



REBUILT FOR SPEED

SOME PEOPLE COLLECT ART. THESE GUYS RACE IT

by david hayes
photographs by gus powell

Frank Fusillo looks asleep. He's not, but I still don't want to disturb him. A big man in a bulky, blue-and-white race suit made of fire-resistant Nomex, he's strapped into a black '69 Corvette Coupe, number forty-six, by a five-point safety harness and he's surrounded by a modern racing cage – a skeletal formation of roll bars and diagonal struts that are welded into place so securely that, should the rest of the car disintegrate, Frank would remain safe inside it, like a chick inside an egg. It's a hot Friday morning in October, on the grid at Virginia International Raceway (VIR), and Frank's wearing a black racing helmet through which you can just see the upper part of his face. His eyes are closed because he's visualizing the track, every turn and elevation, every

shimmy and undulation. The joke is, if you visualize long enough, you'll get it perfect and won't have to actually drive the course.

At Frank's first race, last June at Mid-Ohio, one of North America's premier race tracks, there he was, a rookie trying not to look like one as he sat on the grid with all the other drivers, visualizing the track the way his friend, Peter Klutt – who got him into racing and whose company, Legendary Motorcar Company Ltd., maintains his car – had told him to. All of a sudden, smoke started pouring out of the Vette and the pit crew was hammering on the roof and yelling at him. You only let a racing engine idle for so long, and Frank was doing such a good job of visualizing the track that he'd forgotten it was

running. It overheated.

That was a close one, Peter told him later, wearing that lopsided grin of his. Sure, it's vintage racing, the car fanatic's equivalent of a Thursday-night hockey team renting the Air Canada Centre, but still, there were guys at Mid-Ohio who used to race professionally, and a few who still do. Frank wouldn't say this out loud, but he was kind of intimidated. Then it happened: He was sitting on the grid, his engine rumbling so loud it made his teeth shake, and the official waved the car in front of him onto the track and next it was his turn and all he could think was, *Holy shit!* But Frank did okay at Mid-Ohio, which, in your first season, "basically means you don't get in any accidents and you don't piss anybody off."

That may not be the smokin' rebel yell of NASCAR, but it's a pretty accurate picture of the genteel pastime of vintage racing. It's difficult to pinpoint its genesis, but by the early '70s, the steady advance of technology meant that professional racecars were regularly made obsolete almost overnight. Pretty soon, private owners and collectors who could no longer race their prized cars professionally began getting together for amateur races. Over time, organizations were formed, rules were written, and race weekends became formally scheduled series. What makes a car "vintage" is defined a little differently from organization to organization, and regulations vary, but everyone shares the belief that cars belong on tracks, not in museums. The same view is neatly, if a little grandiosely, expressed by the motto of the Sportscar Vintage Racing Association (SVRA): "Some people collect art; we race it." Although races are often held at premier tracks such as Watkins Glen International, Sebring Raceway, Mid-Ohio, or here at VIR, competition is checked. Still, it's close enough for ordinary men – well, ordinary *wealthy* men – to at least taste the turbocharged thrills of auto racing.

The qualifying round is about to begin. Almost simultaneously, the two dozen cars on the grid begin growling and rumbling, and an SVRA official waves them forward one by one until it's Frank's turn. He revs the Vette and, with a concussive explosion of sound, roars onto the track. He accelerates to 100 mph in a few seconds before diving into the first of a series of corkscrew turns, his heart beating at more than twice its resting rate.

a 2002 Prowler (Chrysler's retro hot rod), and a 2003 Z06 Corvette. Fusillo has bought and sold cars as a hobby for years, he explains, because he gets a thrill out of hanging around auctions, finding a deal, selling it for a few bucks more.

A few years ago, one of Fusillo's partners suggested the two of them fly to Florida to attend a racing school, just for fun. Fusillo loved the experience and then, a few months later, met Klutt at a car auction. They hit it off and Con-Ker Construction ended up with a \$350,000 contract to do the paving and road work at the new 40,000-square-foot facility that Klutt was building for Legendary Motorcar in Halton Hills, a bedroom community



Frank Fusillo (above) waits for race time (opposite) in his '69 Corvette Coupe at the Virginia International Raceway.

west of Toronto. Then Fusillo and Klutt combined a trip to an Arizona car auction with an advanced session at a nearby racing school. Klutt, who's raced semi-professionally and won a vintage event at Watkins Glen three years ago, encouraged his friend to try vintage racing.

"You know," says Fusillo, "my dad died of cancer a few years ago. Just before he died he said to me, 'I didn't do a lot of the things I wanted to. Do what you really want to do.'"

For Fusillo, who's thirty-eight, that meant transforming his passion for fast cars into a passion for racing. "Working through the week, you often get that tension build-up, especially when you have those really shitty days," says Fusillo. "But when I go out on a track, everything else disappears, and when I come back from a weekend like this I feel like a new man."

A race weekend isn't cheap. There's the

US\$700 entry fee, plus transportation, accommodation, and meals. For Klutt to bring a crew and maintain the cars, he charges approximately US\$250 per car per day. The cost of transporting the cars to the track is based on mileage, and then there are tires and miscellaneous parts. When Fusillo is asked how much tires cost, he peers over his shoulder at his wife, Teresa, who's standing nearby, and whispers, "One thousand US for four of them, and I'll use two sets this weekend." Then, in a loud stage voice, he says, "Oh, they're a couple hundred bucks."

It costs each driver anywhere from \$7,000 to \$10,000 per weekend, but Klutt doesn't make much money over the three days. It's only worth doing at all because his company has skilled mechanics on staff, as well as mechanical, fabricating, and paint shops in-house and owns a fifty-three-foot, custom-built tractor-trailer for transporting cars. He sees it as a way to support some of his best customers who like to race. The real profits are in restoring vintage cars, then doing service work between races and fixing them if they're involved in an "incident."

Later that afternoon, during the endurance race, the driver of a '71 Porsche 911 spins out, clipping two cars, including Marc Mehl's \$150,000 Camaro on which Klutt had recently completed extensive restoration work. In vintage racing, accidents are infrequent and so discouraged that offending drivers usually receive a stern visit from race officials. A crowd gathers at Legendary to stare at Mehl's smashed front end.

"I don't know what he was doing," Mehl tells Fusillo, Klutt, and the others. "He friggin' let it roll across the track right in front of us." Mehl, usually laid-back, is steamed. "You know what they say: What's the difference between a Porsche and a porcupine?" he asks. "A porcupine has the pricks on the outside."

A few minutes later, the Porsche driver, a compact man in his early sixties, approaches Mehl and the two of them step aside to talk. Klutt, keeping a wary eye on Mehl, quietly explains to Fusillo that the only time you see the guy who caused an accident come over is when he wants to claim it wasn't his fault, and there's often a fight. Most often, you never see him; the offending driver packs up and gets out of town before his engine's cooled down.

When the man leaves, Fusillo turns to Klutt in mock innocence and says, "What did Marc make a mistake doing?"

When they stop laughing, Mehl says, "He offered to pay for my repairs."

Klutt looked genuinely shocked. "Really!



Left: Legendary Motorcar Company's Lou Ciarafoni offers Fusillo some advice before Sunday morning's time trials. Right: a VIR race official readies for Sunday's start.

This is supposed to be a gentlemen's sport, but I've never heard of that happening. There's still honour in this world."

Saturday morning is overcast and a steady drizzle is slicking the track. Fusillo, whose car is equipped with rain tires, is driving the third qualifying round, but only about half of the drivers in his group ("selected big-bore production sports cars and sedans through 1972") are on the track. Some were so deterred by the weather that they were striking their tents, packing their trailers, and leaving early. Alone along the pit lane, Klutt and his four-man Legendary crew stand next to their tool cabinet and rack of spare tires.

"There are more track crews than drivers," says Klutt. He has a wiry build and square-jawed features, and he's usually wearing an insouciant grin that makes it hard to know when he's ragging you.

Like Fusillo, Klutt, who is forty, always loved cars. As a kid, he would help out his father, a welder who repaired his own Firebird. In 1978, when Klutt was fifteen, he bought a smashed-up Mustang Mach 1 for \$200, repaired it in his parent's driveway, then sold it for \$2,800. He studied business in university but eventually figured that since he was still obsessed with cars, he should probably try to make a living at it.

He started a business called The Shelby Shop that specialized in Fords, especially the Mustangs that former star driver Carroll Shelby turned into high-performance race cars. It outgrew the garage of his first house and a couple of other locations before turning into Legendary Motorcar, a multi-million-dollar enterprise in its present Halton Hills home. The complex, which sits on twenty acres of property, has a twenty-eight-foot glass atrium and a cobblestoned reception area, and looks from a distance like a conference centre. Inside,

Legendary can do everything from tune-ups to engine rebuilds to top-to-bottom restorations. When Klutt discovered that many old parts were next to impossible to find, he started a manufacturing arm that makes metal and fibreglass components. The Halton Hills property also contains a two-level showroom packed with classic cars – most either for sale or being stored for customers – and a TV studio where Klutt and a partner, Tom Hnatiw, own, produce, and host *Dream Car Garage*, a popular show available to seventy-million North American homes on the Fox Entertainment Group's SPEED Channel.

The TV sideline has been valuable for Legendary's profile. Many customers learn about the restoration business via *Dream Car Garage*, and over the weekend in Virginia, a steady stream of people stop by, attracted by the huge Legendary Motorcar tractor-trailer that has the *Dream Car Garage* logo



Left: Fusillo's fireproof race suit hangs out to dry in the Legendary Motorcar trailer. Legendary is owned and operated out of Halton Hills, Ontario, by Peter Klutt (above, on left, with Fusillo).



Custom detailing on a vintage Corvette

emblazoned on the side. Klutt, who never stops smiling at them, nonetheless looks relieved when they're gone. While he can handle doing the PR, he's happiest attending to the details of a race weekend or overseeing an exciting restoration back in Toronto – such as the one he's currently working on, a '65 Shelby Cobra 427 with a prestigious racing history, valued at US\$1-million – or haunting the big car auctions. “We tend to specialize in the rarest of the rare, but we also look for almost anything that you can make money on,” he says of the buying and selling that is the heart of Legendary's business. “Fortunately for us, what's hot right now are muscle cars with big motors.”

It's a warm, sleepy Sunday afternoon and, back at the VIR, the Edelbrock Sprint, the feature race for Fusillo's Group 6, has just started. Klutt has driven to a vantage point from which he can watch Fusillo's progress

through a snaky part of the track called the “climbing esses.” As number forty-six whizzes by, Klutt comments, half to himself. “He's sliding past as opposed to rotating the car. He's losing a little speed there.”

Klutt is intrigued by the mental dynamics of success and how it relates to racing. “Ninety percent of racing is in your head,” he says. “You have to convince yourself to go into that corner at eighty with your foot on the pedal, where most people wouldn't go.

“Even in this class of racing, a driver thinks he has the ability to win or he wouldn't race. Even if he's starting out, he still has to think he has the ability to *learn* to win.” Referring to Fusillo and the other drivers, he says, “These guys are all successful businesspeople, so of course they think they can win. But racing is a great equalizer. On the track, you're respected for your driving abilities, not your bank account.”

And they're unashamedly boys who love

cars and speed, the *vroom vroom* of the soul. They live by the words of Michael Delaney, the late Steve McQueen's character in the movie *Le Mans*: “Racing is life. Anything that happens before or after is just waiting.” At least for a few weekends a year.

Back at the paddock, Fusillo steers his Vette into its spot with an explosive fart. His best time is 2:16.44, which isn't bad for a guy on his fourth race at a track as challenging as VIR. He hauls himself out of the car and unzips his suit, sweat pouring down his face and staining his fireproof long underwear. “That woke me up,” he shouts, as his wife and kids smile and Klutt congratulates him on a good run. The weekend's over and it's time to pack up. But for the moment, Fusillo's still riding a manic energy, laughing like a kid who just got off a rollercoaster at the fair and isn't ready to go home. ■

David Hayes is an award-winning Toronto-based freelance writer who drives a late-model Honda Civic hatchback.



Left: Klutt and the Legendary pit crew watch Fusillo's last lap of the race season. Right: The crumpled remains of Marc Mehl's US\$150,000 Camaro.