

# Bob Bondurant — NO BRAKES AT 78

Written by David M. Brown  
Photos by Matthew D. Graff

Paradise Valley legend Bob Bondurant, 78, started racing motorcycles when he was in his teens. This past Valentine's Day he celebrated 43 years guiding the world-destination Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving in Chandler.

His daily driver: a 600-horsepower Cadillac CTS-V that isn't your dad's Caddy and probably won't be your children's either. And he still hops into the go-karts at the school in 110 degrees; pass him at peril.

His first car? "At a family Thanksgiving dinner with an older distant cousin, J.C. Lewis, he drove a brand-new Jaguar and let Bob take it out for a spin," says wife Pat, whom he met, not surprisingly, at the 2010 Russo and Steele automobile auction in Scottsdale, where she was auctioning her Dodge Viper.

"That led to Bob trading in his new Mercury Montclair in 1955 for a white Jag coupe that, coincidentally, was sold to him by no other than Ken Miles," she adds.

Later, Ken and Bob tested the Shelby Cobra's Daytona Coupes, GT-40s and GT-350s and went on to win many races, and legendary status, in the Cobras throughout the United States and Europe.

A native of Evanston, Ill., Bob moved with his family to Southern California when he was toddler. There he owned many cars and raced many cars: a 1954 Black Jag roadster, a Morgan Plus 4, in which he placed third in his first race at Santa Barbara — with no experience or training; and an Austin Healy, which he raced at Pomona, placing fifth.

Then there was a Triumph TR2 bored and stroked to three liters; the 1957 Orange Corvette #51, built by Bill Thomas and Jim Peterson, in which Bob won the Cal Club Championship in 1959 — 18 wins out of 20 races and second in the two he lost. That year he was Corvette Driver of the Year.

Following that, he drove a 1959 Corvette Roadster and the original Z06 Stingray, both numbered #614: He won 30 of 32 races.

#### Carroll Shelby Calls

Carroll Shelby called Bob in August 1963 to fly to Denver to drive Miles' 289 Cobra Roadster, #98, in the Continental Divide, and although he had never driven the car or the track before practice, he won. Naturally, he went on to lead



the Ford Cobra Team from 1963 to 1965.

In the 1963 LA Times Grand Prix at the Riverside pre-race, he was first overall in a Shelby 289 Cobra, besting Dan Gurney. A year later, with Gurney, he won the GT Class in the 24 Hours of Le Mans, driving the new Shelby Daytona Coupe, beating the Ferrari GTOs. Following that, with Jo Schlesler, he was the GT Class champ in the 1965 12 Hours of Sebring, again in a Shelby Daytona Coupe. "Carroll knew Bondurant was the man to beat and also the man to drive his Cobra," Pat says.

In that iconic car, Bob won seven of 10 FIA World Championship races in America and Europe. In 1965, he guided Shelby Cobra 289 Roadsters and Daytona Coupes to the prestigious FIA World Manufacturers Championship. Everywhere he and his team bested the mighty Ferrari GTOs.

"Bob was a big part of us winning the world championship in 1965," Shelby says. "Not only was he fast, Bob really knew how to get the most out of a car. He has the rare talent of being able to translate those things to students, which is why I asked him to help start a driving school in the 1960s. I'm proud of his accomplishments and to call him my friend."

Bob was the first and only American in an American car to beat the sacred chariots of Enzo Ferrari. No American has done this since. The Daytona Coupe in which he notched the

championship recently sold to an Argentinean collector for \$8.5 million, Pat notes.

Just a few months after Bob beat Scuderia Ferrari (Team Ferrari), Ferrari hired him to drive his first Ferrari Formula 1 in the United States Grand Prix, and he continued to drive many Ferrari prototypes. "Driving for Ferrari is one of the proudest moments in my racing career," Bob says.

#### Bob Flies High

In June 1967, at Watkins Glen in New York, in a McLaren MARK II CanAm, a steering arm broke at 150 miles an hour; the car rolled eight times and was thrown in the air as high as the telephone poles, spectators reported. "I remember seeing the tree-tops on the way down. Luckily, it was raining to soften the ground," Bob recalls.

A year later, inspired by his having taught James Garner and others how to drive Formula 1 race cars for John Frankenheimer's *Grand Prix*, released in 1966, he opened the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving at the Orange County International Raceway. His first students included Paul Newman and Robert Wagner, whom he trained for the 1969 movie *Winning*.

Since 1990, the school has been on the Gila River Indian Community at Firebird Raceway. In 43 years, he and his instructors have trained 350,000-plus students to be better



Shortly after their wedding in 2010, Pat and Bob celebrate at the school with their dog, Rusty, who recently died and is buried not far from this spot.





drivers: NASCAR legends and celebrities, car enthusiasts, housewives, teenagers and military officers.

He has raced with and against the best: Carroll Shelby, Stirling Moss, Phil Hill and Chuck Daigh, Jackie Stewart, Lorenzo Bandini, Mario Andretti and Graham Hill. And Mike Parkes, John Surtees, Ludovico Scarfiotti, Peter Revson, Bruce McLaren, Chris Amon, Jimmy Clark, Graham Hill, Dan Gurney and Denny Hulme. That's a short history of road racing over a quarter century.

He's known and whopped Enzo Ferrari, but the legend called him "Bondurante Sir Cobra." That's like accepting the tablets at Sinai and kudos from God.

He's competed in racing cars such as American Shelby Cobras, Daytona Coupes, Ford GT40s, Formula 1 cars, Porsches and NASCAR stock cars, and at tracks as diverse as Riverside, Sebring, Laguna Seca, Le Mans and Nurburgring. He even won the first off-road BAJA 500 in his class.

Bob Bondurant was inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 2003 and the San Diego Motorsports Hall of Fame with Andy Granatelli in 2004. He received the Ferrari Bella Machina Award at the Italiano Concorso in 2010, and most recently, was nominated into the Corvette Museum Hall of Fame by his 1967 Corvette Le Mans co-driver, Dick Guldstrand.

"God may smile at all the trophies I bring to him — including beating Ferrari — but all of the championships and racer dreams can't compare to what the school's success means to me," Bob says.

Today people from everywhere in the world come to learn high-performance driving as well as specialty skills such as emergency preparedness for chauffeurs of political leaders and CEOs and elite military groups. The new Bondurant fleet includes 2011 Corvette Grand Sports, six ZR1s and Camaro SS cars, and the school still runs the open-wheel Formula Mazdas as part of its extended lessons.

"After nearly losing my life in a race car," he continues, "I have always thanked God for the opportunity to redirect me to start the school to save so many lives."

**Cars are Stars**

At the world-famous school, Bob invited *Highline Autos* into his garage to talk about some of his prized cycles and cars:

- 1937 Indian Scout Motorcycle — "It's identical to the one I raced on dirt track ovals when I was only 17 in Southern California. I found it in Chicago and had it painted white. We have a picture above the motorcycle in the museum of the original back in 1952.

- 1969 Datsun 2000 Roadster — "When I started my high performance driving school in 1968, my priority was acquiring student-training vehicles. Datsun's Yutaka Katayama, better known as Mr. K, was kind enough to supply me with two Datsun Roadsters and a 510 sedan, starting years of collaboration and a lifelong friendship. My very first students were Paul Newman and Robert Wagner. Paul



was a great driver, and his training with the Roadster sparked a desire to race Datsuns professionally and winning four national championships. This is the one Newman drove. I have since had it restored.

•1972 Datsun 240Z — “This 240Z is a fantastic car. It was the perfect vehicle for training maximum car control while my school was at Sears Point Raceway. Fantastic. These cars were modified for the track by Peter Brock’s Trans Am race team, BRE. Famous students that have trained with this car include Clint Eastwood, Gene Hackman and James Brolin. This is the car that I trained Hackman in for the famous scene in *The French Connection*.

•1997 Ford Mustang Cobra — “Ford became my primary school sponsor in 1982. This hand-built Roush Mustang Cobra was the final addition to our Mustang fleet of over 150

cars and was built from the ground up as a dedicated race car. Modifications include a six-point roll-cage, fuel cell, on-board fire suppression system and a full-competition chassis and suspension setup. We once had 200 of them as school cars, all built by Roush.

•1999 Ford Crown Victoria “Cobra Vic” — “Before the ‘Cobra Vics,’ instructor cars were little more than lightly modified four-door sedans driven by my instructors to introduce students to the track and serve as lead cars. As the performance of the Mustangs increased, we needed a sedan that could keep up with the students at track speeds. Jack Roush built 19 special P71 Crown Victoria Police Interceptors with four-cam Cobra engines and five-speed manual transmissions. To build these cars was an enormous undertaking, and they are absolutely fantastic to drive. We call it ‘The Beast.’

•2004 Chevrolet Corvette C5 — “Beginning in 2003, General Motors became the School’s sponsor and has supplied us with brand-new C5 Corvettes and Cadillac CTS-V instructor cars. I had raced Corvettes in my early racing career, so I was thrilled to have a fleet of Corvettes at my school. These C5s were perfect for the track with great brakes, power and balance. NASCAR greats Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson learned how to ‘road race’ with my Corvettes, and the word quickly spread.

•2007 Jeff Gordon’s NASCAR #24 Chevrolet Monte Carlo — “Chevrolet kindly gave me Jeff Gordon’s #24 stock car as a ‘thank you’ for successfully teaching Jeff Gordon how to road race in NASCAR. The school trains about 90 percent of the NASCAR drivers. This is an exact replica of Jeff’s 2006 car and was used for promotional events. It is completely drivable with a 350-cid racing engine. We sometimes fire it

up in the museum for special events, and it always brings the house down, literally; small pieces of ceiling insulation will rain down from the noise and vibration. I love it.

•2011 Chevrolet Corvette ZR1 — “My favorite car to drive, on the track or on the street. We have a program at my School where ZR1 owners are given a two-day ZR1 Driving Class that is included with the sale of the car from Chevrolet. We train for two days how to skillfully drive the most powerful Corvette ever made. On the second day of the class, I give the students ‘hot laps’ on my road course and demonstrate what these cars are capable of. ZR1 owners say the car produces 700 horsepower! Wow, just incredible!”

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