

Rule number one remains the same:

# Go with your heart

By Joe Sage | Photos by Randall Bohl

The Phoenix Automotive Press Association hosted an annual panel discussion on the state of automobile collecting and auction sales at the start of auction week, at the Arizona Biltmore, on Saturday, the eve of the third annual Arizona Concours d'Elegance.

Moderated by automotive journalist and author Larry Edsall, the panel of collector car experts included John Carlson, president and chief executive of the National Association of Automobile Clubs of Canada, long-time concours judge and chief judge for the Arizona concours; Don Williams, founder in 1981 of the esteemed Blackhawk Collection in Danville, California, which has some 150 of the world's rarest vehicles; Diane Fitzgerald, National Director of the Hagerty Education Program for LeMay—America's Car Museum, in Tacoma; and Dave Kinney, publisher of the *Hagerty Price Guide*, Accredited Senior Appraiser and head of USA Appraisal, which has been evaluating collector vehicles for over 25 years.

Mark Gessler—president of the Historic Vehicle Association (HVA), US representative to FIVA and spearhead of the National Historic Vehicle Register—was on the roster, but stranded in the East Coast's record-breaking monster snowstorm.

The attending foursome shared their insights about the state of collector vehicles and trends.

**Q:** *Arizona once had only what we now know as Barrett-Jackson. Fast forward 45 years, and there are six auctions, another due next year, and now a concours. How did all this happen from that little seed back in the '70s?*

**DON WILLIAMS:** We're lucky Tom Barrett got a divorce: that's the seed, one of the great moments in auction history. He had a big sale, and when he sold a T-bird for \$153,000, when the world record had been \$90,000, that was a shock that went around the world. Tom was one of my mentors, a very good human being. He was obsessive on the cars. When you build something so big there will always be other events—just like Pebble Beach, that was the opposite, nothing but a concours, then Christie's came in. Both grew with the same kind of growth. One started with a car show, one with an auction. With media and social networks, in the last 10-15 years it's grown more than in the first 30. Arizona is now a 10-day event, where it was a 3-day event, while Pebble Beach was a 1-day event and is now a 7-day event. RM, Gooding and Bonhams specialize in different types of car. But each has only a certain capacity, and it gets to the point where each feeds off the other. The world shrank. In 1991, nobody in

Japan knew what was happening here. I went to Japan and did auctions in 1991 and '92, selling cars for more than I could get at home but less than they'd ever seen in Tokyo. That can't happen today. The light switch is in one spot for the whole world. Many more people research, and many more are interested. We'll see what, 300-400,000 people here this weekend? Add zeroes to that. We have no idea how far this will grow.

**Q:** *Where does Arizona fit in the hierarchy?*

**DAVE KINNEY:** Pebble Beach is in August, kind of the official end of driving season. With Arizona in January, everything has kind of shifted to the South and Southwest, and to some extent to Florida as well. But by far the two biggest events are Arizona and Monterey. It's television. You can go into a diner in small town Texas, and someone will say, oh, I was watching that Barrett-Jackson show on TV last night. You have to explain that was from eight months ago, and the big news coming out now is different. But Mecum and Barrett-Jackson have amazing television presence, and that has translated into incredible awareness for classic cars and the hobby. Anybody who tells you the next generation is not interested in cars isn't paying attention. They might not want a '37 Packard, I get that. But they want that SVT Focus that has 85,000 miles on it, has a 6-speed and it's \$6000. They can afford it, and it's the collector car of the future. And if they stay with it, they may want that '37 Packard. Everybody thought the Brass Era would die, but now it's one of the hottest parts of the hobby.

(From left) Moderator Larry Edsall, John Carlson, Don Williams, Diane Fitzgerald, Dave Kinney.



**Q:** *When the judges are on the field, you're not just doing a beauty contest. Why does it matter whether a car is original and has period-correct parts, especially if its mechanical components don't affect how the car looks?*

**JOHN CARLSON:** What separates a really, truly sophisticated concours is a heavy emphasis on authenticity and originality combined with elegance. It's a very debatable topic. If you look at a show like Villa D'Este or a couple of other major shows around the world, that would be in direct contravention with what they suggest is proper. From my point of view—and I'm very blessed to be able to look after a number of concours across the US—I use the Pebble Beach model. They got it right the first time and have never wavered. So the Arizona show uses the 100-point system, 20 categories, five points a category, and at the end of those categories we have an additional three points for elegance or presence factor. We want something that's going to be really, really elegant, that's correct. If a Model A Ford is 100 points, and beside it is a mid-'30s Auburn, and it's 98 points. I guarantee the Model A Ford is not going to win, and I'm a Model A guy. The judges will take those three elegance points and attach them to the most elegant car. I make a real effort to bring the best judges from across North America into this concours, and you're going to see a very significant grouping of international judges. This has a lot to do with making your concours. If it looks like a foo-foo event, you are not going to see serious entries. Owners want to go where they know they'll be treated fairly and the judging is first class. It took me a year just to put the judges together.

**Q:** *How do you choose Best of Show?*

**CARLSON:** Only First in Class are eligible for Best of Show—special awards are not. To make a First in Class selection, I'd tell the judges: first of all, pretend this car you choose is going to be for you—you can never sell it, you're going to own it for the rest of your life, choose the car that fits into that category. That gives them some very different parameters. They're not choosing because it's worth a lot of money. They're not choosing a car that they couldn't drive. If you have a tie, just ask yourself which car you'd like to take home. It can't be for financial gain. And they always seem to make the right decision.

**Q:** *What feedback do you give owners on the judging of their cars?*

**CARLSON:** Absolutely none. That would be the kiss of death. We recommend owners join a club, go through its process, find out what's really wrong with your car, accurately, then when you bring it to the concours it should be ready and

Collecting panelists (top to bottom) John Carlson, Don Williams, Diane Fitzgerald and Dave Kinney had advice, questions to answer and stories to tell.

technically correct. In a concours, it's about presence and elegance. The number one thing I recommend is that everything on the car works.

**KINNEY:** If you get invited, that's winning.

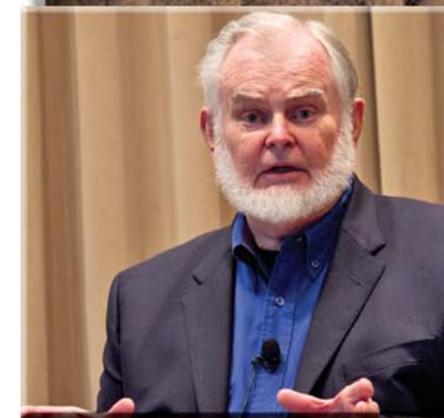
**Q:** *Why are judges told not to touch the cars?*

**CARLSON:** That's easy. Nobody touches the cars. It's Murphy's Law. If you want to see something go wrong, it'll happen right when the judge has his hand on the hood. Judges don't touch the car, don't sit on the running boards, don't sit in the car. They lean in to observe the instrumentation and those kinds of things. It's a matter of courtesy and preservation of the vehicle. If the owner allows the judge to do something, or asks the judge to do something, that's great. But if we're judging a vehicle and the owner isn't there, we don't judge the car in terms of opening the doors or the hood, we only judge what we can see. We give the owner time to come back, we'll judge a few more cars and move down the field, but eventually, if he's not there, that's as far as it goes. And in all likelihood, that car won't place.

**Q:** *It's one thing to own or show old cars, but last year, the HVA drove a 1915 Model T from Detroit to San Francisco, and recently, the LeMay took... well, Diane, tell us about this.*

**DIANE FITZGERALD:** We took a '57 Chevy Nomad, a '61 Chrysler 300G and a '68 Mustang, all from LeMay—America's Car Museum's collection, all red, to drive 3000 miles in the dead of winter—from Tacoma on December 27 to Detroit on January 9, with 11 stops along the way. The idea was to engage in communities, and stops along the way became as important as the driving. We encountered terrible weather, from Pacific Northwest drama through Colorado, and didn't see the light of day till Kansas. Our headlights were so dull, they were like those solar-powered garden lights. There were probably 20 drivers, codrivers, passengers and chase vehicles with the drive at any stop along the way. We got in touch with clubs of each of the marques, with members of the Museum and with schools. Part of my job is to find auto tech programs across the US at high schools, community colleges and junior colleges. We contacted grant awardees, interns and apprentices, the Museum having given money over the years in 29 states. We attracted 100 to 1000 people at our stops. The sense of community was astonishing. We usually drove 250 to 400 miles a day, stopping along the way with clubs, cars & coffees—just

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**Q:** *Do we store our cars too long for the winter, when we could drive them more?*

**FITZGERALD:** I guess our recent Tacoma to Detroit drive proves it.

**KINNEY:** Probably. We think of our cars as precious little snowflakes. I own a couple of cars that are nothing like that, and take them out in the winter. Even when it's cold, I like to drive with the top down. It doesn't hurt it a bit, and it helps it a lot. Anyone will tell you cars like to be driven, and they get bad when you don't drive them—that's when the problems happen. If you live in an area with winter weather, you can be weather-dependent, but I don't mothball them for the season.

**WILLIAMS:** At the museum, we can't exercise that many cars and do a good job of it, so we exercise them once a year. But cars are like humans—if any of us here lie down on the floor for a year, we're not getting up. You don't just take a car out of storage, stick a battery in it, turn the key and take off. Even if it's just been sitting three months, we fight gas, which eats up every part of your car. Tires have a shelf life. There are so many variables, you'd better figure out a system. I don't think there's any one rule for all of us.

**CARLSON:** I'm from Vancouver BC, with lots of salt on the roads. I often start my cars once a month, even if I just move them 10 feet back and forth. We're very blessed in Canada to have non-ethanol fuel. That's the kiss of death, it truly is.

**Q:** *You won the Powerball and want to start a collection, you come to Arizona, what advice?*

**KINNEY:** The reasonable thing is to leave your checkbook at home the first time. There are lots of good people, like Don, like John, who can guide you and help you. You need to educate yourself, and the education is almost free. Come to the Concours, see what you like. See what fits you. There are practical considerations—do you have a garage? But get an education about the vehicles. I don't mean just standing around talking to the people who are there. Join the club. Talk to the people who own the cars. Find out the high points and low points. Car collectors are some of the greatest people in the world. It's an education process that goes on and on, and there's not one person who can know it all.

**WILLIAMS:** You have hobbyists, and you have investors. You have people who come to the auctions with the same mentality they'd use to drop a million dollars in Las Vegas. There are different rules. If you love cars but aren't sure what each car is worth, take time and find somebody with a long term good reputation for helping build

collections. Educate yourself, but buy with your heart. Buy what you love. I have never really made a mistake with my gut, but all kinds of mistakes with my head, and I've been doing this for 50 years. We've blurred the line between investing and hobby. There's nothing wrong with your choice if it's what you want to do.

**Q:** *A new generation is entering the 40-to-60-year-old demographic that has dominated the hobby. Will they buy the Countach that was on their teen wall? Will pre-war be worthless? Should anyone be fearful of this change?*

**WILLIAMS:** No. Embrace it.

**KINNEY:** Most of us bond with an automobile between age 16 to 26, some younger and some older, and that's what you have to follow, if you're looking to invest in automobiles. You have to look to see what vehicle made an impact on those guys turning 40, when they were younger. The price of older cars doesn't fall through the floor—they stop appreciating, mostly. The old joke that a Model T that was worth \$22,000 in 1972 is worth \$22,000 right now pretty well tells the story. I'm a value guy involved in automobile value since the beginning, and I always think the value aspect should always be secondary. Buy it because you love it, buy it because you want it, buy it because you enjoy it and you have a responsibility to take care of it. The investment part is the icing on the cake, the foam on the beer.

**CARLSON:** Kids today, ballpark 16 to 27, are the most sophisticated you've ever seen in your life. Why buy an old Corvette, when they can buy something new in the Corvette world that is so technologically advanced? They want performance. Most really don't care about showing, at all. They want to go out and drive, participate in runs, it's a very personal thing for them. It's not like the concours world. They're not generally club-associated, unless it's a younger club. We're seeing a huge generational gap, no question about that.

**Q:** *With the generational shift, are you recruiting younger concours judges?*

**CARLSON:** That's one of my high priorities. Pebble Beach has a waiting list—you won't find new judges at Pebble Beach nor here. Canada is probably on the forefront for having a junior judging program. We started it in the late 1980s. Kids start at 12 years old and go to age 16. They go to two or three seminars a year and judge three or four times a year, with a mentor, a particular person to look after them from 12 till 16. They're judging in a team of three, and their votes don't count. When they turn 16, either I or a chief judge in the area interviews them, they move into a team of three, and then they go to work. My oldest son is

Collecting panelists (top to bottom) John Carlson, Don Williams, Diane Fitzgerald and Dave Kinney were a wealth of information not only for current collectors, but for a new emerging generation.

33, started judging when he was 12, went through that process, and by 19 had judged at least 10 major concours in North America and Cobble Beach Concours in Canada. As a 19-year-old, he was judging at a very high end concours, and an owner said you're pretty young to be judging—have you judged before? Well, probably over 100 times. Well, what's the most significant show you've ever been to? Well, that's easy—I've been to Pebble Beach 17 times. We really want to embrace the young folks, because they're the heart of the hobby. As Don said, you buy with your heart. And for my judges, I want them to judge with their heart, especially the chief class judges, who are now charged with choosing Best of Show.

**FITZGERALD:** I'm in the weeds with the next generation after the 40-60 generation. I have the story of a 21-year-old who had always liked hot rods and custom builds, but walked into a shop that had just brought in a Pierce-Arrow, which dazzled her like a piece of jewelry. One kind of car felt like home to her, while another took her breath away. They just need to be exposed to new and different things, and educated, and their choices will reveal themselves. The shift I'm seeing is a little different from what we're talking about here, going back 10 years to the bring-back-shop-class movement, after decades of hands-on education being mostly wiped out in high schools and vocational schools. I see interest by the 40-to-60-year-old car guys who are teaching curriculums in auto tech programs across the US, using restoration as part of the curriculum, interpreting a certain type of state-mandated curriculum in a particular way. Those are the kind of programs the Hagerty Education Program at ACM funds. They have car clubs, they're engaging the kids, they're creating clubs with younger people, all part of educating the 16-to-27-year-old enthusiast in very meaningful ways. The shift I'm seeing is a resurgence, a renaissance of an interest at state and municipal levels, an interest in putting money into programs like this. One barrier to some of these kids getting into automotive restoration and classic cars may be their very well educated parents who don't want a grease monkey kid. It's part of my mission now to whisper in the ear of guidance counselors and parents that this is an absolute career path for kids who have never been book students, but are hands-on students—and that there is an elegance to it. We're winning the hearts of parents who are relieved by that to a certain extent, and we're putting kids in the pipeline who are going to be stewards of all our cars in the future. ■

