

High Speads action

Take away the backdrop of Mallory Park, lose that reference of scale, and anybody would do a double-take as the scarlet single-seater hurtles into view. The shape of the body, with its distinctive drooping snout and lofty airbox (cunningly topped with a placebo TV camera pod) are pure Ferrari. Yet hark, for all its high-revving bravado, that shrill engine note is a four-cylinder and not a V10.

Reintroduce the familiar surroundings, add a regular-sized person for perspective, and a clever ruse is revealed. You see, this is a junior Monoposto machine of inspired design and impeccable finish, with a Leaping Springbok, not a Prancing Horse, emblazoned on its nose. And that provides a clue as to the car's country of origin, South Africa, although its creator John Sapsed is British. And Speads, his brainchild's name, is an anagram of his own.

"Of course it looks like a Formula 1 car - shouldn't all little single-seaters? - but it's shrunk by about 10 percent," explains Sapsed, speaking from his factory outside Cape Town. "Given that the driver's size is the biggest limiting factor when tooling-up to build a production racing car, and most amateurs are bigger than grand prix stars, this was the best styling balance we could achieve."

Moulding complex multi-curvature bodywork from scratch and making it look right is a black art, and the area of race car construction which has been the downfall of countless projects. Not so the Speads, because expert local help was on hand in the form of Brightglass, which mastered the bucks and panels. The fit of the fibreglass around the

spaceframe chassis, where the pilot is cocooned, is an impressive feat of shrink-wrapping by anyone's standards.

The chassis frame was hardly simple either, for in plan view it takes the form of a narrow-waisted diamond, comprised of twin triangles with extremely strong extremities at the confluence of the longeron tubes. "It took a lot of time to get right, and jig," affirms Sapsed, whose expert handiwork with a TIG welder should fill drivers with confidence.

Behind the double cockpit bulkhead, a range of motorcycle engines can be fitted transversely, with their integral drivetrains. This makes for an extremely compact installation, with a chain drive to a British-sourced Quaife differential.

Suspension is neatly tucked away, inboard all round, with pushrod operation. To keep things simple, and costs in check, Gaz-matic dampers are specified. Again manufactured here, these are single-adjustable units with a range of 26 settings. Interestingly, the factory's baseline set-up has proved excellent, and remains true in service. And most owners have not strayed too far from that.

The Speads rides on 15-inch diameter Speedline magnesium-alloy wheels of Dallara F3 fitment, in 8.5-inch and 9.5-inch widths. Cross-drilled Alcon brakes, fed by Exact braided hoses, sit inside the rims and are extremely efficient given the machine's low all-up weight. Tyres are specified to customer choice, depending on whether or not the car is kitted for Monoposto or Formula 4 championship use in Britain.

UK concessionaire Kirby Automotive of

An affordable, well-built and quick F1 clone, the Speads is everything you could wish for in a club single-seater racer. By MARCUS PYE



AUTOSPORT's own Marcus Pye about to get to grips with the racing cars

National Focus Speads track test



Dave Longstaff's '03 run was affected by electrical problems with his car



"Given that a driver's size is the biggest limiting factor, it was the best styling balance we could achieve" John Sapsed

Northampton brought its first Speads in during the autumn of 2002, and was off to a flying start when Richard Cottrill won both F4 and Mono rounds at Oulton Park on its debut. The second race marked the model's first encounter with rain, delighting John Kirby because it was sent out on guessed settings.

A year later, and with a handful of cars sold, former professional motocrosser Kirby arranged two cars – Cottrill's Mono 1200 series runner-up, equipped with a Suzuki GSXR 1000 engine, and F4 regular Dave Longstaff's car complete with 1137cc Honda Blackbird unit – for me to try at Mallory Park on one of its popular and very cost-effective Wednesday morning general test sessions.

The differences don't stop at the engine sizes, because Monoposto Club rules allowed a minimum weight of 370kg with driver in 2003 (increased to 400kg for '04, which the 80kg Cottrill is confident he'll make), while F4 promoter, the 750 Motor Club, has opted for 500kg inclusive, allowing a generous (even for me at 90kg) 20 percent for the occupant.

Electrical problems, more specifically down to the wiring loom, blighted relative novice

The author reckons he's never lapped Mallory so fast in any single-seater



The powerplant is located snugly behind the double cockpit bulkhead



The Speads has inboard suspension and sports cross-drilled Alcon brakes



The diamond-shaped chassis frame is a highly complex piece of race engineering

Longstaff's season, and also resulted in stranding me on Stebbe Straight during a brief foray in the yellow car. Nonetheless, it had definitely whetted my appetite, because the torquey Honda engine propelled it at quite a rate of knots, making the chassis work through the long right-handed sweeper at Gerards. Brake feel was not all it might have been, but the potential was obviously there.

Shortly after our day out, both car and trailer were stolen from Longstaff's well-secured home. Sadly, they have not been recovered, but the indefatigable Lincolnshire estate agent has subsequently ordered a replacement from Kirby. It has a Suzuki GSXR engine, as the F4 rules have been opened up for this season. Having had the chance to sample Cottrill's version, I can understand why.

While it doesn't have the gruff Blackbird's bottom-end urge, or 140bhp at the wheels, the cammier 997cc 'Suzi' sings for another 2000rpm, right through to a sonorous 13000. Its output is slightly more modest at 117bhp, but its weight of 62kg with transmission (24kg less than the Honda) more than atones for this, and succeeds in keeping the mass low.

This translates to phenomenal performance, particularly through Gerards where the car carries extraordinary speed, either in top gear or one down for agility in traffic. Such is the downforce it generates that my neck received a thorough workout, yet the chassis coped admirably with little discernible roll, or increase in steering effort in the red car, which features Cottrill's own rack. Ultimately the pace here, building for the all-important back straight, was about nerve and 'big balls'.

Multiple grass track champion Cottrill is not short in either department, for his personal best lap of 43.02 seconds (a mind-blowing average speed of 112.9mph) is in the realm of pre-ground-effect two-litre Formula 2 cars or the 1600cc Atlantics of the '70s.

Supremely well sorted, his red machine rode the circuit brilliantly, but its cornering grip left the biggest impression even without the benefit of a soft tyre compound. Indeed, his set of Hoosiers lasted all season, but the

American supplier is coming up with a more advantageous mix for the approaching season. While I had to readjust my mindset for the charge through Gerards, I quickly built up the confidence to tussle with allcomers. A realistic target for me, given a morning, would have been 44-second laps, but I remain convinced that I have never lapped Mallory Park quicker in a single-seater of any size.

At £16,500 plus VAT for a rolling chassis, complete less engine, gearbox, exhaust, chain, sprocket and electrics, the Speads represents excellent value. "We build cars to a price but also to a quality," says Sapsed. "Spares are an

important part of the jigsaw for customer too," says Kirby. Wishbones at £90, a complete body for around £800 and a nose and front wing at under £500 compare most favourably with prices charged by proprietary UK manufacturers. For the self-funded weekend warrior, these potential supplementary costs become more important if the occasional prang occurs. And it's here that a strong chassis, and good spares back-up to get you back on the track quickly, are every bit as important as the cachet of racing a great-looking high-performance miniature F1 clone. All of which the Speads is. ☑

JOHN SAPSED

DIY ethic

THE migration of aspiring racing car designers between South Africa and Great Britain has, unsurprisingly, been a one-way street down the years, with world-renowned Gordon Murray and Rory Byrne the legendary arrivals on these shores.

However, expat Briton John Sapsed seems to be bucking this trend. The 50-year-old, originally from the Wellingborough area, has been in South Africa for 15 years, and for the past couple has been making some impressive motorcycle-engined machines. His Speads cars are now winning here and in the US.

"My father was a toolmaker, and I'd been



John Kirby is a satisfied customer of Sapsed's

around the block in the engineering trade," says Sapsed. "I'd raced karts for years, but I was inspired to build a car when I saw a bike-powered Formula M single-seater down here. I took a good look and thought that I could do better..."

"Turning my hobby into a business has been interesting. A real challenge. Now there's myself and five other guys working in a 400-square-metre factory at Strand, east of Cape Town. We have a tool room and a welding area and make virtually everything in-house, except for the bodywork which is done by Keith Bright. He's great – head and shoulders above anybody else in his field out here."

The big advantage of building things in South Africa for export is cost. "We can make anything, but what is a reasonable price in the UK or USA isn't here. Salaries have not kept pace, and overheads are nowhere near as high, so we are very competitive overseas," explains Sapsed.

Nonetheless, the Speads marque arrived with a bang when Sapsed won the prototype single-seater's debut race at the Killarney circuit in 2002. Home market interest is also growing, and John's 12-year-old son is poised to start driving a 500cc model this season.

And things are taking off Stateside too, where veteran Bob Schader put the Sapsed name on the map last autumn. With a sensational full-bodied RS04 sports car version – which resembles a scaled-down Audi – successfully tested and set for Schader in Colorado, plus two others in build, the SCCA's C and D Sports Racer classes could be in for a wake-up call.