

# The History of Shelby-American Cars

by Ken Yeager

Part I

It is July 5, 1965 at the twelve-hour GT Championship Race at Rheims, France. Rheims is made to order for the Daytona coupes: not too rough and enough straights to allow the cars to get to their 180 mph + speed. The Daytona roars across the finish line in first place with another Daytona right behind. This victory allows Shelby-American enough points to win the World Manufacturers Championship. The AC Cobras and Shelby Mustangs were some of the top performance cars of the 1960's and are considered classics today.

Carroll Shelby was born on January 11, 1923 in Leesburg, Texas outside Dallas. At an early age he became interested in cars and airplanes. During World War II he joined the Army Air Force and flew planes. After the war, he started a chicken ranch which soon fell into debt.

A few years later an old high school friend named Wilkins asked him if he would be interested in racing some of his cars. Of course Shelby jumped at the chance to race and in 1952 his career began. Before long Carroll Shelby was driving in big races such as the Buenos Aires Race, Aintree, LeMans, Carrera, Panamerican, Pebble Beach, Fort Worth, and the Los Angeles Times — Mirror Grand Prix. He drove several different types of cars such as MG, Cad-Allard (a forerunner of the Cobra), Aston Martin, Austin-Healey, Ferrari, Maserati, and Porsche.

Carroll Shelby's favorite race was probably the Le Mans, which he entered three times. The first time he entered was in 1954. Driving an Aston Martin, he was put out of the race after one hundred laps by a broken bearing. In 1958 he tried again but got physically sick and so had to turn the car over to his co-driver. Finally in 1959, Carroll Shelby drove his Aston Martin into first place and the victory circle. This made Carroll Shelby a famous personality in Europe and the United States.

In 1960 Carroll Shelby moved to California to start planning his American race car. After he was in California a while Shelby had to give up his racing career altogether because he was diagnosed as having heart trouble. Now he was thirty-seven years old and ready to build a winning race car.

The idea of a hybrid (American V-8, foreign racing chassis and body) was to blend the old and the new to come up with a salable car at a reasonable price. In 1961 Shelby heard that A.C. Cars, Ltd., maker of the sports car A.C. Ace Bristol, could no longer make their cars. Their engine supplier, Bristol Aeroplane Company, had decided to stop making six cylinder engines. A.C. needed a better engine than before. Shelby borrowed an A.C. Bristol and found it to be what he needed — a sturdy chassis that would easily accommodate a V-8 engine.



Daytona Coupe



Factory Team Race Cars



427 Cobra

July 1983

In 1965 Ford came out with the 289 cubic inch high performance engine which was rated at 271 horsepower. When Shelby learned of this he immediately had the engine shipped to his plant and installed in the Cobra. Thus the birth of the 289 Cobra. At the same time Shelby was researching ways of improving his car at Ford's expense. Rack-and-pinion steering replaced worm-and-sector steering, and he switched to wide tires for better traction and roadability. Last was to change the final drive ratio to 3.77 to make the car accelerate quickly as opposed to having speeds of one hundred fifty and more. Writers said the Cobra was the fastest and best of its time.

Shelby's next big assignment was to build another body for the A.C. Cobra just for international racing. The reason was that Ferrari had come out with a new model called the 250GT. In order to compete in the racing circuit, Shelby had to build a car with better wind resistance. He came up with a body style that resembles today's 280ZX made by Datsun. The Daytona coupe was tested in the wind tunnels at Ford's factory and proved to be better than expected. Shelby built six in all for his racing team. The car proved to be a big success because in 1965 Carroll Shelby won the World Manufacturer's Championship, something no other car maker in America had done. Out of eleven events it placed first in nine events and second in the other two events.



427 Cobra Race Car beside a 289 Street Car

Shelby wrote A.C. Cars Ltd. with the idea and found that they were interested if a suitable V-8 could be found. At the same time Ford came out with a new 260 cubic inch V-8 which was just what Shelby had been looking for. He had an engine shipped to England where a prototype car could be built. The weeks went by and then Shelby heard from A.C.: fly to England immediately for further testing of the car. On February 1, 1962 Shelby tested the prototype and except for a few problems the car was exactly what he wanted.

The next problem Shelby had was selling his idea to Ford Motor Company. He presented his idea at the perfect time when Ford was creating a Total Performance image. When Ford heard his idea they fell in love with it. He told Ford that he wanted them to set up a factory for him in the United States and he would get the cars from A.C. With the engine and drivetrain from Ford, he would create a winning race car that would build up the performance image. Ford then decided to finance only the first one hundred cars in case it was not a successful venture. Then they would not have to put any more money into the project.

The next thing Shelby needed to do was to come up with a name for his car. He came up with the name Cobra, which he claimed came to him in a dream. In England the car was called A.C. Cobra and in America it was called Shelby Cobra "Powered by Ford."

Even though he had won the World Manufacturer's Championship it was still not enough. Ford wanted more cars sold and both knew the only way to do this was to build a faster Cobra for the street which could also be used in racing. In late 1965 the problem was solved. Ford came out with a new 427 cubic inch engine and Shelby had to come out with a body that could accommodate a big block engine. He went back to the drawing board, took the Cobra, and made it a little wider to fit the bigger engine.

The way Shelby expanded his car was to redesign the chassis. Next he put in integral coil shocks that could hold up the big block engine much better than the previous shocks. Another change in the car was the interior with wall to wall carpeting and real leather seats. All of these changes made an improvement in the way the car handled and looked.

After Shelby had completed the 427 Cobra, Ford had come out with a new car that interested Shelby very much called the Mustang. This car was a new concept in automobiles which started the line of cars with long hoods and short trunks. The Mustang could seat four people comfortably and could be bought at a mere \$2,368 in 1964. Another desirable thing about this car was that it could be ordered from a long list of options from luxury to performance or both. The Mustang gave birth to the "do-it-yourself" cars which simply meant a customer could order it the way he or she wanted.