



*Willie Meissner and the Dart prototype*

## OUR CAPE MOTORING SCENE

# WILLIE MEISSNER - MOTOR ENGINEERING GENIUS

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

In June 1963 Basil van Rooyen and four racing colleagues came down from the Transvaal to compete at the Fisantekraal circuit for the first time. Van Rooyen's Superformance Cortina 1500 was reputed to be one of the fastest production cars in the country, but he soon learnt that his lap times couldn't match those of his Cape rivals. Emmot Barwell and his 1290 cc Alfa TI (Chronicle July 2022) was his main opposition that day, but Koos Swanepoel and his potent Ford Anglia 105E were not far behind.

The master technician behind the performance of Swanepoel's Anglia was Willie Meissner, already famous locally for his role in the design and development of the highly competitive Dart sports car (Chronicle Nov 2022). The Dart had been the brainchild of Willie and his friend Bob van Niekerk who had met as Stellenbosch engineering students. Willie, frustrated by his mechanical engineering lectures as he was being taught about 'everything except cars', abandoned his studies to qualify as a motor mechanic. But he kept in touch with Bob and they worked together to build numerous racing specials to compete successfully on local circuits. Disappointed by the sports cars available in the early 1950s, the Dart, announced in 1958, had been their answer to their ambitions to build a world-beating but affordable sports car. The first

of these cars had used a highly tuned version of the humble but robust 1172 cc Ford 100E engine, but later models adopted the much improved 105E OHV engine and four-speed gearbox for the 1959 'reverse angle' Anglia.

Realizing that the market in South Africa was too small to support a viable manufacturing operation, Bob went to England to build Deltas (as the Dart name had already been registered) and to compete successfully in the European circuits. He returned to the Cape in November 1960 to develop a car better suited to European weather conditions, the Flamingo. On arrival he found that he had to take over the production line as Willie had opened the Dart Service Station in Marine Drive Paarden Eiland to concentrate on another passion, tuning accessories.

Within a few years Willie developed a simple, low-cost

engine improvement which could apply to any four-stroke car. It was designed specifically to improve fuel economy and engine flexibility. The inexpensive Meissner 'Economy Kit' used standard components throughout, the secret lay in the sculpture of the combustion chambers. Willie had created a new design which could only be achieved by careful hand-machining, it forced the incoming petrol-air mixture to swirl around in the combustion chamber and



*Meissner gearing up to go racing*



*Swanepoel (Anglia) chasing Barwell (Alfa) at Killarney*

burn more efficiently. This achieved a substantial improvement in engine flexibility and a decrease in fuel consumption of around 11%.

The 'Economy Kit' was made available for a range of SA production cars including Ford, Opel, BMC, Vauxhall, Valiant, Renault, Fiat and Hillman, and Willie's customer base increased strongly. He established a new operation, Meissner Marketing Services, and moved its headquarters to a 900 sq m building in Auckland Street, Paarden Eiland.

Over time Willie found that a consistent 60% of his modification work was on Ford engines. These were ideally suited for his conversions, and both the in-line and V engines stood up easily to the additional stresses imposed. Internationally, Ford supported their cars on race track and rally competitions, so in 1968, a new local marketing operation, Meissner-Ford, was established to sell performance equipment.

The Ford dealer organization throughout South Africa was to handle the distribution of Meissner parts. Apart from performance cylinder heads and camshafts, other Meissner-developed equipment included Weber pre-tuned carburetors, inlet manifolds, wood-rimmed steering wheels and suspension kits including wide-rim wheels, front stabilizer bars and

brackets and rear suspension lowering kits. A Meissner-Ford badge was designed to identify modified cars. These reasonably-priced modifications proved to be extremely popular.

A major boost to sales of these tuning accessories had been a highly successful Meissner racing programme. The Anglia 105E driven by Willie's workshop manager Koos Swanepoel at the Fisantekraal circuit had been developed to 1500 cc. CAR magazine, reputedly, reported it as 'the fastest Anglia in the world'!

For the inaugural 1964 SA Saloon Car championship Ford SA allocated Lotus Cortinas to the keen interprovincial rivals Willie Meissner and Basil van Rooyen. Both developed their cars extensively, the Meissner car's engine power was increased by 22%, its rear suspension was replaced by a Meissner design, and rear disc brakes were fitted to match the front. The two fighting saloons gave the crowds round the country a spectacle second to none; while Van Rooyen dominated at Kyalami, Swanepoel conquered the coastal circuits. By the end of the season the inaugural champion Swanepoel had triumphed over Van Rooyen by a clear margin of seven victories to four.

In 1965 Peter Gough upheld the team's prominence by winning the Sports Car championship in



*Dart Service Station, Paarden Eiland*



*Meissner Marketing Services, Paarden Eiland*



*Packaging Meissner-Ford products*

a Meissner-engined Dart.

For the next season Ford SA allocated Meissner and Van Rooyen a pair of 4.7-litre Mustangs. The Meissner Mustang was quick but suspension issues for tight tracks like Killarney made it difficult to handle, and Van Rooyen took the Saloon Car titles for both 1966 and 1967.

Gough came second in the 1968 Ford Saloon Car championship driving an incredible Meissner-tuned Cosworth FVA 1600cc Escort, but the engine, not being Ford-based, was disqualified for the next season. Undeterred, Willie worked on an Escort engine block to create a unique 2-litre twin-cam engine that produced even more power



*Meissner conversions: Zodiac V6*



*Cortina GT*



*Capri V6*





*Van Rooyen leading Swanepoel (inset), Lotus Cortinas*



*Gough (Cortina) contesting Van Rooyen (Mustang)*



*Basil van Rooyen*



*Peter Gough*



*Gough's Meissner Escort Y151*

than its predecessor! It formed the heart of Gough's legendary Escort Y151 in which he won the 1969 SA Saloon Car championship.

But to the disappointment of enthusiasts, at the end of the 1970 season the SA Saloon Car championship was discontinued as it had become unsustainably expensive. The Ford racing sponsorship came to an end and Willie turned his attention to the development of a new range of engine oils incorporating Meissner-developed additives.

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Tragically, in July 1973, at the age of only 39, Willie Meissner died unexpectedly. He collapsed at the wheel of his Ford Cortina on a straight stretch of road in Milerton and the car veered across the road and collided with a truck.


It was the end of an era. Later that year the first oil crises erupted and Basil van Rooyen, seeing the writing on the wall, made plans to



*Willie Meissner*

leave Superformance to pursue other interests.

Basil always acknowledged that his great rival Willie Meissner, although largely self-taught, had ranked as one of South Africa's greatest automobile engineers.

*Acknowledgements to 50 years of Killarney by Adrian Pheiffer; Kyalami by Andre Loubser; CAR March '65, April '66, Jan '68, July '73, Technicar Feb '70* 

One evening in 2003, I received an email from Ron introducing himself, as he had picked up that I was a new member of the Austin Ten Drivers Club in the UK. For a few years we frequently corresponded by email regarding our shared interest in cars and Formula one.

We met for the first time in the UK for the Austin Centenary Celebrations in Longbridge in 2005. Ron was living in France at the time and hatched a plan to return to South Africa where he had lived for many years. During this visit we discovered that we shared two other passions, fine wine and fine dining. After a few years and many interactions with SA Bureaucracy, Ron's permanent residence visa was granted. He moved to SA in 2009 together with his beloved cat Pepi.

Ron joined the Crankhandle Club and he soon became a loyal member, attended most Natters, many of the events, and was always available to man the Club's stand at the January car show. In spite of limited computer skills, aided by John Brewster and Ray Bungay, Ron took on and completed the arduous task of

## Obituary for Ron Sheldon

Kindly supplied by Alan Webb

registering all of the library books on a computer system.

He was a true petrolhead. He had worked for Mercedes-Benz and owned a Skoda garage at one stage too. In the ten years that Ron lived in SA he bought more cars than I have owned in my lifetime. It was difficult to keep track, but I can remember 4 Peugeots, a BMW, a Mercedes, two Nissans, a Daihatsu, a Suzuki, two Kias, a Renault and a Volkswagen. A new vehicle was always preceded with a long discussion on how he found the vehicle interesting but had no intent of purchasing it, followed by another discussion a few days later as to why he had actually made the purchase, often followed by a third call as to why he regretted it and why he would need to change it!

Bernadette and my fondest memories of Ron relate to F1 Sundays. We usually cooked a meal that was somehow related to the F1 host country, and Ron would provide a bottle of wine or other drink from the host country, and dessert too.

There would usually be a commentary about the meal and how he had enjoyed similar in the host country during his travels. After the meal and copious wine, we would watch the race. Usually, we took turns in dozing off and reconstructed the race afterwards. In the off-season, we would just meet, eat, drink and be merry any way. We shared in birthdays, Christmas and other celebrations, as well as his and our family tragedies. Over time he became a cherished and beloved friend. We used to call him our Grandpa until he objected, as it tarnished his image with the ladies.

Late in 2019 Ron told us that he thought it best to return to the UK as his brother in Johannesburg had passed away, he had some health issues and as a UK resident he would have a better support system. Although we were close, at the time that we were unaware that he was also battling with the trauma of ex-girlfriend being killed in a drive-by shooting. It was with great sadness

that we helped him prepare to move. Terrible luck made him one of the first victims of the flights cancelled due to Covid. Under lock down, he lived in the property adjacent to us and our friendship continued as we would meet for drinks and snacks over the back fence and occasionally have a clandestine meal together under the cover of darkness. It was a sad morning in June when I took him to the Cape Town stadium to get a UK government flight home.

Back in the UK his health declined further and last year the doctor said that he could do no more for Ron. He was advised to just enjoy the rest of his life. Whilst this was obviously a shock, he bravely continued even though it was clear that he struggled to cope at times. During our last telephone discussion in December his biggest concern was if he would be able to renew his driving licence. Alas this is no longer an issue for him to worry about. I am so happy that we were able to chat for about 40 minutes, as I was unable to reach him again.

We will miss Ron, a precious friend, his interesting stories, quirks, and kindness. 