

Bondurant: Road Racing Professor

By JOHN JEPPESON

Mention the name Bob Bondurant to a racer or enthusiast and he or she will immediately think of his world-renowned School of High Performance Driving. That, however, is but part of a much richer story.

Bondurant's legacy goes back to the 1940s when he raced an Indian motorcycle on dirt ovals. He didn't compete on four wheels until 1956 when he began sports car racing in a Morgan. The little plywood-bottomed roadster was a far cry from the legendary makes he would eventually wheel at tracks around the world.

In 1961, Bondurant landed a ride with Santa Barbara, Calif., Chevrolet dealer Shelly Washburn. His No. 614 Corvette was always at the front of the pack, duking it out with Dave McDonald, an established West Coast Corvette hot shoe. Bondurant made his mark, winning 30 of 32 races for Washburn.

It was bow ties to blue ovals for Bondurant when his on-track feats attracted the attention of Texas chicken farmer Carroll Shelby — already an established star. After a couple quick wins in Shelby's Cobra, Bondurant and the team packed their big boy pants and headed for Europe to do battle with Enzo Ferrari's red fleet.

The team's high point was winning the GT class at the 1964 Le Mans 24 Hours in the new Cobra Daytona Coupe. A year later Bondurant won the FIA Manufacturers' world championship for Shelby American and Ford. It didn't sit well with Ferrari when the young Californian won seven of 10 races against the vaunted 250 GTOs from Maranello.

Bondurant's driving earned him an audience with the man himself. Ferrari offered him a ride, but didn't say when, Bondurant recalled. "I kept asking, 'When?'" Then Enzo said flatly: "I'll call." End of discussion.

Later that year Bondurant was belted into a factory Ferrari Formula One car at Watkins Glen (N.Y.) Int'l for the United States Grand Prix. The result wasn't what he or Ferrari expected. Bondurant also drove other Formula One cars, but not with his usual top-step-of-the-podium finishes. Simply making it to Formula One has been elusive for American drivers. Fewer than 20 have competed during F-1's 60-year history. Phil Hill and Mario Andretti are the only American world champions.

Bondurant's drive at Spa in 1966 was simply heroic. Fatal Formula One crashes were rife during the 1960s. Bondurant crashed, then helped save Jackie Stewart's life. The Belgian track is notorious for sudden downpours, which catch drivers unawares. Bondurant was the first to spin off in one such shower and flip.

Once he was extracted, he saw Stewart trapped in his car on the other side of the track and ran to his aid. Stewart's car was also inverted and Graham Hill joined the effort, fraught



BOB BONDURANT RACING PHOTOS

by the Scot being trapped under the steering wheel. Fuel was leaking everywhere and the threat of a fire loomed. A mad scramble to a nearby farmhouse netted a toolbox with a wrench to remove the wheel, facilitating extrication of the fuel-drenched driver. In future races, Stewart taped a wrench to a steering wheel spoke every time he belted into a race car.

With his ticket punched in Formula One, Bondurant returned to the U.S. to the Can-Am Series. In his second race back, Bondurant was driving a McLaren at Watkins Glen when a steering arm broke, sending him on a wild, somersaulting ride. The car was a write-off, nearly taking Bondurant to the bone yard as a result. He survived, admitting to having a "Come-to-Jesus" experience.

"The Big Guy up above helped me swallow my pride and accept all the bad news and gave me the idea to take all I had learned as a champion driver and teach others how to drive correctly and to save thousands of lives," Bondurant said.

"First I had to learn to walk again, and secondly I had to stop racing and figure out a new way to make a living," he continued. "Lying in the hospital bed in full body traction, I remembered training the actors for the movie 'Grand Prix' to drive Formula cars and how that felt good to my heart. What if I started a driving school for racers?"

Bondurant didn't know where or



how to start. He even enlisted the aid of actor James Garner, who was one of his students when preparing for the John Frankenheimer movie. He needed a place for the school, cars, a curriculum and instructors. Bit by bit, the pieces fell into place.

Getting cars for the school was a thorny problem. None of the major U.S. or European car makers showed any inclination to partner with Bondurant's fledgling driving school. Porsche flatly turned him down.

"It's hard to convince an automotive executive you're the real deal with both legs in casts sitting in a wheel chair," Bondurant recalled.

The tireless promoter pressed on. One has to wonder if Bondurant learned that from Shelby. The dead-in-the-water driving school boss stopped by the Datsun headquarters on the way back from the unsuccessful Porsche pitch.

Datsun roadsters were fast and reliable in West Coast sports car racing. He rolled into the building and talked to Datsun marketing executive Mayfield Marshall. Marshall said Mr. Katayama was in the office that day. The two met and "Mr. K," as he was called, agreed to provide a pair of Datsun 510s for the instructors and a pair of 1600 "Fair Lady" roadsters for the students. The roadsters were later upgraded to 240Zs when they were introduced.

Bondurant credits "Mr. K" with the school's salvation. "Mr. Katayama

was the sole reason that the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving got any air under its wings 47 years ago," Bondurant explained.

The school still needed a venue. He first set up shop at California's Orange County Int'l Raceway on Valentine's Day 1968. It has moved to several tracks since, including Ontario Motor Speedway and Sonoma Raceway. The school is now located in Chandler, Ariz. — its permanent home.

Bondurant said the core teaching tools have evolved over time.

"The Bondurant Method is the term I have coined for 47 years," he explained. "I taught my instructors to profile the driver, peel back the layers of probable bad habits, analyze the core, rebuild their natural talent and then watch as seconds come off qualifying times and get them out of mid pack," said Bondurant. "Despite the ego, the race history, the wins, everyone will enter as a beginner; it's the only way. Learning the most basic skills usually reveals the first signs of bad habits that limit full potential."

Bondurant announced in November at the SEMA show that he is once again changing horses. This has happened several times in the past. Datsun, Ford and Chevrolet have been the official cars for Bondurant's school. Students will now get to feel all 700 horsepower of Mopar Hellcat Dodge Chargers and Challengers in addition to Vipers.

But one thing never changes — the school itself and the "Bondurant Method."

Bondurant's wife, Pat, summed the story up: "Most men want to taste that feeling just once, what it was like to race like Bob Bondurant and the closest they will ever get to that feeling is to come to the school." ■