A Long and Very Varied Link with Ford

By Roger Houghton

My touch points with the Ford brand, its products, and the company itself have been many and varied over a period of many decades.

It all began in my early years, in the 1950s and '60s, due to my interest in cars in general and motorsport in particular. I vividly remember going to Steyns Garage in Pretoria one Saturday morning in 1960 to go for a test drive in the new Anglia with the 997cc overhead valve 105E engine which replaced the ageing Anglia and Prefect sedans with their stodgy 1 272 cc side valve power units.

The new Anglia's inward slanting rear window was a real showstopper and source of heated discussion among the motoring cognoscente. The spritely engine was a big plus and the airy and spacious cabin made the car most appealing. Sales boomed.

At the time we did not know the potential of this short-stroke power unit or the extensive line of derivatives that followed – like the BDA and BDG versions – that would leave their stamp in many motorsport disciplines for years to come. Ford became increasingly dominant in racing from Formula 1 to sports cars, saloon cars, single seaters (Formula Ford) and even Castrol Clubmans.

My personal motorsport interest and where I was an active competitor was rallying. Here too Ford was prominent, first with modified standard engines and later with beautiful-sounding power units developed for motorsport.

The opportunity to attend a once-off national race at Fisantekraal exposed me to another icon in the Ford stable. The drawcard at this race meeting was the first appearance of the much-publicised Lotus Cortinas in the Western Cape.

Drivers were Basil van Rooyen and Koos Swanepoel, who subsequently spent many years as the fiercest of competitors, with both retaining Ford links for many years of head-to-head racing.

After that, I was a huge fan of the Lotus Cortina and followed its successes in overseas magazines. It was out of my price range though, but I would happily have settled for a related Cortina GT. However, that was also too costly for a cadet journalist.

My heart went out to Ford at the 1965 9 Hour race at Kyalami, when the beautiful new GT40 made its debut in South Africa. Peter Sutcliffe and Innes Ireland seemed on course for a fairytale victory.



But it was not to be as the GT40 slowed markedly in the closing stages and this allowed the Ferrari 365 P2 of David Piper and Richard Attwood to overtake them with only two minutes of the nine hours remaining. The reason for the GT40 slowing was a freak one – 65 spokes in a Borrani wire front wheel had broken. Heartbreak for all Ford fans … including me.

While at the Pretoria News I was also occasionally called on by the Business Editor to cover a motor industry-related event. This saw me in Booysens, Johannesburg, one evening to attend the unveiling of a rolling road dynamometer at Basil van Rooyen's Superformance car tuning business. The Ford link was that Basil had a highly modified Anglia on the dyno for the demonstration and how impressed we all were as the roaring car pulled at the restraining straps, while the engine was taken through the gears at high revs.

My second major new model launch, now wearing my new Motor Editor's hat was the Ford Fairmont. It was a swish occasion with a drive to Swaziland and overnighting at the Swazi Spa.

This was a very fluid period for the South African automotive industry as more of the overseas source companies came under intense political pressure to withdraw from the country.
Sigma, which at that time consisted of Chrysler, Mazda, and Mitsubishi saw this as an opportunity to expand and added the Peugeot and Citroën brands to its ranks in 1979, as well as, for a brief time, Leykor, British Leyland's South African subsidiary.

Sigma briefly became Amcar in 1984, when Anglo American took full control of the company as several of the brands in the Sigma stable left South Africa (Chrysler, Peugeot, and Citroën) and Leykor returned to its assembly plant in Cape Town.

The next step came only a year later, in 1985, when Amcar merged with the Ford Motor Company of Canada to form the South African Motor Corporation (Samcor), with Ford holding 42% of the new entity.

The merger was a busy time for all involved with many Ford employees moving from Port Elizabeth, where Ford had been part of the city's fabric since 1923, to Pretoria where its current operations are located.

For some of us it was the second time we had to go through a merger. I was again one of the fortunate ones to be retained in the new setup and joined the new Samcor Public Relations Department with Dirk de Vos looking after the Ford side of the PR operation.

Once I had retired, in 2007, I started a new working life as a motoring journalist and, as you can imagine, it was not long before my path crossed with a Ford new model launch. I went to several Ford new model launches, including the local introduction of the second-generation Ford Ranger, a local Fiesta launch, and overseas Focus and Mustang reveals.

The Focus event was in the United States and here I had the opportunity of visiting the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. Unfortunately, it was being refurbished at the time, but it was still very impressive for museum-mad Roger to see the history of Ford through the ages, including the beautiful Lotus Ford that Jim Clark drove to victory in the 1965 Indy 500.
The Mustang celebration in Barcelona in 2014 included a pan-European media conference. It was a real highlight in my career as I got personal, one-on-one interviews with Jim Farley, then Global Vice President of Marketing and Sales and now President of Ford Motor Company, Stephen Odell, President of Ford of Europe, Middle East and Africa, and well-known designer Martin Smith.



Before we left South Africa, Rella Bernardes gave me the option of an interview with one of them. I selected Jim Farley. What made this special was that there were about 400 journalists at the briefing and when the one-on-one interviews began there were few takers, so I got the opportunity to interview all three of these VIPs. On each occasion I went right on chatting with them until the "final whistle blew" after 20 minutes. What a pleasure and a privilege.

My involvement with Ford expanded into a media release writing contract for a Johannesburg public relations agency in 2017-2018, which meant I was often back on the site where the roots of my career in the South African motor industry had been planted.

It is amazing to see what Ford South Africa has done in vastly expanding the scope of operations that take place on a site that once had sufficient open space for a private plane runway and vast areas which included a test track that the local motor clubs used for gymkhanas and rallycross racing. They were memorable days.



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