Look out, world, here comes that crazy American!

AROUND THE WORLD ON A GO-KART

I gritted my teeth and kept moving. He didn't shoot! I looked back. The Hungarian soldier had left his machine gun and joined his buddy in the middle of the road. Both used flashlights the better to see the strange souvenir I had presented just seconds before—an imitation American cowboy badge, bought in Germany and made in Japan.

Twice again that desperate July evening, Hungarian border patrols popped out of the rain and darkness, flagged us to a halt and demanded passports. We complied like Boy Scouts, but always pinned inside was a fresh, new badge which they always noticed and immediately fancied. After I explained its great value in sign language, I unhooked the badge, placed it in outstretched hands and indicated that it was theirs. They would always grin, quickly return our passports and wave us on.

That cajolery avoided long inquisitions and saved valuable time we desperately needed. The primitive cobblestone road which led from Budapest to the frontier had nearly shaken my go-kart to pieces, forcing us to drive at a snail's pace. But after the cloudburst, which filled the road with water, mud and cow dung, the going was hopelessly slow. But we couldn't stop, even though we were soaked to the skin and shattered by fatigue.

Our visas expired at midnight. We had no choice; we had to keep going. We had to get out. Otherwise, we'd be stuck illegally behind the Iron Curtain. How did I get in this mess in the first place?

On a bet—for a cup of coffee.

It was January 1961. I was working as a cartoonist and knocking out funny drawings for a big ad agency. There were no complications, that is, not before that fateful coffee break. While standing around the coffee machine, a group of cartoonists got into a heated debate.

"None of us will ever see the world until we're sixty-five, and we'll probably have to do it in a wheel chair at that!" said one.

That bothered me, and I protested, "You can do whatever you want, if you want to badly enough!"

One thing led to another. The upshot was a bet. I was to prove my point by driving a go-kart around the world. The prize? A cup of coffee (with sugar and cream).

Before I realized what I'd done, the whole gang down at O'Henry's knew of the bet, labeled me Phineas Fogg, and burst into whoops of laughter whenever I told them that I was serious. That did it!

I quit my job; promoted a go-kart from a Long Island manufacturer; built a small, plywood trailer to carry a few things; found a carefree karter named Bill Davis who wanted to travel, and bought a one-way ticket to Italy.

I proudly waved good-bye to my challenger as the Yugoslavian freighter pulled out of the Brooklyn docks. But once out of his sight, I wondered, "What lies ahead?" How was I to know that I would spend three years, traveling 38,000 miles through twenty-nine countries, before I'd taste that cup of coffee?

In Genoa, Italy, I got my first taste of karting. I had never driven one of the things before. Bill explained the

BY STAN MOTT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

RIGHT: Mott used ships for hops across Atlantic and Pacific oceans, English Channel, Sea of Japan. BELOW: *Making like Larry the Arab, Mott clowns atop kart in middle of Sahara.*

COLOR PHOTO BY CHARLES PETERSON, COURTESY "KARTING WORLD" MAGAZINE


PRESIDENT MADISON
MICHIGAN
GL·4777
WATER WONDERLAND
Lambretta

controls then followed close behind while I soloed—over sixteenth-century cobblestone streets. After five minutes, I stopped. I had to. The short ride on that springless little monster left me with jumbled vision, ringing ears, disrupted nerves, and a definite pain in the back. I stared at the kart in disbelief.

"Drive around the world—on that? I'd be lucky to make the city limits!" I mumbled.

I was all for quitting at that moment, bet or no bet. An excited crowd had gathered and was asking, *"Gira el mundo? Gira el mundo?"* I explained it was all a big joke and that I was returning to America on the next ship.

Then Bill asked sarcastically, "What with?"

I was thunderstruck—we were nearly stone broke! Frantically I turned my pockets inside out. I found $1.65. The Italians thought *this* was great humor and howled with laughter. But fortunately for us, members of the Genoa kart club were *sympatico*. After a huge Italian lunch, they gave us the name of an influential friend in Turin. They said he would help us if we could drive the eighty miles to that northern city. With nothing to lose except $1.65, we thanked them and set out.

By some miracle, we escaped the cobblestones and the wild city traffic, but not the two policemen on the motorcycle and sidecar who pulled us over. "Impossible!" they shouted frantically, pointing to the little vehicles.

TOP: Uniformed Japanese schoolboys admire kart which had previously tied up Tokyo traffic for an hour. RIGHT: *King Hussein, an avid karter, invited an American to a local race where the around-the-world-weary vehicle finished last against souped-up sheiks.* BELOW: *"I don't know what is that you drive," one Egyptian said, "but it never replace camel."*

COLOR PHOTOS BY VICTOR ENGLEBERT

ABOVE: Wearing smile that got him help, handouts and girls around the world, Mott was photographed at World's Fair Unisphere at end of trip. BELOW: Serious skids on dirt roads were constant danger.

VICTOR ENGLEBERT

LEFT: He was first to cross dreaded desert traveling in tiny, chain-powered kart.

AROUND THE WORLD IN A GO-KART *continued*

We tried to explain. The excitement attracted a large crowd, which for some reason, chose to argue our case. Our best defender turned out to be a burly, 250-pound artist named Caesar. He could shout loudest and therefore won the argument. The police left, defeated. Our champion was pleased and insisted that we should eat with him—a second gigantic Italian meal!

It was after dark when we left that little restaurant. *Pasta ascuitta* was coming out our ears, and Caesar, who had downed at least a hundred Camparis, felt no pain. He was singing grand opera. We broke in to inform him that our karts had no headlights and we would have to sleep there for the night.

"*Niente!*" he roared. His Fiat 500 had enough lights for us all; we would drive to Turin immediately. Together. Otherwise, he would be insulted. We set out—on the wildest ride of my life.

It began slowly. I went first because I owned the only pair of goggles. Bill followed close behind and Caesar brought up the rear in his Fiat. But not for long; last position was a disgrace. Soon he was alongside, laughing and pounding the door with his free hand. I quickened the pace to get in his light beam. I felt a bump from behind as Bill pulled up close to keep me in sight. Wherever I went, he followed—on or off the road. Caesar speeded up, passed us and cut in front. I gave my kart full throttle and tried to pass him, but once I was alongside, he roared with delight, and pounded the door again. His maneuverings kept us in the center of the road, and oncoming traffic missed us by inches. . . . I felt the hot blast of exhaust as it passed!

But all this was tame stuff (*Continued on page* 92)

ABOVE: Indian snake charmers found trailer of kart ideal for cobra come-on. ABOVE, RIGHT: Refused permission to take kart on English roads, Mott disguised it with cardboard, told bobbies it was secret government project. RIGHT: Kart is landed after sea voyage. BELOW: Poor roads behind Iron Curtain caused this accident, one of about a dozen on three-year trip around world.

AROUND THE WORLD ON A GO-KART

Continued from page 32

compared to the frenzied moments when we were blasting through small villages and towns. "Foot on the gas! Lean left! Watch that bicycle! Hard right! Dodge those people! One-way street! Pull a U!" And all the while Bill was doggedly on my tail, not six inches back.

By ten o'clock, the wild ride over, Bill and I sat grimy, terrified and exhausted, on the floor of Caesar's Turin studio. But not Caesar. He was in high spirits and broke open a bottle of chianti to celebrate.

"Are we not alive?" he shouted. It took some minutes for this fact to sink in, but when it did, we laughed, and laughed, and laughed. The whole stupid business was *fun!* I forgot about quitting.

We got in touch with the influential friend of the Genoese karters. With his help, our karts were completely rebuilt to cope with European roads. Rugged Lambretta engines were installed and, most important, headlights were added.

We put these roadworthy karts to good use during the next five months and toured the length and breadth of Italy and France. We never had more than a few hundred lire or francs in our pockets and the police did stop us occasionally, but we never went hungry or lost our karts—that is, until we crossed the Channel.

"I say, you can't drive those things in England!" said the Dover customs officer.

"But in Italy and France . . ." we protested.

"Oh, those silly Europeans! Let's see your road insurance. Do you 'ave it?"

"Well . . ."

"I thought so! Teddy! Alphonse!" he shouted. "Impound these 'ere bloody things!"

Two burly gentlemen in blue uniforms appeared, and proceeded to push our karts toward a warehouse. Bill rebelled. He said he would leave on the next ferry if they would return his kart. They agreed. After a short good-bye, Bill left. I was tempted to follow, but the English had thrown down the gauntlet; I was determined, somehow, to drive my kart on English roads.

I hitchhiked to London and spent two hectic weeks trying to get insurance. But no one, not even Lloyds of London, was interested. The BBC thought my kart would make jolly good watching on the telly. They paid the Dover customs a few shillings to bail out my kart, trucked it to London and presented it on the Cliff Mitchelmore program. But the publicity did not help my plight, or give any hope. I figured I would be doing well if I could only drive the ninety miles back to Dover and the Channel ferry. But how? The ever-watchful bobbies would nail me the moment my kart touched the highways.

The answer came when dining on fish and chips with an astute American named Carl Bonner, in a Wimpy hamburger joint. "Disguise it," he wisely said.

And that we did. It took eight hours, using masking tape and mat knife to transform an old TV box into a makeshift sports-car body. We fastened it to the kart with bits of wire coat hangers, painted it with dark gray primer, and hand-lettered DANGER—EXPERIMENTAL on the side. It looked something like a tiny rocket sled.

Carl wished me luck, and by three a.m. the next morning I was under way. All went well at first. Providing I didn't stick an elbow through the fragile body which felt something like a large, baggy overcoat, I'd be all right. While passing through the dark streets of East Croyden, I spotted a lonely bobby walking his beat. Here was the test; I stopped and asked directions. Without batting an eye, he gave them, then politely asked what I was driving.

"Experimental," I said, "Government project, you know."

He nodded solemnly as if he understood, then gave a brisk, "Carry on!"

I did—as quickly as possible. I had to be in Dover and off the roads before dawn.

I might have made it, too, if it hadn't rained. But it poured for a solid hour. The cardboard body soaked up water like a sponge. It soon drooped soggily and began to flap in the breeze. When I entered Maidstone, parts had ripped off and left an ominous trail of wet cardboard on Route A-20. By Folkstone, the body had nearly disintegrated.

By the time I reached Dover, it was daylight and two bobbies spotted me. They raised their nightsticks, signaling me to stop. I didn't. The younger of the two gave chase on foot. Within minutes, I had raced up the ramp and inside a Channel ferry. Not a second too soon! The gates slammed shut, the ship's horn gave a blast and we moved slowly out to sea.

By December 1961, the cold European winter had been left far behind and my kart bounced over the rough tarmac roads of Morocco. The Sahara Desert lay south and I wanted to find out if a kart would cross it as easily as a camel. In Marrakesh, I stocked up with extra supplies: auxiliary gasoline cans; a goatskin water bag, and a cache of survival food (donated by GIs at nearby Benguerir SAC base). But the most useful item (which came cheap—after three hours of haggling) was an Arabic *galaba,* a hooded, loose-fitting robe, perfect for karting, as I soon found.

The Frenchmen in the Marrakesh Kart Club gave a farewell dinner, for, as they put it: "A man should have at least one last good meal before being lost forever in the Sahara."

With this happy thought in mind, I set out early the next morning. By nightfall, I'd crossed the rugged, snow-capped Atlas Mountains and spent my first night on the Sahara. It was freezing cold. But the blazing morning sun changed all that, and by ten o'clock, the air was so hot it seared my lungs. The heat didn't faze the kart and it steadily ticked off the miles, carrying me deeper into the desert. The landscape was flat, endless, barren and desolate. But wherever I stopped, a smiling Arab on a donkey would pop' up out of nowhere. They were always polite and were fascinated with my kart. When I was stopped by tire trouble, I would give away the ruined carcass as a souvenir. The recipient would always bow and praise me to

Allah because Arabs can make fine sandals and water bags out of used tires.

I had traveled through Quarazazate and Tazenakhte, and stopped in Taroudannt a week later. I was resting in a café after a hard day's drive, watching the crowd fussing over the strange little vehicle at the curb. A military Land Rover pulled up and an officer beckoned me to get in. He explained that the Moroccan Minister of the Interior had seen the kart and requested that the owner join him to share a dinner of *cous-cous*. It was a fascinating evening, tasting Moroccan delicacies in a plush country villa and listening to the minister, a brilliant man with total recall, recite Moroccan history from beginning to end. All this, just twenty-five miles outside the Sahara Desert!

My goal for summer 1962 was Moscow. By March, my kart was back in Europe and sliding dizzily over icy roads in the Swiss Alps. I stopped in the village of Arth-Goldau and staggered into a restaurant to thaw out. Now, I suppose my appearance *was* a wee bit peculiar, wearing that *galaba* and with a sweater wrapped around my head to keep my ears warm. Anyway, a group of circus performers at a table inside howled with laughter when they spotted me. They thought I must be a sort of free-lance clown. We struck up a quick friendship, and I soon became a member of the Stuy Family Circus, playing everything from a comic Arab to a genuine American cowboy, who chased Swiss-German Indians on a go-kart.

By June, the weather had warmed, my pocketbook was fatter, and I was speeding toward Russia. But not alone this time. Christine, an equestrienne performer, had quit the circus and was following close behind me on a motor scooter. Our tour of Austria was rich and wonderful.

But there was trouble to come. Entering Hungary was no problem; the border guards certified our three-day visas, checked our luggage in moments, and let us pass the steel barriers without delay. But the road to Budapest was rougher than the tarmacs in the Sahara, and we were exhausted when we arrived in the Hungarian capital.

It seemed that we had hardly met the friendly Hungarian people, who cautiously spoke of the heavy life under Communism, then later helped us tour the city, before we had to leave. While saying good-bye, I found the Hungarians loved American cowboys. For souvenirs, I passed out a boxful of cowboy badges I had used in the circus act. It was six p.m. before we finally started toward Austria.

We slid to a muddy stop parallel to the Hungarian customs house and sprinted up the stairs with passports in outstretched hands. We were late. It was twelve-thirty. Inside, we stopped short; before us lay an incredible sight!

"*Mein Gott!* Forget the cowboy badges!" Christine whispered. The room was in a shambles. Vodka and schnapps bottles were strewn about on the floor and propped against an old writing desk were two customs officials in crumpled uniforms. They were dead drunk!

From a back room came shouts and laughter. We entered cautiously and presented our passports to three officials sitting around a table covered with empty glasses. They fell silent, stared at us, then at our passports. It took a full minute for them to realize that an American passport lay before them.

Suddenly, a big peasant type jumped up, pointed at me, and said, "*Amerikan! Ahh, Amerikan!*" Then he jammed a thumb at his chest and roared, "*Kommunist!*" He staggered forward and put out his hand as if to shake mine.

When I responded, he viciously grabbed my arm and tried to jam it behind my back. I jumped back and freed myself from his grasp. The other officials laughed, but the bartender, who was sober, tried to intercede. He was shoved back and the big peasant official assumed a boxer's stance. He wanted to fight! East versus West, and deadly serious!

I backed against the wall. The other officials realized things had gone too far and tried to stop him, but too late. He cocked his arm and charged across the room, my chin the target of this mighty John Wayne-type blow. I ducked. His fist crashed against the wall. He staggered back, gasping for breath. He was finished—as were our chances of escaping from Hungary, I thought. The other officials grabbed the damaged peasant-type and ushered him to a cot.

The bartender acted just as quickly, but to our advantage; he scooped up our passports, raced into a small side office, reappeared seconds later and led us swiftly outside. He showed the soldiers that our passports had been stamped, then returned them to me saying, "Go! Quick! Kommandant break hand! Tomorrow big trouble! Go quick!"

The steel barrier was raised. Go-kart

and scooter were started and jammed into gear. In that last instant, I shoved a cowboy badge into the bartender's hand and thanked him.

He smiled, jabbed a thumb at his chest and said, "No *Kommunist!*"

Within a month, we re-crossed the Iron Curtain. This time, in Warsaw, the Russian embassy denied us visas to enter the USSR. Only if we paid them $22.50 a day and traveled on their trains would they allow us entry. It was too expensive for travelers like us, so we spent the next eight months in Western Europe.

We didn't know a soul and were down to our last drachma when we arrived on the island of Crete. It didn't matter; the friendly Greek peasants accepted my kart as a calling card, and we were soon adopted by a family of grape-pickers who lived in the fields near Nea Alikarnosis.

During our three-month stay, I put the kart to work: weekdays it served as a small truck as I transported people and tools and grapes to and from the fields. On holidays, like New Year's day of 1962, it provided entertainment. I drove to the village square, loaded the trailer with squealing youngsters, then put-putted around the fountain while a hundred laughing kids (and adults) chased us on foot. For reasons known only to Greeks, they were thrown into fits of ecstasy by blasting us with rapid-fire water pistols.

It was an invitation from another kart enthusiast, His Majesty, King Hussein of Jordan, which prompted our departure. The king thought it would be splendid if I could drive down to Amman and join the Friday-afternoon fun at the races held on his private course. We quickly accepted. Christine and her folk-singing sister, Micheline, who had joined us in Athens, jammed all our gear into the ancient VW Chris had picked up on our last swing through Switzerland. With the trailer empty, the kart could just manage to keep up with the girls as we zoomed toward Asia Minor.

The March 8, 1963 revolution in Syria closed the Turkish-Syrian border and forced a two-week lay-over in Istanbul. Turks love entertainment, so we were soon performing nightly at the plush cabaret, Cati, as comic folk singers.

When the revolution settled down and the borders reopened, we took a fat roll of Turkish pounds with us when we sped southward.

It was a Friday afternoon when we pulled into the hilly city of Amman and telephoned the Royal Palace.

"Oh, yes, yes!" said the voice that answered, "You must go immediately to the airport kart track. His Majesty will be expecting you!"

He hung up. We had been on the road for two days (and nights) straight, and we looked it. We couldn't let our grimy appearances offend the king. We had to clean up—fast!

I don't think the startled desk clerk at the Continental Hotel ever really realized what happened to him. Three grubby foreigners in levis dashed in, shouted, "Meeting the king!" and "Showers! Showers!", raced upstairs, rushed down again a few minutes later—clean—yelling, "Thanks a lot, buddy!", then sprinted out the front door, gone forever. We were waiting at the airport kart track five minutes later.

The caravan of military vehicles and King Hussein's white T-Bird soon appeared. The king was set for a day of racing, attired in gleaming white coveralls and sneakers. He exuded enthusiasm, and as soon as he spotted us he flashed his famous winning smile and extended his hand. "How's the trip, Stan?"

I gave him a quick rundown before the conversation drifted to sports cars, karts, racing engines and racing in general. He was so well-informed, so casual, that I had to catch myself—make myself remember that he was a *king*. A whistle interrupted the talk.

"A race is starting," the king said, "Get your kart and we'll give it a go!"

When the flag dropped, I was off with the pack, and actually did keep up for a lap or two. But soon one kart after another came screaming up from behind and shot past. The king was up front battling for the lead. I saw him gaining in the corners, but he faded on the back stretch. It was a hard-fought race.

No, the king didn't win. An Englishman employed as an airport baggage inspector did. Hussein won two races later that afternoon, but only because he was a damn fast driver.

Diplomacy evaporated in the heat of competition during those races, but it returned after the race for the benefit of losers like me. The 24,000 miles on my kart did nothing to help make it a winner: I always came in dead last. Some diplomats from the embassies downtown, completely professional when they were not dicing with the king, came over to shake my hand. They said I had done remarkably well, considering the rotten, miserable, dilapidated condition of my machine. I felt pretty good about that, so I gave them cowboy badges.

We toured Jordan and saw the wondrous sights of the Holy Land: Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem, Petra, the Dead Sea.

In Kuwait, Micheline packed her guitar and hopped a plane back to Europe. We sold the Volkswagen at an Arab *harag* (auction), and bought passage to India with the proceeds. The only ship available was the *Dwaka,* a British-operated, rusted-out, wallowing, flat-bottomed hulk.

Bombay was hot and humid. Christine mounted the trailer, and we set off to try to cross India.

It was no go. After a hundred miles, we decided that the extra weight was too much for the worn-out kart. The primitive roads brought on breakdown after breakdown. In Poona, Christine slid off her precarious perch and took a train for Madras, where we decided to meet later.

I kept to the roads with the kart, alone. It seldom stopped raining, and it didn't matter when it did. The hot, muggy air refused to let things dry. My clothes rotted on my back. Roads were washed away. In the villages, after dodging the sacred cows, the sacred monkeys, the sacred rats and the throngs of non-sacred people filling the street, I'd stop and rest . . . or try to. But I couldn't escape the curious mobs engulfing the kart.

After I met Christine in Madras, we took a ship—clean, this time—to Japan. The Japanese road police were most alert and stopped me regularly, although they couldn't figure out what to do with the kart afterward. I would present them with every document I had, from a youth-hostel pass to a Parisian metro-ticket stub, then in loud, clear, precise English I'd ask, "Care to drive it, sir?"

The policemen would look terribly uncomfortable, and beat a hasty retreat on their super-fast motorcycles.

By April, 1964, we were in Los Angeles. I knew that American cops, unlike their Japanese counterparts, would know perfectly well what to do about a go-kart. I also had a slight problem: my kart had *never been registered or legally licensed.* The three plates I used while driving around the world were either given to me by friends or made up out of cardboard. I had bluffed or cajoled the foreign police and had always gotten by. But America? Drive an illegal vehicle across 3,500 miles of highways infested with the good men in blue? Impossible!

I tried to get the kart registered. The clerk at the California Motor Vehicle Bureau just laughed at me. I wrote the governors of three states, requesting special plates so that I could cross the country. The answers were polite—and negative. So I nailed on an old Swiss plate and started east on good old Route 66.

The action started ninety miles out of Los Angeles. A highway patrolman stopped me in San Bernardino.

"Dad burn!" he said. "I perty near swallered my gum when I spotted this!"

It costs very little money to drive a go-kart across the United States. (I spent only $17 for gas), but it sure does take a stiff investment in time. I spent at least forty-six hours joking and pleading with police officers who stopped me: How do I know that? I was stopped forty-six different times—that's how I know! I only crossed eleven states, but not one missed me. It seems a miracle, but they all let me go without tickets or fines or a trip to jail.

I arrived back here in New York City exactly three years, four months and one day after the journey began. My kart was scheduled for exhibition in the Cavalcade of Cars at the World's Fair, and I had an important appointment with a publisher who wanted a book about my adventures. But first, before all else, I had to meet a certain friend down at O'Henry's. He asked whether it was all worth it. I picked up the cup of coffee he had just bought me, took a long, slow sip—and smiled. • • •