

Master craftsman: Paul Russell with Ralph Lauren's Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa. 'Ralph's a very good man to work for,' he says, 'because he has very high standards and that's what we're all about'



Retouch of brilliance

Phil Llewelin meets Paul Russell, the restorer's restorer

HE MIGHT look cool, but Paul Russell will be crossing his fingers at Pebble Beach, California, tomorrow afternoon. As the sun glints on Carmel Bay, nit-picking judges in immaculate blazers and perfectly creased slacks will deliver their verdicts at the end of the world's most prestigious Concours d'Élégance for old cars. If a first-in-class at Pebble is the equivalent of an athlete winning a gold medal in the Olympic Games, best-of-show is like being invited to live with the gods on Mount Olympus.

Russell, 47, is the quiet, charming and infinitely painstaking restorer who has made many such dreams come true. Eight years ago, while making his Pebble Beach debut, he was applauded for setting new standards when Ralph Lauren's 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic won the top award. It reflected 7,000 hours of work at Russell's immaculate premises in Essex, Massachusetts. That is the equivalent of one man concentrating on a car for 36 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, for four years.

Russell's uncompromising craftsmanship and Lauren's deep pockets did it again when 1993's best-of-show went to the fashion king's Mercedes-Benz SSK. That mighty road-

ster and Lauren's Type 59 Bugatti stood in the reception area when I visited Russell with one of his customers, Ervin "Bud" Lyon — the friend who can muster more cylinders than anyone else I know. Restored and fettled by Russell's team, his collection embraces vast pre-war Cadillacs and Packards, classic Ferraris, exquisite Porsches and the Jaguar D-type in which we drove to Le Mans in 1996.

Lyon's Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster has won major awards at Pebble Beach and other top-notch venues, including the Louis Vuitton Classic in New York. Two of his rarest and most beautiful cars, the Ferrari 166MM and the Porsche 356 Carrera 2 Cabriolet, are on parade at Pebble Beach this weekend. And that is why Russell has more than a passing interest in the results.

The restorers' restorer was born in New England, the son of an engineer. "One day, when I was 16," he says, "a friend's father came to our house in a bug-eyed Austin-Healey Sprite. We went for a ride and I was hooked. It was the first car I'd ever been in where you sat so close to the road and it went more or less where you pointed it."

His parents were not pleased when Paul dropped

out of college to work for a small garage that specialised in Mercedes-Benzes. The owner was a superb technician, but his shortcomings in other areas led to Russell studying business administration in his spare time before taking the plunge in 1978. He bought the Gullwing Service Company, which specialised in the spectacular Mercedes-Benz 300SL sports cars of the Fifties, and changed the name to Paul Russell and Company.

"Ralph Lauren contacted me after buying a 300SL we'd done for another customer," he recalls. "He asked if we were up to the challenge of restoring a Bugatti Atlantic. That was a very significant step, because it was the first time we had done a pre-war, coach-built car. Ralph's a very good man to work for, because he has very high standards and that's what we're all about. When the best-of-show was announced at Pebble Beach, my eyes welled up and it was just... wonderful."

The Eighties were a time of over-restoration and suffered from what Russell refers to as "the Hollywood look". Times have changed, he asserts, and glitz now loses points.

His own restoration project, a Lancia Aurelia GT, gathers dust while Russell and his 19-

strong team concentrate on \$60-per-hour work for customers. His favourites include a Gullwing, so called because of the way its doors open upwards, that arrived from Bogota, Colombia.

"It was held together by rust and baling wire, so I called the owner and explained that for half the cost of a restoration we could find him a very nice example which he could drive straight away. He explained that he would prefer us to restore the car, because it had belonged to a childhood friend's father. He remembered him running it in races on the streets of Bogota and was there when he lost his brakes and hit a church. He couldn't believe his eyes when he opened the crate and saw what we had done."

Russell believes in discussing a customer's objectives before starting a project. "We have talked people out of spending a lot of money if what they really want is a nice car to drive at weekends. It wouldn't do our reputation any good to suck a guy into a full, body-off restoration and then, when it's finished, he's afraid to drive the car because it looks untouchable. When all's said and done, cars exist to be driven."