My Race

Richard Covert*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1960 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
My Race

TWENTY MINUTES till race time. Alec's glance shifted quickly from his watch to the car that was his for this race. It was alive for him, vicious and efficient. His eyes lingered with pride on the name on the hood. SPIDER, a breed of racing cars known and feared on any racecourse. The company team of drivers, mechanics, and cars could be found at every important race. Alec had spent his life around races, dreaming of driving a Spider and being the top driver. At twenty-two, his reputation had a good start.

He paced around the car, closely watching the mechanics as they finished the final check. Ahead of his car in the Spider pit was car seventeen. Its driver, Paul Treiber, was joking with a timekeeper.

How could he be so relaxed? This was the worst course they raced on all season. Alec traced the track in his mind. Front straightaway past the stands and pits, good place to pass. Long curve to the hairpin on the far end of the track. Then three long, high-speed curves, just sharp enough to be dangerous. The back straightaway. Then the square corner into the Esses, a series of five sharp curves that took every bit of skill a driver had. Out of the Esses into the long curve to the front straightaway again. Seven miles of treachery.

"Hey Kid, let's roll."

Everyone calls me Kid. Damn them, I'll show them. So I'm new on the team, so what? I'll show them today!

Alec and two mechanics rolled his car to the starting strip. The cars were side by side on the outside edge of the track. At the starter's gun, the drivers would be across the track from their cars. They must sprint to their cars, start them, and pull into the tangle of accelerating racers. He watched the crowd, thinking that they would be watching him, soon.
He stood with muscles tensed. Noticing Paul's number seventeen beside his, he glanced around. Paul met his startled look with a smile.

"Luck, Kid." Paul placed his hand on Alec's rigid shoulder. "Watch the Esses. We can't afford to lose as good a driver as you are on your second race for us."

Alec said nothing. Kid! You just keep out of my way. This is my race.

CRACK! The line of drivers broke for their cars. Alec was there first. Young and wiry, he vaulted into the seat and quickly strapped himself in. He jammed the starter button. Nothing.

Other cars roared to life. Paul pulled out, second off the line.

Damn those mechanics! Alec tried again. He felt a shudder, then a scream of power as the Spider responded to his urging.

Alec had learned that the start of a twelve-hour race was not a deciding factor of winning, but he drove with a fierce-ness that sometimes didn't show his knowledge of racing. He pushed his car to its limit.

On the second lap the team manager held up the large blackboard they used to communicate with the drivers. The white letters showed plainly.

Paul 2nd
Alec 7th

Something about being anything but first irked Alec. He waved impatiently at the pit to let them know he had read the blackboard.

By the twelfth lap, the cars had spread out. Alec caught a Lister-Jag on the back straightaway. Intent on passing, he hit the brakes just in time as the car ahead slowed for the entry to the Esses.

Hell, I'll get him in front of the stands. Wait now.

Alec followed the Lister-Jag through the Esses, counting the curves. One — the back tires screeched and began to slip out, then held. He smiled. Two — three — he waited for the end of the curves like a steel spring stretched to the breaking point. Four — one to go. Five. They shot out of the Esses
onto the long curve leading to the straightaway past the stands. Alec studied the car ahead of him, deciding how the driver would take the curve.

He'll stay left. Close in now, easy. Wait till we're in front of the stands. Now! Now I'll show them!

He shifted down to third and felt the snap in his neck and against his back as he released the Spider's full power.

As Alec came within a few yards of the car ahead of him it pulled to the left, away from him and toward the pits, coming to an abrupt stop across from the stands. Alec cursed the driver for cheating him of a chance to prove his skill in front of the crowd.

He was so occupied with his bitterness that he had taken the long curve and approached the deadly hairpin before he realized what was happening. He hit the brakes; the tires squealed. Too late. The Spider leaped onto the dirt escape road built for just such emergencies. Alec responded automatically, bringing the lurching car to a dust-raising halt.

His mind cleared as he heard a car pass behind him on the hairpin. He shoved it into reverse, checked for cars, and backed onto the track. He pushed the Spider up through its four gears.

I'll catch them. The race is just started. It's still mine. I suppose those damn mechanics won't let me forget this the rest of the season. I'll still show them.

On the forty-third lap his pit crew flagged him in. His car was already up on the jacks when he jumped out. As much as he hated it when they called him Kid, he reluctantly admitted to himself that the Spider pit crew was the best there was. His manager came up to him.

"Take it easy, Kid. You could kill yourself making mistakes like that. Paul's holding first now. You're third."

As they talked, he watched the pit crew. A new set of tires was already on. The old ones lay against the pit wall. They were shredded to the depth of the treads.

"Nice goin', Kid."

"Thanks." Yeah, thanks, Alec thought, I'll get out in front, just wait. But he smiled, enjoying the manager's restrained praise.
For the next eight laps the positions posted on the Spider blackboard didn't change.

Paul 1st
Alec 3rd

Only once was Alec's position threatened. A Cooper stuck behind him all the way through the Esses, but he lost it on the front straightaway.

On the fifty-sixth lap the blackboard changed.

Paul 1st
Alec 2nd

Alec HOLD SECOND

Hold second? Why? This is my chance. It's still my race. He didn't see Paul for three more laps.

He almost didn't notice the change in the blackboard the next time.

Oil on
approach
to Esses! !

All right. I can handle it. He waved.

The sun was almost down. The twelve hours wouldn't end till after dark.

Not much more time, Alec thought. He'd have to catch Paul. Where the hell was he?

Paul had stayed halfway around the track from Alec, so equal were the cars and the skill of the two drivers. But number seventeen had shaken a steering knuckle loose which forced Paul into the pit. He was just pulling out onto the track again as Alec came past the stands. By the time Paul had reached top speed, Alec was right behind him.

Get him now!

Alec closed the distance between the two cars till they were side by side. Paul waved and smiled.

This is my race.

He glanced at Paul, remembering the blackboard. Alec HOLD SECOND. Why? He slowed to let Paul go through the hairpin first, then stayed close behind through the long curves.

I'll show them. HOLD SECOND. He debated with him-
self, watching Paul. Kid! Take it easy. Luck, Kid. HOLD SECOND.

He suddenly hated second place. They left the long curves and started down the back straightaway.

Now! I'll get him now. It's my race. Close in on him. He doesn't know I'm coming. Getting close to the Esses.

They slowed at the same rate. Paul looked surprised to see a car beside him. They entered the square corner into the Esses. Alec slipped through, forcing Paul to swerve right, into the oil. The sharp scream of rubber and metal scraping on concrete pierced Alec's crash helmet. He checked his rearview mirror — seventeen wasn't there. He didn't look back again.

It was dark when the official gave Alec the checkered winner's flag. He pulled into his pit, made the Spider roar, and listened with elation to its shattering exhaust.

He had forgotten Paul, but the manager's grim face reminded him.

"How is he?"

"Broken back." The manager could hardly be heard over the noise of the approaching crowd. "He won't drive again for a year."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

A press photographer called to him. "Hey, Alec. How about some pictures of you and the Spider?"

Alec returned to his car. Smiling broadly, he accepted congratulations and shook every hand offered to him. He listened to the praise shouted at him over the sound of the public address system.

"In first place, Alec Zahn, with a lap average of . . ."

It was his race.

Richard Covert, Sci. H. Jr.