

**A McLaren wins the Singapore Grand Prix
By
Eli Solomon**



In 1969 the sports car no longer stood a chance against the lithe single-seaters from McLaren and Brabham. Aerodynamics, in the form of the inverted wing, was to make its presence felt in Singapore and Selangor that year.

Singapore celebrated its 150th year of modern existence in 1969. That year Singapore motorsports also embraced the “black art” of aerodynamics in the pursuit of greater speed. The Singapore Grand Prix, now in its ninth year would, for the first time ever, see racing cars arrive with such aids that first appeared in top-flight motor racing less than a year earlier.



Not everyone felt the same way about the circuit. Malcolm Ramsay, owner of Birrana Engineering, was surprised when he arrived at the circuit for the first time in 1968 in a taxi. “Wow, what are we in for here! Storm water drains, the telegraph poles...when we first got here, I said hang on; this is a circuit? I hope these flag marshals know what they’re doing!”



Three of the top foreign entries for the 1969 Singapore Grand Prix, showing the two single-seaters with contraptions that harnessed this new found magical thing called downforce. The Brabham BT23C, with its bi-wing configuration mounted on suspension pickup points fore and aft, was seen as cutting edge at the time. The McLaren M4A was less radical looking.

When Kiwi Graeme Lawrence's McLaren M4A was unveiled at Paya Lebar Airport there were looks of astonishment. The McLaren had aerofoils that most had only read about in the international magazines such as Autosport and Motorsport. Lawrence's 'wings' appeared somewhat modest but when fellow Kiwi Roly Levis's Brabham BT23C was assembled it had sprouted wings that were high enough to transmit signals back to Auckland.

Singapore was going to be entertained by Formula 2 cars with inverted wings sixty-six years after the Wright brothers used such devices to get a petrol-engine aircraft off the ground. Levis however, would be using his wings turned to the new task of keeping his petrol-engine machine forced down on the ground. On top of this entirely new experience, both Singapore and the Selangor races were still run to Formula *Libre* rules, a somewhat free-for-all form of motor racing for countries and circuits not sanctioned for Formula 1. This allowed Mini Coopers, Mazda R100s, Porsche 911S, Lotus 23Bs, Jaguar E-Types and even Alfa Romeo GTVs to race against the likes of McLaren, Brabham and Lotus single-seater. In Singapore all of this would be around an exciting street circuit.

Graeme Lawrence's McLaren M4A had been built while he was working for Bruce McLaren. Over lunch in Auckland one year he told me the he **"...looked upon Bruce McLaren as a God...But it [the M4A] wasn't right"**. After a test session at the Crystal Palace Circuit in London in 1967, well-known Australian race driver Frank Gardner told Bruce that he couldn't understand how he could **"drive this piece of shit!"**

McLaren's Formula 1 and Can-Am cars were now taking up a lot of the effort and this impinged on the development that could be dedicated to the lower formulae racing cars. Graeme soon took the right steps to develop the car. **"We lowered the suspension arms...we altered the roll bar linkage and we also cut a hole in the bottom of the tub so we could get the engine sump off to work on the bearings. We took the car home to New Zealand and at every meeting we were 1 to 2 seconds faster than Piers Courage in a factory-prepared McLaren M4A."** There had been a total lack of development of the M4 McLaren and following the Lotus mantra of the time, the driver would also play the role of development engineer. The Kiwi, who would race four different single-seaters in Singapore from 1969 to 1973, recalled that this McLaren of 1969 was the most difficult of his cars to drive; **"...like trying to dance with an octopus on a tight wire."**

This was also Lawrence's first visit to Singapore, and the first of his Treble-Double, winning the Singapore and Selangor Grand Prix back to back between 1969 and 1971, a feat no one was ever able to match.



Jan Bussel's McLaren M4C (pictured leading an Elfin Mono out of Bus Stop Chicane in the 1969 Grand Prix) was the only other McLaren in the Grand Prix in 1969, sans any form of aero aids. The car had already won the Macao Grand Prix in November 1968, the first McLaren to race in Asia.

Graeme Lawrence's McLaren was a state-of-the-art semi-monocoque, a bathtub that made the spaceframe technology of the 1960s all but obsolete. Roly Levis's car was a much more conventional spaceframe contraption. But that ex-Frank Williams Brabham BT23C was still a far more successful car than the McLaren M4A in its class, the Brabhams more robust and much more conventional. The other top contender was Garrie Cooper in a BOAC-backed Elfin 600C, a car that captured the imagination of a naive media that bought the story that this was a Formula 1. Cooper and his very first Elfin 600 Prototype had already won the 1968 Singapore Grand Prix, putting an end to local domination of the sport. Still, the new 1969 Elfin had yet to embrace aerodynamics and remained a fairly clean-lined racing car.



One of the favoured cars was top Australian driver and race car builder Frank Matich's Formula 5000 McLaren M10 Traco Chevy V8 in 1970. This would be the third McLaren to race in Singapore and should have made an impression. It did, but for all the wrong reasons.



With rain falling intermittently at different parts of the circuit the start of the 1969 Grand Prix was delayed by 25 minutes. John MacDonald was unfortunate to miss out on the start as pole sitter due to soaked electrics, having set a new lap record of 2:05.1 in Saturday practice, without any wings attached.

There were other notable cars on the grid for the Singapore Grand Prix, including a Brabham BT10 with enormous history in the hands of Cosworth's Mike Costin and referred to as Costin's Mule. It was a bit long in the tooth by 1969 and had undergone some serious modifications over the years, one of which was the addition of rear wings by race driver Chris Meek for Formula 2, but Macdonald was loath to use them and when he did it was only for qualifying in 1970, removing the front wings during the race. Even then, the front wings were attached by a broomstick! MacDonal realised that those wings did not work so well for the car on a winding circuit like Singapore's and promptly ditched them before the race, recalling that "wings may not have done anything except increase the confidence of the man at the wheel."

The organisers in Singapore and Malaysia were intent on attracting the best talents in the region and spared no expense in bringing them over. No one thought about whether it was a McLaren or a Ferrari or Brabham or

Lotus in those days. Particular attention was spent on getting the best drivers from Australia and New Zealand, which was not difficult as these drivers were keen to do a series that did not just cover Southeast Asia (Singapore and Shah Alam at Batu Tiga) but Penang, Macao and Japan as well. In 1969, the Singapore Grand Prix, held over Good Friday, coincided with the second round of the Australian Gold Star Championships at Bathurst's Mount Panorama. Even without the likes of Kevin "Big Rev" Bartlett present, some well-known names such as Brian Foley, Garrie Cooper and Malcolm Ramsay arrived alongside the Kiwi pair of Lawrence and Levis.



The writer has the privilege of getting some advice from Graeme Lawrence at Eastern Creek during the Tasman Revival of 2006. The photo shows Lawrence instructing the writer to "take the first corner flat out."



Two of the entrants in the 1969 event meet each other for the first time in over 30 years. To the left is Roly Levis, holder of the fastest lap at Singapore and Selangor that year. To Roly's right is Jan Bussell, winner of the 1968 and 1971 Macao Grand Prix. Both their cars could not have been more different in 1969.



We know that bi-wings and wings were actually banned ahead of the Monaco Grand Prix of 1969 but the rules were re-engineered along with wing dimensions and reintroduced later on. Better knowledge of aerodynamics allowed the aerodynamist to reduce the size of the wing without the need for such scaffolding. Lawrence however, had made his mark in the region, having won the Singapore and Selangor Grand Prix over back to back weekends in 1969, while Levis took the honour of setting fastest lap at both venues. 1969 was clearly a watershed year for the Grand Prix. Motor racing in Asia had come of age.

About the writer:

Eli Solomon is a motorsport historian and author of *Snakes & Devils – A History of the Singapore Grand Prix*. He has always had a soft spot for the Grand Prix cars of the 1960s and 1970s and has had the pleasure of racing against some of the cars featured in this article. The contents of this article come from his original research on the Lost Circuits of Southeast Asia, part of which appeared in *Snakes & Devils*.