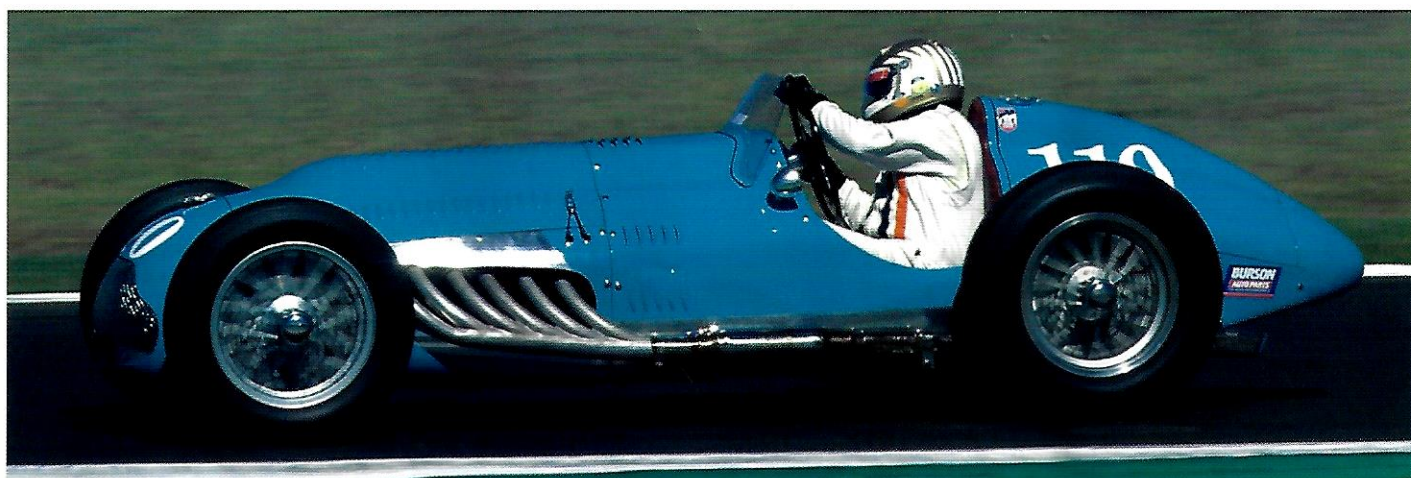


Vern Schuppan and the Talbot-Lago T26

BY RICHARD BATCHELOR



Jim Jones

Phillip Island's turn twelve, at the start of the main straight, looks benign with a wide entry and helpful camber, but it tightens after the apex and can spit the unwary into the gravel at high speed – or worse, into the concrete wall on the inside of the track. It certainly makes great viewing for spectators.

At the Phillip Island Historics it was a joy to watch one of Australia's greatest international aces, Vern Schuppan, four-wheel drifting his 1948 Talbot-Lago 4.5 litre grand prix car through turn 12 in the J,K,Lb and Invited races. Interviewed after one of the races, Schuppan said he was having problems with the pre-selector gearbox and future outings would mainly be demonstrations and Regularity, but he had made an exception to race the valuable (\$1m plus) car at Phillip Island, which he described as one of the best tracks in the world.

By the final race on Sunday, he had overcome the gearbox issues to finish in second place, only shaded by the much newer 2.5 litre T50 Cooper-Climax driven by Adam Berryman.

Born in Booleroo, South Australia on 19 March 1943, Vern Schuppan has a secure place in the rollcall of great Australian race drivers who have achieved significant success while based overseas. A group which includes Jack Brabham, Paul Hawkins, Tim Schenken,

Alan Jones, Geoff Brabham, David Brabham, Marcos Ambrose, Will Power, Mark Webber and Daniel Ricciardo.

After a successful karting career Schuppan travelled to Great Britain to contest the 1971 British Formula Atlantic championship, which he won. He secured a test driving job with BRM and qualified for the 1972 Belgian Grand Prix, but another team driver commandeered his car. He drove for back-of-grid Formula One teams for another few years, with a career best F1 placing of seventh in the 1977 German GP.

During the 1970s Schuppan also competed in 32 Indy Car races, including three Indianapolis 500s, winning Rookie of the Year in 1976. In an amazing result in the 1981 Indy 500 he brought an old and tired McLaren-Ford to the finish line in third place. Other international open-wheeler successes included wins in the 1973 Singapore GP and the 1974 and 1976 Macau GP races. Schuppan also won the 1976 Rothmans

International Formula 5000 Series in Australia and placed second in the Australian GP that year, only half a second behind winner John Goss. Schuppan displayed his versatility when driving an XB Falcon coupe in the 1976 Bathurst 1000 with Allan Moffat. Their car had a good lead before retiring after a fan belt pulley broke, over-heating the engine.

Le Mans

Schuppan's greatest fame was to come in sports cars, particularly in the Le Mans 24 Hours. In 1975 he finished third in a factory Mirage-Cosworth (with J-P Jaussard). In 1977 he was second in a Mirage-Renault turbo (with J-P Jarier). A contract to drive for the fabled Porsche team was then signed and driving with Jochen Mass in the 1982 race, Schuppan took second place in a Porsche 956. The following year he stood on top of the podium with co-drivers Hurley Haywood and Al Holbert, the trio having nursed their ailing Porsche 956 to a victory by only 17 seconds over defending winners Jacky Ickx and Derek Bell in another 956. This made Schuppan only the second Aussie to win Le Mans, the first being Bernard Rubini in 1928 in a Bentley with Woolf Barnato.

During the 80s Schuppan also played an important part in securing the Australian Grand Prix for Adelaide, due to



John Lemm

Running at Mallala on Anzac Day 2017.

his personal association with Bernie Ecclestone. Prior to accepting Schuppan's invitation to visit Adelaide, Ecclestone is understood to have favoured Sydney as the venue.

My love affair with the Talbot-Lago T26 goes back a long way. In February 1955 I read about a newly-imported grand prix car which was to be raced at Fisherman's Bend (it was Reg Hunt's Maserati A6GCM) and I persuaded my father to take me there. That day I caught the Motor Sport 'disease'. The amazing cars and drivers there included Doug Whiteford in his Talbot-Lago T26, to give the car its correct title, although in Oz to be different it is often called a Lago-Talbot, or even a 'large tablet'!

The Talbot-Lago marque originated from the Darracq company which started making cars in 1896, the company being renamed Talbot in 1922. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1932 an outstanding Italo-British engineer, Antonio (Tony) Lago, was appointed MD but he was unable to prevent the company going into receivership two years later. In 1936 Lago acquired the Talbot company from the receiver and undertook a major reorganisation, including resuming motor sport.



Vern Schuppan and the Talbot-Lago in the pits at Phillip Island. Richard Batchelor photo.

Launched at the 1948 Monaco Grand Prix, the Talbot-Lago T26 had a naturally aspirated 4.5 litre straight six engine, box section chassis and four-speed Wilson pre-selector gearbox. The car took second place at Monaco in the hands of Louis Chiron (after whom the latest Bugatti hypercar is named). Louis Rosier then won

the 1949 Belgian GP and Chiron took out that year's French GP. In most races, however, the supercharged Alfa Romeo and Maserati opposition outshone the Talbot-Lagos. In Australia Doug Whiteford imported the first of two Talbot-Lagos, driving one of them to victory in the Australian GPs of 1952 and 1953 (he also won the 1950 AGP in a Ford special).

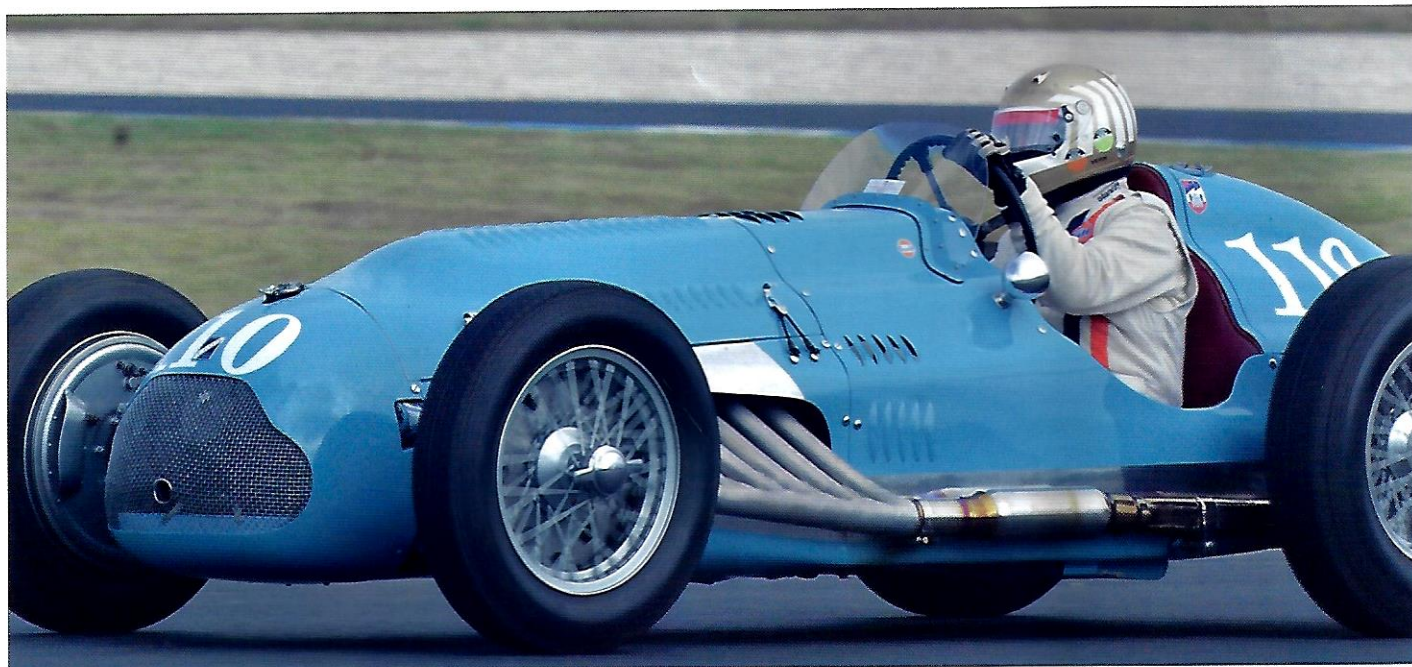
Sports Car Race

Arguably, the Talbot-Lago T26 grand prix car had its greatest victory in a sports car race. For the 1950 Le Mans 24 Hour race Tony Lago entered two T26s fitted with lights, cycle guards, wider bodywork accommodating a narrow passenger seat and a new twin-plug version of the reliable six-cylinder engine.

Despite the presence of five fast V12 Ferraris in the field of 60 cars, Louis Rosier in one of the Talbot-Lagos was fastest qualifier and he took the lead from Raymond Sommer's Ferrari in the



The Talbot-Lago resting at Phillip Island



Neil Hammond

third hour of the race, later recording the race's first-ever 100mph lap during the cool of Saturday evening. After racing through the night without a relief driver, Rosier pitted at 5am with the engine rattling ominously. The intrepid ace (and Renault dealer) personally changed an engine rocker arm during a 41-minute stop. Rosier senior allowed his son Jean-Louis to drive for two laps, while he cleaned himself up and ate some bananas, then resumed driving with the Talbot in third place. By 9am he had regained the lead he was not to lose.

Later in the morning the Talbot struck an owl which gave Rosier a black eye and required a pit stop to remove broken glass from the windscreen. Louis Rosier then drove the T26 into the history books, smashing the race distance record by more than 110kms and almost (apart from the two laps completed by Jean-Louis) becoming the only person to win Le Mans with a solo drive, an incredible feat of skill and endurance. The other T26 finished the race in second place to cap a memorable weekend for Tony Lago that brought great joy to France.

The 4.5 litre un-supercharged Talbot-

Lago won grands prix in the late 1940s through a combination of reliability and better fuel consumption than the faster 1.5 litre supercharged opposition, particularly the screaming Alfa Romeo 158/9. Enzo Ferrari took careful note and launched his own 4.5 litre grand prix car in 1951 to bring an end to Alfa Romeo domination, an action he described as like killing his mother!

The Talbot-Lago T26 certainly fired my imagination in 1955, looking like a Boy's Own Annual version of a proper racing car, long, low and lean with that wonderful six pipe exhaust snaking out of the bonnet. The Phillip Island classic reminds us that it still inspires,

especially in the hands of one of our greatest aces in Vern Schuppan.

Postscript:

- The great Louis Rosier died in 1956 after a crash at the Montlhery track near Paris, aged 50.

- Jean-Louis Rosier raced twice more at Le Mans, without success. He died in 2011, aged 86.

- Tony Lago was awarded the Legion d'Honneur for the glory he brought to France on the track. In 1959 he sold the Talbot brand to Simca. He passed away the following year, aged 67.

- Three-time Australian Grand Prix winner Doug Whiteford, regarded by many of his contemporaries as Australia's best race driver, died in 1979 after a long illness.



Neil Hammond