

The Rodney Dangerfield of Sevens

The Lotus Seven, a car whose design was “dashed off in a weekend” by genius Colin Chapman is an icon that is still in production as the Caterham Seven in an updated but visually similar form over 65 years on. Created at the behest of Hazel Chapman, Colin’s wife, it was designed to be a simple, cheap, sports car that a working chap could afford to use as transport to and from work during the week and then race on the weekend.

While the Seven is indeed iconic, there is one in the hierarchy of the Lotus and Caterham Sevens that gets no respect and that is the Series 3 version. The original version, later referred to as the Series 1, had a lovely formed aluminum body and although the most basic, it was hand crafted art and, for its time, went far more quickly than it should have based on the origins of its humble parts. The Series 2, the car that most think of when they picture a Lotus Seven, is the version driven by Patrick McGoochan at the beginning of every *Prisoner* episode. It was and still is widely raced and, in its Super version with the twin side draft Weber 1500 Ford engine, is the Seven that developed the reputation as a “Giant Killer” in SCCA C Production class. The 948 cc Austin Healey Sprite powered version, called the America, ruled the smaller F production class thus cementing that reputation. The final version, the Series 4, may have looked like a beach buggy but it at least had the twin cam engine as an option throughout its tenure and was the roomiest.



The Series 3 was pretty much relegated to the “cooking” version of the Ford Cortina engine so it didn’t rule the racetrack. It wasn’t quite the streetable racer as its predecessor nor was it as “Hip” as the Series 4. So, it wasn’t cool and it wasn’t a racecar. But you know what? It was and is a pretty versatile sportscar. Let me tell you why, after I tell you how I came by mine.

I was racing my Lotus Elan at Pacific Raceways in Kent, WA in July of 2000. There was a Lotus car corral as is common at many vintage races and within this one was an S3 Seven for sale. I was looking for a Seven to add to my growing Lotus collection but after looking over this car, I decided to pass on its purchase. Though in very good condition, it was priced a bit higher than I wanted to spend (the owner had sent it with a friend, so there was no one with whom I might discuss price) and it was right hand drive - a big concern for street driving. The then President of the Evergreen Lotus Club, Dave Billings, whom I had gotten to know during the weekend by his hanging around the Colorado racers paddock area, saw the interest I had in the car and pressed me to really think about taking it back to Colorado. No sale.

After continuing the trip to Portland International Raceway to race the following week and a long tow home, I had put the car out of my mind. Three weeks after the race week end in Washington, Dave called with a big piece of news. Some dealer had called to buy the Seven but offered the owner a price that was a third below his asking price. The owner called Dave to see what he should do - he wanted to sell the car. Dave thought the car should go to a good Lotus home so he called me and suggested I offer the owner \$500

more than he was willing to take from the dealer and he, Dave, would press the owner to sell. So, I called the owner, offered the suggested amount which was accepted, dutifully wired funds the following day, and the car was mine.

Now there was the simple matter of collecting the car and getting it 1,450 miles from Snohomish, WA back to Littleton, CO. I tried to get it shipped and even thought about taking my race trailer up there and retrieving it, but finally decided I needed a little bit of adventure. I made a one-way reservation and flew up to Seattle on September 2, 2000 to pick up the waiting car; a car I had only seen once two months before.

My daughter, Rebecca who lives in Seattle, met me at the airport and drove me up to Snohomish and the waiting seller. After an hour spent familiarizing me with the things he knew and after giving Rebecca a short ride, I stopped in "downtown" Snohomish (Pop 8,400) at a Quick Lube for oil and filter, fluids check, and to hit the lube points. At about 4:00 in the afternoon I started off on highway 2 towards Wenatchee. My destination was 1,450 miles away in a tiny, topless, RHD car about which I really knew nothing.

The good news is that I made it home safely, with only a few scares such as the big 18 wheelers on I-80, in my little, right hand drive, 1,200-pound car. Success breeds success they say, so either very brave or very naive, that was only the first of seven trips of over 1,000 miles each I have taken both alone and with friends, or with my wife Ann, in my now well-travelled and loved Seven. Here are the others:

In September 2005 a group of crazy Brits planned what they called "The USA Se7ens Tour." Over 50 Sevens were shipped from England to Houston TX where their drivers met them to begin their tour to San Francisco on a circuitous route through TX, NM, CO, UT, NV and CA. Due to work commitments (and an aversion to crossing hot dry Texas!) I joined the group in Santa Fe, NM and drove with them the remaining 2,300 miles to California for my second long Seven trip. We went northwest through New Mexico and on to Durango, Colorado. Then we came back east to Pagosa Springs, north to Vail then west to Moab. UT. Down through the Monument Valley and through Bryce and Zion we ran. Then we crossed Arizona via Lake Powell and the Grand Canyon and on to Las



Vegas. My little Seven ran flawlessly although many others had problems. Leaving Las Vegas, we had a long hot drive on the Interstate to Barstow. My car started using oil at a rate I had not previously seen. At Willow Springs Raceway, a too enthusiastic press in a tired car resulted in an engine that spewed oil all over the place. I staggered into our overnight stop in Tehachapi with oil covering the footwell. After sacrificing my propshaft to another S3 Seven owner that had his fail, my drive was finished and the car was towed to San Francisco and on to Vacaville, CA where the engine was rebuilt. I flew home.

The third long trip, the return drive from California on US 50 after the engine was rebuilt in November 2005, was recounted in another story "Coming Home" in my book Road Trip! The short version is that I lost the belt and generator on "The Loneliest Road in America," fabricated a belt out of a bungee cord until I could find a replacement belt,

from a washing machine no less, in tiny Eureka, Nevada. Then I soldiered on sans lights to Utah to meet a friend with my trailer for the trip home. This trip was 1,100 miles.

A year later, in November 2006, Ann and I participated in The Texas 1000 Rally for our fourth long trip. We had planned to take our Plus 2 but that car was not ready. This time we had only the Brooklands screens (the little windscreens that look like half monocles) for protection despite the West Texas wind. While we should have had a coupe for this trip through west Texas and the Big Bend National Park, the vistas were amazing but we looked like banditos with our red bandanas to protect our faces. It was really 1,300 miles the way Ann and I did it as we missed a turn in McCamey, Texas and took a 280-mile detour on our way to the Chaparral Museum. This was a textbook case of a little car in a big country! The good news was the car ran great with no problems at all and we ended up being featured in an article in *Corvette Quarterly* of all things.



For years, I had planned a cross country trip, so in September 2010 to finish the US 50 trip across the country (when added to the trip from California to Colorado), this became the fifth long trip. Three friends from England and I took the Seven and my Elan from Denver to Ocean City Maryland, to dip a toe in the Atlantic, then back to LOG 30 in Gettysburg, PA a distance of 2, 245 miles. The Seven ran perfectly except for losing the windshield wiper function, solved perfectly with Rainex.

After LOG 30, of course, there were these same two cars to get back to Colorado. So, trip number six took place in October 2010 when I drove the Seven and Ann drove the Elan 1,850 miles home to Denver. The Elan needed gear oil several times and the Seven lost a front seal which was replaced in Indianapolis thanks to another wonderful bunch of car guys. Unfortunately, in the resulting repair it seems the fan belt was over tightened which caused the generator to fail in Missouri. The washing machine belt from Nevada was pressed into service. I drove the Seven home with no generator and no further problem.

And, the seventh trip for the Seven was the biggest of them all: The Great River Road Trip recounted in [Highways, Byways and Racetracks](#). This trip was over 4,400 miles in its own right, in each of two cars that were over 40 years old. I guess that translates into 176,000 modern car miles, (much as dog years are seven times that of humans). Or, look at it another way; the combined revolutions of the two engines was more than twenty-three million and the spark plugs fired over forty-six million times before we pulled in the home driveway! That was the perfect way to end the long-distance travel in this simple, wonderful little car.

So, you can see, I drove the living whee out of my Seven. And the right-hand drive has not been a problem at all. It is small enough that it doesn't seem to matter. An unrestored car, the patina on the Seven comes from many owners. I am responsible for some of the most obvious, like the scrape and dent on the left side of the bonnet. I took it out one day after checking things over but forgot to fasten the clamps that hold the bonnet securely. About a block from home, when I reached a speed high enough, the wind caught the front edge of the loose bonnet and it flew like an aluminum kite up over the cockpit and onto

the nearby curb. Ouch! I straightened the sheet metal, but I have never repainted the damage. Hey, I have scars from driving and my cars do too. It adds character!

As for repairs, as noted, the engine was rebuilt in 2005 in California, the rear “A” frame had its brackets repaired, and the rear axle got new seals. New front shocks and all the bushings were replaced in 2010. I had a new tonneau cover made and new side curtains were obtained in 2012 from Caterham USA which still carries most specific Seven parts.

The car has seen several track days. My favorite memory is of chasing a Porsche Boxster around Second Creek Raceway, a twisty 1.3-mile track in Denver. The guy ran away from me on the two straights but I caught him quickly in the turns. The car slides so nicely it is fun to drift it through the corners on its 12-year-old Korean all season radials. I maintained a lot of momentum through the turns. When we got back to the paddock, the Boxster guy asked what I had in that thing that made it go so fast! That cooking Cortina engine made 84 horsepower at sea level, when new, and we were a mile high so it's closer to 50. It's Lotus handling and light weight that allows high speeds with low power.

I never had the top on during my ownership of fifteen years. Fortunately, it rarely rains in Colorado, so my key fashion accessories were a cap and sunglasses. What if it rains? I get wet. It is pretty bad with the Brooklands screens, but, if one is moving quickly enough, tolerable with the windshield and side curtains. I still go out regularly in my beloved Seven and hope for dry weather. One night, returning from a local club meet, it began to rain. Then it rained even heavier. With no top, there was nothing to do but suffer through it, and while I was sitting at a red light, a police cruiser pulled up in the right lane. It was a long light and I looked up to my right (Right Hand Drive, remember) at the officer in the car while the rain relentlessly soaked me only to see the cop with a wry smile shaking his head in that universal massage of sympathetic disdain. I just smiled.



When I'm asked what is on the horizon for my future in the Seven, I tell folks my son has granted me visitation rights. Just like my granddaughter I get to go play with her then hand her back to my son for care and feeding. It is the perfect way to have a Seven!

Although the Series 3 Seven may not get much respect, it's a mighty fine sports car. It is perhaps the best tool of all Sevens to cover the countryside and make distinct memories. Just look at the few that I have noted in this little journal...and these just scratch the surface of the thousands of miles I have run with this fine companion and trustworthy road warrior!