

Lola's Rivals: The Formula 5000 cars of Eagle, Talon and Shadow

by Wolfgang Klopfer

In 1974 British racing car manufacturer Lola launched the T332 model. It would dominate the American F5000 scene until 1976.

One of Lola's challengers was Dan Gurney's Eagle. Gurney's All American Racers team entered F5000 in 1974 with a new car which followed the lines of their successful Indycar design. The Eagle had an all enveloped body and looked aerodynamically efficient. Brett Lunger was AAR's no.1 driver. He regularly ran in the top five but often suffered from unreliable engines. In seven races Lunger scored a second, a third, and a sixth. It was good enough for fifth place overall. His biggest disappointment must have been at Ontario where Lunger won his heat and ran in a secure second place in the final until a crash with a backmarker put him out.

The second works car was driven by Elliot Forbes-Robinson who scored no points due to all sorts of mechanical trouble. At Laguna Seca F1 man James Hunt replaced him when AAR brought a new lighter and narrower Eagle. Hunt finished a very promising second.

Los Angeles Ferrari dealer Francisco Mir entered a private Eagle in 1974. Drivers were Argentinian Nestor Garcia Veiga (sixth at Mosport), Italian lady Lella Lombardi, Forbes-Robinson and John Morton (seventh at Riverside). In 1975 and 1976 the Eagle challenge faded when AAR continued with the ex-Hunt machine. The car had handling deficiencies and there were also many broken engines. First Bobby Unser and then Australian Vern Schuppan drove the lone works entry. Schuppan got a fine second in the inaugural Long Beach GP in 1975 and finished third in the opening round at Pocono in 1976.

New Zealand driver/constructor Graham McRae sold his GM2 design to American Jack McCormack who renamed it Talon MR1. The car sported a chisel nose and wide sidepods. The red Talons - driven in 1974 by McRae, Sam Posey and Jon Woodner - were fast but fragile. Observers noted their balance under braking and in high-speed corners. But an experimental gearbox and numerous engine failures badly hurt the reliability of the Talons. Their best results were a fifth and two sixths. At Ontario Posey impressed by qualifying within half a second of Redman's Lola. In the heat he led for some laps until Redman overtook him. In 1975 McCormack entered only one MR1A (with modified side radiators and a smaller airbox) for Australian Warwick Brown. Brown showed some aggressive driving in the Talon which was a more consistent finisher than a year before. A third at Mosport and five other top ten placings meant seventh overall for the Australian. At Long Beach F1 veteran Chris Amon made a guest appearance and scored a fine fourth place for Talon. Incidentally, Amon achieved the marque's only victory at Teretonga/New Zealand in a Tasman Cup race early in 1975.

Jon Woodner ran a Talon in the black colours of Interscope Racing without much success. His best result was an eighth at Riverside. In 1976 Sam Posey campaigned a Talon in the opening two races. Then the money ran out and that was the end of the Talon saga.

The Shadow was perhaps Lola`s most serious challenger. With generous backing from Universal Oil Products Don Nichols` team fielded a car for Can-Am champion Jackie Oliver in 1975. The long and sleek DN6 based on the Shadow F1 machine. Oliver took fourth overall in the championship. At Watkins Glen and Road America the Shadow ran particularly well and Oliver held designated champion Redman at bay for a while. The Wisconsin track saw also Oliver`s best finish. He was second behind Andretti`s Lola after a win in the heat. In the last four 1975 races Shadow used a Dodge engine which was somewhat heavier than the Chevrolet unit but had a better torque curve. F1 drivers Jean-Pierre Jarier, Tom Pryce and Jody Scheckter each drove a second Shadow at Watkins Glen, Long Beach and Riverside respectively. All three qualified within the top five but DNF due to mechanical troubles. Despite losing the UOP sponsorship the Shadow-Dodge combination was stronger than ever in 1976. Oliver led at Mosport with five laps to go when a backmarker held him up and Alan Jones snatched the win. Three weeks later at Watkins Glen Oliver had the race in his pocket until a cracked oil sump took him out. Finally, the Shadow won at Road America. But first Oliver had to overcome problems with a differential locker and a flat tire in the heat which put him 14th on the starting grid of the final. After 16 of 25 laps Oliver was up to third. Within further three laps he went past the Lolas of Al Unser and Brian Redman and that was that. Oliver then scored two second places at Mid-Ohio and Riverside and finished third overall in the final SCCA F5000 championship.