

Chapter 18 – A Different Breed of Cat

Life was good in Florida. I had my MG and my Model A together again, and I had a rusted out Pinto for my foul weather car. I was getting great experience working construction projects with RED HORSE, and my good friend Chris lived nearby in Pensacola. It seemed like I had everything I could ever want. Then one day while I was home on leave my younger brother Jack told me he'd found a man who had an E-Type Jaguar for sale.

It's nice to have a younger brother who's looking out for you. Maybe someday I can return the favor and help him spend lots of money. I wasn't actively looking to buy another car, let alone a Jaguar, and I certainly didn't need another car. On the other hand, how could I resist an E-Type? Even as a kid with no concept of automobiles I had lusted over Chris's dad's E-Type. Since then I had been given the opportunity to work on them at Riccotto's, and of course if you worked on a car you had to take it out for a test drive afterwards. Imagine a car that weighed about 400 pounds more than my MG, roughly the equivalent of two passengers of mother-in-law proportions, but with three times the horsepower. Now wrap that car in a body that was so sexy that even pictures of it came with a parental advisory. I had to take a look at the car Jack had found.

The car turned out to be a 1964 OTS (Open Two-Seater, a convertible to anyone on this side of the Atlantic) in moderately shabby condition. On the plus side, the car was complete and original, and I particularly liked E-Types from the early sixties. This was a Series One car, with a triple-carbureted 3.8 liter six cylinder engine. Later, as emission controls became more strict, Jaguar would bore the engine out to 4.2 liters. Later still they would replace the six with a V-12, but these later engines were never quite as fast or as responsive as the early sixes. The car had covered headlights, chrome plated wire wheels, and an intimidating array of gauges and toggle switches across the dashboard. It had the Moss gearbox, a somewhat brutal racing transmission that was virtually indestructible but which required careful double-clutching if you wanted to drive it

smoothly. It had true bucket seats – shaped like each seat had been individually carved out of a leather hoghead. And of course, it had the low, sleek E-Type body, a car so beautiful that one was put on display at the New York Museum of Modern Art.

On the negative side, this particular Jaguar had evidently led a hard life. The odometer only showed a little over 60,000 miles, but the blue smoke pouring out the tailpipe showed it was time for a rebuild. This engine didn't purr, it clanked. I don't think the car had 160,000 miles on it, but I wouldn't have been surprised to learn the speedometer had been broken for an extended period of time. The body showed typical Indiana rust damage and one of the rear axle traction bars had pulled loose from its rusted mounting, causing some squirrely handling and an unsettling "thump" just below the driver's seat. The top and the upholstery were worn, the carpet was shot (and wet), and someone had run the windshield wipers with no blades, leaving a deep scratch across the width of the windshield. I believe I may have mentioned one or two of these shortcomings to the owner while we were haggling over the price. I must have played my part pretty well, because at one point Jack took me aside and quietly offered to loan me some money if I needed it to buy the car. That was a very thoughtful offer, especially so because Jack was still in high school and didn't have a whole lot of spare cash. I've never forgotten it. In any event, I gradually convinced the owner that my offer was a more realistic representation of the car's true worth than his asking price, and I bought the car for \$2500. Later I got to thinking back about all the other cars I'd owned in my life and I realized this was the 9'th car I'd ever bought, and it cost more than the first 8 put together.

Even in 1979, \$2500 wouldn't buy a perfectly restored Jaguar E-Type. I certainly didn't have a car that I could cruise down to Florida. I had a ratty Jaguar that barely clattered its way to Riccotto's for an engine rebuild. I knew this was going to be required when I bought it, but still it really drove home the fact that Jaguar parts prices aren't quite as gentle as MG parts prices. When I dropped the car off at Riccotto's I suspected the rebuild would cost as much as a small battleship. If I was extremely lucky, I could

maybe even get by for the cost of a frigate. I knew Umbarti would do a good job, though, and I wasn't disappointed. In a few months he rebuilt the engine and transmission, welded new repair sections into the floor pan to replace the metal lost to the demon rust, and fitted an enormously strong if not aesthetically pleasing new mounting point for the traction bar. Now the car drove like a Jaguar! I picked it up on my way to a training class in Ohio, and when the class was over it purred all the way to Florida. I watched the tachometer and the odometer religiously, just itching for the day when I would be finished with the break-in period and I could make it snarl once in a while. My common sense as a mechanic and the memory of the rebuild price helped me keep my right foot in check. I was also keenly aware of the fact that this car was capable of speeds that far exceeded any reasonable bounds of safety. According to contemporary road tests the car would see 150 mph, but only a total idiot would see that speed on a public highway. I may have been a cocksure young Air Force officer, but I wasn't an idiot. Or at least, not a total idiot. I felt that I was a pretty good driver, but I had enough experience with old cars to know that being a good driver wouldn't prevent a blowout, or a locked wheel bearing, or any one of a hundred other malfunctions that could ruin your day if you were driving too fast. I also had no way of knowing how talented the driver of the pickup truck just ahead of me was, the one who was thinking about changing lanes without signaling. Or the driver I couldn't see who was about to pull out of a blind side street into my lane. Those drivers had no reason whatsoever to suspect a vehicle might rush up from behind at two or three times the posted speed limit. James Dean was just one of many drivers who proved that point, and I had no wish to wind up dead or responsible for the deaths of others. That's not to say that I was a choir boy who constantly drove at 55 mph, but I recognized the fact that there is a difference between spirited driving and stupidity.

Once I got the car down to Florida, I began to use it as my daily driver. I've never felt I really knew a car until I had driven it on a daily basis, through good times and bad, for a year or two. Part of that time is spent just "sorting out" the car. Fixing all the niggling rattles, erratic instruments, and other minor irritants while fine tuning the engine

and suspension until the car feels “right.” Part of that time is spent learning the car’s character, finding out what its strengths and weakness are. And of course part of that time is spent simply fixing things that break. In the Jag’s case what broke was the back window on the convertible top. It was a standard clear vinyl convertible top window – OK maybe it was more crinkly brown than clear – and it cracked lengthwise when I put the top down one morning to drive to work. It was a little chilly that morning, maybe 20 °F, but not cold enough to keep the top up and certainly not so cold that the vinyl should have cracked. I guess it got brittle with age. I checked with a couple of convertible top shops and was astounded to find they wanted over \$75 to replace the back window. That was roughly half the price of a complete new top, and it seemed particularly outrageous because it only cost me \$15 to buy the clear vinyl I’d used to fix the top on Old Number 12. Actually, \$15 bought me more than enough to fix that window. Was it possible there was enough left to fix the Jag top?

It took me a while to find it, but there was indeed enough left over to fix the Jag. Maybe I’m a cheapskate, but I just couldn’t see spending \$75 to have someone else repair the top when I could do the job myself for free. The only problem was, how could I attach the vinyl to the top? On Old Number 12 I’d sewn the new window in with fish line, but I didn’t think that would look appropriate on a Jaguar. I finally decided I’d have to take the top off the car so I could spread it flat on the floor, cut out the old window, glue in the new one, and use weights to hold it down until the glue dried.

My plan worked OK as far as the top was concerned, but when I took the top off the car I discovered the metal top bows were rusted and grungy looking. So, as long as I had the top off anyway, I decided it was a good time to take off the top bows, clean the crud off, and put a nice new coat of shiny black paint on them. That plan worked too, as far as the bows were concerned, but I had to take off several interior trim pieces to get the bows off. That’s when I discovered the trim pieces were shot. They were originally made of thin metal and covered with vinyl that matched the leather seats. Over the years the metal had rusted to the point where several of the trim pieces fell apart in my hands as I

took out the bows. So, I had to make new trim pieces. To do that I needed vinyl that matched the leather seats, and the more I looked at those seats the more I noticed how worn the leather was. So I took out the seats and found an upholstery shop that was able to replace the leather and rebuild the seats to match the originals. (Finding an upholstery shop that was willing to do that was tougher than it sounds.) That shop was also able to provide me with vinyl that matched the new leather exactly. Of course, while I had the seats out was a good time to replace the carpeting so I ripped out the carpeting too.

As I stared at my gutted Jaguar, I realized this was an ideal time to have it painted. I really wanted to find a craftsman to do the bodywork, but once again craftsmen wanted just a little more than I could spare from my salary as a junior officer. OK, they wanted a lot more than I could spare. When I ruled out the craftsmen, I really, really, REALLY wanted to find a reputable paint and body shop to do the work. None of them would touch it. Finally, in desperation, I turned once again to Florida Sports Cars. Jerry was more than willing to paint my car, and he absolutely double-dog dare promised not to steal the engine while it was in the shop. Reluctantly, I agreed to let him do the work with the warning that I would be stopping by on a daily basis to see how things were going. Of course, you can't do a decent job painting a car with the chrome on, so I took off the bumpers and other trim before I took the car in to the body shop. There was no point in letting these pieces just lie around my garage gathering dust while the car was being painted, so I took them into an electroplating shop to have all the chrome redone.

For a brief period of time my garage was empty and my wallet was full. Then my "stone soup" method of restoration began to catch up with me. The parts started trickling back from the sandblaster, the upholsterer, and the electroplater. My garage began to fill and my wallet began to shrink. In the end, it required a quantity of cash that would have overflowed the Jag's trunk to get all my parts back. But, the results did look nice. Finally the day came when Florida Sports Cars was finished painting my Jag and it looked sharp! Now I could begin the tedious process of putting my car back together again. I'd saved all the carpet and crumbling trim pieces I'd ripped out of the car to use

as patterns so I wasn't starting from scratch, but it still took me several months to get everything put back together. Finally the day arrived when all the carpeting was in, all the trim pieces were in, the chrome was bolted back into place, and I had new rubber seals on the doors, windows, hood, trunk, and top. In short, it looked like a brand new car. Except for the top, and that shabby homemade back window. They stood out like a sore thumb. So, I bought a new top and installed it. Now the car looked brand new. As I stood back and admired my handiwork I thought about how much money I'd saved by replacing the back window myself.

Now the car looked and drove like a brand new Jaguar, and my driving impressions were beginning to gel. I had expected the car to drive like a super-MG. After all, it had 2-1/2 times the power of my MG but only weighed about 400 pounds more. It also had fully independent torsion bar suspension, 4-wheel disk brakes with inboard disks on the rear, a limited slip differential, and other refinements to make it handle even better than my MG. After all, this was basically a street version of the racing D-Types that had dominated Le Mans and other high speed circuits in the late 50s and early 60s. To my surprise, however, it didn't drive like the MG. It truly was a different breed of cat. It was much more refined, gliding over pavement imperfections that would have sent the MG bouncing from one pothole to the next. To say it out-accelerated the MG would be a gross understatement, and it also cruised effortlessly at speeds that would leave the MG gasping for air. It had a wide power band so I didn't have to constantly change gears, upshifting or downshifting to keep the engine in a narrow range between "no power" and "shift dammit!" It would stick like glue on a long, high speed sweeper that would have the live-axle MG skidding sideways toward the weeds.

On the other hand, the Jag wasn't as much fun as the MG on a tight, twisting road. It didn't turn as tightly and the gearshift didn't "snick" effortlessly from one gear to the next. It was faster on these roads, but it felt like I was manhandling a big car around a tiny circuit. It also wasn't as much fun as the MG when I was just "bombing around town." I couldn't just toss it into a right angle turn to veer off onto a side street, and it

wasn't as adept as the MG at weaving in and out of traffic. I also felt a little self-conscious driving it. Maybe there was a little "reverse snobbery" involved. After all, I grew up in the generation that rejected the materialistic views of our parents and mined the resale shops for torn jeans and faded tops, what my father-in-law referred to as "fake poor people clothes." I may have also been influenced by the time I spent working as a mechanic for Riccotto's, cringing at the doctors and bank presidents who bought brand new Jaguars and then fouled the plugs by puttering around town in fourth gear. Whatever the reason, I felt a little uncomfortable driving a car that people automatically associated with money.

As a kid, I was astounded one day when I referred to a Jag as a "sports car" and Chris corrected me. A Jaguar wasn't a sports car, he informed me, it was a "gran tourisimo" or "grand touring" car. At the time I didn't understand the difference, but now that I had some experience with the Jag I began to understand what he meant. The Jaguar is a grand automobile for touring. Take it out in the country, rocket through a set of sweeping turns along a river bank, or just cruise effortlessly for mile after mile of scenic highways. I absolutely love to drive the Jaguar on roads like that. On the other hand, if I'm going to be driving a narrow mountain road with lots of switchbacks and right-angle turns, or just zig-zagging through city streets to make a Wal-Mart run, I'd rather drive the MG. And if I was going to be driving in an auto-cross I'd pick the MG hands down. The Jaguar is a touring car, not a sports car.

This of course begs the question "what is a sports car?" If you base your answer on car ads, the correct answer is "anything a car manufacturer wants to sell to younger drivers." Certainly the term "sports car" has great marketing appeal. In many ways the concept of a sports car is much more appealing than the reality. Autoweek probably said it best in a review published when Nissan first unveiled the legendary Datsun 240-Z. They said (and I'm paraphrasing from memory because I don't have ready access to 40 year old weekly newspapers) "According to the last census, in the entire world there are exactly 347 honest-to-God, bugs in their teeth, drive it at ten-tenths of capacity sports car

freaks. Great Britain has aimed their entire car production for the last 20 years at these 347 buyers. On the other hand, the last census also showed there were over 2 million people in Tulsa Oklahoma alone who wanted a sporty car that was fun to drive at seven or eight-tenths of capacity. Datsun aimed the 240-Z at these buyers.” With such a huge market of potential buyers, it’s no wonder everything from a 26 hp Crosley Hot Shot to a 5,000 pound Oldsmobile Toronado has been advertised as a sports car. Adding to the confusion, car companies have called their products sport coupes, sport sedans, sports economy, and sports luxury cars in one ad, and then called them a sports car in another ad. Sometimes they don’t go quite so far as to call them a sports car, but they will say they have “sports car handling” or a “sports car suspension.” Volvo, Porsche, and possibly others have built “sports station wagons.” And of course when the car companies discovered male buyers wouldn’t be caught dead in a minivan, they made the basic shape even boxier, added a few “power bulges,” and created a Strikingly Ugly Van or “SUV.” The marketing folks liked the nickname but not the name, so they changed it to “Sports” Utility Vehicle and sold millions.

So, since anyone can define the term “sports car” to mean whatever they want it to, I feel free to offer my own definition. This definition is based in part on definitions in books like “The Modern Sports Car” written during the “golden age” of sports cars, and in part on my own experience driving sports cars and sports car wannabes. To me, a sports car is a small, open, two-seat automobile designed to be agile and quick. If you don’t like this definition, feel free to write your own.

The “small” term in my definition is part of the heritage of sports cars. Most authors agree the sports car originated in England, but they quickly became popular in France, and Italy as well. All of these countries had narrow, winding roads that could only be driven quickly if the car was small. They also tended to have high fuel prices, so buyers appreciated a performance car that would get 35 or 40 mpg. Making the cars small also kept the weight low, and if you want to change directions in a hurry, or change speeds in a hurry, weight is the enemy. Try driving an MG through a tight slalom course and then

drive, say, a 1970's Dodge Charger through the same slalom. The Charger is a wonderful car and it handles great on a long sweeping turn, but if you take it through a tight zig-zag course you'll feel the weight fighting you at every turn. How light is lightweight? My own experience is that 2,000 lbs is about the limit for a sports car. This is not an absolute limit, a 2400 lb TR6 definitely feels like a sports car, but as cars get heavier than 2000 lbs they tend to drive more and more like a touring car and less like a sports car. (This is just one of many areas in which I find myself at odds with the majority of car buyers, as modern cars tend to be much heavier than older cars. It seems amazing to me that I have a 50 year old MG with a cast iron engine, a massive steel box frame, heavy gauge steel body panels, and other ancient materials that tips the scales at just under 2,000 lbs, while modern cars with aluminum blocks, unibody construction, plastic body panels, and all the other modern developments weigh hundreds or thousands of pounds more than my MG. Wouldn't you expect them to weigh less? I suspect the answer is not that there's a technical reason for modern cars to weigh more, but that most buyers don't like light cars. I guess I'm just one of the 347 people who actually prefer a sports car to a sporty car, and we're not the ones who are driving the market.)

To me, the fact that a sports car is an open car is a "self-evident truth." Closed cars just don't have the same feel to them, the same devil-may-care freedom of an open car. That's not to say closed cars are not fun. I've driven some really great sport coupes and sport sedans that are a ball to drive, but it's a different feeling. Even my MG feels significantly different when I put the top up. It's fun to drive, but I don't feel the speed like I do with the top down. Plus, if you ever drive in a "sporting event" like an autocross, hill climb, or road race – the kinds of events that gave "sports" cars their name, you'll quickly discover the importance of the extra visibility provided by an open car. Some of the classic books on sports cars go even further in this regard than I do, insisting that only roadsters (front engine cars with side curtains rather than roll-up windows) qualify as sports cars. Side curtains are lighter in weight than roll-up windows, and they don't take up so much space so the doors can be thinner and cut lower, providing the driver with more "elbow room" than a convertible. While I must admit to a preference

for roadsters, I don't think the driving experience is different enough to exclude convertibles from the sports car classification. Plus, if you ever get caught in the rain and have to drive with the top up, you'll discover that roll-up windows do offer certain advantages over side curtains. (They don't rattle and they don't leak, or at least, not as much as side curtains do.)

Like the requirement for a sports car to be open, the requirement to be a two-seater is a self-evident truth. This is probably as much a psychological requirement as it is a technical requirement. Yes, cars with a back seat tend to be bigger, heavier, and not as nimble as a two-seater, but that's only part of the story. Let's face it folks. When we fantasize about driving a sports car the fantasy doesn't include dropping the kids off at the orthodontist while you and your spouse shop for a new washing machine. Sports cars are for fast solo drives down a twisting country road, or a romantic drive in the moonlight with your significant other. If the drive is romantic enough you may eventually wind up shopping for an orthodontist, a washing machine, and a car with a back seat, but that's not part of the fantasy.

“Agile and quick” describe the essence of sports car performance. To be agile, a car must not only be capable of impressive cornering performance on a skid pad, it must be able to switch back and forth, changing directions instantly in response to a quick flick of the steering wheel. Sports car drivers live for switchbacks, slaloms, and right-angle turns. Excellent braking is another agility requirement for sports cars. Success in road racing required drivers to be able to wait until the last possible moment before standing on the brakes, reducing the cars speed as quickly as possible, and then diving into a corner. It's no coincidence that disk brakes became standard on sports cars long before they even became options on other cars. Quickness goes hand in hand with agility. A quick car isn't necessarily a fast car, but it's not a sluggard either. Although some sports cars are fast, most of the classic sports cars from the 50's and 60's would barely top 100 mph. (Not that there are many places where you can legally or morally drive over 100 mph.) Although the classic sports cars may not have been fast, they did have very quick

throttle response and gear ratios that let you keep the engine operating near its peak power output while accelerating up to, say, 60 or 70 mph. This isn't a particularly desirable trait for cruising down the Interstate, as the classic sports cars will be whining away at an uncomfortably high RPM under these conditions. They're not designed for this. That's what touring cars are designed for. On the other hand, if you're driving a road race, standing on the brake with your toe while your heel "blips" the throttle as you double clutch into a lower gear for a hairpin turn, and then standing on the gas pedal as you accelerate out of the turn, you'll appreciate the quicker gear ratios and throttle response of a sports car.

One attribute I almost included in my definition of a sports car is "inexpensive." While most sports cars are not cheap, they're not megabuck exotic cars either. After careful consideration, however, I decided this was a consequence and not a requirement of a sports car. There's no reason why you couldn't build an exotic, state-of-the-art, astronomically priced sports car. Indeed, there are specialty car builders who do just that. Some Lotus models in particular would seem to fall into this category. The economic reality, however, is that very few of the 347 sports car enthusiasts can afford to buy a machine like that. People who can afford to buy exotic cars want a combination of luxury and speed. In short, they want a gran turismo car, but they want to call it a sports car.

OK. That's a very long explanation of why I consider the Jaguar to be a different breed of cat than the MG. Perhaps the ultimate question is, which car do I like best – the Jaguar or the MG? That's a little like asking a parent which child they like best. I like them both. They both have different strengths, different weaknesses, and different personalities. I wouldn't want to give up either one. If you held a gun to my head and presented me with a choice, I could keep one car but you'd take the other, I'd keep the Jaguar. Then after you left I'd sell the Jag, buy another MG, and keep the change.



My 1964 E-Type



E-Type Fascia

“Flaming Floorboards” is available in paperback from [CreateSpace](#) and [Amazon](#). It is also available in electronic (Kindle) format from [Amazon](#) and in epub (Nook) format through [Barnes & Noble](#) and [Google](#).