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Sharing the Gold

By allowing for more than one winner, Bloomington Gold founder David Burroughs stood Corvette show judging on its head.

STORY BY GARY WITZENBURG PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Say you own a gorgeously restored collector Corvette. You enter it in a show, expecting to win at least Best in Class. But the judges somehow fail to appreciate fully your pride and joy and anoint another car they somehow like better. Damn! Such is the unhappy experience of most who show their cars and compete for awards. Someone goes home proud and happy; everyone else just goes home.

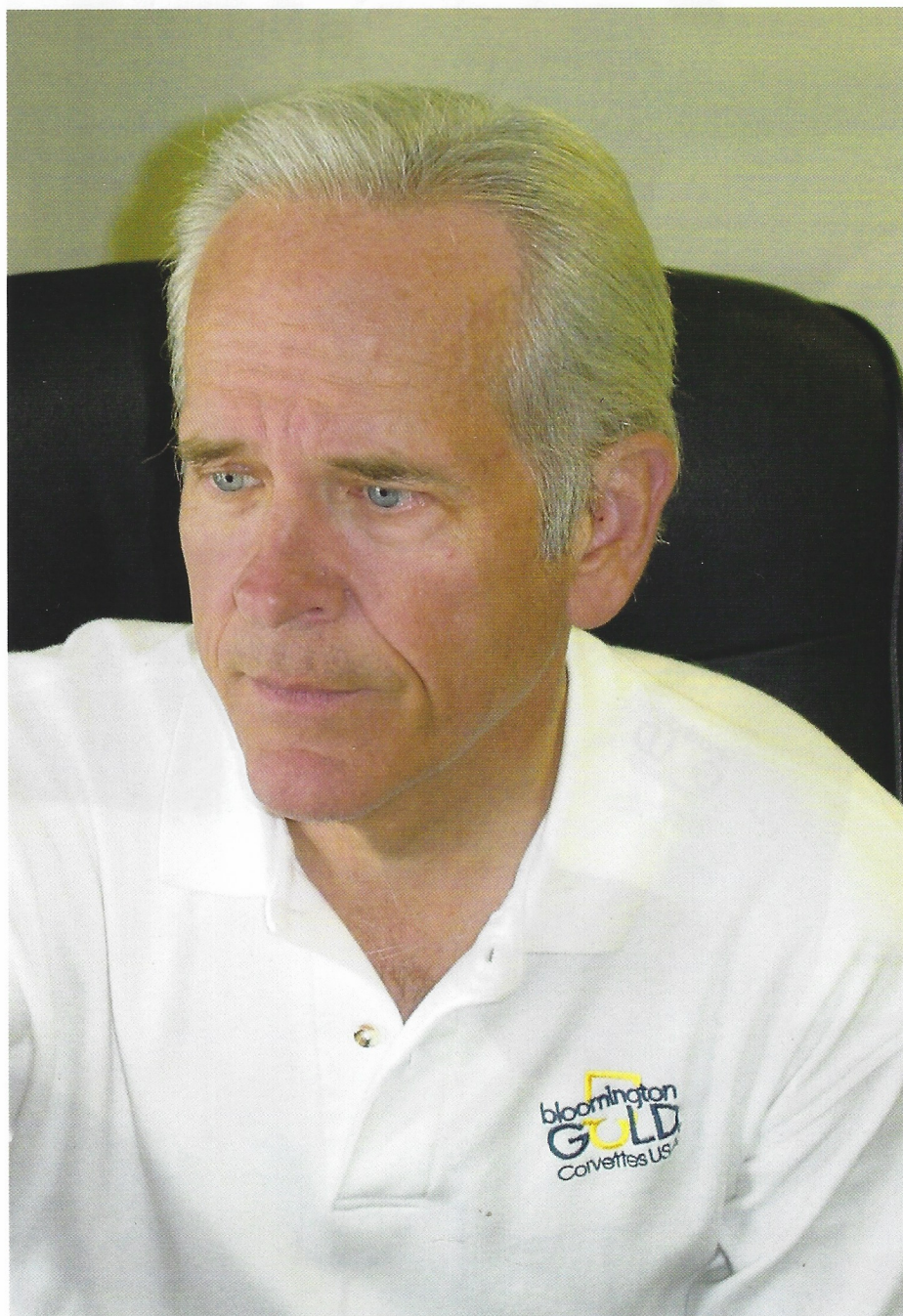
David Burroughs attended the first Bloomington, Illinois Corvette Corral in 1973, and returned the following year with his own 1967 coupe. "We did really well," he adds today. "But I saw how the judging was done. They didn't know much about the cars, and they judged on stuff that didn't make any sense. They put their hand under the fender to see if there was dirt there. If it had pretty paint, it would get an award for something. But originality was no big deal."

Burroughs would later win multiple awards with that same '67 Corvette. However, that first experience sowed the seed that would eventually inspire him to turn auto-show judging upside down.

Farmer's Son

Burroughs was born and raised in the small farm town of El Paso, Illinois, north of the Bloomington/Normal area. "Growing up on a farm," he says, "you have to be part mechanic. I watched my dad work on stuff, and I liked doing it." For Christmas, he asked for things like carburetors and transmissions on which to work. "I was always fascinated with mechanical things...anything that went up in the air and flew or went fast on the ground." That led to soap-box derby and go-kart racing, and eventually grown-up cars.

His father was a loyal Chrysler man, so Burroughs grew up driving Chrysler cars and pickups and loving Chrysler 300s from afar. But his first car—paid for with money earned mowing lawns, doing farm work and working construction—was a big, fast 1962 Oldsmobile Starfire.



Yet the young Burroughs was even crazier about airplanes. He read everything he could about them, began learning to fly neighboring farmers' planes at the age of nine and was a licensed pilot by 16. His career goals, in chronological order, were: aeronautical engineer, military pilot, test pilot, astronaut. But while attending the University of Illinois, he learned to his dismay that his eyesight was not good enough for military flying. "That screwed up my plans to become an astronaut, so I changed majors. While I kept flying, I got double degrees in aviation and marketing."

Business Mechanic

Following graduation, he joined a Bloomington advertising agency. He learned management skills and "how to operate with different kinds of personalities" and worked his way up to marketing research director. All the while, he piloted the company plane. After ten years, he left for a job as a strategic planner for a large insurance company.

Burroughs says he got a better business education from mechanics training in aviation school than he did from his marketing training. "I'm able to look at a business like an air-

plane or car and trouble-shoot a problem," he says. "[Engines] have three systems: intake air, fuel and spark. Marketing has five: people, product, price, path and promotion. Are you going to the right marketplace? Is the product suited to those people? Is the price going to fit? Do you have a path of distribution? Finally, have you properly promoted it?

"I applied the things I learned in mechanics' school and learned how to diagnose businesses. If someone says, 'Our sales are down,' there is one of only five reasons, or a combination of them, why that's the case. If all those elements are in place, it has to work. You can't make it not work. I used that in the Corvette business and built the Bloomington Gold show around it."

First Corvette

At first, Burroughs had little interest in Corvettes. But he built a couple Corvette models and, at the tender age of 14, fell hard for a white '61 roadster he saw pulling into a gas station one summer night in Indiana. "The Corvette was new, and it just glowed in the station's lights," he told writer Michael Antonick, "...and a bunch of girls made a big deal over the Corvette...That was the switch. It was Corvettes from then on."

Two years later, the first '63 he spotted struck him as the most magnificent car he had ever seen: "I had never heard about it, had never seen anything printed about it. To this day, I can tell you exactly where I was when we drove up on it. This beautiful Daytona Blue '63 coupe was sitting in front of us, looking like it had just landed from Mars. It was absolutely stunning, amazing! When I saw that, it was definite." But eight more years passed before he could afford to purchase his first Corvette, an all-original silver '67 coupe, which he bought from the agency's art director. He still owns it today.

In 1972, he joined a local club and in '73 started showing the Vette. Within six months, he was president of the club, showing more often and learning that the cars that won were the most cosmetically beautiful. "This one I was driving was in really nice condition," he says, "but it sat outside, and the paint was fading. So in 1975, I did a really big restoration, put a \$3,000 paint job on it—the car was probably worth about that—and bought a set of finned aluminum '67 wheels for \$750 and tires for \$300."

His goal was to win at the National Council of Corvette Club's (NCCC) national convention. For inspiration, he tore off a magazine cover picture of the car that had won the year before and pinned it to the wall



Left: When David Burroughs speaks, he commands attention. Opposite: Bloomington judges at work.



"I THOUGHT, *THAT'S NOT RIGHT*. SOME PEOPLE GET MOTIVATED TO CREATE SOMETHING BECAUSE THEY LOSE. I GOT MOTIVATED BECAUSE I WON."

above his work bench. That may have helped, because his now cosmetically beautiful former daily driver '67 coupe ended up winning not just the 1976 NCCC Nationals but also that year's Bloomington show and the ultra-competitive Bob McDorman Corvette show. After that, he decided it would be pointless to show the car any more. The following year, he drove it the four miles to the Bloomington show one last time, won a Grand National trophy for "best restored" and parked it.

Despite all this success, Burroughs

remained dissatisfied by the way cars were judged: "I ended up beating some cars that I shouldn't have, because they were more authentic and original. I competed against a 6,000-mile black coupe with original paint that wasn't as nice as mine—because mine was done to perfection—but it was 10 years old, completely authentic and looked like [the day it was built]. Did nobody understand that? Evidently not. I thought, *That's not right*. Some people get motivated to create something because they lose. I got motivated because I won."

Paradigm Shift

While doing some judging for the NCRS that year, Burroughs kept thinking about how to improve show judging. He decided that an excellent beginning would be "a better crop of judges." From his experience in the hobby, he had gotten to know quite a few potential candidates from across the country who had impressed him as being both knowledgeable and nice.

"So in 1978," he relates, "I made a proposal to the people running the Bloomington Corvette show: 'You run your swap meet and



let me run the show. I'll put together a set of judges, and we'll do this right." When they agreed, he lined up 34 well-qualified judges from all over the U.S. They conducted the first-ever "certification" judging that year and, in the process, changed the whole car-show paradigm overnight.

He came up with the concept on the day after New Year's, 1978, put it on paper and began explaining it to people: "Number one, past shows have had one winner. Everyone else lost, and many went home justifiably upset. That didn't make any sense. How do you have good public relations when you've got one person happy and everyone else mad? Number two, if your car meets a certain set of standards, you should leave with the proper award.

"So I set it up like a driver's test. When you go in for your driver's test, you don't win or lose, but you do have to drive to a certain standard. If you complete the test successfully, you get a license. If everyone that day completes it successfully, they all get licenses. If no one completes it to the standards, no one does."

Judging

Burroughs' marketing-research background helped him create a judging system that was quantifiable instead of subjective: "We established a set of published standards that show exactly how to get certified, with no subjectivity. Each of the 250 components on the judging sheets has two elements to it: 'Authenticity' and 'Damage & Deterioration.'

"All you have to do is preserve the car, or restore it, to within 95 percent of the way it looked when it left the factory; that earns you Gold certification. You can use restoration and reproduction parts, as long as it's accurate to within 95 percent."

Accuracy from 90-94 percent earns Silver certification, while 85-89 percent gets you Bronze certification.

Among the many Bloomington Gold documents is a "Judges Advisories" pamphlet that begins with their "simple but difficult" mission—to "recognize factory authentic appearance"—and spells out philosophies, procedures, protocols and even "bad words" to be avoided in communicating with owners (say "typical" or "not typical" instead of "right," "wrong," "correct," or "incorrect"). An "Owners Advisories" pamphlet (sent to entrants in advance, along with a set of judging sheets) offers preparation advice and procedures. A "Certification Guidelines" flyer defines "originality," "damage & deterioration" and the scoring system in precise detail.

"We define authenticity in terms of finish, date codes, the way [a part] is installed, its completeness and its configuration," Burroughs explains. "We don't judge your car, we judge components—which all add up to an

Right: The Bloomington Gold event is now held at the Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles, Illinois.

automobile—and we have specialists for each one.” One judge focuses on the engine compartment, another on the chassis, a third on the body and wheels, a fourth on the interior. “You get more credit for authenticity than you lose for deterioration, so that’s an incentive to leave things alone.”

Are cosmetic and historic perfection mutually exclusive? Achieving both would be less than likely with an older Corvette, which was not that well-finished to begin with: “If you look at furniture that George Washington owned, what do you think the appearance will be? We are very definitive. ‘Original’ means you haven’t changed the finish. If you change it, you’ve destroyed its authentic appearance. Great example: Open a door and look at the jamb. Mid-’60s Corvettes were much rougher in there than the paint on the fenders. You can lose a Gold Certificate by making those areas look better. It’s about historical accuracy, not appearance.”

Big Picture

Burroughs emphasizes repeatedly that Bloomington is “not a car show, not a concours. It’s a learning event, a research event and a preservation event, so everybody wins. If you’ve got something that’s not ‘factory typical,’ bring your documentation and we’ll look at it. If your documentation is good, we’ll love it, because we’ll learn something.” The event has 84 certification judges, who volunteer their time and pay their own expenses to travel from all over the U.S. to work the event. What’s in it for them? “Why would you want to be part of the Blue Angels? It’s an honor. You’re not going to be selected unless you’re very good.”

The Certification Meet at Bloomington quickly became the most important Corvette judging event in the U.S. A split with the Bloomington organizers resulted in no certification event in 1983, but Burroughs launched the new, separate Bloomington Gold show the following year; it has since become the spectacular event (now relocated to the Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles) we know today.

In 1994, overloaded with his insurance company job and aviation activities (air



shows, competitive flying and instructing), Burroughs sold the show and walked away for a decade. Then, retired from his job, he returned as Bloomington Gold’s full-time CEO in 2003. This year, he established “Survivor Collector Car” certification for historic cars of any make and model in the image of his “Survivor” judging for Corvettes that are more than 50 percent unrestored.

Summarizes Burroughs, “What I’m trying to do in the big picture is preserve historic auto-

mobiles and keep people from doing what they’ve done forever: Put paint on a car that’s way better than it should be, plate things way better than they should be, do customization or personalization that fits their definition of perfection. There’s a reason why gun collectors, stamp collectors, collectors of coins, art and antique furniture all have the same attitude toward refinishing and making something better. It ruins credibility. Car people may be the last to figure that out as collectors.” ○

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