

March Formula 5000 cars in the SCCA Championship

by Wolfgang Klopfer

In the 1970s and 1980s March Engineering was one of the biggest race car manufacturers.

The single seaters from Bicester, England, won numerous Indycar, F2, F3 and F Atlantic races and championships and even three Grand Prix, courtesy of Jackie Stewart, Vittorio Brambilla and Ronnie Peterson.

The March F5000 efforts began with an unconventional concept. In 1972 Englishman John Cannon raced a March F2 chassis with a weight-saving 4.7 liter Oldsmobile powerplant. Cannon put the good-handling car on pole position in the third SCCA round at Watkins Glen. But in the race he retired with a head gasket failure. The Oldsmobile's unreliability and its 70 hp deficit prevented Cannon from using the car's full potential. The Englishman scored only two top ten placings and was 23rd overall in the 1972 series.

In 1973 March produced the 73A. The car based on the F1 model and had front radiators in a wide sports car-type nose. It was built around the ubiquitous Chevrolet. Chassis were sold to Americans John Gunn, Gus Hutchison, Bob Lazier and Skip Barber. The latter had had some success with a F1 March in the 1972 series and should spearhead the March works attack in 1973. But after 3 DNFs, a distant 9th place at Laguna Seca and endless handling and engine troubles Barber had enough of the car.

Bob Lazier discarded his machine after two races for a Lola T330. Only Gus Hutchison and John Gunn persevered with their 73As. Hutchison ran well at Laguna Seca where he was second in the heat and took a fine fourth in the final. The Texan then tried to cure the difficult handling of the car by lengthening the wheelbase. He also used his own experimental Chevrolet. There were some promising performances late in the season. At Road America Hutchison finished fourth in his heat and at Road Atlanta and Pocono he scored two third places in the preliminaries. But in the finals the yellow 73A DNF due to a broken suspension, engine problems and crash damage respectively. John Gunn scored only one point in 1973 by taking tenth place at Road Atlanta. Gunn raced the car also in the first four 1974 rounds. He was sixth at Mid-Ohio, fifth at Mosport and tenth at Road America. Bill Tempero campaigned the ex-Lazier machine and got a seventh at Mid-Ohio.

Two March F5000s were entered for the final 1974 races at Laguna Seca and Riverside. Gus Hutchison appeared with a 74A. The car had bodywork of that years F1 racer, side radiators and the suspension of the 73A. Hutchison took a respectable fifth in the heat at the Monterey track and scored eighth place in the final. At Riverside he collected another point by finishing tenth. John Cannon raced the ex-Gunn 73A. At Laguna Seca he retired with engine trouble while at Riverside he was eleventh behind Hutchison.

In 1975 Cannon continued with another 73A, the ex-Barber machine. He used parts of the F1 March 751 and bolted a narrow track suspension on the car. Highlight of his season was undoubtedly the final race at Riverside where he finished a very good fourth after a racelong battle with future Indycar driver Danny Ongais. Canadian Horst Kroll took over Hutchison's 74A in 1975. His best results were two eleventh places at Mid-Ohio and Road Atlanta.

In February 1976 Cannon campaigned the 73A/751 in the Australian Rothmans series and won the race at Sandown Park. But in the SCCA championship he could only manage a sixth and an eighth place in three outings. To finance his racing Cannon had to rent the March to Englishman David Purley at Mid-Ohio and to American Don Breidenbach at Road America. Both DNF.

Australian Alan Jones scored March's only American F5000 victory. Jones drove for Hongkong businessman Teddy Yip in 1976. He began the season with a Lola T332 and captured a seventh at Pocono and a win at Mosport. For the third round at Watkins Glen Theodore Racing brought a March 76A. Like its predecessors the car was in effect a March F1 machine with a Chevrolet engine. In the heat Jones took second place with his new racer. During the 30 lap final there were intermittent rain showers. Jackie Oliver's Shadow had a one minute lead with ten laps to go - only to spin and damage his car. Meanwhile Jones pitted on the 12th lap to change a left rear tire. In the closing laps the hard charging Australian caught the leading Lolas of Warwick Brown and Al Unser and scored a dramatic win. After three year Lola's American win streak had come to an end. Oddly, Jones never raced the March again because of handling problems. His teammate Bruce Allison crashed the 76A heavily at Road America. At Riverside in October 1976 the car made a final appearance with Italian Maurizio Flammini at the wheel. He retired with a driveshaft failure. March designer Robin Herd was at Riverside and talked of works-assisted 77As for the next season. But a few weeks later the SCCA buried F5000 and resurrected the Can-Am.