

ARIZONA COBRA CONNECTION DOMINATES AT MONTEREY

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Carroll Shelby
1923-2012

A LIFE REMEMBERED...



Honoring Carroll Shelby at the 2012 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion was a decision made with some sense of urgency. Shelby had already survived three heart operations and was in his late eighties. Unfortunately, Shel did not live to see his remarkable Cobra sports cars run on the 2.238-mile Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca circuit. However, there were many famous Cobra drivers to stand in for Carroll. Among them were Dan Gurney, Bob Bondurant and Don Roberts. Bondurant and Roberts are legendary Shelby Cobra racers who live in Arizona.

In truth, Carroll Shelby did not achieve international fame entirely on his own. It took a snub from Enzo Ferrari to Henry Ford II to ensure Shelby's success. When Enzo let Henry II cool his heels for hours in his waiting room before their meeting, it sealed the deal for Shelby. Ford would not only not withdraw their offer to buy Ferrari, but Ford would also challenge Ferrari for the FIA Manufacturers' World Championship. Using Shelby's Cobras, Ford's engines and some very talented pilots—like Dan Gurney, Ken Miles and Bob Bondurant—Ford would defeat Ferrari in the 1965 racing season.

HONORING 50 YEARS OF SHELBY COBRA PERFORMANCE

In the mid-sixties, race fans enjoyed watching Bob Bondurant and Don Roberts dominate the competition with their Shelby Cobra 289 roadsters. Later, as an instructor for the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving, I learned why the Cobras were such formidable machines. They had awesome acceleration, excellent braking, and they flew off the corners as if they were shot from a cannon.

At the 2012 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion, forty of the world's fastest Shelby Cobras and their drivers descended upon the Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca circuit to determine who would be the "Top Gun" of Cobra vintage racing. The machines were obviously well prepared, as all but a handful made the starting grid for Saturday's featured race—an amazing feat, since some Cobras came all the way from the United Kingdom and Europe.

Who would win? The smart money would favor the fastest driver in the best-prepared car. Who might that be? Probably Mike McGovern, the Chief Instructor for the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving. Mike's car is owned by Jim Click, and its engine is prepared by Don Roberts of Phoenix.

As predicted, McGovern won the Saturday morning heat race. However, it was not an easy victory for Mike, as he had to fend off challenges from Jim Click of Tucson, Lorne Leibel of Canada and Rob Walton of Scottsdale. Unfortunately, Mike's Cobra developed some mechanical issues and would not make the starting grid for the main event on Saturday afternoon.

The question now became, with McGovern out of the mix, who stands the best chance to win the Cobra main event? Would it be Walton's #9 Daytona Cobra Coupe, Lorne Leibel's #81 Cobra roadster or Jim Click's #89 Cobra? As talented as Walton and Leibel both were, the odds slightly favored Jim Click and his 289 Cobra. Here is why: Jim Click and Mike McGovern have run together for years in endurance races, and much of McGovern's race craft has been transferred to Click. And, there was Cobra ace Don Roberts prepping Jim's car.



Rob Walton of Scottsdale leads the pack in his #9 Shelby Daytona Cobra Coupe, heading into Turn 4 at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, with Turn 3 in the background, during the 2012 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion.

While it took Jim Click a few laps to make his move, he passed Rob Walton for second place and set his sights on the race leader, Lorne Leibel. After pressuring Leibel for much of the race, Click finally assumed the lead and ultimately emerged the victor.

It should be noted that while Scottsdale's Rob Walton was in contention for the win, he went off-course in Turn 5 and was unable to continue. However, do not lament for Walton, because he was able to run in the very next race and was victorious in his Ferrari 250 GT.

Two victories for Arizonans Click and Walton in the main events, plus a win for McGovern in the heat race? Not bad. Actually, great driving by all three of the drivers with "the Arizona Cobra Connection."

ARIZONA COBRA CONNECTION

How did the Arizona Shelby Cobra drivers come to dominate the Shelby Cobra races at Monterey? Consider the following extraordinary circumstances.

Arizonans Mike McGovern and Jim Click each won their races in Cobras prepared by Don Roberts of Phoenix. Back in the day, Roberts raced the same #89 Cobra roadster that carried Jim Click to victory at Monterey. The #89 Cobra is considered the "Winningest Cobra in History," and it shows no sign of slowing down any time soon, especially with Roberts prepping the car.

Mike McGovern has also coached Arizonans Jim Click and Rob Walton at the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving. What McGovern learned from Bondurant about race driving, he has taught Click and Walton. Mike probably also added some moves of his own, which he learned while racing in the Grand Am and Mustang Challenge series.

Finally, what about Bob? Bob Bondurant is the Shelby American factory driver who clinched the FIA Manufacturers' Championship for Carroll Shelby back in 1965.

While Bondurant is also known for racing Corvettes, he is more famous for his remarkable success with the Shelby American Team. Bob knows how to drive Cobras, and what he learned about them was passed to McGovern.

It is interesting to speculate. If Bondurant had not relocated his driving school from Sonoma to Phoenix, would McGovern, Click and Walton be racing vintage Cobras today? Is it fate or merely a coincidence that all of these fast Cobra racers live in Arizona? Would the Arizona Cobra Connection even exist without Bob Bondurant's move to the Valley of The Sun? Probably not.

AZ RACERS IN OTHER CLASSES

While Alan Travis' ancient 1907 Renault Vanderbilt had little chance of winning the Pre-1940 Sports Racing and Touring Cars, his car was a crowd favorite. A massive machine with giant wood wheels, the Renault is quite imposing on the track. Alan lives in Phoenix.

While Scottsdale's Rob Walton won in the 1955-1962 GT Class with his Ferrari GT 250 he was unable to pass Terry Gough's Corvette Stingray with his Ferrari 250 LM in the 1963-1966 over 2500cc race. However, a first and a second place in three races is quite an accomplishment.

Mark Powell of Scottsdale finished mid-pack in the 1974-1980 Formula Atlantic race with his 1972 Mach 722. Considering that many cars in his class were eight years newer than Mark's March 722, this was quite a fine finish.

After winning the Cobra race, Jim Click finished eighth in the 1966-1972 Historic TransAm Car race. Craig Jackson of Scottsdale finished seventeenth. These were both excellent results in a stacked field of some of the fastest TransAm cars on the planet.

Barbara Blackie of Prescott finished sixteenth out of

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Monterey morning in the paddock. Rob Walton's #9 Daytona Cobra Coupe. Jim Click's #89 Cobra.

thirty-four cars in the open-wheel 1958-1963 Formula Junior class—a great finish, considering Barbara's 1962 Lotus' engine gave up a half liter of displacement to many of the cars in the race.

Bob Hardison of Phoenix, and Steven Hilton and John Muller of Scottsdale all tried to run down Don Orosco's 1958 Lotus 15 with their big bore machines. However, their big cars couldn't match the nimbleness and magnificent braking of Orosco's little Lotus on the tight Mazda Laguna Seca circuit. Orosco checked out early in the 1955-1961 Sports Racing Cars over 2000cc race and he left no forwarding address.

Scottsdale's Alex Curtis' 1955 Mercedes 300SL was undoubtedly the most beautiful race car in the 1947-1955 Sports Racing and GT class. However, David Swig's unsightly-by-comparison 1957 Monsterati Special took the win. Sometimes the true beauty of a race car is the power under its hood. Alex finished twelfth.

Scottsdale's Eric Edholm finished a very credible fifth in the 1981-1989 FIA Manufacturers' Championship Cars. Considering that the top three finishers were all former professional race drivers, Eric did a remarkable job.

In the 1961-1966 GT Cars Under 2500cc race, Phoenix's CH De Haan had a good qualifying time; however he had mechanical problems in the race.

Congratulations to the Arizona vintage race drivers who competed in the 2012 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion. Thanks for the great show.

RMMR RACING EXCITEMENT

Compared to 2011, this year's races at Monterey were a big improvement. Outstanding participation by the Shelby owners and close competition in the Cobra race had much to do with this. Of course, it was risky for the drivers to run their million-dollar Cobras on the race track. However, they drove them as they were originally intended, which is to say very fast. Fortunately, there was relatively little damage, and certainly nothing their owners could not afford to fix.

We also liked the fact that Monterey had two classes of Pre-War race cars this year, rather than just one. The older and smaller race cars ran in one class. The newer and more powerful race cars ran in the other. Last year, both of these classes were combined, and it made for some very tense moments for the owners of the fast and priceless grand prix cars as they overtook the older, slower cars.

In 2013, the Chevrolet Corvette will be the honored marque at Monterey, so we expect the featured race to be just as exciting as this year's contest. If you are a Corvette fan or if you just want to see the best vintage racing in America, make your plans now to attend the 2013 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion.

Ticket and event information for the 2013 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion:
www.mazdaraceway.com

Hotel and area information for 2013 Monterey Car Week:
www.monterey.com

