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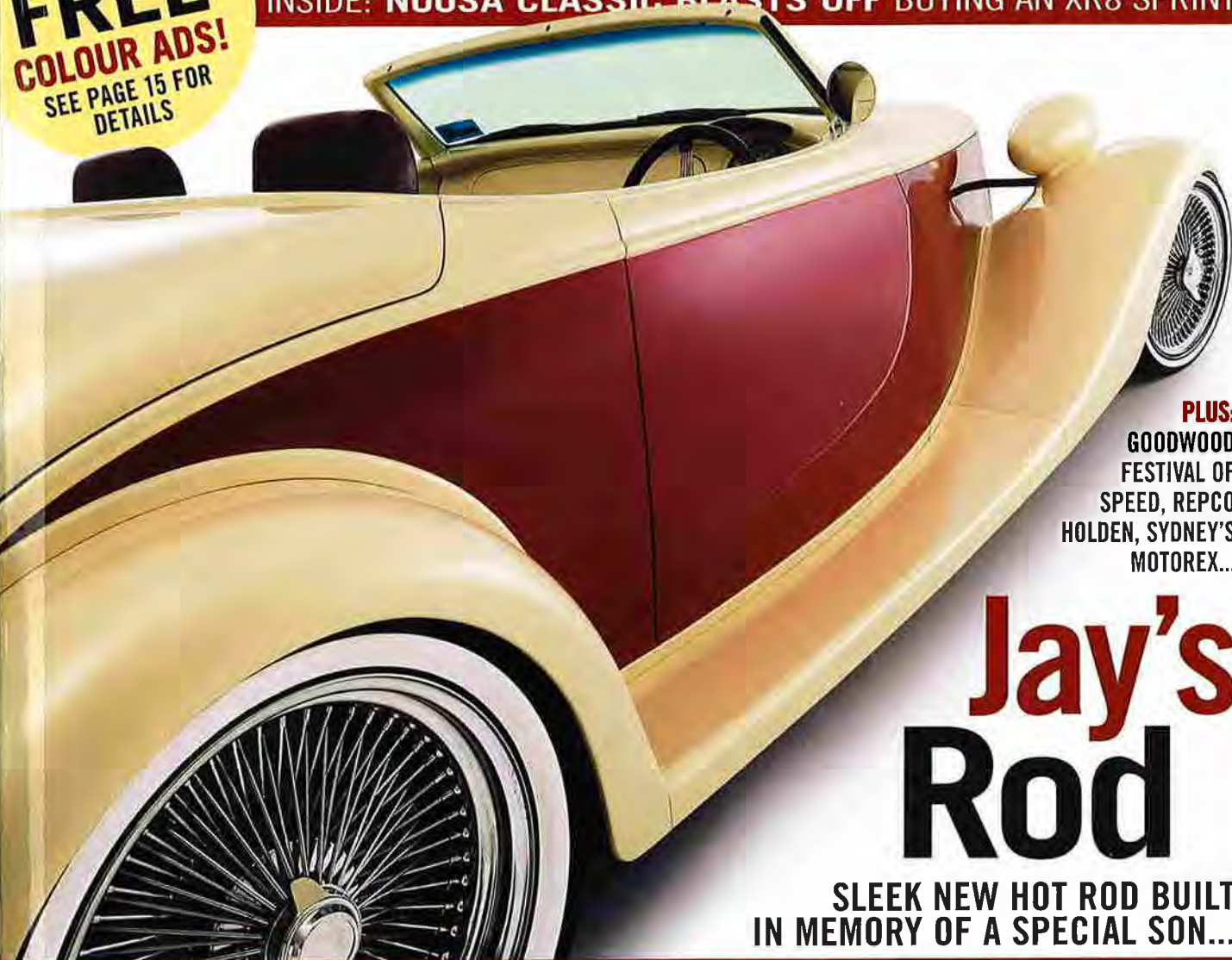
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Repco-Holden could have been built in the '50s in a Maranello carrozzeria, but its sleek body was found in a WA garage in terrible condition. Lionel Beattie races the car in the 1960 Caversham Six-Hour (below)



Aussie BATTLE

SOME REMARKABLE TWISTS OF FATE HAVE BROUGHT THIS UNIQUE AND BEAUTIFUL RACING CAR BACK FROM THE DEAD



Pic: Milton McCulloch

Back in 1974 Perth sports car enthusiast Neil McCrudden received a call from a mate who was a plumber and Volkswagen fan. "I've been working at a house in Belmont and found this old sports car body in a back yard," he said. "It won't fit a VW engine in the back, so I thought you might be interested."

Neil duly went out to the house and was shown the beaten up remains of what looked like an old racing car. There were no badges, or signs of what the car might have been. He thought it looked Italian and the aluminium bodywork, though abused, looked to have been made to a very high standard. There were worn old sponsorship

signs on it and discs for racing numbers, various rough modifications had been made and the body and chassis had been crudely chopped up in an attempt to get a Jaguar engine to fit - which it didn't. The old lady was moving out of the house as it was to be demolished and the car was an abandoned project of her son's. He'd moved back to Italy and the car wreck was simply in the way. With

some negotiating, Neil ended up paying the princely sum of \$45 for the car. It sat for years in his shed while other projects took Neil's attention. His interest in cars was broad - spanning a Corvette, Maserati, Goggomobil, MG, Austin-Healey and many others. But the time eventually came when Neil decided that the old body would be the next project. Neil thought he'd try and find out

about the wreck, as nothing had come to light in the two decades he'd had the car. In his workshop he propped the two sections of bodywork up, put some wheels in the wheel arches and took some photos. He then took these pictures to the office of the WA Sporting Car Club, which operated the race circuits in WA, but nobody there could shed any light on the car. They did suggest however



On the same day in 1974 that McCrudden bought the car he heard a knock on the door and the men who originally built and raced the car, David Van Dal, Cliff Byfield and Jack Ayres, were standing there...



visiting Don Hall, who ran a speed shop not far away. Don was, and remains one of the gurus of post-war motor racing, and was able to quickly identify the unique looking car.

It was the Repco Holden Special. What did that mean? The car was the final iteration of a successful sports racing car that had been developed in Western Australia primarily by David Van Dal, with the body designed and built by master craftsman Cliff Byfield. One of its most successful drivers had been Jack Ayers.

So at last, after many years, Neil had some answers about what his wreck was.

"After Don told me what the car was, I got a knock on the door at 6.30 that same night and there were three men who'd

come to see the car – Van Dal, Byfield and Ayres," recalls Neil, the surprise clearly etched into his memory.

"They thought the car had left the state and was destroyed and were very pleased to see it had survived. The consensus was it should be rebuilt the way it originally was."

McCrudden was then able to find out the amazing history of the car. It had begun life, perhaps surprisingly, as a normal production Morgan Plus 4 roadster in the early 1950s. Van Dal had raced a series of Morgans Plus 4s in WA events, with support from the local Morgan distributor Bill Richards Motors.

With each car modified to varying degrees he'd been successful, including

winning the inaugural Northam Flying 50 in 1952. However, disaster struck in October 1954 when he rolled his third Morgan at the Caversham circuit (not at a hillclimb as sometimes erroneously reported) resulting in the car being badly damaged.

And here's where the confusion started. Many believe the crashed car was turned into the R4 racer. However Morgan expert, Professor Craig Atkins, researched this subject in detail, including interviewing Van Dal before he passed away in 2002. Atkins says that at the end of 1954, another wrecked Morgan was purchased from Reservoir in Victoria, and it became the basis of the new race car that had been planned for some time.

With full support from Richards, the car was reconfigured as a pure racing car, retaining the Morgan running gear and 2.0-litre Standard Vanguard motor, but wearing new lightweight, single-seat bodywork on a tubular frame.

It was called the BRM-Morgan – not after the British racing cars of the same name, but for Bill Richards Motors.

Interestingly, Van Dal had visited the Morgan factory in 1952 and '53 on Bill Richards' behalf. He met with the board, including Peter Morgan and outlined plans for the R4 race car. Morgan had

been providing a level of support for Bill Richards Motors' competition exploits. They insisted Morgan suspension and drivetrain be incorporated in the new racing car if support was to continue.

On his return, the Avion company in Perth built three examples of the lightweight chassis, one of which was sent to Morgan in England in 1955. Its fate is unknown, but Atkins tells that a spaceframe had been seen in a loft at the factory in the late-'60s.

On his trips to the UK, Van Dal also met with Standard Motor Company development engineers and discussed his engine developments and remained in contact throughout the process of upgrading his engine's performance.

Van Dal believed that Morgan in England contributed to the development of the R4 via Bill Richards Motors.

The BRM-Morgan R4 wasn't especially pretty, but it had a dramatic looking external exhaust system. It was certainly an effective racing car, being competitive with the larger engined specials which dominated local racing at the time.

In fact, in 1956 the car placed second in the WA Racing Car Championship, with Merv Dudley driving for Richards, and also set a new lap record at Caversham.

In 1958 ownership changed to Jack Ayers, who had already enjoyed success in Holden sedans. He commissioned Cliff Byfield to create new sleek bodywork,



because, as McCrudden says, "With category changes sports cars became the 'in thing' in racing in the late-'50s."

Byfield had a remarkable flair for creating beautiful and functional forms in metal; had he lived in England or Italy, he undoubtedly would have been a world famous coachbuilder. He had produced many road and competition car bodies, so he was the obvious person to create the new shape for the BRM-Morgan. With additional outriggers added to the existing frame a voluptuous, stylish shape evolved.

Ayers also decided to upgrade the powerplant. Six-cylinder Holden engines



were the default setting for most racecar builders in Australia and the BRM-Morgan morphed into the unimaginatively named Holden Sports.

With the new engine put into a proven package, wearing svelte new bodywork, the car was a hit in the pits as well as on the track. It was an immediate success, with Ayers winning the 1959 Sports Car Championship.

In 1960, Ayers added a Repco head from Terry LeMay's successful Holden racer. While this doesn't sound too significant, it was a major enough change for the car to gain a new name, becoming the Repco Holden Sports.

"The Repco head was very dear and only two cars in WA raced with them in those days" McCrudden explains. "More than just a crossflow head, the conversion included different pistons, pushrods, exhaust and other changes."

Repco's brochure for the "Hi-Power Head" claimed it was, "A revolutionary design with hemispherical combustion chamber and a separate port for each valve." It claimed at least a 50 per cent increase in power and was "designed for the speed connoisseur."

A Holden Grey motor never went so well; in 1960 it came second, then in '61 and '62 the car won the WA Sports Car Championships with Lionel Beattie driving.

"In 1960, racer Jack Ayers added the Repco 'Hi-Power' head, which was designed for 'the speed connoisseur'."





RACING PASSION

PERHAPS NOT surprisingly, the restoration of the Repco Holden Sports fired up the imagination of Neil McCrudden and started him on a mission to restore, preserve and use old racing cars. With an ever increasing collection, in recent years he has instituted the West Australian Racing Museum (WARM), which has generously allowed a considerable number of drivers to enjoy the thrill of competing in historic racing cars. There are plans to construct a purpose-built museum with a variety of facilities. The collection numbers almost 20 cars at this stage, including examples of Lotus, Macon, Brabham and many others. Additionally WARM is amassing a collection of spare parts to ensure these cars can be kept on the circuit for many years to come. Visit the WARM website – warm.org.au



Collector Neil McCrudden (see left) had a hard time finding out what the anonymous body he'd bought for \$45 was, but when he did he committed to a complete restoration and now drives the Repco-Holden on the road and lets others race it

The head went to New South Wales where it was fitted to the famous 'Berco Holden' speedway car.

The last known owner was Bob Webb who had little success with the car, including in Queensland where the car was taken in 1968 for the Surfer's Paradise Speed Week.

After that the car faded into obscurity, outdated and no longer competitive. It was some years later that it fell into Neil McCrudden's hands.

Luckily for McCrudden, the original builders of the car were so keen to see it rebuilt that they enthusiastically assisted. Van Dal was able to remember the design of the chassis, where parts had been cut away, and Byfield was able to repair the original aluminium bodywork.

The work for the owner was to chase up parts. "It was three years of work, and getting the Repco head was the hardest part", McCrudden recalls. "I advertised for months and ended up finding all sorts of parts, including three Repco heads"

Remarkably, one of these heads, which he found in Queensland, was the very

same item his car had worn for so many years.

It retains original Morgan parts dating back to its original configuration including the gearbox, diff, sliding-pillar front suspension and more. The steering rack was changed to Peugeot in the late 1950s, which was a popular conversion in the era. Brakes are specially made "huge" aluminium drums.

By the late-'90s, the car was completed and in 1999 gained its CAMS log book. It took to the track and has had competitive outings in historic events ever since.

McCrudden also road registered the car, as it had been in its heyday, and managed to get the numberplate REPCO.

While McCrudden owns many cars, "this one is a particularly significant car to me because it's West Australian and had such a fantastic racing history.

"Last year we spent six months, virtually full time, re-restoring the car including making some safety upgrades like fitting dual master cylinders, safety fuel cells and a collapsible steering column. It still needs a bit of sorting and could be developed into a very competitive car. I've just given it to John Davies to look after and use for a while, so we'll see it in a few events again."

You know what they say: old racing cars never die... ■