

***I was fortunate to first sit in a Lotus Elan at an early age. I was a big slot car racer. We would race Chaparrals, Lolas, and Lotus. One day a guy pulled up to the slot car track in a real, in the flesh, Lotus. It was an Elan Series 2. I had never sat in a Lotus. I was not new to sports cars, as my dad had bought a TR3 and Jaguar XKE during the mid 1960's, but this was a LOTUS.***



## Tony Vaccaro

I asked him if I could sit in it. He said yes. Sliding into the seat with my feet on those small pedals, and the steering wheel, and gear shift just falling to hand, the car felt like it was made for me. I felt at home right away. I fell in love with Elan at the age of 14.

It was 1968 and my brother, 9 years older than me, had come home from Kentucky where he had stayed after attending college and marrying what Neil Diamond called a "Kentucky Woman." He drove back the red Corvette that our dad had given him when he went to college. I was working on a Ford Falcon as my first car. I was one month shy of my 16th birthday. He walked in the garage where I was working on the Falcon and said that Dad told him to give me the Corvette and throwing me the keys to that red Corvette, he said "I am taking the Falcon back to Kentucky, I am going to be a dad." I still remember the huge smile on my face as I caught those car keys in my hand. We still talk about it quite a bit, and he still kids me that he gave me that car.

So there I am, 16 years old and driving to high school in a red Corvette. Funny thing is that I don't really think I thought about how lucky I was that I was an uncle. It was sort of lost on me. I guess I should have thanked my brother a bit more. Anyway, I thought the Corvette was a sports car, but I was soon to find out what a real sports car was like. I was driving the Corvette one day on the local interstate when a little green sports car appeared like a bullet from behind and passed me on the outside shoulder like I was standing still. It was a British Racing Green Lotus Elan. I tried to catch him, but he was moving in that decreasing radius sweeper at about twice the speed that I could negotiate it. It just amazed me how fast that Elan appeared, passed my Corvette, and was gone. I told myself "I've got to get me one of those."

I was still in high school, and when it became time for me to go to college, financial concerns forced me to sell the Corvette. So, I started looking for cheap sports cars I could fix up and sell. Once in college, I went through several sports cars including several MGBs and a TR4. I would buy them, fix them up, sell them, and move on to the next car. I saw a Lotus Elan for sale in the Buffalo newspaper. It was \$750. In 1972, in the days when a brand new Volkswagen Beetle was \$1650, that was quite a sum of money. It was also a sum that I did not have right at my fingertips. Thinking back to my brief time sitting in the Elan at the slot car track, I knew I had to buy this car. Not having much in assets, I cashed my state college aid check for \$400. I would figure how to pay for college over the summer. I sold my stereo, my bicycle, my school books and my records, and somehow got together \$700 to go take a look at a Lotus Elan.

I drove out to the suburbs, a few streets from where I would live someday. There was a red Elan, with a red interior in the driveway, with a young kid sitting in it. His father was a dentist and he was going to dental school to follow in the family profession. It was faded a bit and the fenders were all cut out with what looked like a hacksaw

blade. It sat on wide tires on wider than stock rims with the windshield cracked and the chrome window channel broken on the driver side. The kid tells me that they had tried to tow it by putting a rope around the windshield and the window channel and broke them both. I started her up and it was blowing enough blue smoke out the tail pipe to act as a smoke screen on a Navy destroyer! Checking the oil on the dipstick told me that there was half oil and half petrol in the sump. I thought it must be a bad fuel pump diaphragm. Oh well, this was a car you buy with your heart and not your head. It was time for me to learn how to rebuild a motor anyway. We agreed on the price of \$700 and shook on the deal. I put down a deposit of \$50 on what my eyes did not see but my heart did.

I came back the next day with my \$650 and a borrowed trailer to pick up the Elan. The young kid I was buying it from told me that he had received an offer the previous night of \$750. So, even though I had a deposit on the car, and we had struck a deal and shaken hands on it, he said I had to come up with the extra \$50. He told me that if I did not pay the extra \$50, his dad was going to sell it to the guy that stopped by last night. So began my life-long fear and loathing of dentists that I always thought was because my first dentist did not use novocaine. But, as I now look back on my life, this must be the real reason. In my naiveté, I thought a deal was a deal, but not so with dentists I guess. This deal taught me a lesson that I follow to this day: Don't buy cars from dentists, and when you go look at a car, take the money, make the deal and bring the car home with you. Never let it sit, because if it is a good deal, someone will try and steal it from you. I borrowed the \$50 from a high school and college friend Peggy, gave the future dentist the \$700, and the car was mine.

I was in the work study program at Buffalo State College and had a job as an assistant lab technician in the Power Lab classroom. This was a teaching college and the Power Lab was used to teach industrial art education. It was also used by the local Chevy Tonawanda motor plant in joint projects with the college. It was quite a facility for its time, with a floor dynamometer, insulated motor room to test sound dampening, and all the latest electronic stuff that was just starting to appear on cars.

I approached the head of the power lab, a Dr. Terry Trudeau, and asked him if I could do an independent study next semester on building my motor. He said sure, so I spent the next semester rebuilding the motor in my Elan and earned three college credits for doing so. Dr. Trudeau was a great guy and I owe him quite a bit, for if not for him, I never would have got that car going. He was a big Datsun 510 SCCA racer and his motor knowledge helped me quite a bit.

I knew I needed some additional help with the car. It had many issues like rotoflex couplings that needed changing, rear shocks, bad rear axle bearings, and springs and spring perches that were shot. Then there were also the prince of darkness issues and the problem of all early Elans at the time: the headlights would not stay up.

I placed an ad in the Buffalo Courier Express that read "Help needed in rebuilding Lotus Elan. Please call Tony." Two guys called me, and the next day Jim and Ron showed up at my door. Both of them were about four years older than me and they had driven up in their Elan S2's. Best friends, they both had Lotus Elans. Cool. They were real car guys and quite the fabricators and mechanics as they were also aircraft pilots who had rebuilt their old World War II trainers from baskets of parts. Really nice guys, and they just knew everything about the Elan.

They helped me and answered some questions, but soon stopped calling me back. I think I was bugging them a bit too much. I think they got tired of hearing from me and I can't blame them. I think I became somewhat of a pain in the arse.

I continued to work on the car fixing all sorts of issues. I bought a set of fender flares from a guy named George Eby and EBY Racing in Texas. I thought this was the easiest solution to the cut out fenders and besides, I liked the look of them. Somebody had hammered in the rear spring perches to clear the wider tires to the point where they were just destroyed. I thought of what at the time was a very unique answer to this problem. I cut off the spring perches and bought a set of smaller diameter springs from somebody in the back of Autoweek. I then went out to the local plumbing supply house and picked up a black pipe reducer where the larger size was the diameter of the spring and the smaller size threaded on to a piece of pipe that just fitted over the shock tube on the rear of the Elan. I rested the spring on the larger size of the reducer and slipped it all over the shock tube. Now I was able to adjust the spring height by screwing an unscrewing the pipe reducer on the piece of threaded pipe that fitted over the shock tube. This worked absolutely fantastic and in later years ended up being the same sort of design sold by the regular Lotus suppliers.

By this time, I had started keeping company (as they said in those days) with a young lady who shall remain nameless and I moved off campus, living on and off in her apartment. We were starting to get serious and this young lady wanted her parents to meet me. The problem was that her parents lived on Long Island. So, shortly thereafter I told her to fly down there and I would be there in 3 days with my Elan to meet her parents. We would drive back together. I guess this was going to be the first of many of what I call 'Lotus Adventures'. She left for New York City, expecting me to be Long Island bound in three days.

Even though I had changed the fuel pump, the Elan was still running like it was pouring petrol into the combustion chambers, producing black smoke, stalling, bucking and hard to start. Every time I drained the oil there was a lot of petrol in the sump. I called up the place where the guy who sold it to me had bought the car. It was a car wholesaler in Bradford PA. I found out the car originally came from St Louis. It was part of a dealership buyout. I called the dealership and spoke to a woman who owned the dealership. She told me her husband had run off with his secretary, taking all of the money in the bank accounts. She said that she had sold all of the sports car inventory (she was a GM dealer as I recall) in a "take everything" deal to the wholesaler in Bradford PA. She sounded pretty knowledgeable and when I told her what was happening with the Elan, she had a possible solution. She said she knew the Elan and that when they came to pick up all of the Lotus cars, the Elan had been sitting with the Webers off of it in front of the racing workbench. As they had sold all of the Lotus Formula cars as well, she suspected that who ever got the cars ready for shipment had thrown on a pair of Formula car Webers on the Elan instead of the correctly jetted ones that were probably just thrown in to a box somewhere. I thanked her and said how sorry I was to hear her story. She was a nice lady.

I went out and looked at the model or type number on top of the Webers and she was right. Checking the numbers in the Elan manual, the Weber carbs were DCOE 40's, but the model or type number was not correct. Those Webers were jetted and choked all wrong for the Elan and I was just pooling petrol on top of the pistons. Petrol was running down the cylinder walls into the sump. I was lucky that the car had not blown up. What was I going to do? I had to be in NYC in three days. I had to drive this car eight hours there and eight hours back.

I remembered that Jim (one of the two guys that had come over my house) had told me that there was a place in Toronto, Canada that stocked Weber parts. I called Jim but he had stopped returning my phone calls. I was desperate. I drove out to Jim's house and pulled in the driveway. A young lady came out, said her name was Joanne, and she looked to be about 16 or at the most 17 (I was 20). She said her brother was not home, but I had a nice car and could she go for a ride. I said sure.

As we went around the block, I asked her where she went to school, thinking she was in high school. She said she was in college, a sophomore, and with some quick math I figured she was one year younger than I was. I remember making a quick mental note of that fact. I then told her of my plight. Going to Long Island to meet my girl's parents. Having to do it within three days and having to drive the Elan back. When we got back to her house she said to come back tomorrow. She would get her brother to help me.

Coming back the next day, Jim compared the jets and chokes in his car to the jets and chokes in my car. We saw the difference and that really helped me out. He tuned the Webers for me, balancing and adjusting the idle circuit. He even had some jets to put in my car until I got a chance to drive up to Toronto to buy the correct jets and chokes. It took a few hours on a hot July afternoon and the Elan was still running a little rich, but it was running pretty good. When finished, Joanne, Jim's sister, came out of the house bringing us something to drink and asked if I wanted to take a quick dip in the neighbor's pool. I said sure and she told me to meet her in the back yard next door.

I took off my purple Buffalo State sweatshirt (which I still have but cannot fit into) and dove into the pool with the shorts I was wearing. A few minutes later out comes Joanne in an orange swimsuit (I remember that as it had quite an effect on me, and maybe that is why my favorite color today is orange) and slides into the pool. Now I tell this story a lot, although my wife does not remember this moment in history with the same clarity as I do, but as Joanne slid into the pool I said to myself, "that is the girl I am going to marry."

I never went to NYC. I had moved out of the apartment by the time the girl got back. It took a while, but the timing finally became right to ask Joanne out on our first date. We have been together ever since. I remember this all like it was yesterday. So, when people ask me about my first Lotus, how I got started with Lotus and what it means to me, I tell them this story. It led me to my partner and the best decision I ever made in my life: to ask Joanne out and to marry her.

You may ask where that Elan is today. It is owned by Jeff Kyle, one of our LOONY club members. Every time I see that car it brings back a ton of memories (actually 1650lb.) of memories. The car is now yellow with a black interior. Joanne and I made the mistake of replacing the red interior with white naughahyde a few years after I bought the car. I was told a few years after I did that, that there were only three S2 Elans built with red interior. I checked the other day at a car show Jeff and I were both at and it still has the same rear spring perches that I designed and made. I am happy that the car has an owner that really takes care of it. That car has a lot of good karma in it.

What of the BRG Elan that passed me on the interstate in 1969? It is such a small Lotus world that in 1991, Will Burnham, who co-founded the LOONYS with Bill Baldwin, and I answered an ad for a Lotus Elan for sale and there sitting was the exact same BRG Elan. Will purchased that from the guy that passed me on that interstate. Amazing.

And the guy that let me sit in his Elan at the slot car track? I saw him sitting in a Lotus 61 at a local event in 2002. It was the 50th anniversary of the first, last, and only street race on Grand Island NY, (location of LOG 23). He had moved to Texas to live with his son but had brought his Lotus 61 for this event and I was stunned to see him at the age of something over 80 driving an open wheel racer. When I saw him, I introduced myself and told him that it was his influence and his car that led me down the Lotus path. He told me he still has that Elan. I thanked him for that time long ago and gave him a hug. Like I said, Lotus is a small world.

And for my brother in law, Jim, he still has his Elan. He still drives it all the time. And, he now returns my phone calls.