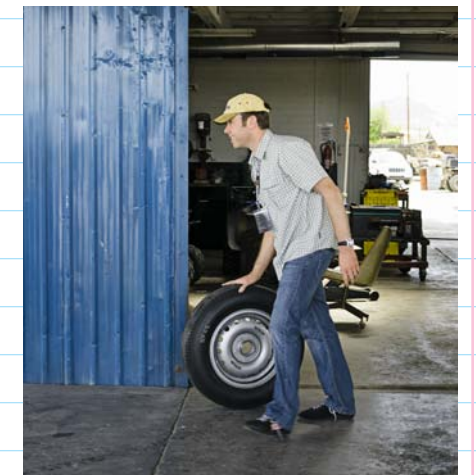


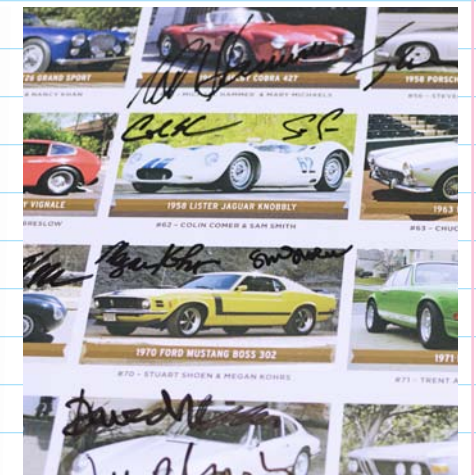


# COPPERSTATE OF MIND



A ROADTEST OF A FIFTIES LEMANS CAR  
IN 1000 MILES AND FOUR DAYS,  
WHERE WE CLIMB BEHIND THE WHEEL  
EXACTLY ONCE. WELCOME TO THE  
COPPERSTATE 1000 CLASSIC-CAR RALLY,  
A 1938 LISTER JAGUAR,  
AND ONE MAN'S VERY WARM WEEK.

by SAM SMITH  
photographed by MARK PETERMAN



WHAT HAPPENS  
WHEN YOU TAKE  
A BARE-BONES  
1950S SPORTS  
RACER INTO THE  
DESERT FOR A  
THOUSAND-MILE  
JAUNT? A LOT,  
THAT'S WHAT.

L



with no real passenger seat

last year, R&T Contributing Editor Colin Comer asked Executive Editor Sam Smith to accompany him on Arizona's Copperstate 1000 classic-car rally. Comer entered his 1958 Lister-Jaguar "Knobbly," a 350-horse British race car that was once owned by American motorsport icon Briggs Cunningham.

comfort-free

Sam thought running a four-day, 1000-mile event with two men in a one-man car sounded entertaining. He was supposed to come back with a story. One week later, a fractured husk of a man walked into the editor-in-chief's office, desert heat leaching from his frame in waves, and dropped six pounds of assorted notes on the desk before crumpling to the floor.

The following story has been assembled from Smith's trip notes by forensic editors. Context will be provided where necessary. Smith's gibberish has been preserved as a warning to future generations. —The Editors

FROM COLIN COMER'S WEBSITE. WE'RE USING HIS HISTORY HERE BECAUSE SMITH'S NOTES ON THE SUBJECT APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN SMEARED WITH BEEF JERKY —ED.

#### ON THE CAR, FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT FAMILIAR

"In the late Fifties, Jaguar's racing program could do no wrong. The company's legendary D-types were the dominant sports-racing car of the time, thanks to the magnificent, reliable XK straight-six. But then tragedy struck. In 1957, fire destroyed Jaguar's main factory. The entire stock of D-types, as well as any ability to produce more, was lost.

"Jaguar quickly turned to Englishman Brian Lister to produce the D's successor. Lister would supply the body and chassis, and Jaguar would supply engines, transmissions, and the full support of its competition department. This new car featured a lightweight steel-tube frame with independent suspension, huge disc brakes, and a stunning aluminum body. Due to the fact that the body was designed to cover

the tall Jaguar six yet minimize frontal area, the aluminum dropped down from the engine and then swept up to cover the tires, creating the swoopy look that earned the cars their 'Knobbly' nickname."

➤ Around 350 hp, 1900 pounds, only nine built.

➤ This car: BHL 102. Sold new to Cunningham, helped win '58 SCCA championship, won June Sprints at Road America and 12 Hours of Sebring, driven by Cunningham, Walt Hansgen, John Fitch, Stirling Moss.

➤ Sound deadening, insulation, weather protection: absent. Suspension: A-arms up front, de Dion in rear.

➤ Engine: twin-cam, twin-plug furnace mere inches from your body.

➤ Walter Hayes: "The Lister-Jaguar is a national treasure."

#### ON THE EVENT, FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT FAMILIAR

➤ Copperstate: classic-car rally in the vein of the Colorado Grand or Italy's modern Mille Miglia. One thousand miles, public roads, police escort for safety.

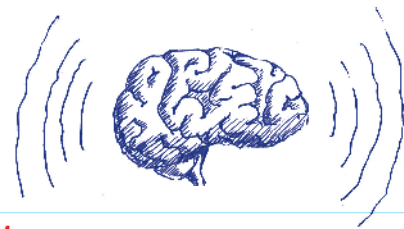
PASSENGER SEAT: VIRTUALLY NONEXISTENT, A HOLE IN THE FRAME COVERED IN VINYL. WHO ROAD RACES WITH A PASSENGER?



COCKPIT, 1958 LISTER-JAGUAR. STEEL TUBE IN FLOOR IS PART OF FRAME. PASSENGER SEAT, WHERE SMITH SAT, IS SMALLER THAN IT LOOKS. AIRCRAFT HEADSETS WERE INTENDED TO HELP PRESERVE SANITY, FAILED MISERABLY.



WHEN NOISE STOPS, YOUR BRAIN  
SHIFTS INTO DUMB. AT A GAS STOP,  
IT TAKES 15 MINUTES TO FEEL NORMAL.



➤ Admission costs around \$6000, but that includes nice double-occupancy hotel rooms for you and a guest, highway-patrol escort, plus good food and drink and access to an entertaining party each night. Also, because the event benefits charity, it's tax-deductible.

➤ You must have an old car, but it doesn't have to be special. There is an equal appreciation for Shelby Comp Cobras (one's here) and Aston Martin DB3Ss but also MGBs and ordinary whatever. Owners of which are encouraged to sign up, to keep the mix of people interesting.

➤ Everything is for charity. Benefits Phoenix Men's Arts Council.

#### ON COMER, FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT FAMILIAR

➤ Nice guy. I always forget how tall he is. He's forgotten more about fast old cars than I'll ever know.

➤ He enjoys gummy candy. We have this in common.

➤ He *really* enjoys gummy candy. If I were not me, I'd be moderately frightened.

➤ Wisconsinite. In his forties. Quiet.

➤ Nice guy—but don't mess with him. The quiet holds a sort of friendly menace. At one point, he says I should later drive the Lister. I never bring it up again, for fear he will take it back.

#### WHEREIN OUR HERO MEETS HIS STEED

➤ The Copperstate starts with a car show held on a local AAA baseball field. Gorgeous day. The field is filled with amazing things: Cobras, an Alfa Giulia TZ, a D-type, a Cisitalia with a NUVOLARI license plate. Lotus 7, a few Mustangs. Charming, eclectic mix.

➤ Lister stands out in the crowd, a pop! of insanity, a rhino in a shopping mall.

➤ Up close: Holy Jesus. Car is lumpy. Car is white. Car is half the size of an Eighties Hyundai. Looks pissed off just sitting there, on manicured grass, stewing in its own funk. (Car: "RAR-THFFFFF \*thbb snort\*" must find Road America." Assembled crowd: "Timmy, don't spill your Coke on the Cobra.") The bodywork—Pretty! Curves! Perfect!—looks like some sort of accident, a Maserati Birdcage left under a heat lamp, then allowed to hang out with pro baseball players.

➤ Colin says Lister is basically a tube-frame D-type. (He owned one, should know. Says he sold it before they got really expensive, rolls eyes, makes Things I Regret face.) Dunlop alloys. D-type wheels, brakes, transmission, twin-plug 3.8-liter six originally built for Briggs Cunningham by Alfred Freaking Momo.

➤ I am told by Smiling Yet Serious Colin that the body aluminum is thinner than on a Cobra—you can see it in the way the stuff curves, in the edges. (Colin: "Try to not touch it." Me: "Woo.") The saucer-sized Smiths chronometric tach has a Dymo label at 6500 rpm that reads "\$\$." My initials, I point out. Colin is not amused.

#### WHEREIN OUR HERO ATTEMPTS TO FIT HIMSELF TO HIS STEED

➤ I climb into the car. Right-hand drive, I'm on left. Legs are permanently splayed, shifter half an inch from my right knee. Interior is bare aluminum, seats a layer of vinyl, not much else. Exhaust under my legs, sheet aluminum between me and it. Passenger footwell is a foot deep, basically a glove box surrounded by steel tubing. Legs have to go up around chin. After five minutes of engine running, floorboards too hot to touch. Passenger seat canted right. Giant lump behind my back—no idea what it is. To imitate seating position: Sit Indian style. Begin doing the Twist, then freeze halfway through.

➤ In cockpit, rear fenders come up to

your ears. Cockpit narrows around you, rises like a turtleneck! Or maybe a straitjacket, which is convenient because the car is white and legitimately insane. In the Fifties, race-car safety was not so much a thing as a wisp of an idea that people avoided discussing, lest you be that nerd at parties whom everyone hated because seriously *danger is part of fun things* *fun things are dangerous* *what are you some kind of Commie?*

➤ Price! Rude to ask, but curious.

➤ In line of rally cars, waiting to get on main road, Colin says he bought the car from someone named Ilton. Or Bilton? Hilton? Exhaust is beyond deafening. My colon is vibrating. Don't know if this is sustainable.

#### WHEREIN OUR HERO WITNESSES THE AWE-INSPIRING VIOLENCE OF HIS STEED

➤ Somewhere on the freeway, a few hours out of Phoenix, Colin nails it. It is wailhowlbat. It is war noise. A Spitfire ranging over to France. When passing, a Spitfire in a dive. Passing a truck at the top of third gear, a Spitfire meeting a herd of female Spitfires. How to produce Lister-Jaguar noise? One: Give Jaguar E-type open exhaust/steroid injection. Two: Inform car that Queen of England is horse-faced woman in boots. Three: Run.

➤ This makes a D-type look candy-ass preschool. Why are Lister-Jags not worth more money? Wealthy collectors say no. Wealthy collectors have kumquats for brains. They should let me make their decisions. I am no kumquat. I am at least a pineapple.

➤ Pass another truck, then back to 55 mph. Heat drops by half when not accelerating. "It's not just a go pedal," Colin says. "Also a thermostat."

#### COVERING GROUND

➤ Engine whumps away merrily. At 80 mph, car is in this low, growling prowl, a perpetual state of prepounce.



## RALLY IN THE U.S.A.

No surprise that long-distance classic rallies have become popular—they're a great way to combine a vacation and a cool old car. Here's a sampling that spans pay scale and the vehicular spectrum.

### CALIFORNIA MILLE

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA ■ April 27-May 1 ■ **GENERAL VIBE:** Steeped in tradition, this mille only accepts cars that could have qualified for the original Italian event (i.e., pre-1957). **COST:** \$6000 (includes hotels, meals) **MILES DRIVEN:** 1000

### FREEDOM ROAD RALLY

OHIO RIVER VALLEY ■ June 1-6 ■ **GENERAL VIBE:** For the country motorist in search of America's Largest Anything. Welcomes vehicles aged 40 years or more, and owners generally match. Eighty-five percent return rate makes for lasting friendships and dependable reunions. **COST:**

\$1950 (includes hotels, museum admission, roadside assistance) **MILES DRIVEN:** 600

### BULLRUN 2014 LIVE RALLY

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, TO SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA ■ June 7-13 ■ **GENERAL VIBE:** A camera-crazed scavenger hunt for the next big thing. Destinations unfold with the day as "petrosexuals" (their word) pursue the thrill of being the first to the next mystery locale. Known for attracting reality-show hopefuls and has-beens, as well as a share of drama. Bring your custom Lambo, matching race suits, big watches, and your game face. **COST:** \$20,000

(includes hotels, meals, parties) **MILES DRIVEN:** 3000

### HEMMINGS MOTOR NEWS GREAT RACE

OGUNQUIT, MAINE, TO THE VILLAGES, FLORIDA ■ June 21-29 ■ **GENERAL VIBE:** A time-speed-distance rally for the meticulous. Of the \$150,000 purse, the grand champion will claim a third. Open to all pre-1972 models; age-factor adjustments help level the playing field between a 1915 Scripps-Booth and a 1969 Camaro. **COST:** \$5000 (includes entry, activities, some meals) **MILES DRIVEN:** 2100

### RALLY NORTH AMERICA'S CJ PONY PARTS RALLY U.S. 50

MARTINSBURG, WEST VIRGINIA, TO PUEBLO, COLORADO ■ July 7-11 ■ **GENERAL VIBE:** Where American muscle shines, though not exclusively. Costumes

are encouraged. **COST:** \$500 (includes track entry, donation to charity) **MILES DRIVEN:** 1700

### THE COLORADO GRAND

GREATER COLORADO ■ September 8-13 ■ **GENERAL VIBE:** Charity-driven, noncompetitive tour through the Rockies. Prides itself on authentic vintage race cars (pre-1961) with historical significance. Prepare yourself—for higher elevations and blue skies. **COST:** \$6500 (includes hotels, meals, donation, roadside assistance) **MILES DRIVEN:** 1000

If none of these options suits your car or your fancy, the Sports Car Club of America holds similar events for its members and also allows modern cars. Most are time-speed-distance rallies and scored accordingly, but you don't have to go for points to have fun: [SCCA.org/rally](http://SCCA.org/rally).

OPPOSITE:  
COMER FUELS,  
CAR SEETHES.  
TACHOMETER.  
MAINTENANCE.  
PATROLMAN  
CLEARS ROAD.  
CHASING A  
PORSCHE WHILE  
HOODLESS.



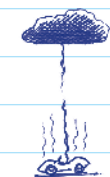
TOP LEFT AND LOWER RIGHT: SAM SMITH



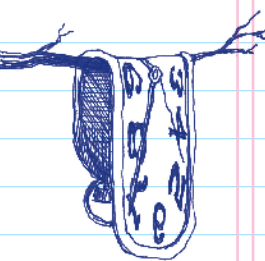
THIS PAGE: NORTHERN ARIZONA, LISTER SMEARED WITH DIRT, OCCUPANTS FRAGRANT AND EXHAUSTED. OPPOSITE: ED CRAWFORD, SAME CAR, RACING AT CUMBERLAND IN MAY OF 1958.



THE FOLLOWING WAS FOUND FASTENED TO THE BACK OF THE NOTEBOOK. STUCK ON BY WHAT WE BELIEVE WAS ONCE A GUMMY BEAR—ED.



REST OF PAGE DEVOLVES INTO SCRIBBLE, THEN BECOMES LEGIBLE AGAIN—ED.



Waiting to wake up and blat around a minivan. To wage an air war with Germany. To dominate a sea battle.

› We rip out of the town of Wickenburg and almost immediately get passed by a Boss 302 Mustang, a D-type Jaguar, and a Mercedes 300SL. They seem to be engaged in their own little game, with the goal to use as much fuel as possible. “Tear-assing” are the only words for it.

› SPILLED SODA AND GUMMY BEARS ALL OVER FLOOR OF CAR. EXHAUST HEAT MELTS 10 OR 15 GUMMIES INTO GIANT BLOB. COLIN GIVES DIRTY LOOK, THEN ASKS IF IT TASTES GOOD. IT DOES. AM FORGIVEN?

› Too hot to think. Heat explodes off the floor in waves, streams, thundering tides that saturate your body. Sixty-six miles per hour on dash-mounted GPS unit is 3000 rpm. Hills open up in distance, that impossible rainbow mountain-mesa Arizona from postcards. Gorgeous. If you don’t live here, you forget this actually exists.

The heat. I can see it. Can it see me? It’s red to me. Am I red to the heat? I do not know. I am color-blind.

Colin looks over. “This is the boring part,” he says.

**THE POINT OF THE RALLY**  
› Near the Grand Canyon, we spend

around 15 miles discussing the merits of the Copperstate. Colin mentions the lovely people, the good food, the chance to drive quasi-legal racing cars and neat old street cars on the road at entertaining speed with a support network and a rolling party. How you can have as much fun in a plain-Jane Mustang as a Lister. Also, one year, a man brought an ancient Bentley and did donuts on a muddy road in the middle of nowhere.

So they don’t take things too seriously, which is nice.

**HISTORY EVERYWHERE**  
› The car has been restored only once, in 1984. It feels suitably worn-in—scuffs here and there—but the potato-chip-thin aluminum doors fit perfectly, the bodywork still gleams.

› This was a thoroughly different era of motorsport and race-car construction. The Lister’s body is just thin aluminum. At one point, we remove the engine lid—big as a coffee table, held on with Dzus fasteners—to let heat out of the engine bay and bring cockpit temps down. After, the bodywork seems to wiggle more over bumps. Incredible, but not unexpected.

**ON FLAMMABLES**  
› Colin, man of few words, at lunch one day: “So far, I’m very pleased. We haven’t caught fire.” Is he hiding something? He goes back to his sandwich, casually mentions a mas-

**OBLIGATORY TRAVEL EXPOSITION**

THE COPPERSTATE ROUTE VARIES WITH EACH RUNNING. THE FIRST DAY APPARENTLY ENDED IN LAUGHLIN, NEVADA. THE SECOND AND THIRD TOOK OUR BOYS TO SEDONA, ARIZONA, AND THE FOURTH, BACK TO PHOENIX. AT ONE POINT, COMER REBALANCED A WHEEL AT A RURAL TIRE SHOP. THEY VISITED THE GRAND CANYON. THERE WERE LUNCH STOPS AND LATE-NIGHT COCKTAILS. INEXPLICABLY, SMITH WROTE MANY PAGES ABOUT BEEF JERKY, COMPLETE WITH GRAPHS AND CHARTS. THEN, OUTSIDE FLAGSTAFF, HE DROVE IT—ED.



COLIN HAS PICTURES OF IT BEING DRIVEN AT ROAD AMERICA AND SEBRING IN PERIOD. BIG MEN, IN LIDS THAT LOOK LIKE POLO HELMETS, ARMS OUT. FLYING ELBOWS. SO COOL.

sive fuel leak at the carburetors he repaired a few days back. I quietly make friends with the cockpit-mounted fire extinguisher. His name is Greg. He misses his fire-extinguisher wife. He could use a fire-extinguisher beer.

I glance around cockpit. As we rumble out of the parking lot, Colin turns to me: “Nothing in here will burn except you.”

I resolve to burn well. Screw Greg! I want to be the best at burning.

**YOU MAY NOW LAUGH, BECAUSE THEY GOT WET**

› Ow ow ow ow ow rain it comes from everywhere so much rain now the countryside looks like Montana if we go faster it goes over the windshield but then it comes up through the floor ow ow ow rain hurts ow.

› Rain has stopped. Wet everywhere. Pants are squinchy from rain. Comer gets steely look, drives faster, car clears throat. Feel like wet, Jewish Errol Flynn. I love this car! Why? I should not. Must ask Greg later.

**CONTINUE LAUGHING, BECAUSE HE GOT HURT**

› Somewhere out in the desert after the rain WHAT THE HELL A ROCK JUST LEAPED OVER THE WINDSHIELD AND HIT ME IN THE EYE WHILE WRITING I would never have lasted on the Mulsanne I think I’m blind no wait fine Jesus I need a helmet no I am my own helmet the pain is truth.

**WHEREIN OUR HERO FINALLY GETS TO DRIVE THE BEAST**

› Day three. Or maybe it’s day two. Time has no meaning. Deserted two-lane. We pull out onto the road. Colin’s tall frame is folded into the

TKTKTK continued on page tk

TKTKTK continued from page tk  
passenger “seat,” a space it doesn’t fit. He’s poking out of the car and wind-cocking like a weather vane. “You have 20 minutes, and after that, I’m not going to be able to unfold myself,” he says.

› What the hell is happening? How did I get here?

› Wait, this is happening. Really happening. We are on the freeway. Is Greg driving? No. I am driving. Silly Greg.

› Shift to third, rip up to 90, coast back down, into fourth. Repeat. Glassy. Linear. I want to lick this engine.

› Wait, that would be dumb. It’s hot. How did my tongue get burned?

› Steering can be heavy at low speed but is largely easy. Big wheel, skinny Dunlop wheels. Nose is a mile away. Rear tires are at your hips. Car leads with your crotch.

› I cannot imagine balls-out through the Kink at Road America in this.

› I mean, I can imagine it. I just don’t want to. That would be nuts!

› Fine, imagination. These words together: manly oversteer sex buffet.

› Tatty pavement. Colin: “On rough roads, this thing sounds like a hardware store exploding.” Me: “This is normal?” Colin: “Oh yes.” I shall blow up a hardware store as research.

› Tach is chronometric (mechanical) so needle stutter-steps up the gauge like an old watch, which it mostly is. Only, I don’t see this because by this time in the trip, it’s decided to break. Understandable. Heat is hard on things, or so I hear.

› Seating position is batty. Your right foot is so far over (in?) the right rocker that it might as well be outside the car. You’re crammed off in a corner, hung out like an outrigger on a sailboat. I thought Colin had all the space, but the transmission tunnel takes up most of the cockpit. (Colin: “The throttle is down that hallway to the right.”)

› Brakes are leg-lift heavy but stop the car well. Shift lever on the Moss four-speed is angled forward; trans is slow enough that you don’t so much shift gears as telegraph the engine room for a change.  
Given the lack of suspension travel and

feels-like-a-big-spring frame, the car is essentially a giant kart.

› I am okay with this. Because it’s a riot. I’ve been through a lot.

**AND ALSO DARING FASHION CHOICES**

› At a truck stop near the Grand Canyon, Colin buys a sleeveless denim jacket with a picture of a big rig and the words ROLLING THUNDER on the back. He claims it’s to stay warm in the car. He wears it for the rest of the trip, strutting around with sunglasses, speaking in the third person. (“ROLLING THUNDER WANTS MEAT FOR DINNER.” “ROLLING THUNDER DOES NOT ENJOY YOUR FACE.”) Think he may be becoming hysterical. Greg concurs.

At the end of the trip, Colin’s wife sees the jacket. Colin laughs. She does something that resembles laughing but is not.

**NO, THE REAL POINT OF THE RALLY**

› Colin: “Events like this are getting more popular. The cars are beautiful, but that’s not the draw. I think the last time the economy dropped, when some of the big stuff really lost value, a lot of people were like, well, let’s start driving ’em. These rallies have been great because it gives people a way to use these cars. It’s training wheels. You don’t have to worry about the car breaking, because there’s a mechanic

along. You don’t have to worry about booking a room. And it’s probably helped bring up values—a lot of auction catalogs say a car is great for the Copperstate, great for the Colorado Grand, and so on.

“How many times in America do you get to see a D-type in traffic? Get up close to these cars like vintage racers do? It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience. You get to see this stuff as few people ever see it—you can come in a GT40, you can come in an MGB. Everyone’s nice.”

› This sounds easy, but really, a lot of these cars are not comfortable, not meant for long-distance travel. I hear there was a case this year where one of the passengers actually went a little loopy. There but for the grace of God, right?

› At the end of the event, we sit down for dinner with the other participants. A rambling, entertaining dinner. There are different versions of this concept—California Melee, California Mille, Colorado Grand—which vary with how seriously they take things. The Copperstate takes itself not too seriously, but organizers want your car to actually be old. (No replicas.) All ask the same: To get you out there in something old and get you driving it. There may be weird weather. The car may break. But you should be doing more than rubbing it with a cloth diaper. I can get behind that.

**FIN**  
› Obligatory mention of how racing has evolved.

› Obligatory mention of how the Lister seduced me completely.

› Obligatory mention of how aches and pains were worth it. (Duh.)

› I am back home now.

› I have never been so simultaneously hot, exhausted, happy in my life. I am reminded that classic-car rallies are entirely made up of the people you meet on them, and the people on the Copperstate are great, with a sense of humor. That’s good. The trip may have been a little weird, but I will look back on this experience with great fondness and not worry about the odd gaps in my memory or what I choose to believe were hallucinations. I will overuse air conditioners in the near future. I do not wish to see any more grown men without sleeves.

› I want back in the car.

› Soon as my pants dry out.

› Everything is back to norbal. ■

