

Bob Olthoff – Racing Legend

Part two of Ken MacLeod's account of the career of one of South Africa's greatest drivers



Pinpoint placement ... Bob Olthoff at the wheel of the Willment Shelby American Cobra during the sports and GT car race at the Cape South-Easter meeting at Killarney in January 1965. Pictures courtesy of Bob Olthoff

Willment Racing had decided to open a branch in South Africa, with Bob Olthoff as manager, and he certainly gave the company some tremendous advance publicity during the course of the 1964 Springbok Series.

Jack Sears and Bob shared the Shelby American Cobra to fifth place in the Nine Hour race at Kyalami and Bob went on to win the Sports and GT car races outright at East London and Killarney. Although the Ford Galaxie was never happy on the tighter sections of these two circuits, Bob also won his class in the saloon car race at East London. The big car was fitted with disc brakes but they were not ventilated, with the result that, after heavy braking for Cocobana Corner at East London, the car had no brakes left.

Bob was, in his own words, superquick after the 1964 season and his ambition in 1965 was to try to win every saloon car race in South Africa in the Galaxie. He almost succeeded. He scored outright wins at consecutive meetings at Kyalami and a second at Roy Hesketh circuit, three outright wins at one meeting at Marlborough circuit in the then Salisbury, outright wins at Roy Hesketh and Kyalami, class wins at Kyalami, Roy Hesketh and Killarney and ended with an outright win at Kyalami, having clinched the South African saloon car championship at the previous Killarney meeting.

The big Galaxie could be guaranteed to attract big crowds wherever it raced and seemed to make the ground shake as it thundered down the straights. Bob had an initial battle with Koos Swanepoel in the Lotus Cortina at Kyalami and finished behind him at Maritzburg. But he ran away from Basil van Rooyen's sister car at Kyalami and repeated this performance against the two Lotus Cortinas at Roy Hesketh. He was headed home by the Van Rooyen Lotus Cortina at East London, but reversed this result at Kyalami. The Lotus Cortina "twins" showed the Galaxie the way home at Roy Hesketh and Killarney before Bob made amends at Kyalami.

The AC Cobra took outright wins in the Sports and GT and Invitation races at Roy Hesketh, class wins at Killarney and Roy Hesketh in the former category and an outright win in the Sports and GT car race at Kyalami.

But it lost a dramatic race at the beginning of the year. Bob led the Roy Hesketh Three Hour race on distance from the start and took the lead on index as well at the halfway mark. Then drama struck. He came in for a wheel change five laps from the end but, on his last lap, a wheel came off at BP. The Willment pit crew sprinted across country down to the corner and fitted a replacement and Bob raced away full bore. *But*, in terms of the regulations for the event, the

chequered flag was displayed for five minutes after the finish, after which it was withdrawn. Bob was on the finishing straight when it was withdrawn! So near, yet so very far.

At the end of the year, he shared a Peugeot 404 with Bob van Niekerk to clinch second overall on distance, a class win and victory on Index of Performance in the Cape Three Hour race at Killarney.

Unfortunately, the Willment enterprise failed to materialise and Bob opened a garage at La Rochelle, Johannesburg, instead. It is the single regret of his very active career that he did not return overseas in 1965, because it was at this stage that drivers in his particular fields were starting to make good money. But there was to be no return.

After a year out of racing overseas, it would have meant virtually starting all over again. As said, Bob was superquick after 52 races in 1964, but he found himself becoming slower the longer he remained here because of the fewer racing opportunities. It is a fact that it takes at least a year, aside from learning new circuits, to get on the pace with drivers who race or test virtually every day.

The Galaxie continued its domination of saloon car racing in this country by taking outright honours at East London in January 1966. However, Bob had been negotiating with David Prophet since the Nine Hour race

for his McLaren-Elva Ford and he and Ford SA sales manager Hew Brooke finally made Prophet an acceptable offer on the night before he was to load the car on board ship at Cape Town at the end of the Springbok Series.

At the same time, he bought Prophet's Ford F100 as a towing truck and was somewhat stunned on taking delivery to be warned by Prophet, pointing at the engine, that "there is an animal in there!" A disbelieving Bob opened the bonnet, to be met by a roar from what turned out to be a leguaan over a metre long that Prophet had driven over and which had taken refuge alongside the engine! "We had to get people from the zoo, armed with long gloves, to remove it!"

The McLaren-Elva was to dominate sports car racing in South Africa in 1966 the way the Galaxie had dominated saloon car racing the previous year. Bob scored outright wins at consecutive meetings at Roy Hesketh, East London and consecutive wins at Kyalami and Killarney to win the South African sports car championship comfortably. Mechanical trouble aside, only Steve Mellet in the Mirage Ford gave him any opposition, at the Rand Winter Trophy meeting.

Bob also scored an outright win with Fastest Time of Day and an outright record at the Krugersdorp Hillclimb. He took the car to Rainbow Drag Strip near Alberton and set a national record in the "Special-Special" category of 11,25 seconds for the standing start quarter-mile.

He survived a big crash at Lourenco Marques unscathed when he shot off the track after his steering broke and flew across several sand dunes, miraculously clearing spectators sitting on the ground between them. He also had an outing in a Capital Vee, finishing fourth at Roy Hesketh, but didn't endear himself to the hierarchy of the fledgling formula with his uncomplimentary remarks about the car.

But he had opposition the following year, in the shape of Doug Serrurier's Lola T70 Ford. Bob only won at Killarney after Serrurier crashed and the latter took the honours in the Rand Autumn meeting at Kyalami. But Bob took outright wins at Killarney, after Serrurier executed a monumental spin, and consecutive Roy Hesketh meetings.

After the McLaren suffered a broken pinion in practice at Killarney, Koos Swanepoel loaned Bob the ex-Luki Botha Elva Porsche



Bob Olthoff at Kyalami.
Picture: Robert Young

with which he took third overall and second in class behind Keith Berrington-Smith.

The Pietermaritzburg man had taken his Lotus 23 Alfa to a class third in the opening round at Killarney, but then got class wins at Kyalami, Killarney (twice) and Roy Hesketh and a class second to Swanepoel at Roy Hesketh to lead the championship comfortably. The Capetonian gave Bob a lifeline by heading Berrington-Smith home again at Kyalami, with Bob taking overall honours, and suddenly the championship was down to the wire at Bulawayo.

That final race was exciting to say the least, with four overseas cars and two British drivers, David Prophet (Ford GT40) and Tony Dean (Porsche 906), in the field. Bob led marginally from Serrurier at the start, only to spin at the Esses and rejoin the race near the back of the field. He regained the lead from Serrurier on lap 13 when the latter had to stop at the pits and continued to win the 20-lap race, despite completing the last eight laps without water and coasting across the finish with a dead engine, three seconds ahead of Dean with Prophet third. Berrington-Smith retired with a dropped valve while trailing Dean and Swanepoel in his class. Bob had retained the South African sports car championship, and shared the Rhodesian title with Serrurier.

Driving the McLaren-Elva, he added Fastest Time of Day and an outright record at both Krugersdorp Hillclimbs held that year.

1967 was a very notable year for Bob in another respect, for it saw him break the 15-year-old South African Land Speed Record

held by Vic Procter on the 998cc Vincent Black Lightning. "Although one would think the Free State is flat," Bob remarks, "in fact, there were only two roads in the province that met the criteria of a less than one percent variation in gradient required for the record attempt." One was the Soutpan road near Bloemfontein that was eventually used; the other was at Reddersburg, but it had a kink in it and was ruled out.

On 21 October, Bob took the McLaren-Elva Ford, fitted for the occasion with fully enclosed wheels, to a first run of 174 mph, a return run of 182 mph for a new record of 177,972 mph. Unfortunately, the authorities allowed him only limited time to set up the car and no time for practice. Did the enclosed wheels help? "I don't know. I never got the chance to find out."

His record did not last long, being broken by David Piper in the Ferrari P2/3 and then Mike D'Udy in the Lola T70 Chev. Bob wanted to try to reclaim the record, being confident of reaching 200 mph, but D'Udy had nearly hit a local farmer on a tractor who happened to be on the road on one of his runs and the authorities summarily banned further attempts on public roads. In fact the subsequent records set by Sarel van der Merwe in the Audi and Willie Hepburn in the Pontiac TransAm were made on roads not yet opened to the public.

Bob was awarded Springbok colours for his SA Land Speed Record, but it took two years and a public storm before he finally received them. At that time Dr Danie Craven held that only the South African Rugby Board could award Springbok colours. Bob took the matter to StarLine and he eventually received his colours.

At the end of 1967, the AA, Bob thinks as a result of lobbying by certain parties, banned the V8 cars from the sports car championship. He got together with Serrurier and they decided to import frames, install their V8 engines and run single-seaters, in Serrurier's case with Jackie Pretorius as driver. This was the launch of Formula 5000. Bob believes that, had the prohibitively expensive Formula One cars been banned, Formula 5000 would still be running.

Bob imported a McLaren frame from David Prophet that had been used as a film car and built up his own McLaren Ford Special which he ran in the SA drivers' championship in 1968 and 1969.

That first season saw him third in the Coronation 100, the Border 100, the Rand Spring Trophy and the Rhodesian Grand Prix. But there were some near-misses: one for second in the Natal Winter Trophy when he and Basil van Rooyen tangled while the latter was lapping him and he shot off the track. At the False Bay 100 he spun while dicing with Pretorius for the lead and dropped to third, only to retire with mechanical failure while trying to regain second from Sam Tingle.

In 1969 Bob had a busy season as Ford SA launched a serious onslaught on local motor racing. In addition to the McLaren Ford, he drove the 500 bhp Ford Fairlane V8 in saloon car races and the Basil Green Ford Perana Cortina V6 in Team Gunston colours in the Transvaal (Onyx) production car championship.

His best result in the single-seater was a third in the Rand Winter Trophy. He scored an outright victory and a number of class wins in the Perana Cortina to finish joint third



Bob in the Peugeot 404 he shared with Bob van Niekerk in the 1965 Cape Three Hour at Killarney. The pair won on index of performance and finished second on distance.



Bob prepares for his attempt on the SA Land Speed Record in his McLaren-Elva Ford in October 1967. He set a new mark of 177,972 mph to break Vic Procter's longstanding record. Picture courtesy of Andrew Reed. Inset: Bob Olthoff today.

overall in the Onyx championship. But the Fairlane proved troublesome and unsuccessful.

It all came together in 1970, when on more than one occasion Bob was the star of the meeting. He imported a McLaren M10A Ford for the Formula 5000 series (now carrying Gold Star championship status previously awarded for Formula Two) and the Fairlane made way for the Perana Capri in the saloon car championship.

Bob was third in the early stages of the Cape South Easter at Killarney, opening round of the drivers' championship, behind Dave Charlton and John Love in the Formula One Lotus. After Charlton retired, Bob took over second place, which he held to the end despite a spin.

A third at the Highveld 100 following John McNicol's retirement in the Lola Ford was coupled to an outright saloon car win. He was fifth in the Coronation 100, but put up a storming drive in the saloon car race when he lost three laps at the start of heat one because of a broken fan belt to finish only one lap behind.

In the Republic Trophy race, he finished third after giving way to a charging Charlton, who had been delayed at the start, in the closing stages of the race. However, he repeated his outright saloon car win by way of compensation.

Fourth in the Bulawayo 100 after a gearchange linkage problem kept him in the hunt for Gold Star championship points before a somewhat dramatic Natal Winter Trophy race.

Paddy Driver crashed his Lola Ford in spectacular fashion in the first corner, his left-front wheel mounting Bob's right-rear wheel after he inadvertently opened the throttle wide under braking for Quarry – the result of

enlarging the brake pedal against Bob's advice to improve heeling-and-toeing. Despite suffering from flu and shaken by the crash (there was a tyre mark on Bob's helmet afterwards), he kept going to finish third. Then he scored another outright saloon car win.

Charlton struck trouble at the start of the Governor-General's Cup race at Lourenco Marques, leaving Bob and Pretorius to fight out the lead while Charlton charged through the field. He took the lead after seven laps, but the two Formula 5000 drivers continued their fight for second place – until Pretorius slowed with engine problems.

Despite retirements in both the Rand Winter Trophy and Rand Spring Trophy, Bob became the first winner of the Formula 5000 Gold Star championship and finished fourth overall in the South African drivers' championship.

With outright saloon car wins at Kyalami (twice), Killarney and Bulawayo, he clinched third place in what was to prove the last South African saloon car championship.

Bob's year was not quite over, however,

and he finished second in the non-championship Welkom 100 which marked the opening of the Goldfields circuit. This result must have been particularly satisfying as Bob had helped with the circuit's layout, suggesting the siting of brakemarkers. He regards Goldfields as his favourite circuit in South Africa and considers the corner entering the main straight as the most challenging in the country.

Bob drove the McLaren M10A Ford in 1971, but the car finished only one race, the Autumn Trophy at Welkom, in which he was fourth. The Perana Capri was run in the Transvaal (The Star) production car championship, Bob scoring four outright wins at Kyalami and one at Welkom to take third in the championship.

At this stage, Bob simply ran out of drives and was forced into retirement. Or was he? He had been flying for some time, first with a Tiger Moth and then with a Mooney single-engined plane, and took up air rallying in 1975. That same year he and Paddy Driver flew down to watch the Trans Kalahari Road Race and decided off-road racing was for them.

This led to the acquisition of a straight-four Chevrolet Nomad, fitted with a turbocharger after its first event as Bob felt this was the only way to be competitive. It was, and Bob won the first Castrol Barberspan 500 race in 1977.

Time and again Bob was in contention, only to retire. He led both the 1977 and 1978 Trans Kalahari races and the 1978 Barberspan, and was lying well up in the Roof of Africa Rally in both years only to be sidelined. The scenario continued in the 1979 Trans Kalahari, with gearbox and brake problems, but this time Bob finished fourth, albeit with a broken gearlever.



Bob flies to victory in the 1977 Barberspan 500 in his turbocharged Chev Nomad.

Bob put up what must surely be one of the greatest drives in local off-road racing in the 1979 Roof of Africa Rally. He held the lead from the start and through the Lancers Gap section and back to the overnight stop at Maseru.

The following day he held off Arthur Harcus's Ventura Mazda single-seater until a particularly rough section better suited to the Ventura when Harcus finally forced his way past into the lead. But Bob hung on with grim determination to take second place and a class win, only six seconds behind Harcus at the end of an epic race.

Bob's road racing career was not quite over, either, and he teamed up with Collin Burford in a Mazda Capella to take fifth on distance, third on Index of Performance and class wins in each category in the Wynns 1000 km race at Kyalami at the end of the year.

His bad luck continued in 1980. Bob led the Castrol Barberspan 500 until a series of punctures cost him 54 minutes. Then in the Trans Kalahari race, he took the lead on the second day, only to suffer a puncture, damage his shock absorbers and, to top it all, lose a fuel tank. The fuel tank was the only one monitored by his instruments and, with no idea of the amount of fuel left in the remaining two tanks, he had to take things easy to the finish, once again coming home fourth.

There was no overall result for the Shell Off-Road 80 event run at Kyalami, only class results on the second day of the two-day race counting. Tony Pennell and Spotti Woodhead had been Bob's navigators in previous events, but this time he took along wife Baby so that she could see for herself what they endured in off-road racing. Baby was apprehensive before the start but reports indicate that by the end she was berating Bob for not going fast enough! In fact, Bob says she didn't like it at all. They finished second in class.

Alongside off-road racing, Bob had taken to air rallying with as much success as he had enjoyed on the ground. In 1977, he and navigator Tony Pennell won the Gaborone Holiday Inn and the Johannesburg Light Plane Club rallies, but he competed in only two events the following year, with Spotti Woodhead as navigator.

Up until now he had had been flying his faithful Mooney, but in 1980 he won the Northern Transvaal rally outright and the Twin Prop class in a Piper Seminole with Pennell as navigator.

In his sole event in 1982, he sang his swansong in serious competition with the Mooney and top stunt pilot Scully Levine as navigator to win the Southern Transvaal rally.

Bob has done some fun classic racing since then, but at the age of 59, when most men are contemplating a quiet retirement, he left his plot, Solitude, near Eikenhof, on another serious venture. This will see him selling Cobra replicas in the United States in partnership with son Dennis.

He also plans to team up with Dennis and former top American driver Bob Burdant to race their Cobra replicas in a historic racing car series. The series calls for a team and an overall winner, but the drivers contesting the team competition cannot score points in the overall championship. The plan is for the two Bobs to contest the team championship and for Dennis to aim at the overall title.

Classic Car Africa wishes them the best of luck!



Bob powerslides his rebodied McLaren Ford at the Roy Hesketh circuit in 1968.



Tweaking the McLaren M10A Ford through Angel's Angle at Roy Hesketh in 1970.



Bob takes the Basil Green Perana Capri to another victory. Picture courtesy of Ken MacLeod



Having some fun ... Bob has an outing in Peter du Toit's Lolette in the 1991 Nine Hour Retrospective at Zwartkops. Picture: Neil Phillipson