and con-rods. He left the pistons as standard but homologated four large Weber 48IDA carburettors in place of the standard four-barrel Holley. Power increases varied from car to car, but generally grew from 271bhp to about 345bhp, while torque was up from 269lb ft to 285lb ft.

The body was made from thinner aluminium than the regular cars and had flared wheelarches and cut-back doors that follow the rear wheelarch curvature. FIA Cobras also had shorter bootlids so they could be opened without fouling the streamlined hard-tops when fitted. Only five factory FIA cars were built, and today they're the most desirable of all Cobra roadsters.

Shelby didn't have a spare car to sell to Ropner, so he directed him to AC Cars in Thames Ditton. Here Ropner had chassis COB6008 built with FIA-spec bodywork incorporating a bespoke Jaguar D-type-style single-seat cockpit with the passenger side covered by a removable aluminium tonneau panel. The special windscreen could quickly be replaced with a small aeroscreen, and the car was one of only three right-hand drive competition Cobras built.

When Ropner collected his car AC was unable to supply the 8½in-wide Halibrand wheels that the oversize wheelarches were designed to cover, so he had to drive home on skinny 5½in-wide wire wheels. He then sent the car to ex-Ecurie Ecosse mechanic Wilkie Wilkinson, who was working for BRM in Bourne, Lincolnshire. Wilkinson fitted BRM alloy wheels, 6½in x 15in at the front and 8½in x 15in at the back, with bigger brakes and four Weber 48IDA carburettors. He also cut two rows of louvres in the bonnet to aid cooling.

Ropner collected the car from Bourne on a cold winter's day and span on ice on the way home just as a police car was coming the other way. After ensuring Ropner was unhurt and the car was undamaged the officers allowed him to continue, but politely declined his offer to have a go behind the wheel.

From 1964 Ropner raced COB6008 regularly, enjoying success at club level including a couple of wins. Together with his friend Schellenberg



Left to right: Jack Sears, Mike Brown, Bruce Ropner, Keith Schellenberg, Kevin Kivlochan



Current owner and regular *Classic Cars'* Our Cars contributor Kevin Kivlochan unleashes the Cobra at Croft



COB6008 is one of only three right-hand drive competition Cobras built



he mainly ran the car in drag races, coming second in the first British drag race meeting and winning several other prizes. In 1963, with business partner Frances Shand-Kydd (mother of the late Princess Diana) and Schellenberg, Ropner began building a new racetrack on the old Croft Aerodrome site and by April 1964 the first major event, the *Daily Mirror* Trophy, was set to take place.

Sears was due to take part in the race driving the Willment Racing Cobra '39 PH'. When he arrived Willment chief mechanic Mike Brown told him they had a major engine problem: as the Cobra was being unloaded from the truck a valve had picked up in its guide and seized, so when the piston came up it bent the valve, leaving the engine running on seven cylinders.

While Brown got down to repairing the car Sears realised he had another problem: 'I'd never raced at Croft before, so I had to learn the circuit - and I needed a car to drive. Then Bruce Ropner turned up and said I could borrow his car to qualify. We went to see the clerk of the course who looked at Bruce, knowing he was the circuit owner, and said: "You're supposed to qualify in the race car. Jack's car is red and yours is white, but I'm colour blind, so I might not notice. However, whatever you do in qualifying won't count towards a grid position. You'll have to start at the back.'" With Ropner's car still on road tyres Sears completed some cautious laps: 'The tyres were adequate for that.'

Come the 20-lap race Sears had some big opposition, including Tony Lanfranchi in an Elva BMW, Roy Pierpoint in an Attila Ford and Roger Mac in his Jaguar E-type. But Sears carved his way through the field and at around the three-quarter distance took the lead, which he never relinquished. Sears also raced the seven-litre Willment Ford Galaxie that day and won the saloon car race. 'It ended up a very, very good day out,' he says.

Eventually Ropner decided he wanted a proper dragster and the Cobra was becoming too expensive to run, so he sold it to Schellenberg

**'How did the Cobra beat Ferrari? Pure torque and grunt out of the corners. In a 250 GTO only Graham Hill was quicker'**

on November 28, 1965 - the same day the car was entered in the Grande Premio de Angola. This was a reasonably high-profile event for sports cars on the streets of Luanda and also a good excuse for racers to enjoy a jolly. Competition was fierce from drivers such as David Piper in a Ferrari 250 LM, Jo Schlessler in the Ford France seven-litre Cobra, plus a number of potent Porsches. Schellenberg brought the car home a respectable 12th overall.

In December 1966 Schellenberg put COB6008 up for sale because he wanted to race vintage Bentleys. The Cobra passed through various hands before being bought by racer and dealer Brian Classic in 1984. Some time later Michael Fisher, another dealer, bought it and fitted a roll hoop and quick-lift jacking points and painted it Viking Blue.

Several others owned the car over the years including Bill Wykeham and James Lindsay, who both raced it in historic events. Kivlochan took it over in 2003. 'I had been trying to buy the car for some time,' he recalls. 'Then one Wednesday James Lindsay rang me and said that if I could pay him by noon on Friday I could have it. I said I'd better come and see it, but he told me I couldn't because it was on a boat on its way to the Macau Grand Prix. So we agreed he would do the race with Bill Wykeham and I'd own the car when it landed back at Southampton, on condition that if it was damaged Lindsay would repair it. But a week later he rang me again and asked: "Now you've paid me I don't feel it's my car any more - would you like to do the race with Bill?" So I flew out to Macau and did just that. It was scary as hell - I had never driven the car and this was a street circuit with no run-off areas, just concrete walls, barriers and buildings. I was pleased when we came tenth. Since then the car has been a regular at Goodwood, Le Mans and Silverstone, where I've enjoyed sharing it with many celebrity drivers.'

Finally it's my turn to get behind the wheel, though I feel self-



Top right: mighty 4727cc Ford V8 will blast you to 100mph in around 11sec. Left: steering is quick but heavy and provides good feedback through the chassis and steering wheel

conscious in front of such illustrious spectators. The first thing that strikes you is the torque – the V8 is so flexible that even if you pull away from 15mph in top it will fluff for a fraction of a second and then keep accelerating until you run out of bravery. Kivlochan admits to chickening out at Le Mans at 168mph when the front began to feel worryingly light.

The Borg-Warner T10 four-speed gearbox has quite a long throw, but the linkage has been Rose-jointed, which gets rid of any play. The clutch isn't over-heavy and once you're used to it you can make changes through the well-spaced ratios quickly and smoothly, all with that V8 soundtrack accompanying each double-declutched downchange.

The steering feels quick although on these big Dunlop tyres it's quite heavy. The double-adjustable Koni dampers do their job well and there's good feedback via the chassis and steering. But you need to take command and prepare yourself mentally to turn in early, adjusting for the amount of bicep force required. Entering the corner the steering feels heavy and the car wants to understeer; prod the throttle with the front wheel kissing the rumble strips and the tail begins to slide gracefully. Just as the back feels like its getting away, a flick of opposite lock balances the car in a stable oversteer slide. When it starts to slide there's plenty of time before it lets go completely.

The car loses too much speed if you allow it to understeer, so induce oversteer on entry and then power-drift through the corners; too much oversteer and you'll spin. The brakes are far better than I expected with plenty of feel and bite, but leaning on them hard for the first time the car feels twitchy as if it wants to spin. But after a few laps you realise it won't let go, it's just talking to you. Point-and-squirt progress is impressive, the Cobra pinning your back into the seat as it accelerates to 60mph in around 5sec, then keeping you there past 100mph in another 6sec.

I return to the pits, blip the throttle to clear the spark plugs and sit listening to the pinging of cooling metal before reluctantly climbing out.

In the US the Cobra's greatest rival was the Chevrolet Corvette, which it outclassed mainly because Shelby's American programme

was run with Ford support while the Corvettes were running to a more privateer-based production spec. In Europe it was up against the similarly specialised Ferrari 250 GTO. On shorter circuits the Cobra's torque gave it a big advantage, but on fast circuits such as Le Mans the Ferrari's 177mph top speed gave it the edge. Sears says that of all the GT cars raced then the Ferrari had the best handling and gearbox and an unburstable engine you could drive at 7500rpm all day long. 'I never heard of anyone blowing one up and the brakes were very good,' he adds. 'It was the ultimate car.'

So how did the Cobra beat the Ferrari? 'Pure torque and grunt out of the corners,' replies Sears. 'Only Graham Hill in a GTO was quicker than me out of the corners, but the average GTO driver certainly wasn't.'

But the Cobra wasn't an easy car to drive, so how did Sears master it so easily? Mike Brown has an answer: 'Jack was able to drive round problems without destroying things and he didn't ever over-drive a car.'

'And I never spun one and never crashed one,' chips in Sears. 'But I've likened the Cobra to a bucking bronco: some cowboys could stay on one and some would come off. I always managed to stay on that bucking bronco.' ☑

**Thanks to:** Jack Sears, Mike Brown, Bruce Ropner, Keith Schellenberg; Croft Circuit; Trevor Legate, author of *Cobra, The First 40 Years*

### 1964 AC COBRA 289 MKII FIA (ORIGINAL SPEC)

**Engine** 4727cc, V8, four twin-choke Weber 481DA downdraft carburetors **Power and torque** 300bhp @ 5750rpm; 285lb ft @ 4500rpm **Transmission** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion **Suspension** Front: independent, transverse leaf spring, wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti roll bar. Rear: independent, transverse leaf spring, wishbones, telescopic dampers **Brakes** Discs front and rear **Weight** 921kg (2030lb) **Performance** Top speed: 170mph; 0-60mph: sub-5sec **Fuel consumption** 15mpg **Cost new** £2400 **Value now** n/a