

## PAUL RUSSELL *Restoration's World Series*

Most people strolling through the extraordinary field of cars at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance can recall the moment in their lives when they caught the auto mania virus. I was first exposed to this virus through my father, who had worked his way up from machinist to head of engineering at a firm that produced papermaking machinery. We spent Saturdays together fixing stuff or building models and Pinewood Derby entries. Whenever we passed through the wealthy part of town, we would stop and peek in the windows of a certain garage that housed a Cord Beverly Sedan, with its airplanelike dashboard and outside exhaust pipes. The virus took firm hold of me shortly after I got that all-important driver's license in 1967. I met a friend's adventurous father, who built his own gliders and owned sports cars. In particular, he had a 1958 Bug-Eye Sprite. That was my first exposure to a car with tremendous personality and the ability to actually go where you pointed it. That was *my* moment.

A few years later, I left college early and talked my way into a job as a mechanic trainee at an independent auto repair shop. My father had previously confided to me that, despite his managerial success, he felt the greatest satisfaction while at work in the machine shop, where he could see the quality of his accomplishments. He stressed that doing a job well brings the greatest happiness. To my frustration, I soon discovered that the auto shop put a priority on the "quick and dirty" repair of street cars. Hoping that work on classic cars would be different, I joined the Dearborn Automobile Company, a small shop that concentrated on restoring 1950s Mercedes-Benz automobiles. Five years later, in 1978, Alex Dearborn decided to concentrate exclusively on automobile sales, and he sold the restoration portion of the business to me. While I credit

my father with instilling my devotion to precision and craftsmanship, my mother was my entrepreneurial influence. She encouraged me to jump into business at the age of twenty-seven without any real business credentials, but also without any fear of failure.

I named my company the Gullwing Service Company, and I determined that it would do only the best work. I was intent on hiring the best possible people and providing them with an excellent working environment and the respect that good craftsmen deserve. Alex Finigan, David Twitchell, Janet Oliver and I were the nucleus of this little enterprise, situated initially in a three-bay garage.

On my first business trip, in August 1978, I headed for the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance and the Monterey Historic Automobile Races. What an inspiration and an eye-opener for a young entrepreneur! I went home vowing to return someday as a participant, not just an observer.

I returned to Pebble Beach in 1986, when Mercedes-Benz was the featured marque, and I have not missed a year since, presenting clients' restorations in eight of those years.

Initially, I felt that it was important for my company to concentrate on Mercedes-Benz automobiles of the fifties so we could offer expertise to our customers. But over the years, I've grown to understand that the restoration business is one of building relationships. We work on our clients' behalf, doing the right thing for their cars. Maintaining their faith in us is more important than specifying which marque we work on.

It was back in 1988 that Mr. Ralph Lauren, who had been a good client for some time, first asked us if we would take on a project outside of our normal specialty—that being the restoration of his Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic Coupé. Our collaboration with



*Paul Russell at work on the polo field at Pebble Beach.*

*Opposite: Paul Russell at the 1998 Concours.*





*Ralph Lauren and the crew of Paul Russell and Company alongside the 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic Coupé that won Best of Show in 1990.*

him on this restoration led to Best of Show honors at Pebble Beach in 1990. This, in turn, led to Mr. Lauren's request that we restore his dramatic 1930 Mercedes-Benz "Count Trossi" SSK for the 1993 event.

The focus of the Pebble Beach Concours is primarily on the cars and secondarily on the owners. That's as it should be.

There is no specific recognition for the restorers, but it is an extremely important event for us nonetheless; it is the World Series of the restoration business, and I love that aspect of it. Restoring cars made thirty to ninety years ago is an extremely unpredictable endeavor. Yet the date of the Pebble Beach Concours is fixed; it's an inflexible deadline. Your best effort must be completed—all of the variables encountered along the way in a restoration must be dealt with—by that Sunday at 8 A.M. That can best be illustrated by relating our experiences in 1993.

Mr. Lauren had commissioned us to undertake the complete and authentic restoration of his SSK, whose body had been designed by its first owner, Count Carlo Felice Trossi. Mr. Lauren is an extremely busy man, and yet he stays involved with his projects as much as he possibly can. Ours is a true collaboration; we consult him often. During the summer of 1993, as restoration of the SSK neared completion, we sought his guidance on which of two possible wheel treatments he preferred. When the car was delivered from the factory to its first owner, its wire wheels were exposed, but full spun-aluminum wheel covers are showing in a photograph taken of the car in Italy during its early years. Either configuration was in keeping with the history of the car.

We prepared a set of rudimentary disks, photographed the car with the disks covering the wheels on one side but not on the other and sent the pictures to Mr. Lauren's office. Of course, that wasn't the same as seeing the car in person. On numerous occasions, Mr.

Lauren made plans to come to our shop to see the car and make a final decision, but business conflicts forced him to cancel those plans. Ultimately, he left the decision up to me. I felt we should go with the wire wheels, because they gave this substantial car a slightly lighter, sportier appearance and that was the way the car had appeared parked in front of Castello Trossi in a picture Count Trossi's family had given to us.

Mr. Lauren saw the finished car for the first time at 7 A.M. on Saturday, just one day prior to the big event. It was a typical Monterey morning—quiet and misty. Mr. Lauren and I stood together and watched the car being unloaded from its enclosed car carrier. Then Mr. Lauren walked around the car, silently admiring our work, for about fifteen minutes. He seemed very pleased. He looked some more. Then finally, he spoke to me. He said, "Well, where are the wheel covers?"

I explained my decision to him, but it was clear that he really wanted to see what the car would look like with wheel covers. I asked for a few hours to figure out what to do, and I wandered around the polo field looking at other cars. It was ludicrous, of course, to think that we might be able to find and borrow wheel covers that would actually fit the SSK. And so I finally decided to call my shop back in Massachusetts. Fortunately, Frank Price, my body shop foreman, was there, and he agreed to box up the unfinished wheel covers that had been fabricated for the SSK, along with some metalworking tools, and get them on a plane to California. We hired a courier service to retrieve the package from the San Francisco airport, and they delivered it to our hotel in Monterey at 2 A.M. on Sunday morning.

We had previously removed the spare wheel from the SSK and brought it into our hotel room. And right there, we attacked the rough wheel covers with drills, metal files and polishing equipment. Each wheel cover had to be fitted to the wheel, a hole had to be cut for the valve stem and that hole had to be nicely finished. Then





Left and center: A Mercedes-Benz SSK wire wheel without (left) and with (right) wheel cover.

Right: Ralph Lauren accepts the 1993 Best of Show Trophy for his 1930 Mercedes-Benz SSK Willie White/Trossi Sports Two-Seater.

each wheel cover had to be given a consistent, spun-aluminum, satin finish and cleaned with a mild polish. Needless to say, filing the edges of large aluminum disks in the wee hours of the morning created a bit of a stir. While I was out negotiating with the hotel's maintenance engineer for a few additional tools, one of our hotel neighbors came over to see what exactly was going on. When the crew sheepishly explained what they were doing and why, he said, "Oh, that's fine. I know what you're going through. I've been there many times myself! Hearing this creaking that just went on and on and on, I really had to come over and see what was going on and shake the hand of the man with that kind of endurance."

Eventually we relocated to a work area in the hotel kitchen, where we could finish our job without bothering the other guests. We were still there when the kitchen crew came in to cook muffins and pastries for breakfast—an unexpected benefit of our new workplace! All four wheel covers were finally finished to our satisfaction at 5:30 A.M., and after a quick hour of sleep, we headed back to the polo field to meet Mr. Lauren, his wife Ricky and two of their children.

The SSK was out of the trailer, and we fitted the wheel covers to the wheels on one side and left the wire wheels showing on the other side. As is frequently the case on the morning of the Concours, people who really wanted to see the cars up close got to the

polo field extremely early. A crowd quickly gathered around the SSK, and Mr. Lauren walked from one side of the car to the other, again and again, talking with his family and some of the onlookers. Everyone had an opinion about which way the car looked best. My crew and I looked on nervously. When I checked my watch, it was already 7:45 A.M.! I told Mr. Lauren that we needed to make a decision and get down on the competition field. After a few additional, very long minutes, he said, "You know, Paul, I think you were right. Take the wheel covers off!"

You might have expected some grumbling from the crew after their extraordinary effort to get the wheel covers done, but we were very satisfied. We had been presented with a seemingly impossible challenge, and we had met it. Our client had requested that we present all his options to him, and that's simply what we did. Of course, it was especially satisfying to go on through the day's events and to win Best of Show—our second such honor in collaboration with Mr. Lauren.