

Reg Hunt Unsung ace of the 1950's



Maserati Club Life Patron Reg Hunt is interviewed by Richard Batchelor

Reg Hunt – Unsung ace of the 1950s

It is Sunday, December 2, 1956 and the Australian Grand prix has just been held at Albert Park. On the tram home my schoolboy mind is churning over the events of that memorable day, but two things are clear. First, Stirling Moss is God. Second, Reg Hunt is Australia's best race driver. A few weeks later I was shocked to hear Hunt had retired at 33 and sold his race car.

In May, 2013 with some trepidation I visited Reg Hunt's eyrie in St Kilda Road, a stone's throw away from the Albert Park circuit, to interview a man I was told rarely grants interviews.

To my relief Reg gave me a friendly welcome and we settled down for what I promised would be a brief chat but we were still going 1 ½ hours later. He showed an extraordinary recall of a stellar motor sport career which ended over 57 years ago.

Reg was born in Manchester, England in 1923 and lived there prior to his arrival in Australia in 1949. Reg's family had a car and motorcycle business and his grandfather had raced at Brooklands. His mother and grandfather had also raced motorbikes. Reg followed suit, entering a race in late 1939 on the Isle of Man at the tender age of 16. However, "Hitler put paid to that" according to Reg and the meeting was cancelled.

After the war Reg resumed his motor sport career, turning his attention to mud-plug trials on both two and four wheels. He soon developed a formidable reputation, scoring many wins in a trials car he developed himself. This had a supercharged Ford Ten engine and a pre-selector ENV epicyclic gear box. The car's tyres were run at

only 5 psi and of necessity were bolted to the wheel rims. Trials were all about traction at the back wheels and Reg had placed the driver and passenger nearly a metre behind the back axle. On one trial in the Peak district Reg and his co-driver were the only team out of 100 entrants to complete the course.

The RAC then changed the rules so that the backs of the driver and passenger were not allowed to project beyond the back axle. Reg countered this by hanging the petrol tank and battery out the back of the car. The RAC then devised a course with a hill climb so steep that it became known as "Hunt's Horror." There was now a serious risk of the car flipping over onto its back and he and his co-driver practised bail out drills which fortunately were never needed. Reflecting on his trials experiences, Reg says, "it taught you an awful lot about driving."

After settling in Australia Reg joined the Light Car Club and met a rugged character who would become his fiercest rival. Stan Jones was a successful car dealer and a rising star on the local motor sport scene, with a reputation as a person prepared to throw a punch to settle an argument.

Jones suggested Reg enter his road car in a local trial, warning the new-chum not to drive too fast on the unmade roads as he could easily upend the car. With his UK trials experience Reg simply drove flat out, at one point passing a surprised Jones and going on to score his maiden win in his new country.

Meanwhile Reg was building up a race car from bits he had brought with him from England, including Morgan suspension, Norton gearbox, J.A.Prestwick (J.A.P.) 500 cc engine etc. The new Cooper-like device was launched at the Rob Roy hill climb and Reg promptly lowered the record for the 500 cc class by ten seconds. However

more J.A.P. powered cars soon appeared so Reg consulted the legendary Vincent motorcycle designer Phil Irving, who became a close friend. Reg bought a Vincent Black Lightning bike for its 1000 cc engine and installed this in his race car. According to Reg, "it left all the 500 cc cars for dead but soon their drivers started installing 1100 cc J.A.P. twin cylinder engines". Irving enlarged the Black Lightning engine to 1100 cc and Reg persuaded him to add a supercharger. Phil recommended lowering the compression from its current 12:1 ratio but Reg was keen to leave it at this level to give it grunt coming out of corners. Irving replied, "Good idea, why not?" The car performed superbly and maintained its advantage over the J.A.P. powered cars.

In 1953 Reg acquired two Allard J2 sports cars. He set a new class record at the Templestowe hill climb and then contested the 1953 Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park, conducted over 322 kilometres. The race was won by Doug Whiteford's Lago-Talbot, with Reg finishing tenth out of the 18 finishers, slowed by the Allard's gearbox becoming stuck in second gear.

By early 1954 Reg considered his car sales business could survive his absence long enough to enable him to race overseas. He bought a new 500 cc Cooper-Norton Mk. 8 for the Formula 3 class and had a great season's racing in the UK and Europe. He raced against the established stars Don Parker and Stirling Moss, and future Formula One drivers Stuart Lewis-Evans, Graham Hill and Ivor Bueb. Illustrating Reg's professional approach, he had his engines prepared by the legendary Norton engine guru Francis Beart, who also prepared Moss's engines.

At Brands Hatch Reg won a 500 cc event ahead of the future dual world F1 champion Hill. Years later Hill told him, "you cost me 100

pounds that day.” There were bookies at UK race meetings and Hill had backed himself to win. Reg also finished fifth in a big race at the Nurburgring and had his final win in the car at Orleans, France. The astute car trader sold the Cooper at a profit at the end of the season and the car continued to win in the hands of new owner Kurt Ahrens.

Reg then looked around for a race car to take back to Australia. An old mate from his trials days, factory BRM and Jaguar driver Ken Wharton, recommended Reg buy a Maserati, so he travelled to Modena and met Signor Bertocchi, Maserati’s legendary head mechanic. The company was prepared to sell the Maserati A6GCM which Fangio had driven to victory, in two litre form, in the 1953 Italian Grand Prix, and which Harry Schell had campaigned in 1954 fitted with a 2.5 litre engine from the current 250F grand prix car.

In early 1955 Hunt gave the car its debut in the New Zealand Grand Prix. Grid positions were decided by the fastest laps in two 40 kilometre heats. The front row comprised pre-war ace Prince Bira of Siam in a Maserati 250F, Hunt in the A6GCM, Peter Whitehead (Ferrari 625/750), all three having recorded 1m31s laps, and Tony Gaze’s Ferrari 625/750 (1m32s). Bira cleared away for a comfortable victory in what was to be the last race in his career. Whitehead was second from Gaze, while Hunt, who had held third place in the early laps, eventually faded to fifth due to brake problems. After the race Reg consulted Paton’s Brake Replacements (PBR), who replaced his steel brake drums, which had warped, with cast iron items which never gave any more trouble (PBR did the same with Reg’s later 250F Maserati’s brakes).

The Moomba race meeting at Albert Park in March, 1955 attracted Australia’s fastest cars and drivers. Hunt’s Maserati won two preliminary races but while leading the main event the car’s crown

wheel and pinion failed. He had the consolation of setting the fastest lap of 2m04s.

In a subsequent race at Bathurst, "I was on pole with Lex Davison beside me in his 3.0 litre Ferrari (the ex-Tony Gaze Ferrari 625/750). The organizers wanted to make it a closer race so they made me start with two wheels in the dirt. As a protest I pointed my front wheels straight at Lex. Of course when the race started I straightened the wheels and eventually caught Lex and won the race but the organizers presented Lex with the trophy. Mid-way through the race they had changed it from a scratch race to a handicap!"

Hunt and the A6GCM were hot favourites to win the 1955 Australian GP, held over 167 kms at Port Wakefield on October 10. His main opposition was expected to be Stan Jones in the new Maybach Mk.3 (replacing the Mk.2 version destroyed in Jones's huge crash at Southport), Doug Whiteford in a newly acquired 4.5 litre twin-plug Lago-Talbot and Cooper works driver Jack Brabham in a rear-engined Cooper-Bristol which he had raced in the UK. Stan Jones took the lead after the start but Hunt soon took control of the race, followed by Jones, Brabham, Tom Hawkes (Cooper-Bristol), Whiteford and another 17 cars. After four laps Reg had cleared away to a 23 second lead but a broken cam follower put the car onto five cylinders and forced him to reduce his pace, Brabham taking the win by four seconds from Hunt, with Whiteford third.

At the end of 1955 Reg sold the A6GCM to Kevin Neal and again visited the Maserati factory where he tested and obtained a 250F. According to Barry Green in his book "Glory Days – Albert Park 1953-58", Hunt recorded lap times at Modena better than the two leading Italian drivers Musso and Castellotti, who were also practising that day.

Before the car left Modena it was fitted with the correct gear ratios for the South Pacific Championship race at Gnoo Blas, Orange. The car arrived at the Melbourne docks two days before Reg was due to race it, right in the middle of a wharf strike. Reg persuaded the union boss to unload the car quickly and said that he would supply 12 cases of Victoria Bitter if it was unloaded without a scratch. He watched as the 250F was unloaded and heard a wharfie shout, "Be careful mate, there's a drink in this." The new car won on debut.

Motor magazine re-visited the daunting Gnoo Blas circuit in 2005:- "Only by seeing it can you appreciate the challenge of riding this monster, unfenced and girt by trees, over crests and broken edges and a bridge barely six metres wide. Only by driving down the 2.4km Hospital Straight can you appreciate the courage to nail a flying eighth mile at 162mph (261 km/h). Reg Hunt did that - in 1956 - in a Maserati."

Reg described the 250F as "easy to drive, beautiful, with good manners and very predictable." At 261 km/h down Hospital Straight it would need to be!

The car's next outing was at the Moomba race meeting at Albert Park in March, 1956. Reg's main opposition now was Lex Davison in his three litre Ferrari 625/750. Reg dominated the meeting, setting a new lap record of 1m58s, which was six seconds faster than the lap record he had set in the A6GCM Maserati. Davison was also well under the old record at 2m00s. Later that year Stan Jones also acquired a Maserati 250F, a newer version to Hunt's.

For the 1956 Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park the factory Maserati team entered Stirling Moss and Jean Behra in the latest low-line 250F models and another 250F was entered for the British ace Ken Wharton. Two 3.5 litre Ferrari Super Squalos were fielded

by Englishmen Reg Parnell and Peter Whitehead, winner of the 1938 AGP and 1951 Le Mans 24 Hours. The Maserati factory team comprising two race cars, two spare cars and two 300S sports racers were housed at Hunt's Elsternwick premises, indicating his close association with the company.

The weekend before the AGP a short support race was held at the Australian Tourist Trophy meeting. Whitehead's Ferrari was on pole, alongside Hunt and Jones in his new 250F. Reg had heard that Jones planned to squeeze him into the barriers after the start. He recalls, "My father said to just let him go. I made a good start but Jones swerved and lost control of his car, and hit a tree about 80 metres after the start." Jones's car was repaired in time for the AGP.

The stage was now set for a gripping showdown between Hunt and Jones. Certainly it would be difficult to find two more dis-similar people, the urbane expatriate Englishman and the tough Aussie charger. Lex Davison was also expected to do well in his three litre Ferrari. The trio were not expected to trouble the overseas stars in the AGP but there was considerable kudos attached to being first local to finish. In fact they did considerably better than expected.

Qualifying times for the 1956 AGP have never been published but Moss (on pole), Behra and Whitehead shared the front row of the 3-2-3 grid. Wharton and Davison were on the second row, with Hunt, Parnell and Neal on the third. Jones and Doug Whiteford (Lago Talbot) were on the fourth row, followed by another eight cars.

Watched by a huge crowd of over 110,000, Moss, Behra and Whitehead quickly established the first three positions they would hold to the finish of the 402 kilometre event. Behind the leading trio a furious dogfight commenced between Hunt and Jones which saw

them clear away from the other overseas and local stars. In his excellent history of the AGP John Blanden described this battle:-

“First Hunt, and then Jones, asserted themselves; by lap five Jones was neatly astern of Hunt, after two very fast laps each some two seconds faster than Hunt, and it was no surprise to see Jones leading next lap, with Hunt – no surprise either – calmly taking up station a few lengths back. They continued this way for another 35 laps, both driving with a concentrated ferocity which was almost tangible – no errors, no let-up, certainly no smiles. . . . There was trouble brewing for Jones, as his Maserati started to smoke from under the bonnet and on lap 40 he eased off; straight away Hunt was through, putting in three very impressive laps in 1:56s.” (In comparison the race winner Moss was lapping for most of the event in the 1:54 to 1:57 range. Moss also set the race’s fastest lap of 1:52.2).

Jones’s problems proved to be nothing more serious than a broken oil breather pipe but he was unable to regain contact with Hunt and they crossed the finish line in fourth and fifth places, having seen off overseas stars Wharton (who retired from the event) and Reg Parnell. Lex Davison and Doug Whiteford finished seventh and eighth in the race, which had been marred by two showers of rain, the second of which resulted in Kevin Neal crashing heavily in his Maserati A6GCM. Reg recalls that Neal “was lucky not to be decapitated by the steel cable lining the track”. Attitudes to safety were different then and fatalities were not uncommon. Reg says today, “It was a concern but you didn’t worry about it.”

I asked Reg who he rated as the most talented drivers in his day. “Doug Whiteford was the best of the locals but I also rated Jack Brabham, Lex Davison, Stan Jones and Curly Brydon. Of the overseas drivers I believe Jimmy Clark was the best driver who has ever lived,

with Fangio a close second. Moss was also very good but I rate Graham Hill ahead of him due to his two world championships and wins at Indianapolis and Le Mans.”

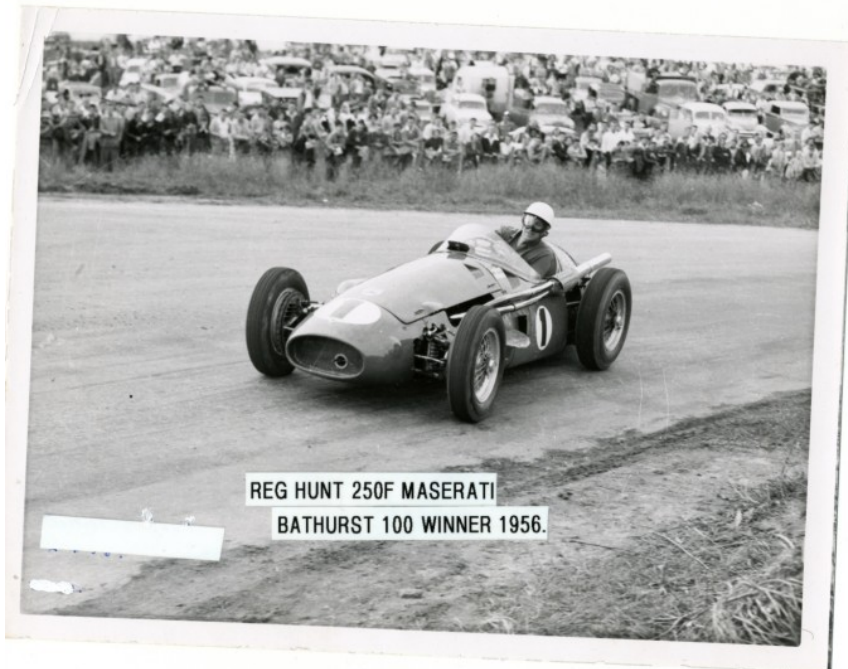
After Reg’s brilliant drive at Albert Park his Maserati was acquired by Bib Stillwell. Now family and business had to take priority, leaving fans to recall an extremely fast and determined driver who never pranged, or even spun, his cars. For the final two years of his career Reg was definitely “the man” and his professional approach had raised the bar in local motor sport.

Reg’s business skills were already finely honed at the time he hung up his helmet and he was to become the largest Holden distributor in Australia. He also ran a vast used car operation with 2000 cars on one 12 acre site in Elsternwick. All up, Reg’s various car yards covered 50 acres.

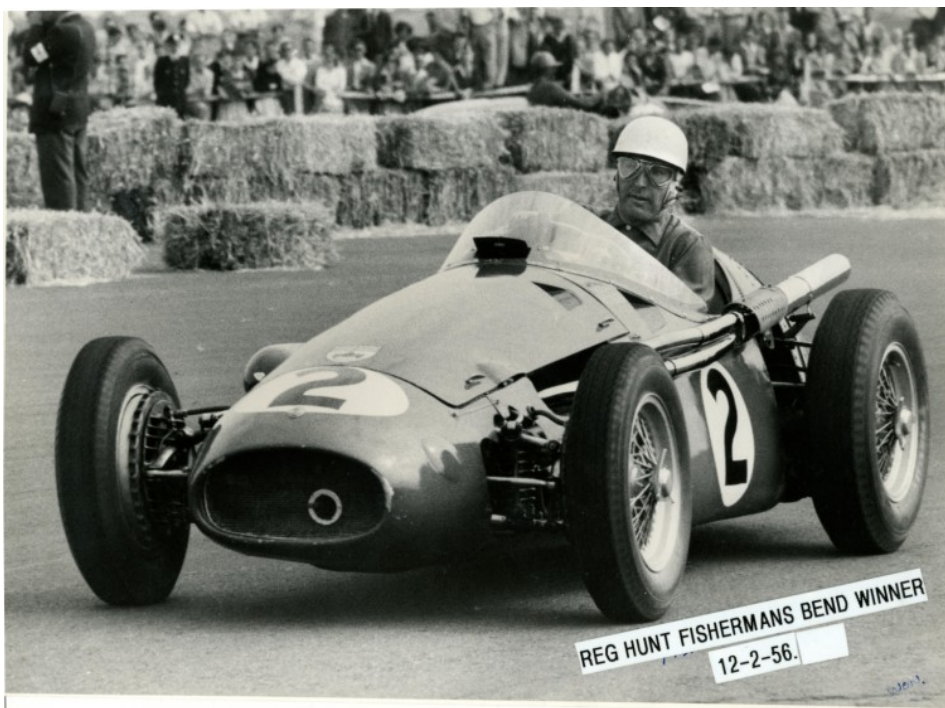
In 1998 Reg sold out of the car business. By then he also had a collection of 200 classic cars and motorcycles, which included a very valuable 1956 Maserati 300S. He started quietly selling the collection as he felt the cost of maintaining it could no longer be justified. Finally all that remained were three 1920s Bentleys, including a super-rare 8 litre model. He recalls, “A wealthy businessman came over from Perth to look at the Bentleys but after about an hour said he could not make up his mind which one to buy. I said in that case you should buy all three. He looked at his wife, she nodded and we shook hands on the deal.” Reg Hunt had not forgotten how to sell cars!

Today at 90 Reg Hunt remains highly focused and involved in his family’s substantial property development activities. I felt very privileged to have interviewed this legendary figure in motor sport and the automotive industry.

REG HUNT FLYINGBEDSTEAD BATHURST 500CC J.A.P.ABOUT 1950.

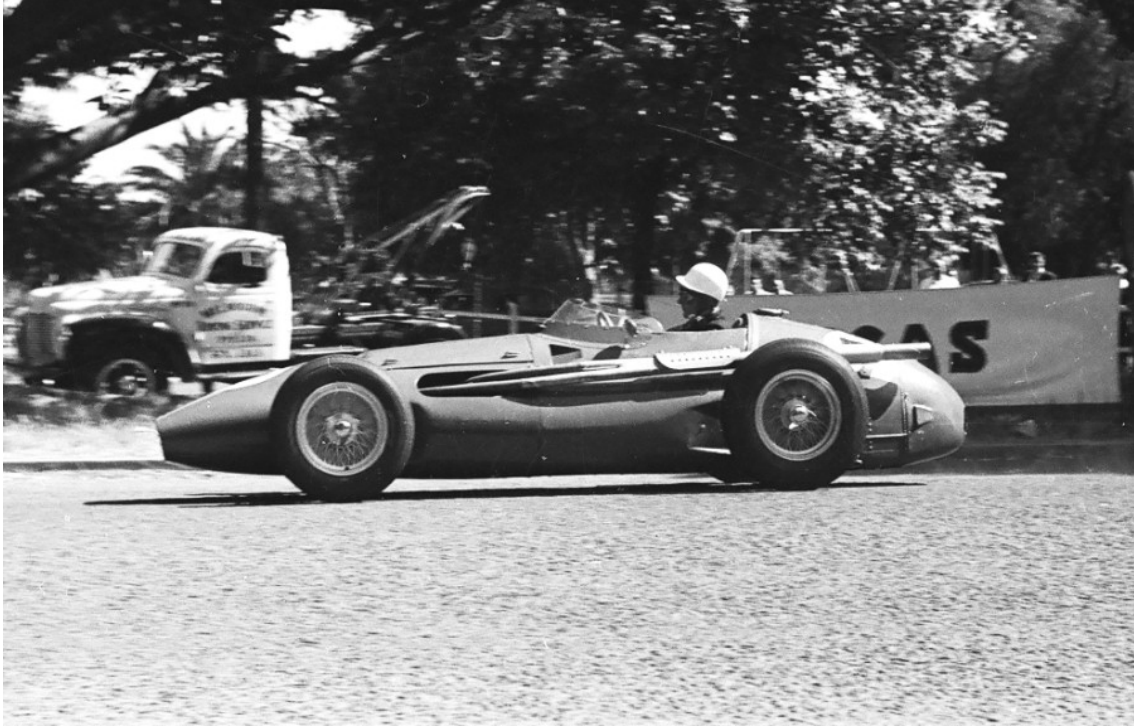


REG HUNT 250F MASERATI
BATHURST 100 WINNER 1956.



REG HUNT 1955 BATHURST 100 WINNER 1955.

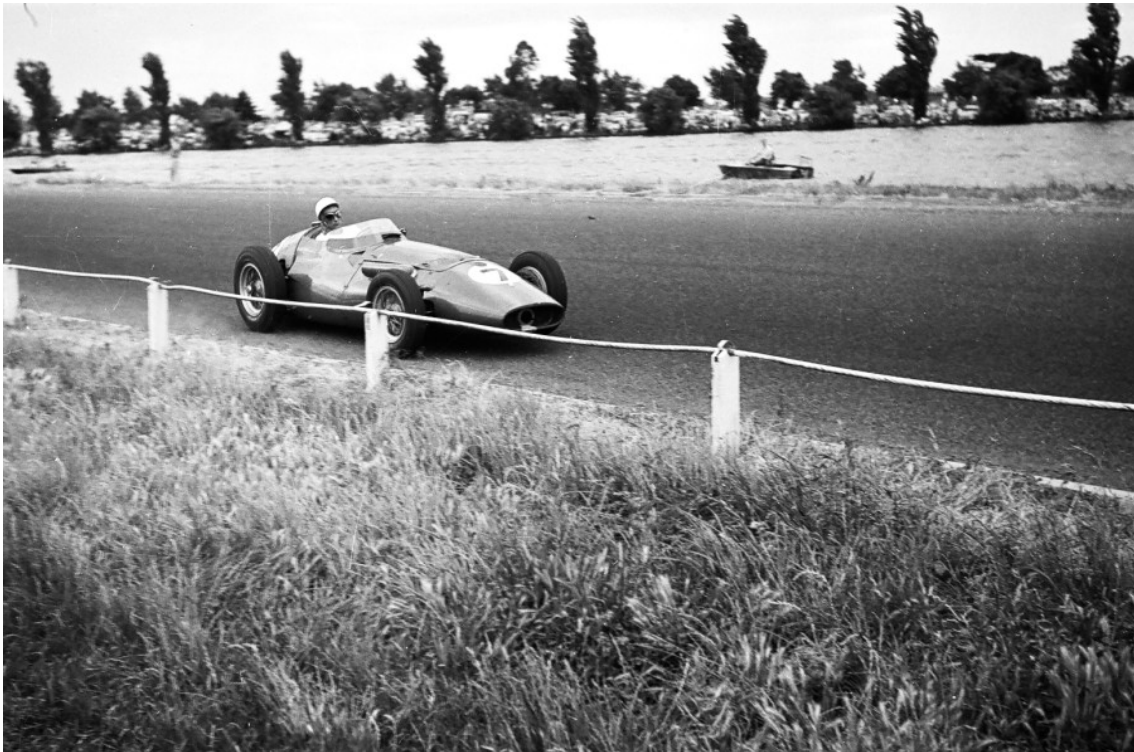




Stirling Moss competing in the 1956 Australian Grand Prix (Photo courtesy [stirlingmoss.com/Alex Hastie](http://stirlingmoss.com/Alex_Hastie))

REG HUNT 30/1/56. FIRST RACE WINNER
ORANGE N.S.W.
MASERATI 250F.





The hazards faced by drivers in the fifties is illustrated by this shot of Moss drifting his Maserati at over 160 km/h past a neck high steel cable, with the unprotected waters of Albert Park lake in the background! (Photo courtesy stirlingmoss.com/Alex Hastie)

All Reg Hunt photos kindly provided from the Hunt family collection