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Meet Bob Tullius: This Year's Mitty Grand Marshal and American Racing's First Full-Time Pro

Story by Gary Witzenburg

Historical photos courtesy Jaguar North American Archives



Sports car road racing blasted into my youthful car-guy consciousness one hot summer Sunday in 1962. My college roommate took me to an SCCA (Sports Car Club of America) national event at a now long-gone track called Meadowdale near Chicago. As a kid, I had watched and loved short-track “bullring” racing and planned to do it as soon as possible, but this left-right-left ribbon-track road racing was easily the coolest thing I had ever seen.

I vividly recall a pack of ground-pounding unlimited C-Modifieds, one well piloted by a beer company heir named Augie Pabst, careening around a long, fast, high-banked Monza Wall. Also, at a more attainable level, some guy named Bob Tullius was smoothly dominating his class in a new Triumph TR4. Suddenly, that was what I desperately wanted to do.

Talent and Determination

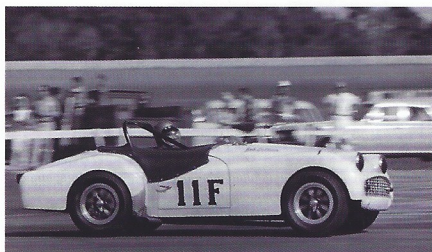
Little did I know that just a few months earlier, in the fall of 1961, freshly licensed racing-legend-to-be Bob Tullius was boldly pitching a pair of ad guys at what was then Standard-Triumph in New York City. All he wanted was a new TR4 to replace his aging TR3. It must have been a pretty good pitch; Mike Cook, then the company's advertising manager, remembers the meeting as a long one—but the answer was no. On his way out the door, Tullius promised to beat the new TR4s with his TR3.

And he did. By the following spring, he had won a couple of early season races, beating new TR4s that the factory had provided to its drivers. So, Tullius returned to pitch Cook a second time. Once again, Cook told him there was no budget for another car.

The determined Tullius waited in the reception room until then-President Martin Tustin headed for the door at the end of his day. Tullius then jumped up and introduced himself. Within a few minutes, Tustin was convinced. The next day he told Cook, “Get Tullius a TR4.”

Tullius wanted a white car—his TR3, wearing No. 44 since his first driver's school, was white—but the only available TR4 was powder blue. To get it ready for its first race at Lime Rock, Conn., Cook relates, “He and mechanic friend Ed Diehl transferred the engine and competition items from the TR3 to the TR4 in two weeks. Observed by several people from Triumph, he led the Lime Rock E Production (EP) class race for a while but was passed by a Morgan and finished second.”

In his very next race at Lake Garnett, Kan., Tullius totaled the TR4. “An exhaust part came off the car in front of me during practice,” Tullius later explained. “I dodged right, went off course and hit a tree.” Standard-Triumph wouldn't replace the car, but the company did give him \$500 to help him continue racing.



Tullius dominated the factory-backed teams in SCCA production racing in his privateer Triumph TR3 (above). When Standard-Triumph adopted the “If you can't beat them, join them” philosophy and gave him a TR4, Tullius's domination continued.

"I can honestly say that I knew of no other race teams in 1964 that earned their livings from motorsport—not in NASCAR, Indy, anywhere else."

"He and Diehl found another wrecked TR4 and built a new race car from the two wrecks," Cook explains. "To conceal the rough bodywork, they painted it black. Tullius said later that getting the car's chassis straight was incredibly difficult, and its wheelbase ended up about an inch longer than the normal 88 inches." The extra inch must not have been a handicap, since this was the car we watched Tullius drive to an apparently effortless win at Meadowdale—and eventually to the 1962 SCCA EP National Championship.

Tullius sold the black TR4, and Triumph gave him a new white one that had been built for the Sebring 12-hour enduro by Kas Kastner, the company's competition guru. Tullius drove it to his second straight championship in 1963, even after the SCCA moved the too-fast-for-EP TR4 up one class to DP. Then he quit his job to race full-time.

True Professional

"Professional racing began with Group 44 Inc., believe it or not," Tullius asserts. "The true definition of a professional in any sport is one who makes his living from it. In the early days of motorsports, virtually no one made his living at racing. Some had decent sponsorship, but they all had day jobs. But from the outset in late '63, early '64, I was required to make my living, meager as it was, out of motorsports."

"The fellow who started Group 44 with me, Dick Gilmartin, was vice president of an ad firm in Washington; I was a sales rep and manager for Eastman Kodak. And suddenly, we were at a point in our lives where neither of us wanted to do those jobs anymore. So, we quit them and started racing professionally, and we were able to get enough sponsorship in those early years to sustain one or two employees. And I can honestly say that I knew of no other race teams in 1964 that earned their livings from motorsport—not in NASCAR, Indy, anywhere else."

By that year, the team had its own garage—a cinder block lean-to built on the end of a garden apartment building in suburban Virginia—and a second Triumph racer, a Spitfire for Gilmartin. They had also hired Brian Fuerstenau, a young student. According to Cook, Fuerstenau worked "part-time after school and on weekends, with an amazing natural talent and intuitive knowledge of mechanical

things, including both engines and chassis."

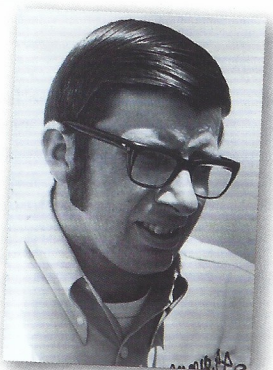
Tullius earned his third straight SCCA national championship on points, but 1964 also brought the first annual season-ending American Road Race of Champions (ARRC) event—later dubbed the Runoffs—to determine the club's national champions. It was held at Riverside, Calif., a long, grueling tow for eastern competitors.

"There were a couple other East Coast guys there," Tullius relates, "whom I had beaten regularly during the season. Jim Adams in an MGB had been whippin' Charlie Gates in Kastner's Triumph, and there were a couple Cal Club guys from San Francisco who were pretty hot shoes. So, when Brian and I came rolling in, towing our car behind a '61 Ford, they thought, 'What is this idiot doing out here?'"

"Jim Adams and I qualified on the front row with absolutely identical lap times. I don't think that's ever happened again in a big-time SCCA race. There was a big crash on about the second lap, in which Jim Ladd, one of my good friends from the East Coast, died in an Austin-Healey. I was in the lead, and there was no flag, but a whole bunch of people were in the way when I came around. I went sailing off course into the dirt to miss them, and had to rock it, like you do in the snow, to get it out. When I came by the pits next time, I was 17 seconds behind. And I won."

Now wearing dual 1964 national champion crowns and working for a local Triumph dealership, Tullius formed Group 44 Inc., in 1965 with Dick Gilmartin and Brian Fuerstenau. The plan was to run three cars, one for each of them, funded by building, selling and preparing race cars for others and by doing advertising and PR work for dealers and sponsors. Tullius drove a new TR4A to second in his fall DP Runoff, but the surprising Fuerstenau drove Bob's old TR3 to his first national title in F Production. Gilmartin brought his Spitfire home fourth in GP.

Sponsorship came from Quaker State and Goodyear, Triumph provided cars and parts, and ad manager Cook threw in \$300 to \$500 per weekend, plus a "run-around" TR4A from his press fleet. In addition, Tullius and Gilmartin arranged sponsorship from local Triumph dealers wherever they raced. "Pre-race publicity was sent to the local media to motivate



Brian Fuerstenau (left) joined the team as an engineer and driver, and forged a three-decade partnership and friendship with Tullius.

It wasn't just British cars that wore Group 44 Inc. colors. The team's first foray into SCCA Trans-Am competition was with a Dodge Dart (below) in the 1966 season.





In 1974, Tullius took on the dominant Corvettes in SCCA BP competition with a V12 Jaguar XKE (above). He narrowly missed a championship in his first year with the car, but scored a dozen wins and a national championship with the car in 1975. Always professional, Group 44 was one of the first race teams in any series to have a proper transporter (right).

potential car buyers to come by the dealer's showroom to see the Group 44 race cars," wrote Gary Horstkorta in "Three Decades of Success" in the May 2005 issue of *Classic Motorsports* magazine.

The team also held seminars for dealers that explained how to use racing to sell cars. On top of that, they worked with local community and youth groups to promote sports cars and driving safety.

With support from Dodge, Tullius added a Dodge Dart for 1966 to participate in SCCA's A Sedan amateur class and its fledgling Trans-Am sedan pro series. Co-driving with Tony Adamowicz, Tullius won the inaugural four-hour Trans-Am enduro at Sebring, Fla., as well as a 12-hour race at Marlboro, Md. The duo took a close second behind Jerry Titus's Mustang in a four-hour at Riverside. Gilmartin piloted the Spitfire to a third at the Runoffs; however, he soon left Group 44 Inc.

By 1967, Group 44 Inc. had a new base in Falls Church, Va.—a steel building with space for its cars and parking for its transporter. While still small and low-budget, the facility looked much larger and better-funded than it was. Group 44's cars were meticulously turned out, its members sported sharp matching attire, and the team became the first in the SCCA to use a high-zoot tractor-trailer rig, sponsored by Quaker State, to transport its cars, parts and equipment.



Along Comes Jaguar

There was no shortage of Group 44, Inc., wins in the late '60s and early '70s. The team grew and prospered, racing a variety of Triumph and British Leyland sports cars piloted by a number of talented drivers, including Fuerstenau, John Kelly, Mike Downs and John McComb. These men helped to add SCCA national title cups to their team's fast-expanding trophy case.

Then came the V12 Jaguar XKE. Tullius and then-Jaguar Executive Vice President Michael Dale convinced Jaguar upper management that the car would be competitive. Tullius then got the deal to prepare and race one in East Coast SCCA competition. All that was left for him to do

was dominate the SCCA B Production (BP) class, long ruled by small-block Corvettes.

Despite the stiff competition, Tullius narrowly missed a 1974 BP National Championship at the Road Atlanta Runoffs, a frustration he considers one of few lows in a career full of highs. "A guy beat me on the last lap," he grumbles. "Pissed me off. I don't know whether I screwed up, or the car screwed up, or he was just good. I hated losing to him—but I won the next year." That he did, winning 12 of 17 races in 1975, including that last and most important one. But that was the final year for the legendary E-type Jag, as it was replaced by the new XJS coupe.

"The sports car era with the Triumphs was a great deal of fun," Tullius relates. "We worked our asses off, harder than hard. I remember working 36 to 48 hours without going home, sleeping in a lawn chair in my shop. But it was rewarding, a lot of fun, and there wasn't a lot of input from our benefactors, Quaker State and Standard-Triumph/British Leyland. They let us do mostly whatever we wanted because we were winning, and we got more publicity for them than anything they did anywhere else. They had a clipping service, and most of it was about our successes. Then Jaguar came along, and from then on, it was much more difficult."

Tullius remained good friends with Mike Dale, who recognized the promotional and image value of racing, even when his U.K.-based bosses didn't. "Jaguar became an independent company around 1983-'84," he recalls, "and it was a very political thing. We were supposed to go to Le Mans in 1983. [CEO] John Egan was trying to extract the company from the British government and take it public, and Margaret Thatcher didn't want any adverse publicity—in case we lost, or crashed and killed somebody. So, they canceled our trip to Le Mans that year."

The road from Tullius's 1975 national championship to the 1983 Le Mans disappointment was paved with major highs and further frustrations. Tullius put his new V12 XJS racer on the pole for its first race in 1976, an SCCA Trans-Am at Mosport, Ontario. He then set the race's

fastest lap and finished a creditable fourth. Tullius won the car's next race, an SCCA National at Lime Rock, but fell out with mechanical ills at the Road Atlanta Runoffs.

SCCA Hassles

The group focused on SCCA's Trans-Am series from 1977-'78, where Tullius won two straight championships with the XJS, ably aided by Fuerstenau's development talent and Lawton "Lanky" Foushee's skills as chief mechanic. "Once the XJS had won the manufacturer's championship in 1978," Mike Cook relates, "the Group 44 program was switched to the Triumph TR8." The smaller, lighter, V8-powered TR8 won the first two 1979 Trans-Ams.

Tullius recalls that story: "The first race was a six-hour event. We sat on the pole and led the entire race for six hours. We beat all the Corvettes, Camaros and Pontiacs with our little TR8, and they were pissed. They were so angry, they all got together before the second race. The next time, we qualified on the front row again, and they went on strike. They went to [Chief Steward] Bob Anderson, and said, 'We're not going to race against that Triumph unless you do something about it.' That was the greatest compliment I've ever had in all my racing.

"We built that car under the watchful eye of [then-SCCA Chief Tech Inspector] John Timanus, and it was every bit within the rules. But Anderson said, 'You guys have to put 400 lbs. in that car.' It only weighed about 2150 lbs. to begin with!" Tullius laughs heartily. "I said, 'You're out of your mind!' Between qualifying and the race, I was supposed to put 400 lbs. in the car? Where was I going to get 400 lbs. of anything? 'The only way I'm going to get 400 lbs. in this car,' I said, 'is to put two of you a**holes running this show in the back seat. That didn't go over well.

"After I calmed down a bit, Anderson finally agreed to let us run the race, but we had to put the 400 lbs. in before the next race. We won that race, and the next morning, I called up Mike Dale, told him the story and said, 'I want to go to IMSA [International Motor Sports Association].' He said, 'Fine.' So, we went to IMSA and beat the Corvettes all the time."

Tullius continues, "SCCA had a points program for the year, and with two wins, we were still second or third in points. But we had to participate in at least three races to get the—I think 20 grand, we could win. The last race of the season was at Laguna Seca, Calif., and we decided to go to that race and get that money, come hell or high water. Brian and Lanky had put maybe 165 lbs. into the car, but it was supposed to weigh about 2550 lbs. with the added 400 lbs., and they determined that it weighed just over that with a full tank of fuel.

"Because we had been doing IMSA races, we had a refueling rig, and we took it there. And very slowly, over the course of three to four days, we moved all the fuel-rig parts up to our pit, but we didn't assemble it. The plan was, with four laps to go, no matter where we were, Brian would give me a signal, I would come in [from the track], and we'd fill the tank. Then we would do the last three laps and finish just over the 2,500 lbs. we were supposed to weigh.

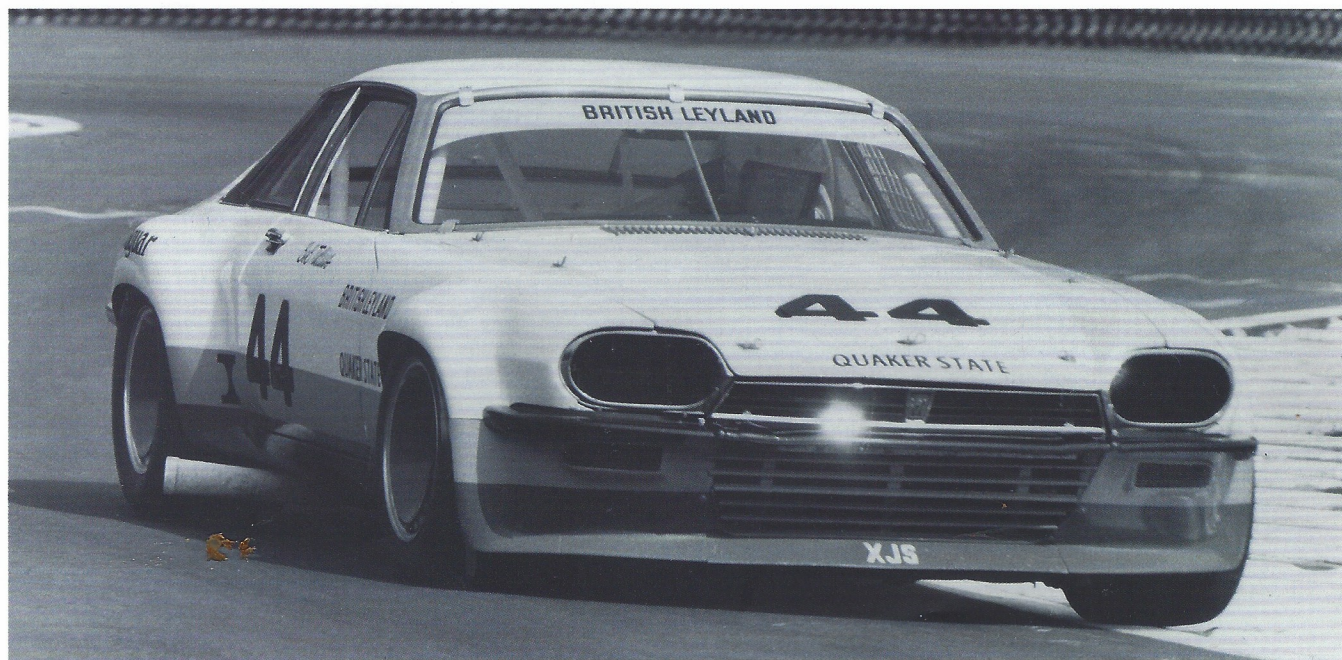
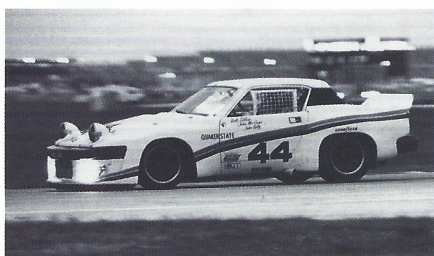
"So, we were leading, he gave me the signal, and the people running second went berserk thinking they were going to win. Our guys had set up the overhead rig during the race—when nobody was paying attention. I had a lead sufficient to pit and fill [the tank]

with fuel, and we still won the race. When we went into impound, the car weighed 2515 lbs., and they just about sh*t. But we got the money. John Timanus looked at me later and said, 'That was the coolest thing I have ever seen in my whole life!' And the next week, there was an amendment to the rules saying that the car has to weigh its proper weight empty of fuel."

IMSA Struggles

Tullius's TR8 won four IMSA GTO-class races in 1980 but finished second in points. The next year, Group 44 Inc. built a new tube-framed silhouette XJS to give the Trans-Am one last try. The team won three races and finished, again, second in the championship. Mike Dale then decided to take a giant step: to move up to IMSA's newly created GTP prototype class, which was American road racing's highest level at the time. Tullius commissioned race car designer Lee Dykstra to create a mid-engine,

When the team switched to Triumph TR8s for the SCCA Trans-Am series in 1979 (left), they dominated right out of the gate, prompting the SCCA to change the rules to make the cars less competitive. Frustrated by the constant adjustments, the team went to IMSA GTO, and won there as well. Group 44's last shot at Trans-Am was with a Jaguar XJS in 1981 (below). The car won three races, and was a runner-up for the championship.



monocoque-chassis Jaguar V12-powered racer for both GTP Prototype and international Group C competition, which would enable them to take on the legendary 24 Hours of Le Mans. This gorgeously sleek four-wheeled car would be called the Jaguar XJR-5.

During their first outing with the V12 at Road Atlanta, Tullius and Bill Adam co-drove the car to an encouraging third place. However, crashes and mechanical troubles plagued the rest of 1982. The next year brought four hard-fought wins, another second-place season finish, and a slew of troubles. The cancellation of their planned Le Mans trip was especially disappointing.

Jaguar assumed full sponsorship for 1984, and Tullius, Doc Bundy and David Hobbs led the season-opening 24 Hours of Daytona for more than 100 laps, eventually finishing third. Then a second XJR-5, driven by IMSA aces Brian Redman and Hurley Haywood, joined the Tullius/Bundy car for most of the rest of that season. They finished one-two at Miami and took several seconds and thirds, but they scored no further victories. When they finally got to Le Mans that summer—Jaguar's first return to that famed event since the 1950s was widely hailed—one car led briefly, but neither finished.

Tullius's car blew a tire at high speed on the back straight at the 1985 24 Hours of Daytona, which cut oil lines, ignited a fire and tore up the bodywork enough to jam the doors shut. Tullius managed to stop the car without hitting anything, but he was trapped inside long enough to sustain burns on his hands.

Despite his injuries, Tullius returned three weeks later to join very quick new co-driver Chip Robinson at Miami. The duo finished second to the Redman/Haywood Jaguar. The rest of that season produced more IMSA seconds and thirds and a 13th at Le Mans after losing a cylinder 90 minutes from the finish. Back at Daytona for the season finale, Tullius and Robinson debuted a brand-new XJR-7 and brought it home fourth, while the Redman/Haywood XJR-5 finished second.

Two XJR-7s started the 1986 24 Hours of Daytona. Both had gearbox troubles, and the No. 44 Tullius/Robinson/Claude Ballot Lena car finished sixth. Things tumbled downhill after that. Chip Robinson was involved in a spectacular multi-car crash at Riverside (with Doc Bundy and Lyn St. James), followed by one second-place finish, one third and a series of mechanical failures.

However, the team scored one terrific victory thanks to Tullius and Robinson at the season-ending Daytona finale. This race was doubly significant because it would be the team leader's last.

The next year, Hurley Haywood and John Morton co-drove the XJR-7 to two GTP wins, but Jaguar moved its support to Tom Walkinshaw's British-based operation. The group also dipped its toes into CART Indy car racing, as Chip Robinson and Tom Sneva drove a used Penske/Lola in six 1987 events before their sponsorship dollars ran out.

"The final race was at Watkins Glen in July," Mike Cook recalls, "where the company threw a delightful farewell dinner party for the team, the press and friends from IMSA and the racing community. Set in a park at the foot of Montour Falls, it was one of those happy-sad occasions full of reminiscences, jokes and tears. The car did not finish well [13th], but the relationship with Group 44, started at Triumph 25 years before, had a wonderful conclusion."

The team made it to the IMSA season's last race at Del Mar, Calif., but not as a "Jaguar." Their last-ever IMSA event was the 1988 24 Hours of Daytona, and the XJR-7 failed to finish.

Audis and More

One last successful chapter was written in Group 44's book, however. The team returned to Trans-Am that year with a well-funded two-car Audi Quattro effort. How did that happen? "We were done with Jaguar," Tullius explains, "and [then-Porsche+Audi racing boss] Jo Hoppen and I had been pretty good friends over the years. Jo had this Audi Trans-Am thing going, and he decided the only American team that could handle it was Group 44. So, he came to me and said, 'Would you like to do it?' I said, 'Sure!' The picture was very rosy, but it turned to sh*t."

"They said they would build the cars and send a skeleton crew to our facility to guide us through the first couple of races, help us understand the technical aspects of the cars, and make sure we knew what we were doing. Jo said, 'Audi is very strong, and they really want to do this.' He said we were probably going to go on to IMSA GTP, and maybe even to Indy. I thought, 'Wow, perfect deal!' I think he was suckered into the deal himself."

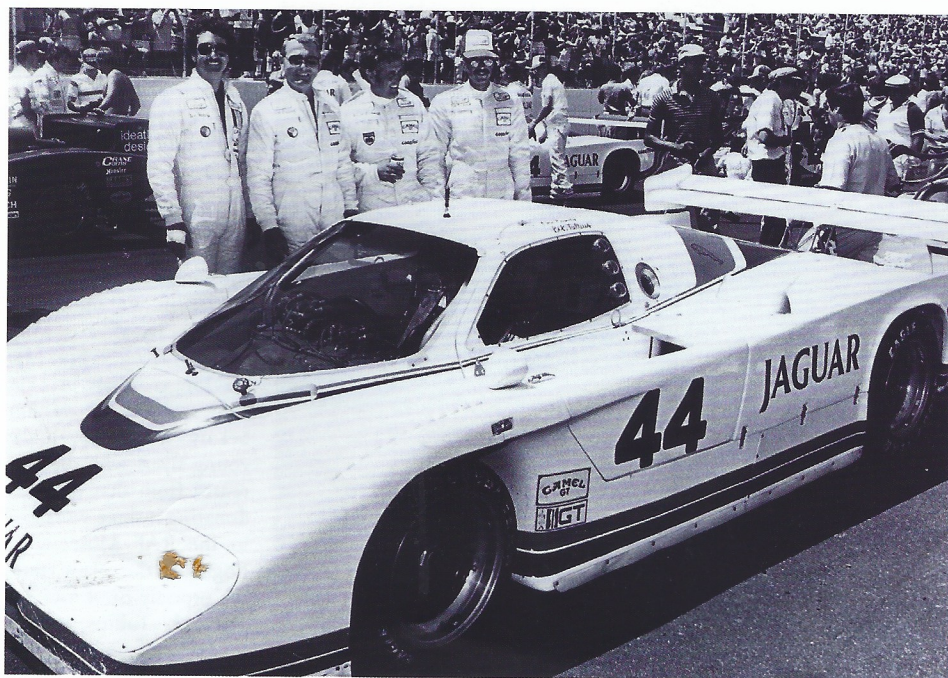
"But Audi had no intention of letting us do anything. They sent the cars and 30 people over and hardly ever let us touch the cars, and I want to tell you that was a horrible experience! They hired me to do the job, then told me when to go to the bathroom and when not to, and that went over like a fart in church with me. The second year, all I did was rent them my facility and my people, and I never even went to a race."

While not exactly a group effort, the Audis dominated Trans-Am in 1988 with drivers Hurley Haywood, Hans Stuck and Walter Röhrl. In fact, Haywood took the championship. And when SCCA changed the rules to slow them down, they moved to IMSA for 1989 and finished second in class. The bad news that year was an underfunded NASCAR Pontiac effort that lasted just 13 races.

One final frustration was a 1990 Trans-Am deal, also with Pontiac, that fell through almost before it began. The team entered just one event before throwing in the towel.

Thus ended a 25-year run that racked up an impressive 14 SCCA National Championships, three Trans-Am titles and nearly 300 race wins,

Their roots may have been with production-based sports cars, but Group 44 also ran in one of the world's premier endurance series: The IMSA GTP series. They ran the beautiful Jaguar XJR-5 and XJR-7.



including 11 IMSA GTP victories. Of the team's 28 Trans-Am wins, Tullius himself scored 21, making him the second all-time winner behind Mark Donohue.

What Kind of a Guy?

What was Bob Tullius like to work and drive for? "He was very much a taskmaster," says ex-PR rep Paul Brand. "You did things the way he needed and wanted them done, or you didn't work for him. For guys who applied for a job as a gopher, their job interview consisted of him handing them a broom and a can of floor sweep compound and watching them sweep the floor. If they couldn't do that well, they didn't get a job. It had to be perfect."

"The reason he was successful is that he set standards above and beyond the level of those he was competing with, and that made him attractive to sponsors. He had a tractor trailer before any of the NASCAR guys did. If you were to ask who was the prototype for the modern professional race team, it was Bob Tullius. He didn't have any money to go racing with, so the only way he was going to do it was as a complete professional, by marketing his services to companies that recognized the promotional value of a winning team and winning race cars."

Adds Hurley Haywood, who drove both the GTP Jags and the Audis for Tullius, "I had heard that he was military and strict in his approach, that it was Bob's way or no way, so I was a little intimidated when I got the call from him. But from the moment we shook hands, he and I never had a cross word. It was a really great relationship. Of all the people I've driven for, Bob was probably the most successful at motivating me to perform at my maximum. He had a unique way of challenging me without pissing me off. In the five years I drove for him, I was driving some of my best races ever. And a lot of that was how Bob controlled his team and the standards he set for everyone to strive for."

Sweet Retirement

"That Daytona IMSA finale, Thanksgiving of '86, was my last race," Tullius says, "and I won. The story is this:

Toward the end of the season, Mike Dale came to me and said, 'I think it's time. I think you're much more valuable to us as the owner/operator of Group 44 than you are as a driver. We can get other drivers.' I said, 'Fine.' I didn't argue with him a bit. I was 56 years old, I had been driving for 25 years, I had won many more than my share of races—I never really added them up, but I think I won somewhere between 150 and 200 races—and that was enough. It was time for me to quit. So, that would be my last race, and the only people who knew it ahead of time were Mike Dale and myself.

"Chip Robinson and I won that race, and on the victory stand, I said I was exceptionally happy to have won because in all probability, there would never be another opportunity for me to be on a victory stand. I actually did drive a couple races after that, but officially, from my own personal viewpoint, that was it."

Not that he wasn't still fast. "We timed every driver every lap of every race," he says. "Chip Robinson was so fast as a qualifier that nobody could out-qualify him in our cars—nobody. He was a rocket ship. And I drove with him all the time, because I wanted to look at the sheet at the end of the race, and if I was a detriment to my team, I would have quit on the spot. But on a regular basis, I was as fast as he was in the race, and more consistent, and as fast and consistent as Haywood or Redman. But I decided not to be a punch-drunk fighter.

"And that day I finished racing, knowing it was my last, I can't imagine anything higher than that. Starting out in a TR3, ending up in a 200 mph GTP car, and winning my last race against tough, tough competition—Porsches, BMWs, everything—if you had written a Hollywood script for my life as a racer, you couldn't have ended it any better."

Today, Tullius lives in Sebring, Fla., where he moved some years ago with a plan to build a museum. He planned to dedicate the facility to the World War II training base known as Hendricks Field, along with its rich histories in racing and wartime aviation.

His wife passed away many years ago, but he enjoys visiting with his son, his son's wife and his four "delightful grandsons" as frequently as possible. The museum didn't happen due to issues with the Sebring Airport authority, but Tullius loves working on and flying his half-dozen airplanes. Also in his hangar is a small collection of retired Group 44 Inc. race cars, including three beautiful IMSA GTP Jaguars.

Tullius flew a P-51 Mustang World War II fighter in air shows for many years after retiring from racing, but he no longer owns it. He dedicated that \$2 million beauty to all the brave young flyers who did not return from that conflict, donating it three years ago to the RAF Museum in England; the plane now sits proudly on a rotating pedestal. Tullius is just that kind of guy.

Tullius retired to Sebring, Florida, the site of many of his great memories. At his private facility at Sebring airport, he keeps many of his old Group 44 racers, as well as a half-dozen small aircraft. Tullius is an avid pilot, devoted father and grandfather, and generous supporter of the Humane Society of Highlands County.

