The Cursed LeMons Spider

Many of you in New England know this car, it was raced in LeMons for quite a few years there. I bought this car a year ago, moved it out West, and having just gotten it to the first ever finish of a LeMons race, I was asked by a former team mate to put together a quick write up. At the risk of refreshing some potential painful memories for some, or perhaps even a lawsuit or two, I’ll try to provide a little background, then I’ll go into our experience with the car.

This car started it’s LeMons life as a purchase by my good friend Jim Scutti. Jim purchased the car from the widow of a guy who had big plans for it, more on that later. Given the history of the car until recently, this is where the ‘curse’ probably started. Jim formed a LeMons team with some of my old Scuderia Limoni team mates, and set out to build the car. They poured a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into it, but at every race something seemed to go wrong, without fail. Blown up motors, flywheels falling off, wheels falling off, etc etc, the list goes on and on. Eventually it proved to be too much for the team, and they disbanded.

Not to be deterred, Jim pulled together another team. They poured even more blood, sweat, tears, and money into the car, with similar results. At every race, something would happen. After a year or two of continued misery, this new team disbanded, and finally Jim threw up his arms and decided that not only did he want nothing more to do with the car, but it would be best if the car went as far away as possible.

I was in the middle of building a LeMons Berlina, so the thought of a ready to go race car to enjoy in the mean time seemed appealing. After all, it seemed like they’d sorted out pretty much everything, and the car had a ton of good parts on it, so what could possibly go wrong?

Jim shipped the car December of 2018, and neither of us thought to have him drain the water (LeMons doesn’t allow you to run with coolant in the system), so somewhere during the cross country trip ice formed. When the car arrived in sunny California everything seemed ok, so we set about addressing the issues Jim had listed, and signed up for our first race. As part of the deal, Jim flew out to join us.

The car started to show it’s colors as we were loading it on to the trailer. I’d removed the access cover for the ECU, and when I put it back there were 3 screws that came out and 4 screw holes. So I screwed the 3 screws into 3 random holes, and made a mental note to get another screw for later.

Of course, now the car won’t start. Worse yet, some of the wires are smoking! We device to load the car into the trailer and head over to Tom Sahines’ house. Some of you may know Tom, he’s renowned for his gear lightened transmissions, but he’s pretty much a master of anything Alfa, long time AROC Tech Advisor, and most importantly, he’s somehow agreed to lower his standards and race LeMons with me out here on the left coast.

We unloaded the car at Toms house, futz around for a while, then finally Tom figures out that the reason there were only 3 screws is because the 4th screw hole is directly above the 12v input for the ECU. And yeah, we’ve melted all of those wires by connecting that 12v to ground with the screw. We finally get that sorted out, and notice a little steam coming from the cylinder head, but write that off to rain droplets falling on the motor. Oh, if only we’d known..

We pack everything up again and take it to the track. Still some things to do before tech inspection in the AM, eventually we fire it up for tech, and that steam is getting worse. Whatever, we run it through tech, bring it back, and that’s when we notice the crack in the cylinder head from that cross country trip. Ugh.

Now, normally on a Friday afternoon at a LeMons race, you’d be kind of screwed, but when you’re Tom Sahines and you call somebody, people tend to pick up the phone. Larry Dickman, of Alfa Parts Exchange, came through in a pinch. He dug up a replacement head, and promised delivery of not only that head but a complete head gasket set, for Saturday AM. Fantastic! We pulled the car into the trailer to escape from the rain, and set about pulling the head off the motor.

The head showed up Saturday AM as promised, but it took all day to prep it and get it back on the motor. Damned Bosch Spiders, the intake support mount thwarted us for hours! But eventually we got it on, changed the clutch master and slave in hopes of solving some shifting problems, and called it a day.

On Sunday, the car seemed to run fine, but it still wasn’t shifting right. Damn, this was a freshly rebuilt transmission (by Tom), this wasn’t right. Whatever, we could get it into 3rd gear, we raised the rev limit, and decided to use the track time to get everybody a little seat time and make a list of things to do. Jim went out for one last stint, and when it started raining and he didn’t come back in, I feared the worst. And I was partially right. He didn’t crash, but the motor did throw a rod. Ugh.

Went to Toms the following weekend to pull the engine and transmission. Found some missing bellhousing hardware, not sure if it fell out or just wasn’t installed, but the good news was that the transmission was just fine. Got a replacement block for the motor, Jim graciously sent us another prepped cylinder head, and Tom reused as much as he could from the first bottom end to build another LeMons grade motor.

We signed up for Buttonwillow in the fall. Went there with our normal 3 person team, everything was looking good. Tom went out first, spent his stint trying to keep the revs down while breaking in the new motor, came in after a couple of hours smiling. Could the curse be over? Not so fast..

Our next driver David went out, and 45 minutes later drove back in, the engine steaming. It had overheated and blown a head gasket. Arghhhh! Well, at least this time we don’t seem to have broken anything, and we have a head gasket set with us, so we figured the r&r would go much quicker this time.

Pulled the head quickly, determined everything was ok, got everything cleaned up and head back on, then couldn’t find the damn master link for the upper timing chain! We spent hours looking for it, scoured the trailer, car, and surroundings with magnets, nothing. Tom would later claim to find the link in the sump, but I think he just said that because he knew I’d be staring at the floor of the trailer every time I set foot in it otherwise. Anyhow, we ended up sending David on a 4 hour round trip to Fresno to fetch another link from a friend of Toms, while Tom and I buttoned everything else up that we could.

Sunday morning we installed the new link, buttoned it up, then I got in for our first stint. The car had trouble starting, then stalled near the hot pits. Towed it back, Tom got it running again, and I went out for a lap. Sadly, as soon as I put my foot in it, I saw clouds of white smoke coming from the exhaust. I didn’t need the resulting black flag to tell me to come in. We ran a compression test, and there was no compression on #2 and #3. Weekend over.

During the tow back home, Tom and I worked out a plan. We’d drop the car and trailer at my house, I’d pull the motor the following weekend, bring it over to Toms, and he’d see what happened. By the time we got to my house those plans had changed. Tom was pretty angry, told me to just get out, he was taking it home with him. I’d come to his house the following weekend to help pull the motor.

On Tuesday, I got a call from Tom, the problem was broken pistons between the rings on a couple of the pistons he’d reused from the original (cursed!) motor. Ok, so I guess you don’t need my help pulling this motor this coming weekend. No, but come over anyhow..

I went to Toms house the next weekend, my task was to help him remove every single wire from the car. Right down to the fuse box.

Now, it’s about this time that I remembered something. Some of you readers might be aware of a trend among some Spider owners to replace the stock tail lights with four round ones, Ferrari style. Well, our deceased original owner of the car, way back when, had gone to the trouble of replacing the rear valence panel with one that could house such lights, and at some point I’d actually measured the holes and bought some round LED tail lights, thinking it might be kind of cool to install them.

Could this be the root cause of the curse? Did we have some pi$$ed off former owner, frowning down on us from above, not being able to rest in peace due to unfulfilled dreams?

Tom laughed at me. But when I showed up with the tail lights, and the car didn’t have a single wire in it, he dropped whatever the heck he was doing to help me install those damn tail lights. They were the first component in the new wiring that worked! And I’ve got to admit, they look kind of cool. At a minimum, there would be very little risk of us ever getting rear ended.

Tom rewired the rest of the car from scratch, including all of the ECU wiring, new connectors for all of the sensors, etc.

This time, we had the luxury of bringing the car to an AROC Southern Cal track weekend at Laguna Seca to break things in. Much better than showing up at a LeMons race and jumping right in for 8 hours of flogging. That weekend went beautifully, so I brought the car back home to change the fluids, give it a good once over, and load up for the season finale at Sonoma.

Sonoma. Eater of race cars. Our beloved #75 Milano ended it’s life here a couple of years ago, punted into a wall. What better setting to break this curse in? Rain was predicted all weekend, so we were anticipating a lot of carnage, and not really looking forward to the driving. An open car, even with a cobbled together carpet ‘top’ over your head, can be a miserable experience in the rain.

I got elected to run the first stint on Saturday. With a 15 gallon fuel cell, and no fuel gauge, we had no idea how far we could go, but we figured that with these conditions we should be able to manage 2-1/2 hours. Well, the car ran flawlessly, aside from what appeared to be some ECU sensor perhaps getting wet and sending it into full rich mode every once in a while. I came in at 2-1/2 hours smiling, this was my first real trouble free drive with this car. David got in and did another maybe 3 hour trouble free stint. At this point our radios weren’t working, which is probably a good thing. From the paddock we noticed that we were actually in a fight for first place in class C, on the same lap, and if our driver knew it who knows what might have happened. Ha! While this was going on I was getting messages from what seemed like anybody who had ever driven the car cheering us on. Tom ran stint #3, and we finished the day either first or second in Class C. Again, I was swamped with congratulatory messages, as though we’d won something half way through a race weekend.

Our driving order Sunday remained the same. We had an extra hour of racing, so based on our fantastic fuel consumption the day before, I was to take a 3 hour stint. It rained for 2 of the three hours, so we consumed less than 10 gallons of fuel. Thrifty! It’s always amazed me how efficient these Alfa motors are, our 3.0 V6 used to consume maybe 4-5 gallons per hour, we watched Honda teams consume 5-6, and some of the American V8’s were in the 10-12 range. This little 4 banger was shaping up to be just as efficient.

Anyhow, David jumped in for his stint, and after a single lap we got the report that he’d been punted off the track at high speed at the end of the main straight. Holy crap! Had we in fact not beaten the curse? David drove the car in under it’s own power, the driver of the other car fessed up, we pounded out a little fender damage, and 12 minutes later he was back on track. Shaken, but not stirred. At this point we’d dropped to third place, maybe 6 laps down.

The rest of his stint went flawlessly. We picked up a position, and when Tom got in for the final stint we were in second place. The remote crowd was going wild.

And there we finished. Four laps down from the Class C winner, which works out to 11 minutes or so. But for that one incident, we were right in the running. Not that we would have won, the car that won the class was pretty fast, and surely would have beaten us in a drag race. But there we were, curse over, second in class, thirty first overall out of 135 cars, on one of the tougher tracks to race on.

Tom likes to think that it was simply a matter of keeping things like rods and pistons inside the block, and making sure that 12v and ground don’t cross paths too often. While I know that there is some validity to his hypothesis, I know from years of owning Alfas that cars do in fact have souls, and you’ve got to respect that.

Ongoing, if we have half of the success and good fortune with this car that we had with our Milano, it will all have been worth it.