

Twice As Swift

Story by Craig Watson
Photos courtesy Russ & Paul Swift

Think of Mini stunts and the name Russ Swift jumps to mind, but there's more to the Swift name than one man, or Minis on two wheels.

Finding an opening to do the thing you really love on a full-time basis is one of the most rewarding experiences. For Russ Swift, that means throwing Minis around in circles, driving them on two wheels, and generally having a rip-roaring time, while being paid for it.

If you think many of the stunts look similar to motorkhana manoeuvres, you'd be exactly right. Russ had a history of autotests (the UK equivalent of motorkhanas), becoming British champion, and rallying before even considering putting on a show.

But his first competition experiences were far from glorious, as he reveals. "A friend of mine built a little Mini rally car, and I think I was the only one stupid enough to sit next to him as he threw it into the scenery on every occasion. I remember doing about eight rallies with him and we never finished one. We crashed every time. I realised that navigating wasn't for me."



Russ Swift with some of his team.

"I started navigating in 1968, when I was 17. I started autotesting in 1970, in a VW Beetle, but I soon changed to a Mini. The Mini is the best thing for that. So, I got sponsorship from the local Leyland dealership, and started to do the British Championship."

"I actually had quite a bad road accident in a Mini, and I found out that Minis aren't the best things if you're going to have an accident. Someone was overtaking on the brow of a hill and hit me head-on. I broke my fibula in seven places, broke my tibia, broke both my legs and my wrist."

"When I got back on my feet, literally, I got another Mini, a 1970 Cooper S, built a lighter-weight one this time, and started doing the British Championship again. Eventually, I was The British Trial and Rally Drivers Association Autotest Champion in 1982 and 1983 and The RAC (now called MSA) British Autotest Champion in 1982 and 1983."

"From that I got a Works drive for General Motors, in a Vauxhall Astra, to go rallying. I actually came second in the British Championship, and was sponsored to do international rallies, but by this time I'd started doing a few displays in the Mini, all the things that I'd do in autotesting, and I realised there was a demand for that form of entertainment."

Russ' first demonstration came about in 1981, when he won a rally in Sewden in his Cooper S. "I won the event, beat a guy in an Opel Cadet GTE, who had won it for very many years. At the end, they said 'we've never heard of you, what's your background, what do you normally do with this Mini?' So, I put on a bit of an impromptu display of spinning the car backwards and forwards. I got a real big round of applause, and I enjoyed it."

"Shortly after that I was asked by Dave Richards, from Prodrive, who's quite well known in motorsport. He's in Formula One now with BAR, but at the time he was sponsored



This is what Russ Swift is best known for.



Like father, like son. Paul Swift at the wheel.

by Rothmans. There was a rally local to us where they were having some corporate guests, and he asked would I go along and do some handbrake turns in front of them, to entertain them, until the rally cars came along. It went down really well, so he asked me to do a display again on the RAC Rally, in front of thousands of spectators. I put a bit more thought into it and it was very well received, and I realised at that point that there was a massive gap in the market for people performing the way I did."

Russ found there was so much demand for this type of entertainment, that in 1985 he turned to it full-time. Since then he has put on shows at every level, from club days to international film premiers, in a wide variety of cars. We caught up with him at the Melbourne International Motor Show, earlier this year, where he was demonstrating the Peugeot 206, but he still says there's nothing to compare with the Mini, except a new MINI.

"The Mini is the perfect thing for it. The old Mini was the ultimate car for my autotesting. For my displays in the past, there was nothing that could beat the old Mini and, to be honest, there is nothing that can beat the new MINI, as far as my displays are



Russ parks the Mini on BBC TV

concerned, especially the Cooper S. That Getrag box is very strong. A lot of cars, when you start doing what I do in them, you start to find weaknesses in them, but I've had three years' experience of the Cooper S and they're absolutely bullet-proof. The steering's pin-sharp. They don't have the suspension travel of the Peugeot, but that means they're far more stable, and the handling is fantastic."

Although balancing on two wheels has become a signature of Russ's work, he admits it took plenty of time to master the stunt. "When I started it was all the tricks I'd learned in autotesting, handbrake turns, reverse spins and all that. I hadn't done any two-wheeling, but I knew other people did do two-wheeling. I decided it would complement what I already did, so I decided I was going to master it. I spent three months rolling on my roof, until I managed to get the technique and I was confident in taking a brand new car and not putting it on its roof every time."

Russ' other signature stunt is hand-brake turning into a space just bigger than the car, between two other cars. In fact, he holds the World Record for such a manoeuvre. "I actually set the record about twelve years ago in a Rover 400. The first record was parking in a space 40cm longer than the car, then I broke it in the old Mini, in 1998, and I got it down to 35cm longer than the car. Then I did it again, with the old Mini, in 1999, and I got it down to 33cm longer than the car. I actually did it for the TV cameras, on BBC Linfords Record Breakers, and I did

it for them seven times, and didn't touch a car any time. But, you're pushing your luck when you get that tight. It's only 6" at either end. But, nobody has attempted to break it, so it still stands."

He also holds records for reverse-throws in the shortest distance (done in a Ford Escort Estate in Germany) and for doing donuts. "That was on 50 Years of Guinness World Records. I did ten donuts in sixteen seconds in a Mitsubishi Evo 8."

The idea for setting the parking record in the first place came from the award-winning TV advert in 1988, for the Rover Montego. Since then, Russ said he does "three or four" advertisements each year. "I've got one on the screen in the UK at the moment, where the cars are playing football, and there's one for Jaguar at the moment in the UK."

However, he hasn't been involved with any feature films, as he explained. "We do get involved with a lot of films, but not in front of the camera. We were actually asked to do the driving for the Italian Job, but I'm so heavily booked in advance, that I just couldn't spare the time to do it. But, I did the premiere in New York, and then in London, we drove the cars into Leicester Square and did a handbrake turn outside the theatre. We appeared on the Jay Leno Show in America, and showed how it was all done."

If you would like to read the rest of this story get your copy of The Mini Experience from your local newsagent, or subscribe today...



Performing in the US to celebrate the new MINI's first birthday.