

The continuing story of racing Citroëns in South Africa.

In a previously published article I recounted the story of racing my 1975 Citroën CX2200 Pallas, alias “Le Bitch” in the South African Historic racing series. Since then, Le Bitch has been temporarily retired whilst the engine is being rebuilt.



Le bitch in action.

During the 2017 season it was mooted to recreate the halcyon days of standard production car racing of the 70's and 80's, known locally as the Group N and Group 1 Production car series. This formula was really about “what wins on Saturday, sells on Monday”. Amongst the plethora of Fords, Alfas, BMW, Mazda, Renault, Fiat there came a surprise contender. Enter the Citroën GS 1220 Club.

In 1977 a Citroën GS Club was entered by the local Citroën dealer in the Asseng Group N Championship, driven by one Sarel van der Merwe. This was in the early days of Sarel's career before he made himself a household name by winning 10 South African Rally Championships and famously winning the Daytona 24 hour race, together with Graham Duxbury and Tony Martin, in a March Porsche sponsored by Kreepy Krawly, automatic swimming pool cleaners.

It is recorded with great surprise that the GS Club won its class in 4 out of 6 races and clinched the Class and Overall 1977 Group N National Championship.

40 years on and Historic Racing South Africa announces plans to recreate the era of Group N and Group 1 racing. Being on the lookout for a replacement of Le Bitch, I naturally looked at the GS Club as it is a perfect fit for the category and I knew no one else would even think about it as a potential race car.

And so.....Y66 Citroën GS 1220 Club returns.



Sarel leads an Alfsud through Leeuwkop at Kyalami 1977



2017 the New Y66

I acquired the 1979 Citroën GS 1220 Club in February 2017 and the immediate plan was to turn it into a replica of the car with which Sarel van der Merwe won the 1977 National Group N Championship. The car was in pretty good nick and was painted the dark blue of the original car's base colour, which meant I didn't have the expense of a costly respray.

Initial assessment of the car revealed the brakes to be non-existent. In fact the right rear calliper had been by passed completely. Not that it would have been a major problem as the brake effort is biased about 85% to the front. The rear brakes only come into action when there is a heavy load. New front discs, pads and seals were ordered from the Chevronic Centre in the UK. Due to our wonderful postal service it took almost two months for the parts to arrive. In the mean time I busied myself removing the engine for cleaning and replacing the clutch and pressure plate. One of the challenges removing the engine and gearbox is the gear lever needs to be removed from the gear box to allow the gearbox to pass under the front cross member. A simple task of removing a locating "Pin" and lifting it out? Problem was there was no pin that I could see, so something else must have been retaining the lever as when I pushed a probe into the hole it passed all the way through without obstruction. All the experts on the internet and locally insisted there is a pin that locates the lever and all I had to do was pull it out. Finally in frustration I wielded the angle grinder and cut the shaft so I could remove the engine and gearbox. A sleeve with grub screws was manufactured to put the lever together again when reassembling. Once out I could inspect it more closely and found it was not a pin, but a hollow bush, which is why the probe passed through the hole. That little episode consumed at least four days and lots of cursing.



Gearbox showing the sleeve arrangement on the gear lever.

Being an air cooled engine I was concerned about the air flow around the barrels which, on initial inspection looked reasonably clear, but on removal of the shrouding proved seriously clogged with

oil and grease and grime. The task of cleaning the engine was handed over to Route 101 Classics in Jet Park. A dry ice process was used to remove the grease and grime. The engine was returned in pristine condition and I would recommend the process. Finally, I started reassembling the engine ready for installation. The install went smoothly, thank goodness. The brake callipers had been removed, new seals and pads fitted. The CV joints had been reconditioned and rebooted by the CV Joint in Benoni. Space in the engine bay of all Citroëns is at a premium, so often one is working by feel only and grazed knuckles and cursing are the order of the day.



Cramped engine bay. Grazed knuckles.

In the mean time I had painted the wheels a bright sunshine yellow, replaced the oversize tyres with correct 165x80R15 size from Jeppe Tyre, which I had skimmed at Big Boss Auto in Alberton.

All that was left to do was the white, red and yellow wrap and the decals. The wrap was done by Basically Branding in Berario. Big thanks to Clayton Cunningham from Home Made Models who provided the contact sheet with all the decals. Clayton and Emil Sluiter recently completed a 1/43 scale model of the car.



1/43 scale Home Made Models Citroën GSX2 by Emil Sluiter

.....And so to racing.

Y66 debuts at Redstar 27 October 2017



Race weekend dawned on Friday 27 October and I set off for Redstar race way near Delmas. At this point the only testing I had done was on public roads and everything seemed to be in order except for what appeared to be a minor hydraulic leak from a return pipe. Tyres pumped, oil checked, ready to go. First session and the car is performing okay except for squealing tyres. Start of the third lap and I adjust the suspension for a slightly stiffer ride to hopefully help dial out some understeer. Following Sarel's advice of "keep it flat and brake late" I did just that heading into turn 8 the hairpin at end of the straight. Hit the clamps at the about 75 metres and nothing happened. Straight off the track and heading to rejoin at turn 11. Thought better of that and managed to turn and stop the car near the marshall post at turn 8. Phew. Back to the pits and hydraulic oil all over the engine bay. Thought the seal on the accumulator sphere had popped. Replaced that, bled the system and got the suspension working again. Then bled the brakes and found the actual leak was from the left side brake calliper. Backwards and forwards to Benoni to get replacement seals. Note to self: Always keep an abundant supply of seals in the tool box.

Arrived at track at 05h30 Saturday to replace the seal. Managed to get it done in time for qualifying. The less said about the contortions to do the job the better. The picture speaks for itself.



Erm.... Not very dignified!

So, before race 1, I approach an old Citroën racer, Mike O'Sullivan, for some tips on set up. His advice is to pump the tyres to 3.0 bars in front and 3.5 bar in rears. That done off I went to race. Suffice to say I have learned a whole new driving technique with lift off oversteer. Race 1 went really well and I crossed the line 5th overall and first of the class F cars. Unfortunately I broke out by .099 secs and was disqualified. Pursuit racing is tough. The second race had a glitch with Kobus's Jaguar 420 not making the start. I was the hare and had the hounds starting sometime behind me. I had to have 1m29s added to my race time to compensate for the difference between the scratch man and my start time which had now changed to zero. Nevertheless, the car ran faultlessly and I crossed the line first overall. After the time was adjusted I placed second overall and first of the Class F cars.

All in all a great debut for the new Y66.

2018 Passion For Speed, Zwartkops raceway.

The next event entered was the International Passion for Speed staged at the Zwartkops International Raceway near Pretoria at the end of January 2018. This event draws many overseas entries and was originally a tribute event to David Piper. Now in its 16th year it is a must do event. All the old, and I mean " Old", legends of South African motorsport somehow manage to haul out their moth bitten racing overalls and helmets to compete in this event. That included Sarel van der Merwe. This was an opportunity not to be missed and I was able to get the man to autograph my car.



Sarel van der Merwe autographs the new Y66 Citroën GS Club.

The weekend wasn't without its trials. On Friday afternoon practice I detected a hydraulic leak from the right rear brake calliper. On removing the wheel I saw the hydraulic brake pipe had cracked at the union. Not too much of a problem, I thought, as I had a replacement back home and it wouldn't take long to replace. Come race day morning, armed with the replacement pipe, I got down to fixing it. Only thing the pipe union would not tighten. Reason – the thread in the calliper hole had stripped. Not having a spare calliper and not wanting to miss the race, I bypassed the calliper completely and took to the track with three operational brakes. Fortunately, because the brakes are heavily biased to the front, it actually made no difference to the braking at all and I was able to complete the day without any further issues.

The race format is a sprint race. Since the format I normally race is Handicap, and having the slowest car normally occupy pole position, it was somewhat different having to start last on the grid of 31 cars. A deluge of rain before race one, put a smile on my face, as there was an opportunity to utilise the superior road holding of skinny tyres and little power to improve my position. This proved to be the case and by lap 2 I was running in 15th position only to hit a river of water in turn 1 leading to a half spin and losing 3 positions. I managed to maintain this position to the end.



Zwartkops Passion for Speed 2018. Photo credit: www.racepics.co.za

Starting from P19 in the second race, the track had dried by now, I was swamped by the more powerful cars I had the measure of in the rain. Needless to say Y66 is a crowd favourite with the lean angles achieved something akin to a MotoGP bike.

And so on to the HRSA Pursuit (Handicap) Racing championship. Round 1 held at the Redstar Raceway ended with 3rd in class and 5th overall for the day in the Pursuit Racing class and 1st place in the revived GroupN/1 category class H. Round 2 at Zwartkops had mixed results. In Pursuit race1 we ended 6th in class and did not start the second race due to a broken clutch cable in the GroupN/1 race. Nevertheless Y66 is currently lying 4th in class and 5th overall in the Pursuit racing category.

Hopefully I will be able to emulate the achievement of the original Y66 of 1977, 40 years later.

Rob Clark