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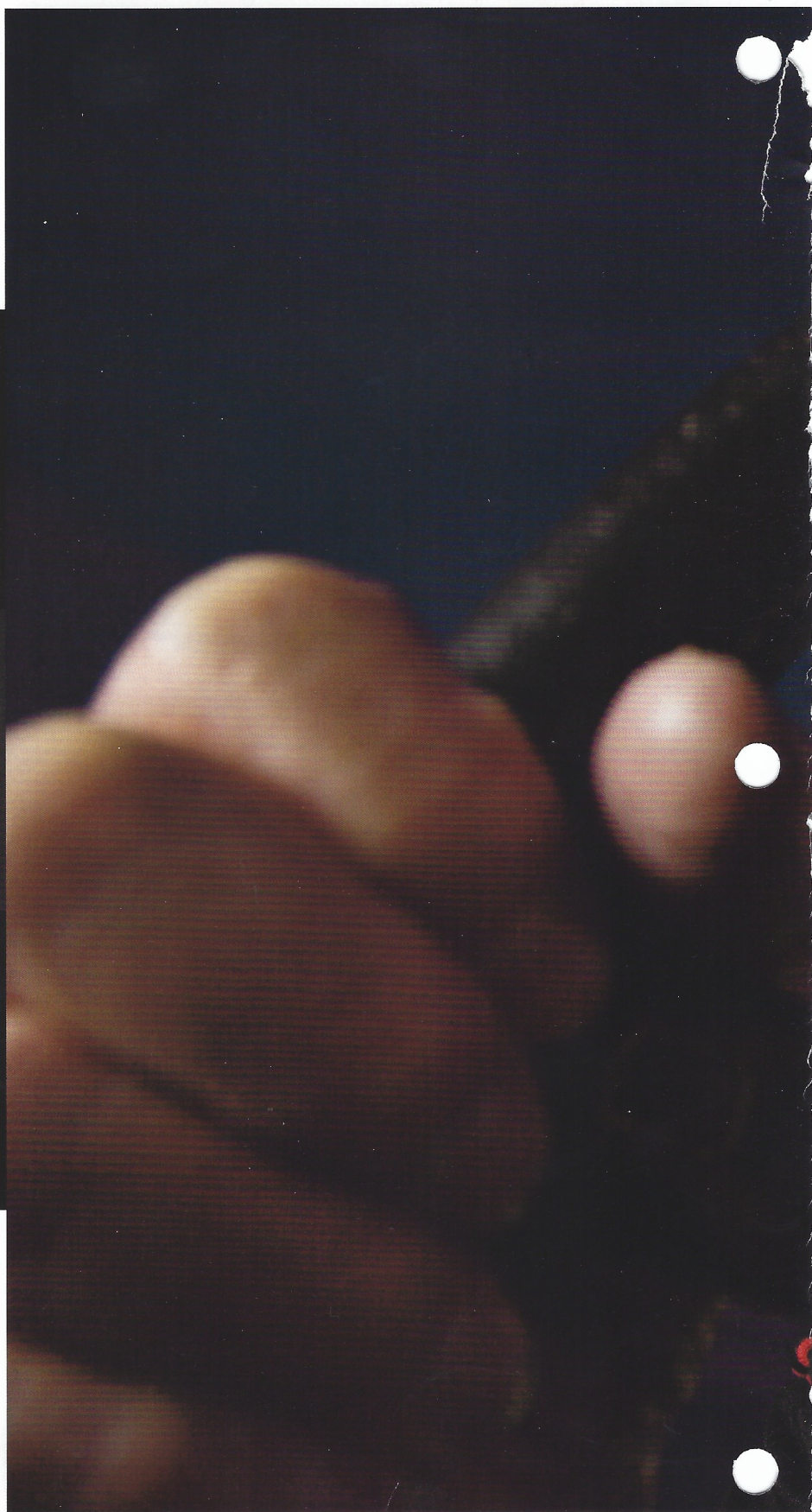
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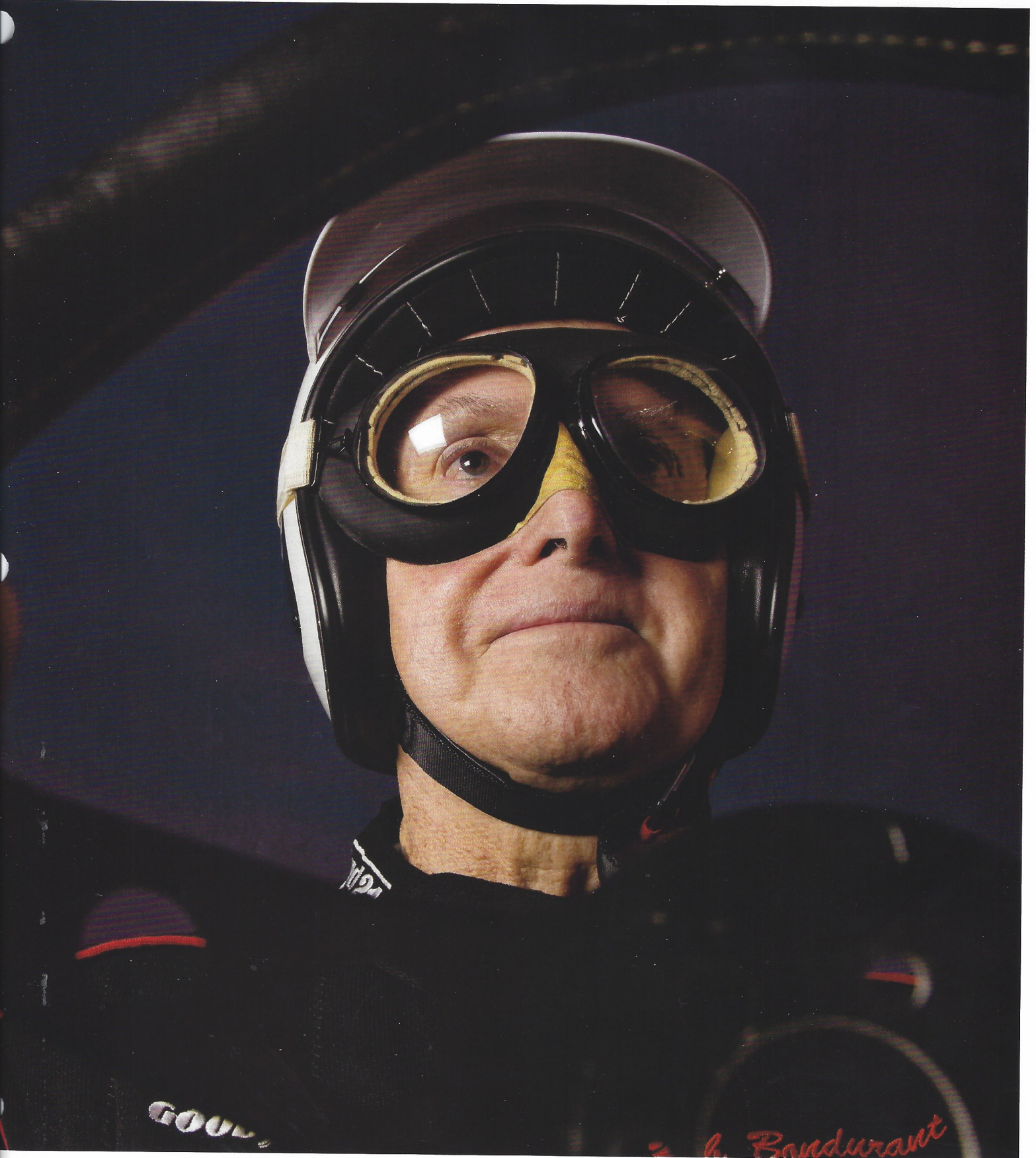
WHEELMAN

IN

TINSELTOWN

HE WAS FAST AND
RELIABLE AND HE
DIDN'T CRASH.
WHAT'S LUCK GOT
TO DO WITH IT?





"HANGING ON FOR DEAR LIFE. TRYING TO BRAKE, DOWNSHIFTING. I WAS SAYING TO MYSELF, 'BONDURANT, THIS IS GOING TO BE A BAD ONE.'"



LA Times GP 1963
Bob powers the Shelby American King Cobra (left) to eighth in the 200 at Riverside, (right) the distinctive helmet and goggles reappear.

STREET CRED

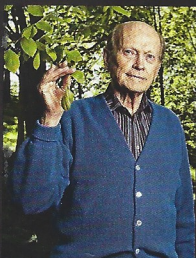


DAN GURNEY ON BOB BONDURANT

When Bob did the Targa Florio in Sicily, he arrived a couple weeks early to learn the course, which was all on public roads. And he drove it many times in our practice "mule" car, very fast, running race-lap times, which kind of shocked the local population. Then, Jerry Grant tried to run it and at one point pulled into a village to find the road blocked with people, and a shotgun in his face. They were mad, and they thought he was Bob. Jerry didn't know what to do, but they finally let him go.

When he was there, he also met a beautiful Sicilian girl and asked her out to dinner. She said she would have to get her parents' permission, and she did. But when Bob showed up at her house to pick her up, her three brothers were there to go along as chaperones. That was not exactly the kind of date that Bob had in mind.

I have had quite a few co-drivers; Bob was right up there with the best, and our results showed it. He was very fast and reliable, and he didn't crash. He is also a great guy, and the girls always loved him, but nobody more than his beautiful wife Pat.



DON PETERSEN, FORMER FORD CEO

When I became president of Ford in 1980, it had been 10 years since I'd been involved with North American passenger cars. So I set about doing a variety of things to get myself back up to date. I had never been to a driving school and was aware that Bob Bondurant had one at Sears Point.

I got in touch, with the idea of spending some time getting reoriented to the high-performance characteristics of driving cars. I didn't really want to drive Datsuns, so I took a [slightly modified] Mustang with me. Bob tailored the course to me, worked out a multi-day program based on what I was telling him I wanted to gain, and it was a remarkably good experience. Driving in that car, seeing what he could do, and what I couldn't do, we had a chance to get to know each other, and a friendship developed.

When I came back, we had a flow of Ford people taking the course. I upped his business significantly, and one outcome was that he switched to Ford products. From that point on, there was a fine relationship between Bob and Ford, so I have nothing but positive feelings about him. There's a big plus in getting to know people with bona fide interest in automobiles and driving. They're fundamentally honest folks, not politicians, so I got a lot of good, straight information and reaction from Bob.

BOB

Bondurant is a lucky man. Tall, handsome, smart, and immensely talented, he raced motorcycles as a Southern California teen, graduated to sports cars at 23, and nine years later was piloting a Ferrari Formula 1 car at the U.S. Grand Prix. While racing F1 in 1966, he trained actors James Garner, Yves Montand, Brian Bedford, and Antonio Sabato to drive race cars for their roles in "Grand Prix," perhaps the best-ever racing movie.

As a racer, Bondurant was fast, smooth, and consistent. In 15 years of racing and winning, in the fastest cars against the best drivers in the top series on both sides of the Atlantic, his two big wrecks were caused by mechanical failures. Each of them probably should have killed him.

He vividly recalls the one that ended his racing career when his Can Am car's steering arm broke at Watkins Glen, New York, in 1967. "Coming out of the turn at the top of the hill, doing about 150, I felt something break. The back end came out, I came up to the curb at an angle, and it turned sharp right when I ran out of curbing. Funny how fast your mind works. In tenths of a second, I shut off the fuel pumps...didn't want a fire. Shut off the engine...didn't want to blow it. Hanging on for dear life, trying to brake, downshifting, I was saying to myself, 'Bondurant, this is going to be a bad one.'

"I hit the embankment and took off, tore the belly pan off, and my legs went out the bottom. I went as high as the trees and was coming down, backwards, last thing I remember. I hit and flipped eight times, end over end and sideways, and landed upside down. When the corner workers turned over the car, it landed on my broken feet, and the shock brought me to."

About all that was left of the car was the seat he was in and the right rear suspension. He remembers looking down, embarrassed that he had landed in a mud puddle, then looking up and seeing spectators. He hoped he had not gotten into them (he hadn't). "I tried to take my helmet off, but a corner worker said, 'No, I'll get that.' Then I was out again."

In the hospital the next morning, he remembers a doctor coming in. "How am I doing, and how soon will I be out?" Bondurant asked. "Relax," the doctor said. "You're going to be here a while. I've been watching racing at the Glen for a long time, and I've never seen that severe a racing accident. You're lucky you're alive." When the car was flipping, the rollbar was below Bondurant's helmet, so the helmet got into the mud more than once. The fact that the ground was soft because it had rained the day before probably saved his life. Lucky man.

The doctor asked which he wanted first, the good news or the bad. He chose the good. "You got a minor concussion," the doctor said, "but you'll heal from that. You broke three ribs, and you'll heal from that. You broke both legs below the knees, and they'll heal." Then he stopped talking. And the bad? "You hit so hard that it chipped the lower part of your spine. I can't allow you to sit up yet because if you do, you could become paralyzed. But the worst thing is, you broke every single bone in both of your feet and ankles. You'll never walk again. I'm a bone specialist. I put your feet back together, and there were so many broken bones, you just won't walk. And even if you do, you'll have a terrible limp and a lot of pain."





He lay there, thinking: "God, I was at the height of my racing career. What am I going to do now? All I know is racing. I've got to make a living somehow. Training the actors for 'Grand Prix' felt good. I've got to learn how to walk somehow, and when I do, I'm going to start a school. I drew a steering wheel and put a number one in the center, because I decided that it would be the number-one school in the world. That's how it all started."

With more surgeries, hard work, and perseverance, Bondurant did relearn to walk, eventually with barely a limp, drive as well as ever, and fly his own helicopter. In 1968, he founded, and today still runs (with wife Pat), the world-famous Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving in Phoenix, Arizona. We recently caught up with him for a delightful, story-filled chat.

Born in Evanston, Illinois, Bondurant moved to California at age 3 after his father, an Auburn/Cord dealer, lost everything in the Great Depression. When he was about 8, his father started taking him to midget auto races. He loved it and decided he wanted to race. When his parents divorced, he moved with his mom to Westwood Village. When he was 10, she bought him a Whizzer motorbike to help him do his paper route faster. Before long, he had parlayed that into a motor scooter and later a James 125cc motorcycle. Skipping classes got him tossed out of high school, but he transferred to a private school and graduated at the top of his class. He also did well at Pasadena City College, then Woodbury Business College.

To learn to fly helicopters, he worked as a mechanic's helper at a helicopter repair shop after school and finagled informal flying lessons. He also learned to ride Harleys. "I'd go over to the local Harley shop, and you could do wheelies on my James, so they all wanted to ride it. I said, 'I'll let you do that if you teach me how to ride your Harleys.'" Then he decided to go racing, bought an Indian 101 Scout, and started competing on dirt ovals.

He worked on his bike in nearby Glendale with a friend who built the best racing engines, and when he was offered one, Bob happily accepted. He went racing that Sunday, looked at the qualifying chalkboards, and thought he was on the wrong one. It turned out his times had vaulted him from the Novice class over Amateur into Expert, and he would be starting on the second row. He actually led that race until an engine valve loosened and put him out.

Motor Trend Classic: You started sports-car racing in a Morgan, then you excelled in a Corvette.

Bob Bondurant: In mid-'58, I bought the '57 Corvette that had won the '57 championship. Santa Barbara was my first race, and I qualified mid-pack. But in the race, I started picking off a car a lap and finally caught the leader. He pulled over in front of me, and I spun. But I got it fired up, took off, and caught him again. That year, 1959, I won 18 out of 20 races, finished second in the other two, and won the West Coast B Production championship and both Corvette and Valvoline Driver of the Year awards. I thought, "This is what I really want to do." You quit racing after Cal Club banned you for driving in rival SCCA races, then came back in a dealer's '63 Corvette.

I got back into Corvette racing and was doing really well. At the last race at Pomona, I was quicker than Davey [MacDonald] in the Cobra in the Sunday warm-up, so Shelby had his car up on jack stands, checking it all over. "Bondurant can't be quicker than us," he said. "There must be something wrong with our car." But when we went to fire up our car for the race, gas started pouring out of the fuel injectors. The smog had eaten the O-rings. I got on the P.A. and asked if anyone had a Corvette, and could we borrow their fuel injection for the race? A guy said, "Sure, take mine." I talked them into delaying the race 15 or 20 minutes while we put the borrowed fuel injection into our car. They finally said they couldn't delay it any longer.

My crew was just finishing up when the race started, so I was last. I ran really hard, caught Davey on the very last lap and finished second, a car length behind

STREET CRED



DRIVER PETER BROCK

We were both early Cal Club racers. Bob was running a Corvette, competing with the Cobras at the time. Then he saw the light and switched over. Of course, when he and Dan won at Le Mans, that was the peak, and they could have won overall had we not had an oil cooler problem. That was really spectacular.

Bob was not an instructor-type guy at first.

But I explained what our procedure was, and of course he picked it up. He was a natural, a great driver, and it didn't take him any time at all to become a great instructor. He had good rapport with all the factories—he had Datsun cars, then Fords [now Corvettes and Cadillacs]. I think it was his ability not only to instruct but also, from a business standpoint, to encourage manufacturers to demonstrate their cars with a high-performance program that really made sense.



him. I got a call from Shelby a couple weeks later. He said, "What are you doing on such-and-such a weekend?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "You're driving Ken Miles' Cobra. You're on such-and-such flight, you're staying at such-and-such hotel." I said, "Am I driving for you now?" He said, "No, you're driving one race. Do you want to drive the sumbitch or not?" I thought, "If I drive the Cobra, I'll find its weakness, then I'll be back in my Corvette and blow them off."

You won that first Cobra drive, so Shelby offered more.

My second Cobra race, Davey and I co-drove together at Elkhart Lake and won our class. Then came the Times Grand Prix at Riverside. I asked Carroll, "If I win the preliminary race, will you enter me in the feature?" "Sure," he said, since he thought Gurney would win. Lou Spencer was fastest qualifier; Dan was second; I was third; and Alan Grant was fourth. In the race, Dan was quickest, and Lou and I were about even. Then Alan came between us, cut my left rear tire—I didn't know it at the time—and clipped Lou's front suspension, knocking it out of alignment. Then he charged after Dan.

He hit Turn Six, got sideways and lost it. I was right behind him, so he always claimed that I hit him. He's been talking about that for 50 years, but I never touched him. Dan was in the lead going down the back straightaway, and I saw him pull off. His coil wire fell out, and he had to get out and put it back in. So I won the race, and just past the finish, my left rear tire went flat, and I went bouncing off through the dirt. Dan came by—he finished second—and was laughing like hell. Dan and I have always been great friends.

You moved to Europe in 1964 to race Cobras for Shelby.

I always wanted to race against the world's best. They were in Europe, and Shelby was going racing in Europe with all American drivers and mechanics. But to save money, he was going to use drivers who were already over there. Dan Gurney,

Phil Hill, Richie Ginther, and Masten Gregory. I said, "If you pay my expenses, we'll move there." I was married at the time, and my wife said, "Yeah, you need to do that." Shelby agreed and paid me \$250 per race—that's what it was back then—and that's how I got to Europe.

And you beat the Ferraris, including at the Le Mans 24-Hour.

Co-driving the Cobra Daytona coupe with Dan to that Le Mans GT Class win is one of my greatest racing memories. But a bigger one was at Rheims, France, in '65, when we won the World Manufacturers' Championship. I was co-driving with Jo Schlesser for Alan Mann's English Cobra team. Shelby was doing the GT40 program, so he wasn't running Cobras in '65.

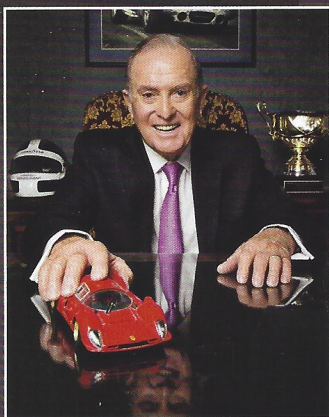
When I arrived in England, Alan Mann met me at the airport and said, "Bob, before you get your luggage, listen up: We're an English team, and I have two really good English drivers. If you want to race, you're going to be number three, and you're never going to win. Do you still want to drive?" That pissed me off so bad, I said to myself, "Screw that! I'll outqualify them in every race and find a way to win." And that happened every race but one.

The race at Monza was the last time they used the high banks. It was so rough coming out of one banking, your eyes would start fluctuating. On the other banking, your eyes would focus back straight. I said, I'll just run flat out in both bankings. I ended up 5 seconds quicker than the English guys, and we won. I was the only American in the series.

What was your other big crash?

Testing an ATS F1 car at Monza, I got so I could get through the Curva Grande, a 150-mph curve, flat out, without lifting. I did it again and again and was doing fine, and I knew I would probably get an F1 ride. Then, on the last lap, the left rear axle broke, the right-front wheel came off the ground, and I had no control.

HOOKING UP WITH FERRARI



BONDURANT: When we beat Ferrari for the World Manufacturer's Championship, that was my proudest win. And I got an offer from Ferrari to go down and meet with him. John Surtees said, "The Old Man wants to see you now! Get in your car and drive down there."

So I did. I got there at noon. The gates were open, I pulled in, the guards stopped me: "Who

are you, what are you doing?" I'm Bob Bondurant, I'm supposed to see Enzo Ferrari." "Bondurante Sur Cobra?" That's what Enzo had started calling me. "Yeah, Bondurante Sur Cobra." But Enzo was not there.

I checked in at a hotel and was expecting a call from Ferrari. I went across the street to have dinner. Surtees called and said, "The Old Man is here. He wants to see you right now." So we ate quickly, then drove to the factory.

Ferrari said, "Would you like to live in Italy?" I said, "Yes, if I'm driving Ferrari F1." He said, "You must drive Prototipo before you drive Formula Uno." I said, "I'm already doing that with the Ford GT40. Formula Uno is what I want to drive. When will you let me know?" He said, "When I decide." I said, "One week? Two weeks?" He looked at me sternly, "When I decide." I thought, "Time to shut up."

I drove back up to Monza for the Italian Grand Prix weekend, and prior to that was a two-heat F3 race. An English team offered me a Lotus F3 car, not noted for horsepower but it handled well. I qualified just 16th in the dry, but it was pouring down rain for the race, and I was on Goodyear tires that were great in the rain.

We got through the rain, and I started doing really well. At one point, I spun completely around in a high-speed left-hander, put it in second gear, popped the clutch and kept going. No one passed me, and I finished fourth. An English guy won, then two Italians.

The rain stopped, we lined up for the second heat. The English guy's battery was dead, so he couldn't race. The Italians were very good. The Curva Grande, a 150-mph turn, and the next two corners have trees growing over the track, and I thought there might still be a little wetness there, so I'd better be careful. There was no guardrail, just a hedge.

I got a great start, was right with them, and the first guy went through there, spun, and went through the hedge. I never saw him again. Next corner, the second Italian spun. Never saw him again. So I was in the lead coming out of there. I had a race-long battle but won. Wow, fantastic! Enzo's right-hand man came up and said, "Congratulations, Senor Bondurant." I said, "Se possible Formula Uno?" He said, "Possible Formula Uno." I thought, "Shut up."

I went back to England. Two weeks went by, no word. Maybe I pushed F1 too hard. Two days later, I got a call from the factory: "Come back here to get fitted for F1 car for the U.S. Grand Prix." I couldn't believe it. It was a Dino Ferrari V-8, a really good car.



Driver's Driver

During a training session for the film "Winning," Bondurant talks tactics with Paul Newman at the O.C. Raceway school.

MOTOR TREND ARCHIVE

There were no guardrails, just a hedge. I dropped down the embankment, hit the hedge, and it shot me out of the car. They didn't have seatbelts then. I went through a tree and landed in a pile of leaves, and it knocked me out.

When I came to, I thought, "My God, I must have broken every bone in my body." I moved my feet; they worked. Tried my legs; they worked. My hands and arms worked. I thought, "Wow!" I was having some trouble breathing, so I thought maybe I had punctured a lung. I tried to get up but couldn't. I rolled over, crawled back to the hedge, pulled myself up, and walked back to find the car. I found it, and, boy, I was so lucky it did not have a seatbelt! When it went through the tree, it took off the windscreen, the steering wheel, the roll bar and the top of the engine. I would have been decapitated.

Your first F1 race was in a Ferrari at the U.S. G.P. at Watkins Glen.

I qualified about 16th, got a really good start and worked my way up to sixth. In those days, we wore goggles, no face shield. About halfway through the race, it started pouring rain, the elastic band on my goggles loosened, and they started blowing down. I put them back up, but they kept blowing up and down, and I couldn't see worth a damn. So I held them with the forefinger of my left hand and drove with my right hand, holding the steering wheel with my knee to shift. I ended up finishing ninth behind Jo Bonnier.

How did you get involved with the movie "Grand Prix"?

I was testing at Riverside with Ken Miles. Pete Brock, who was running Shelby's racing school, came over and said, "I just put a guy named John Frankenheimer through the school. He's going to do a movie, and he'd like to talk to you about it." Frankenheimer said he was going to do a movie on F1, it would be the best racing movie ever, and he wanted me to work on it. Then he said, "I understand you're going out to Willow Springs tomorrow to test the 289 Cobra. Could I ride with you?"



Driving out to Willow Springs, he asked me all kinds of questions. One was, "If you go off the track, what do you do?" I said, "Turn your wheels straight, stay off the gas, stay off the brakes, let the car settle down." He rode with me all day, and at Willow Springs, the wind always comes up about 4 o'clock, and you have a little sand through Turn Eight. So we were going through Turn Eight, pretty much flat out, and went off. I turned the wheels straight, stayed off the gas, stayed off the brakes, let the car settle, then came to a stop. He said, "That was fantastic!" He thought I had done it on purpose [laughs].

You trained James Garner in the U.S., and the other three actors in England. When we were flying over to England, Frankenheimer said, "Oh, by the way, you're going to train the other three actors." I asked, "Where?" He said, "The Jim Russell school." I said, "Doesn't Jim Russell want to train them?" He said, "I don't care what he wants. You're responsible for training those actors, and for making them as good as Garner."

It turned out that Yves Montand was the only one who even knew how to drive a car. Bedford grew up in New York and had never driven a car, and Antonio Sabato had never driven. I arrived at the Russell school and said, "I'm supposed to train these actors." Jim said, "I'm training them." I said, "Frankenheimer said I'm responsible for training them and making them as good as Garner." We argued for a while, then figured out a way to do it.

Then we started working on the movie. I worked every day on it and was also racing F1. The first one was at Monaco. I was doing the F1 race and had raced F3 there three times. We'd shoot the script the week before each race. Then we'd shoot the race itself, and whatever happened that was good for the movie and wasn't in the script, they would reshoot that Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Then we'd load up and go to the next race. Phil Hill helped them put it together

at different races around the circuit. He drove the camera car most of the time, and I drove it when he didn't.

You later trained Paul Newman and Robert Wagner for the movie "Winning." I had just started my school at Orange County Raceway and got a call from the studio that was going to make that movie, so they were my fourth and fifth students. Paul said he chose that movie because he had always loved racing and wanted to see if he could race. "There are two other movies I could have done and made a lot more money, but I wanted to do this one and see what I could do." Bob said, "I just thought it would be a great movie."

Paul picked it up pretty quickly. Wagner had trouble but finally got it. We started in my Datsun 510 instructor car, then moved to a Datsun 1600 roadster, then a 2.0-liter roadster, then a Formula V, then a 450-hp Can Am car. After three days in the Can Am car, we went to the road course at Indianapolis Raceway Park. I put them in a stock car, then an Indy car on the IRP oval, and they both did pretty well.

What advice do you have for those who aspire to race and win?

Any time you get in a race car, you need to adjust the seat so you sit perfectly in the car and can feel what it's doing and saying. That is very important. You also have to concentrate 110 percent. But number one, you absolutely have to have a strong desire to win.

After a few failed marriages, you now have a wife who is also the president of your company.

Pat is a gorgeous blond who also has been married a few times. When we first went out to dinner and were getting to know each other, she said, "Please don't ask me to marry you. I am not going to get married again. It just doesn't work for me." I said, "It doesn't work for me, either." And yet here we are. This is my sixth and final marriage. ♦