

“They’re just out there for fun”

The Vintage Auto Race By Darin O’Dell

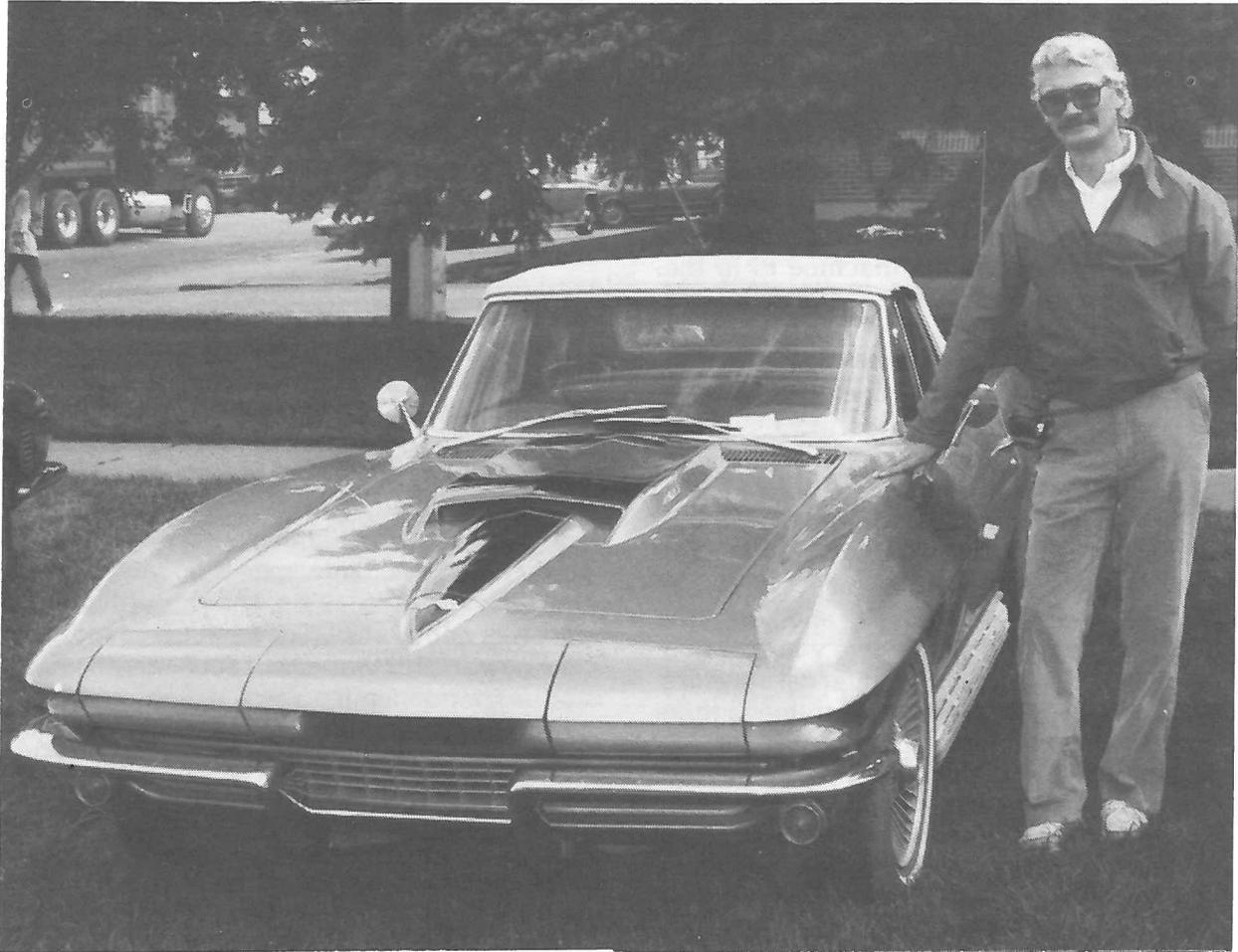


Photo: Portfolio Collection — Steinberg

Cars, cars, cars! That was what I saw when I first entered the pit area at the second Steamboat Vintage Auto Race. Many of the cars that I saw might have been in the first race back in 1955. The large selection was astounding, everything from Alfa-Romeos to Triumphs. It was a motorhead’s dream. The kind of event I had wanted to see all of my life.

The smell was invigorating, gas, oil, exhaust. The sounds were exhilarating — from the low rumble of the Ford and Chevy big-block 427’s to the shrieking scream of the Ford Shelby Cobra’s 298 small block, from the V-12 Ferrari’s canvas ripping engine cry to the 4 cylinder Mini-Cooper’s shrill wail. The shiny gleam of the chromed engine compartments and the bright sheen from the flawless paint gets a little bit of motorhead gas and oil running through one’s veins. I got a chance to interview Ed O’Brien, a man who used to race motorcycles, and who organized this year’s race. I also met and interviewed Bob Martin from one of the teams that participated in the event this year.

Ed O’Brien started the interview by telling us how he got the race organized. “The idea for the race came out of the community committee meetings. I guess it was mine. I had, two years ago, put together a proposal for an individual by the name of Stephen Earl who puts on the Laguna Seca race, which is the granddaddy of them all, at Pebble Beach. I had proposed to do a street race in Steamboat because we already had done motorcycles. John Worcester thought up the idea of road racing motorcycles up here, and that is good, but to build on it, you have to have something else, and there is more interest in automobiles than there is in motorcycles. At least, that is what I perceive. Both will work for Steamboat, but I think the automobiles are something more viable. We went to vintage automobiles. The main reason for the vintage autos is safety, and the glamour, you have both. If we went strictly SCCA (Sport Car Club of America) racing, or International Motor Sports Association or tried to get Formula racing, first off, we don’t have enough of the facilities.

This story sponsored by the Bottleneck

Second, the cost of setting up a track like that would be around half a million dollars, so we went to the vintage stuff instead.

"The automobile races are done by Terry Hefty, Bob Golub and myself. We formed a little company to do it, SOC, Inc. (Summer of Champions), and we'll be doing lots of other events. Hopefully, in the next couple of years we're going to grow with this. When I first decided to do this I knew it was going to keep on in later years; I wouldn't do it unless I knew it would go on.

"It was about a year and a half's worth of work getting the race organized. Getting a number of people involved, and making it actually happen, took about eight months. What I did was made a phone call to Steven Earl. He said, 'No, I'm not coming,' so I said, 'Fine, I'm going to go on by myself.' I had heard there was a Vintage Club started down in Denver, so I made a phone call down to them, and talked to a gentleman named Tom Ellis, who is the President. Tom said, 'Jeez, I'm not sure what I think, how can we make this thing happen?' I said, 'Come up and see the motorcycle race.' So he came up and saw the races, and afterwards he called back and said he had a group of people that would like to come up from the club and see what we have, and maybe get involved. They came up, I loaded them all in a suburban and we started driving around the roads in the village until we picked a course."



"Racing is a form of controlled violence."

I asked Ed how they decided the track that was used. "When we chose the track, we did have some other choices. We looked at using the old track, the motorcycle track, which is around Mt. Werner Circle, and that is a 1.1 mile course. Track and safety-wise, it was a little bit better, but interest-wise it just wasn't there. As a matter of fact, when we did the motorcycle race, the vintage bikes that came in (we had vintage bikes coming in from British Columbia, Canada, New



"We had 76 cars in the race."

York, Florida and California that came up for that) they wouldn't come up unless we used the big track.

"The course was 1.7 miles. It's a funny story how we first decided on this track. At first I thought about using EagleRidge, up the short jog we had up Walton Creek Road, up the new Medicine Springs Road, then down past the Ptarmigan Inn, around Mt. Werner Circle, and back down through Eagle Ridge. The club came up, and we spent about a day and a half doing that; then we said, 'Hey, why don't we just shorten it, it will be easier to contend with and the crowds will be easier to deal with, and it will still be 1.7 miles long.' So we cut off Mt. Werner Circle.

"There wasn't any need for road repair after the race. We thought there might have been; they were using slicks, and when you use slicks, like the GT40 was using, that tire when you get it hot enough, and the asphalt gets hot enough at the same time, it will tear the road apart. They did that in Miami; they did about \$100,000 damage down there. We didn't, but we had road crews out there on Thursday and Friday from the city patching the roads up for us. The city helped us so much I can't tell you. They were just great. Yeah, those slicks just pick rocks up when they're hot. Talk to Murray about tires; he goes through a set about every two races and that's \$150 per tire. All for fun!"

Ed then told me about how much co-operation he got with the race. "It was really easy to get the city officials to agree to the race. They said, 'Go for it!' Phil Struble loved it. He was president of the council at the time and, of course, we had three years of motorcycle racing through the streets behind us, so it was really easy to get it done. The city officials here are

right up on top of it, and summertime is the main time of the year that we need economic help, and they saw the benefit of the race, jumped right on it, and said, 'Go!'



"This year's lady raced a Porsche."

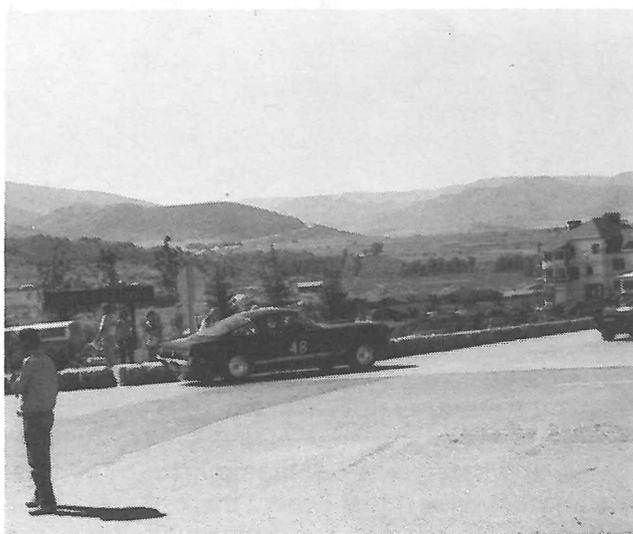
"Rotary Club was the only club that helped. Everybody wanted to, but there really wasn't room. We are looking at that next year, we're not sure what we are going to do. The Rotarians are the biggest club in town; all the clubs are great, but Rotary has a little bit more manpower and we are a manpower organization. To put this on, we had 90 volunteers. The Ski Patrol acted as crowd control, and did a terrific job; they are used to working with people, and they have the ability, if something happens within the crowd. Not on the track, but in the crowd they have the medical ability and the knowledge to help out. The Ski Corp and Ski Patrol were a terrific help. Ski Corp gave us all the netting that you saw, and gave us a lot of moral support along the way; they were great!

"Our major sponsor this year was EagleRidge, they just backed us all the way. They did a terrific job. They gave us a lot of freedom, a lot of use of the money they donated to us, and gave us a lot of trust. At the end of the event, they got up on the stage during the presentation and said that they were going to do it again this year. Stephen Gunn said they were going to do it again for '85 and we were going to make the granddaddy Laguna Seca at Pebble Beach second. So that is the kind of commitment we got from EagleRidge. Other sponsors were, of course, Sheraton, who donated the use of their facilities, and gave us some terrific rates on rooms and food, so we could afford to put this thing on. Two great companies that worked with us were: the Sport Stalker, Ben Hambleton up there let us have some of the people that worked for him work for us, he gave us ideas, he helped us through a lot of different things, and Storm Meadows also got involved. Craig Campbell, who is a big hand when it comes to the motorcycle races, Campbell is hot. And hot is the type of individual we need. The city people came out and

built concrete barriers for us. Mt. Mobile Mix donated all the concrete, the city donated all the workers. The city washed the roads three or four times. They helped us set up the road blocks. It was a concerted effort throughout the whole town to put this thing on. It is going again next year on the consensus that it was a big success.

"We gave a call to Coors, but you need almost a year's lead time with Coors or Bud, or any of them. We called them, but it just wasn't there. We have to make the event happen a few more years, and then those people will start knocking on our door. I had a meeting with one of the people from Renault who does the Ice Driving School, Jean Paul Lucas. They have some interest, and if we can figure a way to work them in, we will. For the community, these are great big dollars, those dollars that those companies would bring in here, promotion wise, as well as hard dollars, meaning dollars in hand, are terrific, and would benefit the community. I don't think there is a monetary value to what national recognition of a town that goes out into the press is worth. It is unimaginable. If you have five or six million people reading about Steamboat, what's the value?"

Racing is not an inexpensive sport, so I asked Ed what it cost to put on the race. "I don't really want to tell you the exact amount of the cost to put on the race, because next year it's going to be much more expensive, but I would say roughly around twenty thousand. This was a benefit race. We made it a benefit for the Routt Memorial Hospital, and we had the Rotarians handle the money for us, selling the tickets, selling the food. The Rotary Club did a terrific job and we gave a check to the hospital for two thousand dollars. It was Terry Hefty's idea to make it a benefit. Any race in the city streets has to be a benefit. I didn't see any sponsored racers. It was just private individuals, with fun cars.



'67 Shelby Mustang G.T. 350

"The most exciting part of auto racing is obviously watching the cars. We had seventy-six cars in the race, plus the **Concours**; about 110 cars total. The **Concours** was magnificent. It was the nicest one I had ever seen since Pebble Beach. We had so many different automobiles, some were even local. Bill Mannion had his 1934 Mercedes Cabriolet here. It's an absolutely stunning automobile. He took top honors — one of our local citizens. It was just terrific watching that happen. There were three short wheelbase Ferraris that had just come back from Pebble Beach and had won the **Concours** there.

"Of the auto clubs we had some were Shelby, we had some Jaguars, we had a lot of Alfa Romeos, we had a handful of Lotus', we had one Lola, one Corvette and a couple of Porsches. Next year, we'll have a lot more of both. So, those would be the clubs that were involved. We're looking forward to a lot more club participation, different clubs. Shelby club was great, they really put out, they were the show; number 98, Bill Murray, was absolutely awesome.

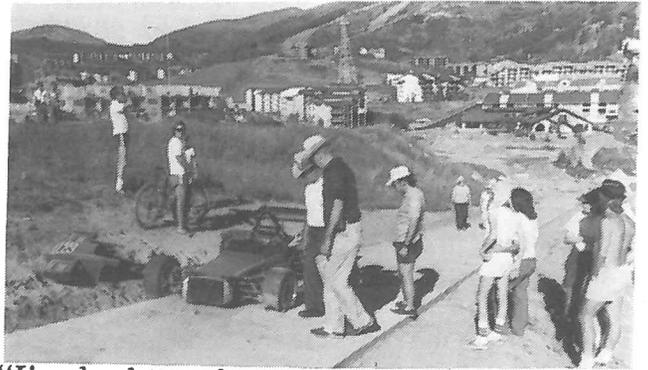


"And then there was Bill Murray, who won it all"

"The most common type of cars were the G.T. 350's, or the Alfas, there were a lot of Alfa Romeos. I'm looking forward to seeing some of the stranger stuff, like the Cunningham. That's a strange automobile, there are two in existence, and he brought one to Steamboat. The fellow who owns that Cunningham is related to Pinky Smith, the Veterinarian. To walk through the pit area and see some of the people here was amazing, you'd never think that certain individuals here in town would come to this. The ratio of American cars to foreign cars was probably 50/50 because we had so many Shelbys here, there were so many Shelbys, there was a great turnout, they're a beautiful automobile, I would say 50/50.

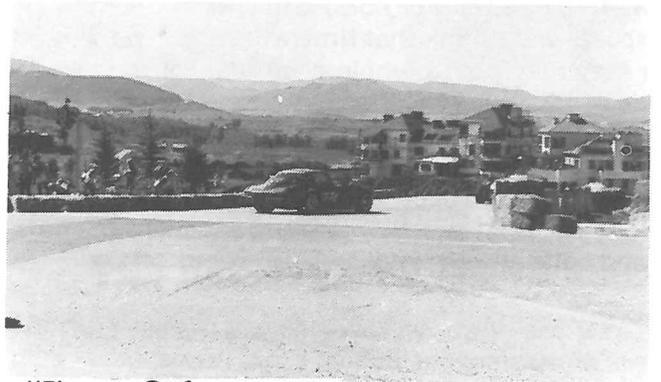
"At this type of race, you don't see very many inexpensive cars, and even fewer new ones. The cars range in value from about \$20,000 for the '56 Lincoln, no, there were some G.T. 350's that are worth around \$15,000 all the way up to Bill

Mannion's Mercedes Benz which has to be close to \$100,000. The Ferrari Daytona Coupes, there was a matching pair, matching numbers, those



"I'm looking forward to seeing some stranger stuff"

cars are worth \$75,000 apiece. Then the Cunningham, I don't think that there is a value on that, it could sell for anywhere from \$150,000-\$250,000, because of the history behind it. The top one might have been the auto owned by Bob Donner, that was #111, the 1964 Ferrari GTO. That car is probably worth \$350,000 and he raced it! There was a GT40 there that's worth \$160,000, the little black Lola is worth \$35,000. The Mercedes Benz 300-SL Gull Wings are right in the middle worth \$110,000, one was a full race aluminum bodied SL so that has even more interest. That was the one that was wrecked. His license was revoked for the year for that, not just in Steamboat, but overall.



"I'm a Cobra man, Corvettes and Cobras"

"The cars ran from 1934, no '38, to the newest which was 1967, the Cobras, the '67 Corvette, there were a few other 1967 autos in the race, Sunbeam Tigers. My favorite cars were the Cobras, I'm a Cobra man. Corvettes and Cobras. I like bigblocks, lots of horsepower. The cars were classified by their times around the course, so there were a few 289 Cobras running with the Alfa Romeos because the drivers weren't pushing, and then there was Bill Murray, who was in a class by himself. It was an eight lap race and he was lapping people. The fastest reported

speed was Bill Murray; he was hitting about 121 MPH coming down the hill.

"The race was not run by the size of the engine, it was run by driver ability, times clocked on the track. I would say 5 Litre (300 c.i.) anywhere from 1.5 Litre to the full blown Vettes and Cobras which were 7 Litre (427 c.i.) monsters."

Ed then talked about what it cost to run in the race. "The cost for one car to race was about \$300. That included the entry fee, but not including a place to stay. Fuel, because they use a special fuel, tire wear, engine wear, clutch wear, ran between \$300-\$500, sometimes more. The guy who wrecked his Cobra did \$5,000 in damage right there in the rocks; thank goodness it wasn't more.

"The drivers are in a class by themselves. If they were any different from what they are, racing wouldn't be the same. The drivers in vintage racing are sometimes involved in SCCA. I would say that's a good percentage, but the SCCA championship was going on in Pueblo the same day, as was the hill climb in Grand Junction.

"The age range of the drivers is a hard one to say. I would say late 20s on up; they won't tell. I would say mid 50s. There was only one lady driving, I'm sorry to say. I think that that will change; I think that we'll see a lot more women. Motor sports haven't drawn as many women as I think it should. I would like to see more. I've raced motorcycles, and I've raced with women, and they have the ability to see a line better than a man, believe it or not. I'd like to see them in all sports and I think that time will come. In the first race, they had a whole race just for women; I don't like the idea of a powder puff race. I don't think that's right. I want a full blown race; I want the women to get into the cars and go like Guthrie who raced at Indianapolis. This year's lady races a Porsche. Her husband turns the nuts and bolts and she races.



"\$5,000 damage right there in the rocks"

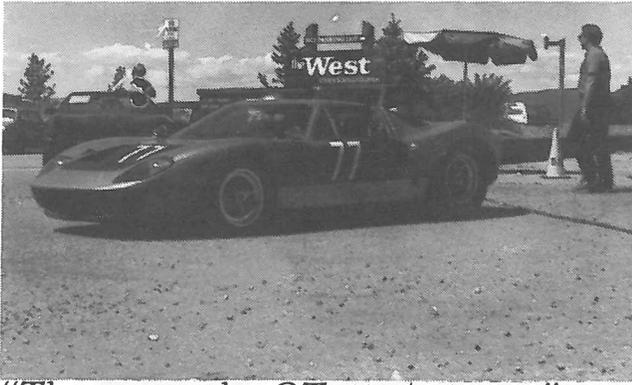


"Number 111.

64 Ferrari GTO, worth \$350,000"

"There are four to five people on a crew for one car. I was expecting two or three. They all have their own job, whether it's making meals, doing go-fer work, to the guy who is twisting wrenches. The camaraderie amongst the racers is a story of its own. There is a lot of bitching and moaning about this and that, but if someone has a problem in the pits, and another individual there can help out, you got it, you're gonna get taken care of. That was another thing, the people here in town, for example, Sunshine Towing, they did that just to be nice, them and A & K Towing. One of the guys needed some welding done, they went down to Sunshine and everyone stayed up all night and fixed the car, for nothing. The people in town really got behind the racers and the racers couldn't believe it! They can't wait to come back again; they made friends in Steamboat. I would say that half the people racing had never been in Steamboat before, that's a big number, and that's one of the things that Steamboat needs to do, draw in some different people."

I asked Ed about the rules and regulations of Vintage Auto Racing. "The rules in Vintage Racing are very strict and they come down pretty hard on anyone who has an accident, whether it is by themselves, or especially with another car. There is quite a bit of controversy over some of the participation in the use of flags here which will be adjusted next year. There is a black flag that tells a person he has one lap then he has to come in. At Laguna Seca and most other Vintage Races, if someone is out there racing, and they feel he is a little bit out of bounds with his driving, that is, going over his head, ability wise, they want to pull him off the track and talk to him to calm him down a little bit. We didn't use the black flag enough, and that is going to change next year. We also used the red flag way too much and that is not going to happen next year either. Our safety regulations



"There was the GT 40, \$160,000"

are that we require a rollbar. SCCA requires a full cage; we require a layer of Nomax Fire Retardant Suit. Indy drivers are completely covered, except their eyes. A full suit is good for about 25 seconds. We didn't require a cage, but we might next year. The cars have to be safety wired, which means you use a little piece of wire that runs through the nuts and bolts and is tied to something solid so the nuts can't come off. The G.T. 40's lost wheel was safety wired. The wire broke.

"For safety services, we had the fire department; we didn't even ask for them, the city just sent them up. We had one ambulance, we had concrete barriers, we used straw bales. When somebody disappears over a hill backwards, sliding; it's pretty scary.

"There were about 2,000 people that came in from out of town to watch the races. We probably had 3,500 or 4,000 people come to watch all together. It's hard to say, because there were so many parties going on in the condos. And not everybody bought a ticket either, so we are going to reduce the ticket prices to change that.

"The thing that is so unique about it is you can rent a condo for a couple of nights, sip your champagne or do whatever you are doing, and watch this bit of insanity, this controlled violence, because that is what racing is, and that is what you need to bring in spectators. I don't care what event it is, either you have to have an amazing amount of competition, or you have to have some sort of controlled violence, at least, that is my point of view. If it is football, baseball, swimming, auto racing, foot racing; there's either a tremendous amount of competition and strain, or there is some controlled violence.

"Avon, right now, is trying to put on a race; that's down by Vail. We are first. I don't think they can even match what we are doing. I'll put the Spirit of Steamboat against any other town because we have a spirit feeling here that no other town in the Rockies, or any other resort town except maybe the Kona Coast in Hawaii, relates to. This town, the ambience here, nothing compares to it.

"The feedback I got from the townspeople about the race was that it went over great! I was at a party, and I got so many compliments for it. The businessmen love it; the ranchers came in and couldn't believe what we were doing."

Big boys' toys, these are the cars that the racers drive, just toys of the rich, some say. But I know the real story. The men are rich, but the cars are more than just toys, they are intricate machines built especially for racing. I talked to Bob Martin, one of the racers; he showed me just how much time and effort goes into the car for it to be raceable.

I did my interview at his shop and it was unbelievable just how neat it actually was. Everything had its own place and it was spotless, save for some oil that had leaked out of the car. The reason for this was that they had blown the interior mounted oil cell the day before during a race. An oil cell is a specially designed tank that takes the place of an oil pan to give the engine higher ground clearance without making the car any higher. These men have to make many adjustments after every race and sometimes they have to change certain parts altogether for racing on different tracks. Both of the men on the team have been working with racing cars for many years, but they freely admit that they don't know half as much as there is to know. The driving is also a matter that takes years of practice to get down. It is much harder than road driving because of our increase in speed and the increase in the speed of the cars around you. You have to compensate for sliding, drifting and decreased reaction time. It's actually a science to drive a race car. Yes, these cars do cost money, too. The owners of this car bought the car for \$5,000 originally and they now have put approximately \$125,000 into the car. So this is no sport for the poor. I have enjoyed auto racing all my life, but now I know the truth behind the drivers, mechanics and organizers. I have much more respect for these people now. Someday I will be behind the wheel of one of these cars. This has helped me prepare for the training.



'63 Jaguar XKE Coupe 3.8 straight 6