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Nigel Cass seated in his 1975 Merlyn MK 29 race car at his parents' home in Hampton, where he restores vintage race cars with his father, Mason. The Casses will race in the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix in July.

# FOR THE LOVE OF SPORTS CARS

A passion for racing and restoring cars unites two father and son teams during the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix

BY MARYLYNNE PITZ  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

On the refrigerator in Chris Longo's kitchen is a picture of a 2-year-old boy taking apart a toy. Now 46, Mr. Longo still takes apart his toys. They just happen to be sports cars.

Various models of MGs dot his Verona driveway

and garage. A fierce competitor, he has spent the past 30 years restoring the British sports cars with his father, Vince, a master tailor who customizes interiors in leather or vinyl down to the contrasting piping on the upholstery.

Billed as "the sports car America loved first," the sensuous MG was the first sports car imported into the U.S. from Britain in the 1940s. U.S. Air Force pilots





Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

Mason Cass, left, with his son, Nigel, display their Formula Ford series race cars, a LeGrand 1982, left, and a 1975 Merlyn MK 29.

especially loved the boxy model with fenders that resembled motorcycle fenders. The MG gave pilots a seat-of-the pants thrill because of its sharp handling, Chris Longo said.

The Longos call their business MGBClassics. Chris Longo will drive for the third consecutive year in July at the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix, the only race in the nation where competitors race vintage cars on city streets. This year's events are set for July 8-17, ending with races in and around Schenley Park ([www.pvgrp.org](http://www.pvgrp.org)).

MGBs have been a hobby since he was 16. Design and details are part of his educational DNA because he earned a degree in graphic design from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh in 1992.

Chris Longo's business partner in MGBClassics is his Gateway High School classmate, Jon Leslie. Four years ago, Mr. Longo restored Mr. Leslie's 1971 MGB Roadster, the same car the two buddies ran around in during the 1980s.

In 2014, Mr. Longo drove a Tartan Red 1968 MGB GT in a preliminary race before the Vintage Grand Prix. He did lots of measurements and modifications to bring the car up to race specifications, replacing the windshield, gaskets and doors, and upgrading the brakes.

Then, a few weeks before the race, one of the rods that holds the four pistons broke with a bang and a thump. It left a tennis ball-sized hole in the engine block.

"It was so gut-wrenching," Mr. Longo said.

Waiting to compete until the next year was not an option. So he pulled the engine out of a 1974 MGB he had bought in Ohio. When he realized that the drive shaft would not fit into the car he wanted to race, he had it shortened at Pittsburgh Drive Shaft in Lawrenceville.

Once it was installed, Mr. Longo said, the car started running "fast and lively," and he was able to compete. He's never looked back.

In July, he will race the same car, emblazoned with a sticker that reads "Carpe Viam," which means "Seize the road." Now, it has an engine more suited to racing.

"The car has to look as good as it runs, and run as good as it looks," Mr. Longo said.

Also competing in July will be Mason and Nigel Cass, a father and son who began racing 11 years ago in auto cross events at North Park. A 62-year-old glass furnace engineer, Mason Cass lives in Hampton. His 29-year-old son lives in Sewickley.

"He just beat me the first time out," said Mason, who grew up in Brands Hatch, Essex, a bastion of British racing. —





Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

← After immigrating to the U.S. 27 years ago, the elder Cass found that he could indulge his passion for cars and racing because it was far more affordable here.

At the Grand Prix, Mason will drive his LeGrand 1982 race car and Nigel will compete in his 1975 Merlyn MK 29.

The duo are members of the North Hills Sports Car Club. Despite their British roots, the Casses prefer racing Fords, an American make. The open-wheeled Formula Ford was created in the 1960s to train young drivers all over the world to compete in Formula One races. The car had a Ford engine but the bodies were made in other countries.

"Nigel wanted to start hill climbing. I tried to put him off it," his father said.

Nigel was undeterred. Behind the wheel of a 1965 Beach MK 5, he won the Pennsylvania Hill Association championship twice. He has raced in Canada, Germany, Watkins Glen, N.Y., New Jersey, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Competitive racing has taught him to push his limits, Nigel Cass said.

"With the right knowledge and the right tools, anything is possible."

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Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

**Top:** A look under the hood of a silver 1974 MGB GT.

**Above:** Chris Longo at work on his 1968 MGB GT.

**Below:** Chris Longo racing in his 1968 MGB GT at Schenley Park.



Vince Longo