

## A Midget Moment #2 – Bright Sparks

Points or Electronic Ignition? It's a highly divisive subject and most people believe they know what the right answer is. As I write this I can already hear people debating the answer! I think what's made it harder for new-to-classic car owners in recent years is the misinformation that is freely available via the various 'technical' forums on social media platforms 24 hours a day. Get a couple of 'experts' writing long, highly detailed technical answers using terms (amongst others) like spark density, pulse gradient, voltage wastage and switch time, or my absolute favourite reason ... "it never fails" and it's pretty easy to see how an electronic ignition upgrade for your humble A Series (or indeed any) engine is simply a must. I mean, who doesn't want a larger, brighter spark at the plug that will never fail? Sign me up! Sadly, it's not quite the case and, whilst elements of what is oft written online are true, the truth is lost in the chorus of misinformation.



I always grimace when I read posts that go along the lines of "... Hi everyone, I've just bought my first classic and it's a MG Midget. What should I do first? I was thinking about fitting EI as I read terrible things about points...". My usual response is always "... spend your electronic ignition budget on a brake/steering check and service and then with the change buy yourself a new set of points and a new condenser" (or something to that effect). Why you'd jump straight into installing EI before you look at the basics I don't know but I read it at least once a fortnight on one forum or another.

So, what is the right answer? Well, I'm not sure there is one actually. Owners form views like footy supporters and, to use a very old English saying, never the twain shall meet. And don't think the 'to EI or not to EI' debate is limited only to misguided forum talk. You'll hear it at club and register meetings in any car club. We've all heard at least one armchair expert who insist that they/you NEED a certain electronic system over a perhaps boring standard dizzy in, mainly, completely standard cars and its stated so believably that others listen and act.

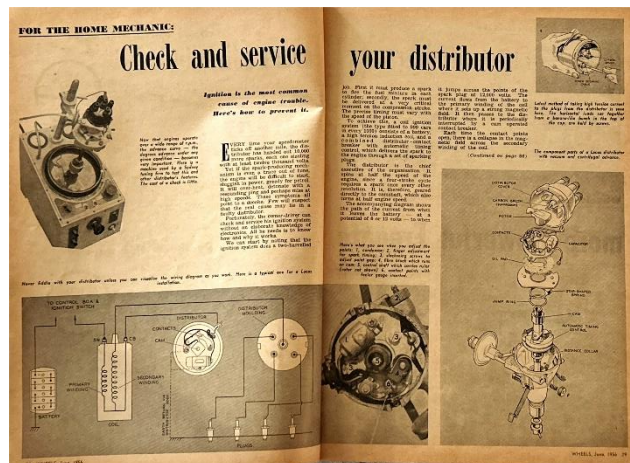
To be fair, this missive mainly focuses on the 'points replacement' systems such as the offerings from Aldon, Petronix, Accuspark and the like. As some will know, there full distributor replacement systems such as the Dutch 123 and the Australian Scorcher systems. These are fully electronic distributors with no moving parts and quite a different beast from the points replacement offerings. Very reliable, truly maintenance free but correspondingly expensive. Perfect for racing, where value for money can be measured in a 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a second but for normal road usage it's a little like hitting a nail with a knock-off mallet rather than an 8oz claw hammer.

My personal view is there isn't a correct answer as to which system to use, only personal preference and your budget. Perhaps consider my 'Ignition Manifesto' before letting the internet voices rule your decision and leap in wallet first.

### *Points vs Electronic Ignition – A 12 Point Ignition Manifesto:*

1. There is no correct answer. Only personal preference and budget.
2. For normal road use, EI is an expensive solution to a problem that possibly only exists in the mind of the owner (or a mechanic who doesn't like to service points!).
3. There are a lot more things you need to focus on first with an old car (brakes, tyres, suspension, steering etc).

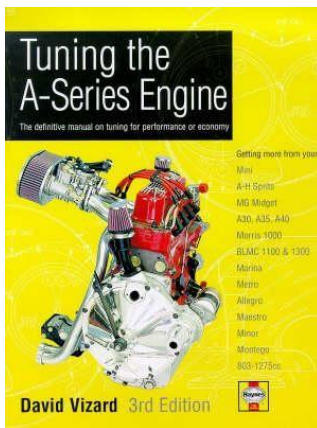
4. Don't be scared of the unknown. Servicing points is quite simple and learning how will build your confidence to tackle more complex repairs.
5. Never believe the claims of the electronic ignition manufacturer in terms of power gain. At most you will see 4% gain in power over points if all the stars line up. That equates to about 2hp for a 1275cc engine and less for the smaller variants. With many EI systems there is little to no appreciable power increase. Similarly, fuel efficiency claims on a 50+ year A Series engine are minimal at best.
6. EI systems fail to. Don't for a minute think its infallible and failsafe. Remember, the Titanic (and the Bismarck for that matter) was supposed to be unsinkable.
7. (One of my favourites) ... yes, points are going to work when it's raining.
8. EI costs 5 to 20 times a new set of points and condenser. You can buy a lot of wine/beer/single malt/coffee for the price difference and still afford a new set of points. Do the cost v benefit analysis before jumping in. If it stacks up, go for it!
9. Points are not 'prone to failure'. Any poorly maintained equipment is prone to failure and a poorly maintained system with EI is just as likely to act up as a Points set.
10. Remember, with a few (expensive) exceptions, you still need to service your distributor no matter what kind of system you install into it.
11. You can change both points and EI on the side of the road, but the spare set of points and a condenser in the glove box is only going to set you back \$10-\$20.
12. Your new EI might not be compatible with your 50+ year old tacho or other elements of your electrical system and may result in considerable additional costs.



In short, EI is not a magic bullet to solve ignition problems. A new set of points will likely equally transform a car. So, before you fork out for an electronic system, stop and ask yourself if you really understand why you are doing this or are you just falling for the online hype. Perhaps you do use your classic so often that an electronic system change stacks up. For many owners, I'm not sure what they are really achieving. My humble points set up will run me up the freeway to Murray Bridge at 110kph or through the hills holding third gear and 5000 revs just as well as the car ahead of me with electronic ignition. Maybe it's a safety blanket as many new-to-classic (and potentially not mechanically minded) owners who are scared of the unknown and that's ok. But equally, at least online, I find quite a few simply looking for bragging rights at the bar, "look what I've installed". We all know at least one person like this. In many instances EI is an expensive solution for a problem that could be solved with a 15-minute distributor service and fresh points. It can be as simple as getting into the habit of putting in fresh points when you replace the spark plugs.

My recent experiences with ignition systems? When I bought the Midget it had a 30+ year old 'Cobra' electronic ignition system fitted into an original fit Lucas 25D distributor with a standard advance curve; quite reliable and, so long as I kept the distributor weights and springs serviced, it was reliable and appropriate for the engine. After I rebuilt the engine the ignition advance curve didn't match the cam profile so I set about having new distributor built to match. Against my better judgement (and the advice of cam grinder), I fell for the lure of a modern electronic ignition system and installed the leading 'points replacement' unit into my new purpose-built distributor. It died within seconds of being fired up. Electronically fried. There is much made about the quality of modern condensers; sadly this argument should equally apply to modern electronic ignition units. A trip down to MiniSport for a set of points plus a spare set (\$35 all up) and the car has been up and

running ever since. The manufacturer, to their credit, sent me a replacement system but it's still in its box. The points have been installed for two years and this winter I'll pull the distributor and service the weights and springs and clean the points for another 2 years of use.



Looking for further reading? I highly recommend reading David Vizard's seminal work Tuning BL's A-Series Engine, a book that applies equally to the B Series in over 90% of his tuning theory. Interestingly, in a 475+ page book on engine tuning theory he devotes only 3 pages to electronic ignition systems.

But as I said at the top, there is no right answer, just personal preference.

As always, if you are A-Series curious and are looking for a technical outlet, feel free to drop me a line or pop along to a Sprite Club event and I'm sure we will set you straight.

I'd also like to put a date out there for MGCC(SA) members to pencil in – Sunday the 16<sup>th</sup> of July. We will be hosting the premier racing event of the year at Clive Spreadbury's ScalexWorld, the Sprite Car Club of SA Interclub Slotcar Championships (the SCCSAIS Championships!). More details to follow but if you have quick reflexes and fancy yourself as race car driver, put a team together, dust off your 1:24 or 1:32 scale cars and start practicing!