

The Handicapper's Tale

ALLAN LUPTON

One of the many features of horse racing that were transferred to motor racing when Brooklands was inaugurated a century ago was handicapping. As with the horses, the idea was that to allow everyone a chance of winning, you had to accept that variations in potential performance had to be levelled out (and indeed the German term for the man who does it is "Ausgleicher" (= equaliser)). As with the nags the early handicapping was done by adding ballast, and variations of that were still used in the TT in the late 1920s (and in Touring Car racing in the 1990s where rear-drive cars were ballasted to allow the front-drivers a chance).

A.V. Ebbelwhite, the Brooklands Timekeeper, was probably the first to try letting the slower cars start with a time allowance over faster competitors. Because of the enormous width of that track, he could line them up as a single row along the start line and photos of him at work as the Starter show that he stood in front of the next car in line, presumably to show that it was not that car's turn. The H&SE would never countenance it these days!

Also because of the great track width, there was room for the first cars to pass the start line before all the quicker cars had been released, so starting time allowances could be longer than the expected time for a standing lap. At other venues where tracks were normal road width, a system of credit laps was developed to avoid the slow cars running down the cars that would otherwise still be on the grid.

That was the state of handicapping when I first saw a club motor race in the late 1950s. One such was the Eight Clubs' Silverstone where the whole meeting was composed of handicap races, or scratch races that were selected from the entry to include cars of similar expected performance, regardless of appearance. In the fullness of time I found myself serving as a Club representative on the committee of the Eight Clubs and therefore was looking for a suitable responsibility at the Race Meeting. On a hunch I asked Robin Birchall, the Handicapper at that time, if he needed any help and he suggested I join him as a trainee.

Robin had inherited the Handicapper's role at the Eight Clubs from Denis Loveridge, who had inherited it from Charles

Bulmer, one of the many staff members of The Motor who were involved. In the very early days, Charles had found time to compete at the meeting as well as Handicap – presumably not in the same actual races. By the time I worked with him, Robin was also handicapping for MG Car Club and 750 Motor Club, a six-hour relay race in the case of the latter. My training and subsequent partnership with Robin included those, and subsequently we added Bentley D.C. Silverstone and other Relay Races to our portfolio. In fact the only serious user of handicap racing we never worked for was the VSCC, although we did some training of their handicappers, some of whom have helped us out in return.

The key to the task is knowing what the performance of every driver/car combination is. That means good record-keeping, and Robin's (and later my) card-index was immense. Each competitor had a card with a brief description of car and driver and a lap time. The lap times were brought up to date on race day by using the data from timed practice and any previous races that had been run. As the lap times were changed we left the previous entries to give us the sense of the progression, a useful "extra" which we had to abandon when we computerised the data in the mid 1980s. I won't attempt a detailed explanation of the methods by which we translated the lap times into handicap race start intervals: anyone who really finds it interesting can contact me directly (and perhaps be roped in as a trainee!). What I perhaps should explain is that our idea of "getting it right" is when all the cars finish the race together – and by together, I mean within the accuracy of the method. As we only keep records to the nearest second per lap, the method is only accurate to ± 1 second per lap (i.e. 10 sec. in a five-lap race).

I had been involved with a Club called the Combined One-Make Car Club (COMCC) since another one-make club I was involved with had been a founder-member in 1961. Later it was COMCC that had joined the Eight Clubs, and it was as its representative that I was there (as reported three paragraphs above). My ownership of SP250s had eventually led me to join DLOC and to get to know Barry Thorne and the SP section. Barry thought it worth getting

DLOC to join COMCC and hence be eligible to race at the Eight Clubs, and in due course three SPs (Barry, Ian Slade and Mike Roper) appeared in about 1973 (I can't find my programmes for those years). Barry persevered until 1981 (he entered in 1982 but didn't start) but the others dropped out sooner (see below for why Mike did so).

SP250s had been raced before, notably by Richard Crosfield whose car was developed by him and subsequent owners to be really quite a good racing car. Our chaps had cars that were pretty standard, running on whatever road tyres they thought suitable, so they were nowhere near Crosfield times, and surprisingly different from each other – but that's what handicap racing is for and we did our best. From memory they were around the 1:20 to 1:23 mark, which leads me neatly to why it is that I do handicapping, rather than racing: at about that time there was a series of winter sprints that used the Silverstone Club Circuit, and as I did a bit of sprinting at that time, I had a go in my SP. Try as I might, I couldn't get much below 1:30 as I could never get right the corners you couldn't see round – had I had a navigator with pace notes I might have done better, but I settled for the idea that it is easier to tell people what they should be capable of than to do it oneself.

In 1973 and 1974 the Eight Clubs had a couple of Race Meetings at Lydden Hill, but support wasn't great so the idea was dropped. At one of these I had been telling Mike Roper how fast I thought he ought to go and, sure enough, it gave him the confidence to do whatever time I'd said (I had done that before at Lydden to someone else – it does boost the Handicapper's ego when it succeeds). What I didn't know was how abrasive the track surface was, and therefore how little tread pattern remained on Mike's tyres as a result. Not long after, he let a friend borrow the SP and the worn tyres failed to grip a wet bit of road resulting in a broadside-on collision with a tree. The driver recovered but the car did not – I later bought the remains of its body but that is another story for another day. The 750 Motor Club's six-hour relay race, like the Eight Clubs, was an invention of Holland Birkett after whom it is now named. A team of up to six cars

runs one car at a time as it likes for six hours. The handicappers credit the teams with numbers of laps, based on their knowledge (or best guess) of what each team member might be capable of, the history of that sort of team and a number of other things including fuel tank capacity. I tried to get a team of SPs to have a go, but in my time it didn't happen. I think it may have in the Crosfield days, as I have a vague memory of seeing them racing.

The handicapper's real problems are the previously unseen combination of driver and car. We seem to guess too fast (so they finish nowhere) or too slow (so they run away with the race) more often than we would like. As the day progresses we get a better understanding, so the results for anyone who raced more than once usually improved. At the Eight Clubs there was an inter-Club team race as the last race of the day and that was of course handicapped with all the day's other results before us. Consequently we Handicappers used to get the result so nearly right that the Timekeepers had difficulty in timing the finish, something they found hard to forgive. Similarly at MGCC there were a couple of all-comers' handicaps where the first dozen from each race had a run in a final which we had every chance of getting right. At the Eight Clubs one year it had all bunched up nicely for the final entry into Woodcote Corner when one David Bettinson in his "Mickey Mouse" special (a sort of Lotus 7 variant) dived down the inside from about 15th place. Any slight misjudgement of his and his car's ability to get round that corner on the inside line would have resulted in the biggest multiple pile-up ever seen, but he got it right to just win at the finish line.

Being respectively a scientist and an engineer, Robin and I were well used to computers at work so we managed to computerise the handicapping as soon as affordable and portable home computers appeared. (actually Robin had sometimes used a programmable pocket calculator before that). We had always found that we made silly errors under pressure, so we believed that building the skill into the tool would remove those errors and it did. The card index was more work to computerise on the poor capacity apparatus we used in 1985 (Commodore 64s)

but we did it, and the logic we developed then was used through several changes of machine up to the present. As I said, we lost the notes of progress in lap times, but we did gain the ability to have data for up to eight circuits for each competitor, and with that to mechanise the conversions between circuits. We had always had the idea that times put up at a different circuit should be useful extra data and our original rough and ready conversion factors were quite helpful: the computer can be asked to fit a likely-looking curve to the data points from a pair of circuits to give a better correlation.

I said we added Bentley DC to our business, and it may be of interest to tell you how it happened. I had been a spectator at BDC Silverstone for years until one year Tony Bird, Comp. Sec. of the VSCC at the time, asked me (as I was a Handicapper) to stand in for him looking after the VSCC's

interests at BDC. I then discovered that their method was to ask all their participating clubs for competitors' lap times and then use the results (uncritically) to calculate handicaps. I saw that a Morgan +8 was given a start that was longer than his expected time for a standing lap and tried to intervene without success, so at the end of his first lap he duly passed the grid where cars were still waiting to start (fortunately without catastrophe). I suggested to Gibbs Pancheri, the BDC's Director, that an approved Handicapper would not have allowed this to happen, and perhaps I could do the job for them. He agreed, but the BDC being what it was I had to have dinner with their Competitions Captain, Victor Gauntlett, at his Club in Piccadilly before he would approve of me.

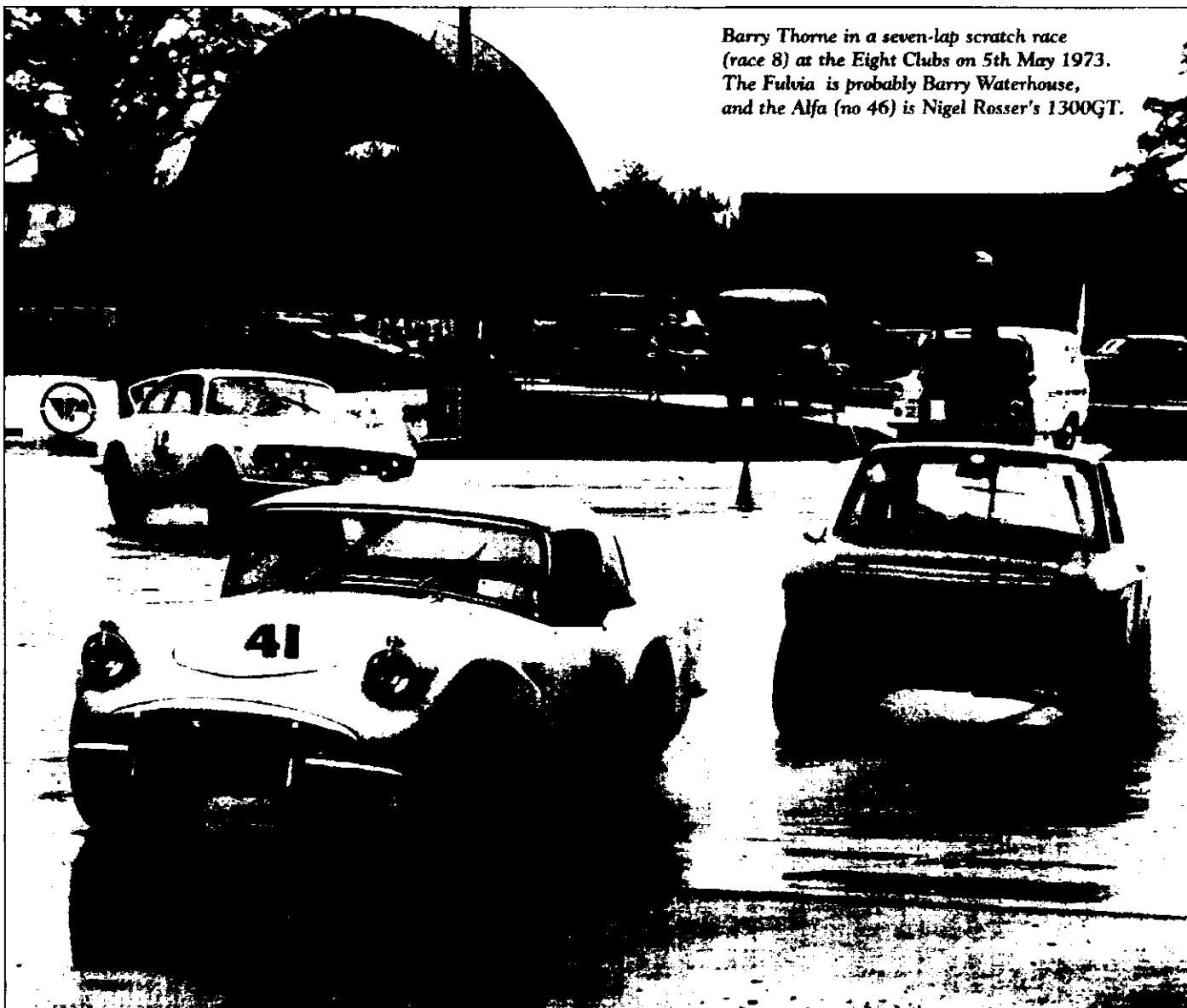
We started at BDC in the mid 1970s when neither we nor the timekeepers were computerised.

Timing was by hand-operated split-action chronograph, each timekeeper timing four or five cars, and a separate person kept a lap chart of the running list variety. The published result was created by the reading of the lap chart order with the times supplied by the appropriate timekeeper, the whole being written down by the Chief Timekeeper. At our first BDC event we got all the finishers of one race across the line in such short order that the lapchart broke down, and the Chief Timekeeper had to spend the next race reconstructing it from the timekeepers' sheets before he could publish the result. We were told that they had never had a finish as close as that before – and for the next year they got a new (and younger) lap chart team. Later someone in the Bentley DC thought that credit laps made a race harder to follow, so we used the Silverstone pit lane for the Start, and let the time benefit be as long as in needed to be

(over six minutes on some occasions). As that resulted in the limit cars covering a number of laps before the scratch men started, I could never see how it was easier to follow.

Timekeeping is now computerised, using transponders and light beams, even in club racing. The Eight Clubs was one of the first to introduce that to the lower levels, but it was a resounding success, even if the times are now quoted to a level of precision that is meaningless. We have been able to get data from the timekeepers into our system without manual intervention for many years now, which again adds to the quality of what we do. The only problem is that all our programming has been in high-level languages that modern PC operating systems do not support, so someone has to rewrite our systems before they can continue this work. Or go back to a card index and scratch pad as we used in the 1970s.

Barry Thorne in a seven-lap scratch race (race 8) at the Eight Clubs on 5th May 1973. The Fulvia is probably Barry Waterhouse, and the Alfa (no 46) is Nigel Rosser's 1300GT.



"I think it was my first race and the track was very wet. I could not see the cars in front when we started as there was so much spray. It got a bit better when some of them left me behind. It is just as well that you cannot see my face it was probably registering fear, I was wondering whether I was doing the right thing".

Barry Thorne