



# A KNOCKOUT ELVA WITH BMW PUNCH

With power from a BMW M10 four-cylinder and an analytical driver at the helm, Harin de Silva's 1965 Elva Mk.8 is a race-winning beauty from the pre-wing era.

By William Edgar Photography by William Edgar

**A**s the sun came up on Wednesday, May 26, 1965, newspapers were slapping onto driveways and porches all across North America with headlines trumpeting Cassius Clay's knockout of Sonny Liston in the first round of the heavy-weight title fight the night before. In Neil Leifer's now-famous photo, Clay—ever after called Muhammad Ali—is frozen in triumph, towering above the floored Liston.

That same morning, Michigan racer Dick Brown was celebrating a hugely important event in his own life: the delivery of a brand-new Elva Mk.8 racer complete with a four-cylinder BMW M10 engine.

The SCCA National at Mid-Ohio was only two weeks away, and Brown would be using

the Elva to make his step up to closed-wheel, new-style aerodynamic racing after twice winning the Central Division's Formula Junior championship. He hoped the car you see here, chassis number 80/04, would deliver the knockout punch he needed.

Brown's performance in his first outing with the Elva-BMW on June 12-13 was propitious. As Ron Lathrop reported in *Sports Car Graphic's* September 1965 edition, "The C-D-E-F Modified event looked like a one-man benefit as Chuck Dietrich led every lap of the 30-minute affair...Still, really the man of the day was Dick Brown. Less than a week before the Mid-Ohio event Brown's Elva Mk.8 arrived. With this new, unused machine, Brown qualified third."

Lathrop describes how Brown ended the first lap in fifth in his green Elva, then passed one driver after another until Dietrich was in his sights. "While he never caught Dietrich, he and Chuck managed to toss the EM-class lap record back and forth, sometimes in the same lap, but both seemed to develop shifting problems toward the end of the race, so the pace slowed and Dietrich romped home the winner and lap-record holder."

Perhaps on the basis of that success, Brown would soon move up from 2.0-liter sports cars to the big-bore Can-Am Series, racing a McLaren from 1966 until June 13, 1970, when he was killed during practice at Mosport, aged 40.

## Before wings and slicks

Before he died, Brown had sold the Elva to Phil Seitz, who raced it in 1967 and '68 before selling it to John Marcosky. Marcosky campaigned it until 1998, about the time Roger Karlson was looking to buy a sports racer. Karlson, a lanky 6'3" West Coaster, had an Elva Mk.7 in mind but switched his search to an 8 because its longer wheelbase allowed more driver leg room. He knew Elva guru Thor Thorson, who fortuitously had knowledge of Marcosky's car in the Midwest. The

match was made, and #80/04 was not only a perfect fit but also aesthetically right, having been built, as Karlson notes, "when aerodynamics was still an artful design."

It also had the emotional appeal that Karlson liked best about these cars, as he says, "from an era before wings and slicks."

With his newly-purchased, muscularly torqued BMW M10-powered Elva, Karlson went C Sports racing in VARA events at southern California road courses, where most of the competition was the adversarial Lotus

23. Blue with a white stripe, Karlson's Elva won a few races and took second in others.

What Karlson really liked about the car, if it ever became obligatory, was its easily repaired tube frame rather than complex monocoque. "And," Karlson adds, "it was appealing to the eye."

He also appreciated the M10 BMW engine for its not-so-exotic character, which allowed it to be tuned well without hassle. (It's the same four-cylinder engine used in BMW's production cars of 1961-1987, albeit with a few modifications.) However, the low-profile tires used in VARA racing prevented Karlson from setting up the Elva's handling to his satisfaction.

Enter Reg Howell of Carpinteria, California, who first became acquainted with our subject car when it was still brand-new.

"I knew Dick Brown well," Howell tells me. "We had run Formula Juniors together, and that's the reason I bought it. I really didn't need another car in my life, but Scott



**Harin de Silva's 1965 Elva Mk.8 race car, #80/04, was delivered to its original owner complete with a BMW M10 four-cylinder engine prepped for racing by Nerus Engineering of Sussex, England. The car is maintained today by Virtuoso Performance in Hayward, CA, where it was modified to remove "a ton" of weight.**



Drnek and I looked at the Elva closely and found it had a lot of the original pieces on it, original castings, so I was excited to get it."

The Elva was taken to Drnek's Virtuoso Performance restoration and tuning shop in Hayward, California.

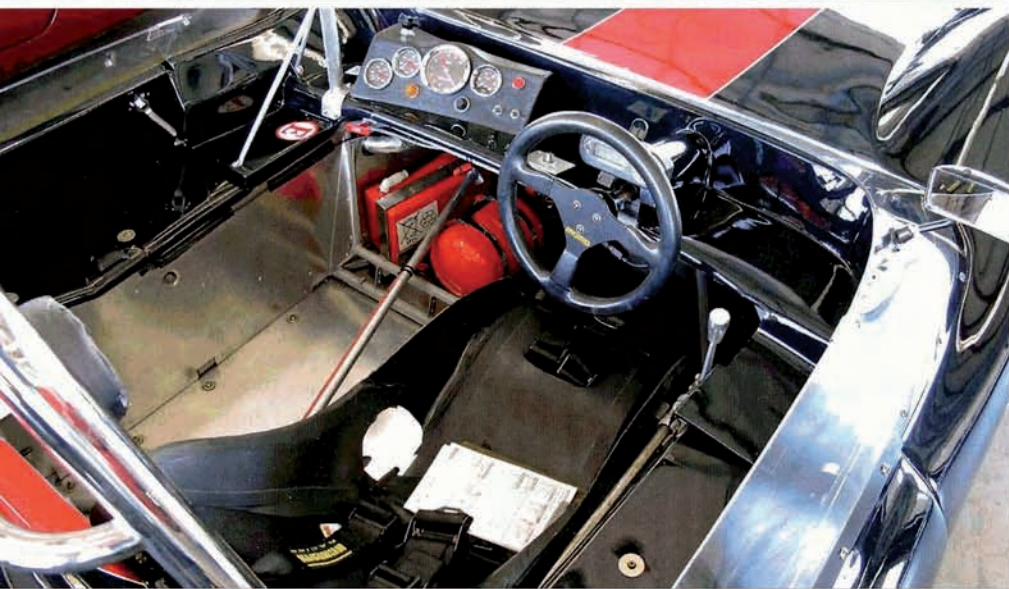
"We decided we could make this one of the front-running cars, and no one else had done it in the whole country," Howell says. "These Mk.8s were a little heavy when new, so Scott Drnek and I figured how to take 'a ton' of weight out of it."

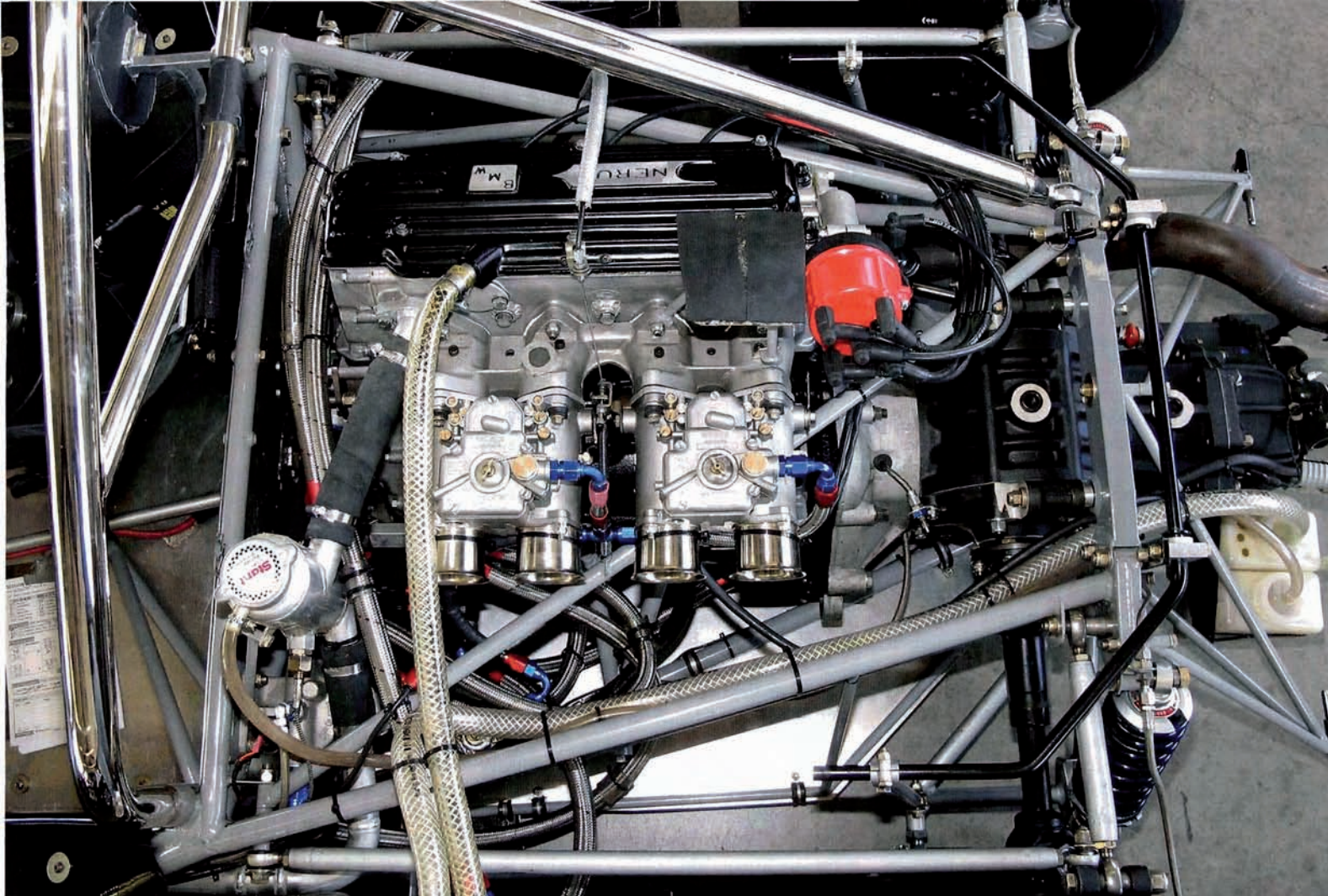
## The pursuit of performance

There's more to this phase of the story. Howell is a resolute believer in preservation—not only of car parts and whole cars, but of memories of old friendships.

"I bought the Elva for two reasons," Howell tells me after a while. "One, it was Dick Brown's, and it was pretty unusual that a guy like me was old enough to have been there when it came off the airplane.

"I saw it turn its first wheels," he says fondly, remembering Brown's race at Mid-Ohio, "and it was kind of a memorial to Dick. It seemed that he had been forgotten in the history books. He was a loner sort of a guy who worked on his cars in his shop





and was a very good driver, but an independent who never had the money to have the very best stuff."

While the Elva was taken apart and put back together again in pursuit of frontrunner performance, Howell's enthusiasm began to wane.

"After two years of going through it totally," he says, "I just ran out of time and money and didn't want to keep racing. The car still needed wider wheels on the rear and a 2-liter motor like no one had ever developed. It was like it never got finished, always something else going on, ordering parts—and then you wait—and we made a new body that took forever. We needed to spend another twenty-five grand to get the right transaxle, because it still had the original in it that we knew wouldn't work."

In 1998, Howell decided to sell #80/04.

Now comes owner number six, Harindra "Harin" de Silva, current custodian of the Elva that Dick Brown first put to task in the distant spring of '65. A rising star in today's vintage racing scene, de Silva is smart, fast and analytical. Born in Sir Lanka fifty years ago, he is now in his fourth year of vintage competition.

"I was looking ideally for a Lotus 23 or something with a BMW engine in it," de

Silva tells me, "and Scott Drnek called to say the Elva was available and I should definitely buy it because, to use Scott's words, 'It would be the sharp end of the stick in its racing group.' I looked it up and everyone said an Elva Mk.8 with a BMW engine is a pretty good car to drive, and reliable and good-looking. Growing up, I wanted a Lotus 23, but when I saw the Elva I realized it was a lot more competitive and would probably be a lot more fun to drive."

De Silva bought #80/04 in its final stages of restoration at Virtuoso Performance. Even though Reg Howell had already taken major steps to make it as light as possible, de Silva and Drnek focused on that objective still further. Lighter shocks headed a new check list, and other weight loss measures followed. The car is now a lean 1,080 pounds with all fluids and a half-tank of fuel—just *half* of what an M10-powered 2002 weighs!

### 230 hp from a BMW M10 four

The Elva marque was created in 1955 by British racing enthusiast Frank Nichols and aptly drew its name from the French phrase *elle va*, meaning "she goes." Nearly 1,000 Elvas were built in England before the company merged with McLaren in the late 1960s.

The Elva Mk.8 was, in effect, the culmination of a long line of small-bore sports racers that led to the next big thing in road racing—USSRC, Can-Am and FIA 2-liter cars—leaving the Mk.8 to become a tidy but exciting entry in future vintage racing.

Drnek tells me that #80/04's dark British Racing Green and Rossa Corsa center striped fiberglass body covers a tubular space frame that has been completely stripped, shot-blasted, crack-tested and reinforced as part of a 1,000-hour restoration. Its coil front suspension is inboard rocker, with cantilever-actuated unequal length wishbones. The rear suspension's coils share independent lower wishbones with upper camber link and parallel trailing links. Shocks are alloy-bodied, double-adjustable Konis. Hoosier Racing tires are mounted on four 13-inch diameter wheels that measure 7 inches wide in front, 8 inches in back.

The five-speed Hewland transaxle connects via an AP clutch to the dry-sump BMW M10 engine, which breathes through a pair of side-draft 48mm DCOE Weber carburetors drawing fuel from an 8-gallon tank. The M10 makes around 230 horsepower and lots of on-demand torque, giving this light, compact car a great balance of handling and power.

"The best thing about the M10 for me in this car," said de Silva during Northern California's Classic Sports Racing Group season opener at Infineon Raceway in April 2011, "is that it's virtually indifferent to what gear I'm in. This engine has so much torque that, apart from the hairpin here at Turn 11, there's almost no place where I actually need to use second gear. Most of the time I can run the entire track in fourth and fifth gears."

Last year's rain-plagued CSRG opener was disappointing for de Silva and his Elva, which then wore race number 9. But 2011's opener was awesome, de Silva's performance in Race Group D unmatched. First he took pole with the Elva-BMW, now wearing 96, then took the win ahead of veteran Carl Moore's very quick Lotus 23B Twin-Cam and young Danny Baker's super fast Lotus 27 Formula Junior.

Even more impressive was de Silva's race with the Elva-BMW at Laguna Seca during last year's Rolex Monterey Historic Motorsports Reunion, where he finished third in a 32-car Group 8B field.

"That was probably the most thrilling race I've had in the Elva," de Silva says. "On the grid, there were several [5.0-liter] Lola T70s behind me and a McLaren and a T70 in front of me. I was able to get up to second place in Turn 2, but the T70s are really hard to keep up with on the straight at Laguna. Two of them got by me, and I was lying in fourth until I was able to get by one of the T70s on Turn 5 in the middle of the race. Then he tried to pass me going into the Corkscrew and spun out because that car is considerably heavier than the Elva. I was

able to get up to third and hold third until the end of the race."

### Beating the big-engine cars

The only two cars ahead of de Silva's 2-liter Elva at the checkered flag were the 5-liter Lola T70 and 5.7-liter McLaren M1B, while his mirrors caught sight of six more over-5-liter cars.

"With our combination of the Elva Mk.8 and the BMW," de Silva tells me in retrospect, "we were probably three or four seconds faster than any other 2-liter car in that class."

What makes de Silva's Elva-BMW so strong against equal and frequently bigger machines? First, his car gets top-flight attention and race prep, plus new tires whenever fresh rubber might make a difference. With his Elva's period aerodynamics and wide footprint, it really sticks. That, along with having more horses, allows him to carry more speed into a corner than a Lotus 23B, though the smaller 23B probably has a higher top speed. "At Road America, where I've run against Lotus 23s, I've noticed they have more top end," de Silva affirms.

When I ask de Silva what he *doesn't* like about this car with its M10—and also his BMW M12-powered, Italian-built Osella—he laughs. "The only thing I dislike about them is the cost. On the scale of engines, they are relatively expensive to maintain, but they run a long time between rebuilds, which is a good thing."

It's to be noted that this Elva Mk.8 has a "Nerus" BMW M10—Nerus Engineering of Sussex, England provided engines to Elva and also made a number of components that

facilitated fitting the M10 four into the Elva chassis at a different cant from how the engine sits in BMW road cars like the 2002. Nerus also made new intake and exhaust components, along with the oil pan, front cover, distributor drive and valve cover. The installation is cool to look at and is a perfect fit within the Elva's engine bay.

### A thoroughly analytical driver

While our subject foremost here is this racing machine, let's nonetheless take a closer look at Harin de Silva himself.

De Silva's father, who flew in the RAF, was a British car aficionado. "I grew up in Sri Lanka living motorsports through the magazine pages of *MotorSport* and *AutoSport*," de Silva tells me.

He worked as a mechanic for a Ford dealer before leaving his island nation to study mechanical engineering at Britain's University of Manchester. He hoped to become a designer of automobiles and their engines, at least until he realized that, in his words, "ninety percent of engineering jobs were about maintenance."

Deciding on a career in what he calls "financial engineering," de Silva earned a graduate degree in finance at the University of Rochester in upstate New York and a PhD from the University of California at Irvine.

"I work for an investment firm that specializes in quantitative strategies," says de Silva, noting that he commutes on his BMW R1200GS motorcycle and refreshes aboard a zippier K1200S. "I'm an engineer at heart, so part of what I do is trying to build mathemat-



ical models to figure out what's actually 'in the market.' The engineering aspect is trying to figure it out and is for me the real thrill, similar to the thrill I get from racing. You have an instrument and you are trying to figure how to go the fastest way possible with it.

"It's why I spend so much time analyzing the race track, analyzing telemetry, working on set-up, trying to make a car go faster. Using TrackMate [a timing software that divides the race track into multiple sectors] is for me one of the keys in understanding how to set up a car better and understand how to go faster, because the most expensive thing about vintage racing is seat time."

## Two BMW engines: one production, one pure race

An hour after his victory with the M10-powered Elva in the 2011 CSRG opener's Group D race, de Silva was into his Osella with its 2-liter M12 engine, ready to take on the Group F cars from the later "wings and slicks" era of sports racers and open wheelers of the 1970s.

Drnek, who bought the 1978 Osella PA-8 in Italy and eventually sold it to de Silva, compared the two BMW motors.

"The M10 block is the basis of the M12," Drnek explains, "and it's an iron casting. BMW never made an aluminum Motorsport version of that engine. In fact, that block is so durable it was the same basic block used in the 1,200-hp turbocharged 1.5-liter engine. People who throw rocks at the M12 say, 'Well, it's 30 or 40 pounds heavier than a Cosworth BDG. My response to that is, 'Yeah, but the BMW will be

**De Silva calls himself a "financial engineer," and he takes a methodical approach to vintage racing, using the latest data acquisition systems to improve his own performance and that of his 45-year old Elva. He also races a 1978 Osella with BMW power from an M12 four, the same engine used by BMW in touring and formula car racing from 1968 to 1981, and aerodynamics that represent a generational advance from the Elva's curvaceous bodywork.**

running at the end of the race.' To look at one of the M12 engines internally is like opening up a very large wristwatch—it's all gear drive in the front, no belt drive like a Cosworth."

De Silva continues the comparison. "The newer Osella is very different from my Elva that came from the pre-aerodynamic era. The Osella has a ton more grip, and its BMW engine is very similar in that it has a really wide power band with lots of torque, but it's probably a little more peaky than the M10."

Nonetheless, he was disappointed with his



PHOTO BY KYLE BURR



result with the M12-powered Osella at Infineon in April. A car switch in his Group F race ruled him to start in back, and he failed to make it to the front. But he'll have other races at which to practice with the Osella before the Monterey Reunion this year, and another opportunity to show its potential.

"For me," says de Silva, "the biggest thrill of vintage racing, apart from just the driving, is experiencing the differences between an open-wheel car and a closed-wheel car, but also the different eras. At this year's Infineon

event, I drove my Lotus 11 Team Car from 1958 and the Elva from 1965, and then from the late 1970s there's the Osella. To see the evolution of technology over the 20- or 30-year period is one of the real thrills of vintage racing. It's hard to experience that in one day anywhere else."

Cars like these inspired Harin de Silva to dream of designing automobiles and their engines, and now they inspire reverie for the experience itself.

"You can actually drive the car in the way the designers intended," he says, smiling. 🚗