

W & L Piotrowicz photo

Four decades after it was introduced, the Lotus 23 remains a prime example of the quintessential sports-racing car.

in the footsteps of JIM CLARK

by James Heine
Photography as
credited

There's no doubt that Jim and Sandra McNeil share a passion for vintage racing. They are regulars at East Coast and Midwest events, and they relish not only the racing but also the sense of history that participating in such events encourages.

While the McNeils' stable of cars includes an AC Cobra and a Ferrari 250 GTO, one of their favorites is a sleek Lotus 23, the last pure sports-racing car produced by Colin Chapman's legendary firm.

"It's a great car," Sandra says. "It's not unlike driving a Formula Ford, and it's very different from our Cobra, which is a real handful to drive. The Lotus is very precise. If you're going into a corner, you don't have to make a 360-degree turn on the steering wheel—and wrap your hands around your neck in the process—just to get the wheels pointed in the right direction. You just turn the wheel a little. It's very responsive. It also has a lot of acceleration. It just shoots out of corners."

Introduced at the January 1962 racing car show in England and produced through 1964, the Lotus 23 quickly earned a reputation as a

successful racer, with perhaps its most memorable moment occurring at the Nürburgring 1000 km in June 1962, when Jim Clark humbled a heavy-weight field with the new racer. Fumes from a broken exhaust pipe eventually caused him to make a rare mistake and slide off the rain-slicked track, but the 23, powered by the 1.5 liter twin-cam engine Lotus was developing for the Elan, proved the viability of the light, lithe British racer.

Based on the success of the car in Germany, Lotus founder Colin Chapman entered a pair of the little racers in the 1962 24 Hours of Le Mans. Unfortunately, he ran afoul of French scrutineering and was forced to withdraw the cars. The experience left such a bad taste in his mouth that Chapman vowed to never race at Le Mans again, and he never did.

From the beginning, Lotus installed a number of powerplants in the 23s, ranging from the 1498cc twin-cam prototype used for the Nürburgring 1000 km to 745cc and 997cc engines installed for the Le Mans outing. The standard engine was a 1097cc Cosworth-Ford unit that produced slightly more than 100 horsepower at 7400 rpm.

For 1963, Lotus strengthened the car's spaceframe chassis and fitted a 1594cc twin-cam engine and Hewland five-speed gearbox. Now known as the 23B, the car again achieved considerable success, with both Clark and Graham Hill piloting 23s when there were no conflicts with their F1 duties.

The McNeils acquired their car—a 23B—after a long search and after Sandra's first vintage car, an Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint Veloce, met an untimely end during the 2000 edition of the Merrill Lynch Brian Redman International Challenge at Road America.

"I enjoyed the Alfa a great deal," Sandra says, "but after I crashed it, it was really out of commission, and I was chomping at the bit to get a car that I could really go for it in. So we started looking at Lotus 23s because they were purpose-built race cars."

While they could have simply raced the Ferrari or the Cobra, opting for a 23 made more sense, Sandra adds. With cars such as the 250 or the Cobra, you always have to hold back because of the historical significance of the car, she says, and that's hard to do when you want to race. "When you race a car, you use it up, and we decided not to do that with the Ferrari and the Cobra. Jim has had the Ferrari for a long time, and he made the Cobra so perfect that it's hard to race something so absolutely beautiful."

The decision to acquire the Lotus actually predates the demise of the Alfa, Jim says. "I've always been interested in significant cars, and I consider the 23 one of the most significant sports-racing cars Lotus built," Jim explains. "Through the years I'd always looked at them at races and paid particular attention to them. A couple of years ago we decided we ought to have one. So then it was pay more attention, pay more attention."

In addition to chasing down leads in the pages of *Hemmings Motor News* and other old-car publications, he also let fellow vintage enthusiasts know he was seeking a 23, Jim says. "The problem is that there are probably as many, or more, reproductions floating around now as there are real cars. To come up with a car that had a great history was the real job—a car that didn't have two or three others with the same numbers. So it took some doing."

While the Giulietta was fun to drive, especially after the suspension had been sorted properly, the Lotus puts the driver in another realm, Sandra observes. "The Lotus is so low to



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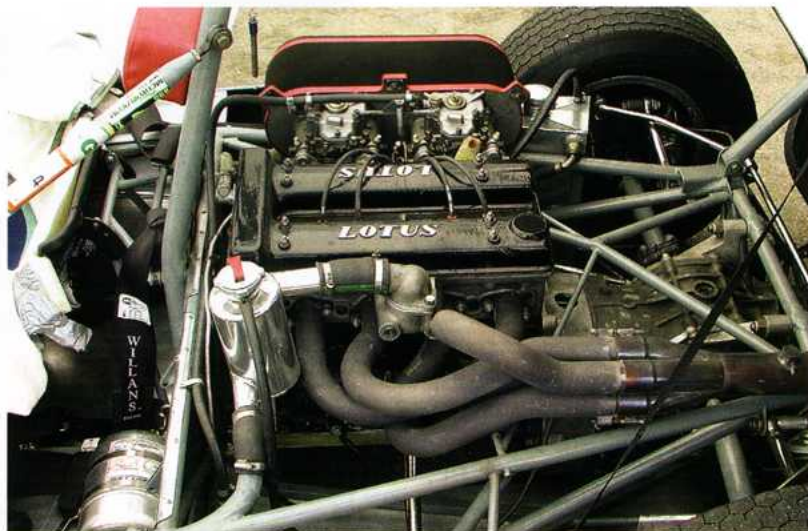
the ground, and the height of the car compared to the width between the wheels makes it feel much more stable and precise. I have much more confidence with it. It's a true race car, not just a street car turned race car that's barely going to make it around the corner."

As with many 23s today, the McNeils' car is equipped with a 1594cc Lotus-Ford twin-cam rated at about 160 horsepower, which as Sandra has noted already, moves the 884-pound car around the track smartly. Carburetion is supplied by 45 DCOE twin Webers, and power is transmitted to the rear wheels via a Hewland Mark V gearbox. Stopping power is provided by outboard 9-inch Girling discs.

"The power output is dependent on your pocketbook and goals," Jim says. "We have an enduro motor. Sprint motors put out as much as 200 horsepower, or more, but last only six hours. Sprint-motor guys

The McNeils' Lotus 23B combines graceful lines with purposeful look from any angle. As Sandra drives the 23, most drivers only see it from the rear.





Sandra and Jim McNeil race a Lotus 23B built in 1963. The chassis was developed from the Lotus 22, and power comes from a 1594cc Lotus-Ford engine driven through a Hewland five-speed gearbox to the iconic Chapman "wobbly webs" magnesium wheels.

A Brief History of the Lotus 23

Just as the Lotus 19 sports racer was an outgrowth of the Lotus 18 Formula 1 and Formula Junior car of 1960, the 23 was the sibling of the Lotus 22 Formula Junior. The 22's tubular spaceframe was revised and stiffened to accommodate the enveloping bodywork of the 23, which features front and rear sections that lift forward and backward respectively for access and repairs. The knee-high doors—this car is really low, folks—have bottom hinges and blend seamlessly with the wraparound windshield. The 22 and 23 were introduced in 1962, and both achieved notable success. Lotus produced 77 Formula Junior 22s and 131 sports-racer 23s.

While Lotus produced a long succession of formula cars after the 22, the 23 was the last pure small-bore sports racer offered by the company. Subsequent offerings grew from modified road-going cars.

carry several motors to each race, and it's not uncommon to have to change one every race. Ours lasted all season."

In the suspension department, the 23 mimics its Formula Junior sibling, the Lotus 22. The front suspension consists of unequal-length double wishbones, coil-overs and an anti-roll bar. In the back, the car features reversed lower wishbones, a top link, twin radius arms, coil-overs and an anti-roll bar.

The 23's wheels are classic magnesium "wobbly webs," 13x5 inches in front and 13x6 inches in the rear. Back in the 1960s, the tire of choice was the Dunlop R6. Today, the McNeils use Avon rubber, 5.00x13 inches front and 5.50x13 inches rear. "They last a season, or about six races," Jim says.

The McNeils take great pride in keeping the car as original as possible, and the only modern modification on their 23B is the roll bar, Jim says. It's a modification that's common today, he adds. "When they started out with these cars in 1963, they didn't have roll bars. At first they didn't even use seat belts.



Lotus 23 1962-'64

Layout

Rear engine, rear drive
Tubular spaceframe chassis
Fiberglass body panels

Engine

Cosworth-Ford, 1097cc (standard);
Lotus-Ford, 1594cc twin-cam (23B)

Carburetors

Twin Webers, 40 DCOE (23); 45 DCOE (23B)

Horsepower

145 bhp @ 7200 rpm (1594cc)

Transmission

Renault or VW/Hewland four-speed
Optional Hewland five-speed (23B)

Suspension

Front: unequal length double wishbone,
coil-overs, anti-roll bar
Rear: reverse lower wishbone, top link, twin
radius arms, coil-overs, anti-roll bar

Brakes

9-in. discs front and rear

Wheels

13x5 in. (f), 13x6 in. (r)
magnesium "wobbly webs"

Tires

4.50x13 (f), 5.50x13 (r) Dunlop R6
(original equip.)

Dimensions

Length: 140 in. Width: 59.5 in.
Height (to top of windscreen): 27 in.

Wheelbase: 90 in.

Weight: 884 lbs.

Produced: 131

Price New (1962)

\$4200 (component form)

Price Now

\$60,000-\$75,000



Role Reversal? In the McNeil Family, Sandra Does the Driving

It's fair to say that Jim McNeil is a lucky guy. In more than one family, even in this day and age when gender roles are supposed to be blurring, time devoted to motorsports is often viewed differently by husbands and wives. The former sees racing, rallying or autocrossing as an avocation and an essential ingredient of domestic life; the latter views it as benign at best, and in many cases, something worse. When wives or girlfriends or significant others are involved in racing, it's often in a supporting role.

In the McNeil household, the opposite is true. Sandra does the racing, and Jim, a retired stockbroker, is happy to serve as historian, conservator, team manager and crew chief.

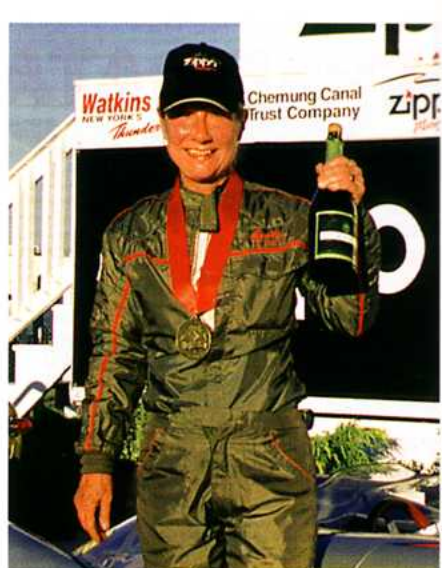
"Sandra's more tenacious than I am," Jim says. "I do two or three laps and say, 'Gee, you know, let's get some coffee.' Sandra studies it, and she really makes an effort to be good. I'm much more into the mechanical side and how things work."

Sandra took up racing to get away from the stresses of running a New York retail and wholesale music business that included five stores and an international import/export firm that specialized in pianos. She says, "I was looking for hobbies that would be strong enough to take my mind off the business and focus it on something else. I got into skiing and met some people who were into racing. They said, 'Why don't you join us and help out.'"

Sandra began by lending a hand with a race car. In short order she moved into a decade-long career as a Sports Car Club of America Formula Ford driver. "I was fairly successful," she says. "I wasn't Mario Andretti right off the bat, but I did as well anyone else with my experience level."

The McNeils met "at some car thing" in New York City in the mid-1980s. "Jim was interested in historic and vintage-type cars, because when he was young, he was able to go to some wonderful races and see some really famous cars and drivers," Sandra says. "We would go to all these different car events, and to me it was sort of boring, because I enjoy doing something more than watching someone else have fun. So I said, 'Why don't we get an historic car for me?' And we did. We got the Alfa."

The rest, as they say, is history.



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Sandra's tenacity and Jim's attention to detail, put into a car with a winning heritage, have put Sandra on the winner's podium multiple times—though the real reward, she says, is found behind the wheel in a close-fought race, or with racing friends afterward.

the races are really, really good. They're in outstanding physical shape, and they're very bright. With the Alfa, you got a big mix. You got some people who never exercised, and they fell asleep after two laps."

In vintage racing, the McNeils' principal home is the Vintage Sports Car Club of America, although they also run Historic Sports Racing and Sportscar Vintage Racing Association events. Not surprisingly, they list among their favorite events the marquee events organized by Steve Earle, such as the Monterey Histories. "They're great," Sandra says. "He puts great emphasis on originality. It's really a pleasure to participate in them."

Regardless of the venue, one thing remains constant, she adds. The Lotus is a joy to drive. "It feels good, it sounds nice, it handles well. After you've been around one for a while, you can understand why Lotus 23s won so many races."



That was the point at which seat belts were just coming in."

One key to maintaining a car in original condition is finding the right mechanic, Jim says, and he and Sandra have found the ideal resource in Andrew Funk of KTR in Ayer, Mass. "It was my experience with these old cars that you run across quite a few fellas who can work on them, but it's a very, very rare fella who says, 'Let's see, how did they do it originally? Let's try to get it back that way.' Those fellas are as rare as hen's teeth. Luckily, we stumbled across one in Andrew."

Despite its great acceleration, speed and corner-hugging ability, the sleek, low-slung Lotus 23 does have one drawback, Sandra observes, laughing. "Because it's so low, and because it's open, it acts like a vacuum cleaner for all the dirt and rocks and rubber that come from other cars on the track. I come back totally filthy. My face is black. I have rubber pieces inside my driver's suit, down in my socks. It's unbelievable."

In traffic, the Lotus holds its own, Sandra says, even when she is forced to run with cars that are considerably larger and more powerful. "The bigger guys think that they can intimidate you because you're smaller—and probably because I'm a woman, too—but I hold my breath and stay in there. If they move in on me, they're going to have to knock me off the track to get my space. They

might try it once or so, but then they realize it's not going to work."

For her own part, she tries to keep in mind the courtesies good vintage drivers extend to one another, Sandra says. "I'm careful not to dive in on somebody in a corner if I think he's going to take the corner, especially if he's bigger than I am."

Sandra finds her most enjoyable competition comes from the ranks of fellow small-bore sports-racing cars. "The competition among Lotus 23s is pretty fierce," she says. "Most of the people who are in the upper third of

Buying a Lotus 23

If you're in the market for a 23 today, expect to pay about \$60,000 for a documented and well-maintained car. As with anything in the old-car world, prices can vary greatly, depending upon market conditions. In the late 1980s, Lotus 23 prices were as high as \$250,000, Jim McNeil observes.

Jim also offers this advice if you're serious about acquiring a Lotus 23:

- Get a list of all known serial numbers of 23s, 23Bs and 23Cs. (There are more fakes than real ones, he says.)
- Check motorsports and old-car publications regularly for "For Sales."
- Visit all of the Web sites specializing in vintage race cars on a regular basis.

- Attend vintage races and ask all owners of 23s if they would sell theirs, or know of any that might be for sale.
- Call or visit all engine builders of vintage race engines and ask if they know of any 23s for sale. "I did this, and Wayne at Marcovicci-Wenz informed me of a customer's desire to sell," Jim remembers.
- Be patient. One will eventually come along.
- Beware of 23s that are constantly for sale and never sell. There usually is a very good reason, such as a questionable provenance, when a car is shunned in the market.