

a man who puts 'em together

# KAS KASTNER

*According to the "students of human nature," when a man crosses his arms in front of his chest he's supposed to be covering up. Kas Kastner leans back in his desk chair, plants his feet on the edge of his desk and crosses his arms. Then he unloads and answers any question you ask him.*

**by Kyle Given**

Kas Kastner, Competition Director, U.S., for Triumph sports cars, is tall, angular and a perfectionist. His imposing size and glowering demeanor have led many people to consider him irritable, or at least, unapproachable. For Triumph owners across the globe, nothing could be more ridiculous. Kastner takes pride in making his techniques and findings instantly available to anyone who will pick up a phone or write him a letter. He takes further pride in dispensing with the technical gobbledygook so prevalent in how-to-do-it manuals.

Kastner, his crew of mechanics, Jim Coan and Bob Avery, and his driving teams, have taken a relatively unsophisticated product, the TR series of Triumph roadsters, and built a racing image second to none in the world.

"Where else," asks Kastner, "can a man get into racing, on a competitive basis, for such a small expenditure of cash?" It's a good question. There's a good answer. Kastner puts all of his years of experience with Triumph into a series of manuals published by the Standard-Triumph firm which, if followed to the letter, will allow any Triumph owner to build a potential sports car racing class winner.

"I don't hide anything," Kastner explains. "Anything at all," he reiterates. "I have no super secrets saved for the team's usage. It's all in those manuals."

Kastner picks up a copy of one of his manuals, opens it carelessly and begins to read, "Camshafts, valve springs, keepers, carburetion, jetting, plugs, gapping, gear ratios, suspension, bearings; you name it,

it's in here." He puts the manual down. You can tell he's pleased. Not proud, pleased.

He defines his approach to engineering. "I'm an empirical engineer." The word "hot rodding," injected into the conversation draws a response. "Yes, it is hot rodding, to a small degree, although we like to think we take it somewhat further. We'll mill a head and then mill it some more and then mill it some more — until the point of diminishing returns." Some of Kastner's Triumphs have roared away when the green flag fell with 14-1 compression ratios. Some of Kastner's Triumphs have blown, but not many.

If Kastner seems to have one of the sweetest jobs in racing, he's earned it. He's paid his dues. He's also taken a few chances lesser men might not have taken.

Kastner spent some time in Colorado with the Army during the second World War. A native of upper state New York, he received his discharge in the West, and in his own words, "wandered around for awhile after that."

His first venture into the sports car field was a small repair shop in Salt Lake City. "It was the only sports car repair shop between San Francisco and the Mississippi," he smiles, "You might say we got some transient business. It was mostly MG's and Jags in those days."

Kastner eventually wound up in Southern California, working for Triumph, under different distributorship, and began racing. He became a regional champion, his cars being obviously so much better prepared than those of his class competitors that he was soon running a thriving modification busi-

ness in his home garage. About that same time, Triumph sales zoomed in the Western area and Kastner found himself in charge of getting the cars ready for the dealers following their voyage from England.

"We did everything in those days; paint, upholstery, and body work as well as tune-ups and general new car get-ready."

"About that time, Triumph got serious about racing and I was appointed to run things." It was a little hectic.

After running things, seemingly everything, for too many months, Kastner got his dander up and resigned, going with Shelby-American for a few hours, literally, until Triumph and he got together and reconciled their differences of opinion on how many hours existed in a single day.

To the casual observer, Kastner's pace hasn't slacked overly since he has more or less limited his duties to racing. He still works more hours than most men and works at twice the rate of speed most men consider sufficient.

Kastner writes it down in a cluttered office which resembles Fibber McGee's closet. Almost hidden away on his desk by the stack of letters from foreign countries and renderings of camshaft configurations, reposes a tape recorder into which Kastner intones his findings over a period of weeks, preparatory to setting the work to paper. What might be six weeks of experimentation comes across in six minutes of tape, Kastner's voice sounding alternately tired or jubilant on the re-play.

A tour of the Gardena Triumph facility reveals an almost overwhelming amount of equip-

ment. all of it either belonging to Kastner or built on the premises by him. The newest addition to the shop area is a dynamometer room, next to Kastner's office which will shortly be converted to a flow bench facility.

The dyno incorporates several interesting features which Kastner designed into the project. There's an interesting note glued to the glass of the rev counter. It reads, "Don't rev engines above ten thousand. Glass will crack." The glass on the tach gauge is cracked. Evidently, Kastner's empirical approach to engineering extended to checking that hypothesis also.

Kastner's personality creeps into the picture time and time again when talking to people about him. Being a perfectionist, a self-made perfectionist, is a burden in itself. But Kastner has a way of numbing the consciousness of those who first meet him. The general reaction from people who are only slightly acquainted with him is either intense dislike or hero worship.

Jim Dittmore (see "The Drivers" this issue) has been associated with Kastner for a considerable time. Dittmore doesn't, apparently, regard Kastner as a resident figure on Mount Olympus, but he obviously likes and respects the man. There's a great deal of warmth in his voice when he says, "One thing about Kas is that he's invariably right. Hell," adds Dittmore, "he's always right. I can't remember him being wrong. I can remember a lot of times when others expressed their doubts, but Kas proved to be right."

Then Dittmore adds the clincher from his point of view, "I'd still be nowhere if he hadn't taken an interest in me."

A few days prior to that comment of Dittmore's, Kastner was talking of his younger driver. "Jim is an outstanding driver. In the next few years, he's going to show everyone a few things." There's obviously a good feeling between the two. A good feeling based on the best of all possible bases, mutual respect.



One person to whom we spoke about Kastner remarked "He's kind of a taller Bob Russo," which doesn't really say anything to people who aren't acquainted with either figure, but says a lot to those who are.

One thing is certain about Kas Kastner. He isn't a hail-fellow, well-met syncophant. He has firm opinions backed up by years of experience. What he knows is available to anyone who will take the trouble to ask him.

Kastner goes the route in answering questions about making Triumphs go better.

In a stack on his desk are letters from many foreign countries. The top letter is from Czechoslovakia. It is written in the native language. Kastner cocks his head and a slight grin appears on his face. "Isn't that something," he asks. "Czechoslovakia," he murmurs.

Answering the obvious question, how are you going to answer that one?, Kastner says, "I send the let-

ter to the consulate for a translation and then I write the person an answer — in English."

Kastner works in close association with the Triumph office in Great Britain. He makes a few trips a year there and a possible direct result of one of those trips might be the new GT-6 spitfire fastback coupe with the six cylinder engine.

He's still awaiting final racing classification from the SCCA on the GT-6, but in the meantime, there's a six cylinder Triumph engine on a stand in Kastner's shop. Some Webers rest on their sides atop a nearby work bench. It should really be something, if the SCCA decides to fit the car into a reasonable class.

But, if the organization doesn't, Kastner will work some of his patented magic on the product, and it will be competitive. The rest will be up to the driver. That's the way Kastner likes it.