



Shown for the first time in America, this 1938 Talbot-Lago was owned by Countess de Covilha of Portugal for 52 years.

ALEX GORT

Beautiful When Wet

Rain fails to dampen the spirits of the South's new Concours d'Elegance

by Dan Neil

In future years, it will be known simply as "Amelia," a handy shorthand for car collectors to throw around, like "Pebble" and "Meadow Brook," those grand parades of automotive chic.

But, properly, the event should be called "The Mercedes-Benz and Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance"—a mouthful of contractual obligations, inelegant to the ear, if not the mind. Yes, "Amelia" is better.

Amelia was born April 4—not without some difficulty—on Amelia Island, a gorgeous maritime resort near Jacksonville, Fla. After World War II, Florida became a haven for car-collecting snowbirds, but a quality concours d'elegance has been rare in the South. So it was only fitting that this one was so Southern in flavor: casually ele-

gant, unstructured, democratic and home-grown. Most of the 150 cars—including some extraordinary specimens never shown before—came from Dixie garages.

Event organizers even managed to arrange some authentic Southern weather. A rare inland wind swept clouds of mist and awful gnats over the 10th and 18th fairways on Saturday. Conditions kept attendance to a modest 3600. Those who did pay the \$20 entrance fee—and had the good sense to bring umbrellas and bug spray—were rewarded with unusual access to the 150 cars and owners, quite unlike the crush of a Pebble Beach soiree.

The official Amelia Island greeting: Scrunch your face up in misery and wave your hands frantically about your head.

Car owners were stoic about the weath-

er. Many of the open cockpit cars—a 1957 Porsche 356 A Speedster, a 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO, a 1958 Kurtis sprint car—sat unprotected in the drizzle for much of the day. Even the storied Count Trossi car, the 1930 Mercedes SSK owned by Ralph Lauren, got a little soggy inside. The last time it was on display, it was in a guarded Montreal museum.

"Hey, it's a car, it's waterproof," shrugged Boyd Moody of the exclusive ocean community of Ponte Verde nearby, and the owner of a pristine Mercedes 300SL roadster.

The Amelia Ritz-Carlton, a hotel that symbolizes the wealth of the new South, hosted the event. Its manager, Michael Carsh, had seen a concours staged at his previous posting in Napa Valley, and he believed it would make an excellent signature event. Carsh found a worthy charity in Hospice Northeast, a respected sponsor in Mercedes-Benz, and then an organizer in Bill Warner, a Jacksonville businessman and classic car enthusiast/collector. Warner has a special affinity for Hospice. A week before the event, Don Andrews, his friend, and a Ferrari expert slated to be a fellow judge, had died of cancer, and Hospice had been there. Amelia, dedicated to the memory of Andrews, raised \$40,000 for the charity.

The concours' mix of judges—racers Stirling Moss, Hurley Haywood and Brian Redman and designers Peter Brock, Larry Shinoda and Dave Holls—emphasized function in their selection. Amelia trophies were more likely to go to daily drivers than to effete showboats.

Tom Lester of Deerfield Beach, Fla., not only drove his 1914 Peugeot Model 150 the 300 miles to the meet, but actually towed a trailer with it. "My wife has a lot of suitcases," he said. "I like to take my golf clubs along."

The judges' preference for cars that could move under their own steam created certain inequities. Ray Jones, well-known restorer of Grand Prix Bugattis, brought two gorgeous specimens to Amelia, neither of which ran. One, the so-called Cork Car (AW, April 17, 1995), is the most advanced racing machine Ettore Bugatti ever built. Its magnesium composite engine would quickly begin to corrode if Jones oiled and fueled it.

Warner and the other judges were pained that Jones left empty-handed.

"They're beautiful cars, magnificent re-creations," said Warner. "But they're trailer queens. It's like having a beauty contest with statues."

Amelia judging was not only practical, it was progressive, in a free-will Baptist sort of way. Classes ranged from motorcycles to muscle cars. The bikes included a 1920 Harley-Davidson eight-valve board track racer, a 1908 Thor and a 1952 Matchless G20. The American Iron featured a 1969 aluminum-block Camaro ZL-1 and an extremely rare 1969 Trans Am convertible, both owned by Dick Bridges of Rock Hill, S.C.

Among the race cars, there was no shortage of

competitive horsepower; those present included a 1929 Mercedes-Benz SSK Grand Prix car; the awesome Mercedes W196 Stromlinienwagen that Juan Manuel Fangio drove in 1955; a 1100-hp Brumos Porsche 917/10K Can-Am car; and a 1956 SR-2 Corvette, one of three vertically finned, lightweight racers made in the GM studio by

Jerry Earl (Harley's nephew) and Bill Mitchell. As the judges walked down the line, the owners of these cars, and the owners of the Lolas, Maseratis, Allards and Porsches on display, shook their cars to noisy life. They seemed almost irreverent, these straight-pipe cannonades, in a place accustomed to the holy quiet of golf. Even the gnats were startled, and however momentarily, dispelled.

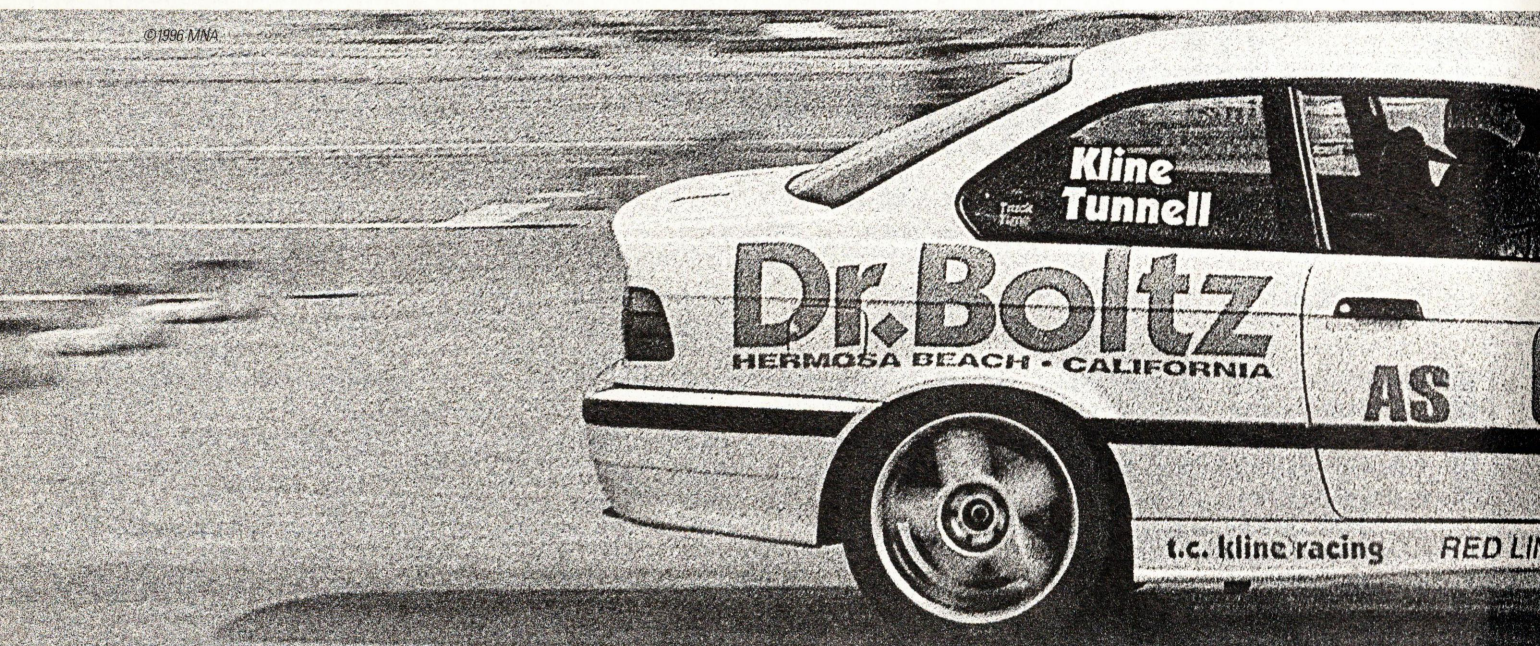
In an act of commendable discretion, the judges elected not to light off Swamp Rat III, one of the Top Fuel dragsters campaigned by Big Daddy Don Garlits. Fueling and firing off the alcohol-burning machine in a concours crowd was deemed a risky proposition.

Garlits and honorary chairman Stirling Moss were pleased to meet each other, and after dinner, reportedly shared a long conversation on the virtues of straight-track and road-course racing.

Other notables in attendance included a sunshine yellow 1914 Mercer Raceabout; a 1929 Cord L29 RS coupe, rakishly tailored by De Sakhnoffsky; a comically huge, red 1909 Thomas Flyer Flyabout owned by Harold Coker of Chattanooga, Tenn.; and a stately, beautifully proportioned Bentley eight-liter with coachworks by Dotteridge. "It's the most wonderfully eclectic group

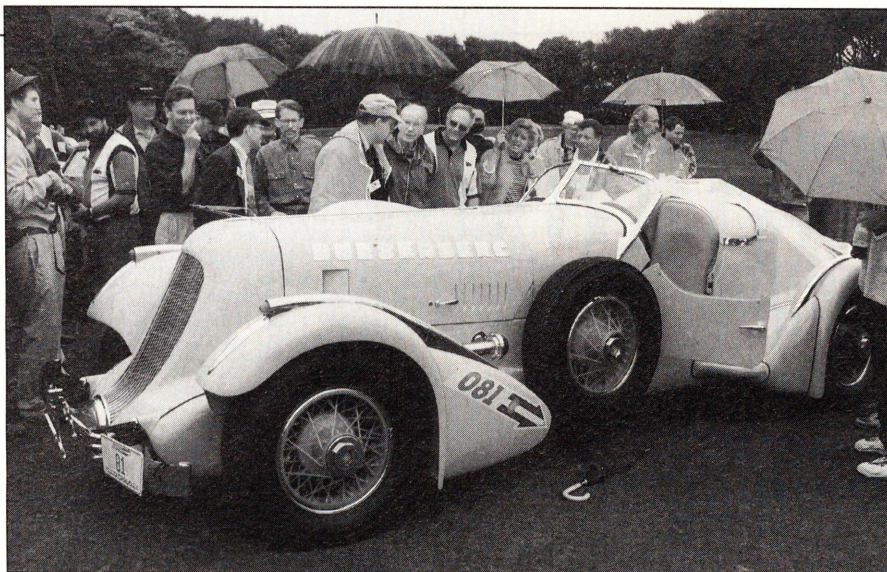
"It's the most wonderfully eclectic group of cars I've seen in decades. If you couldn't find a car that you liked here, you don't like cars."

*—Dave Holls
retired GM director of design*



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ALEX GORT

This 1934 Duesenberg SJ was a hit at Amelia. Salt Lake City mayor Ab Jenkins drove it to numerous world records at Bonneville in 1935-37; many of the records stood for decades.

of cars I've seen in decades," said judge Dave Holls, retired director of design for GM. "If you couldn't find a car that you liked here, you don't like cars."

Many took a shine to Knox Kershaw's remarkable "Mormon Meteor," a 1934 Duesenberg SJ, so called because Ab Jenkins, the mayor of Salt Lake City, drove it to dozens of speed records on the Bonneville Salt Flats. In 1936, with a Curtis Conqueror engine under the bonnet, and Jenkins and

Babe Stapp behind the wheel, the Meteor set an unlimited speed record with an average speed of 153.8 mph for 24 hours.

After Bonneville, Jenkins liked the car so much that he put full fenders, a windshield, doors, and two cramped seats into it, swapping the Curtis with a 400-hp Duesenberg engine. Jenkins and his son rolled up 20,000 highway miles on the car before selling it to a collector. Today, it's a butter-colored, boat-tailed giant of a machine, a road-going loco-

motive with a delightful, resonant thrum.

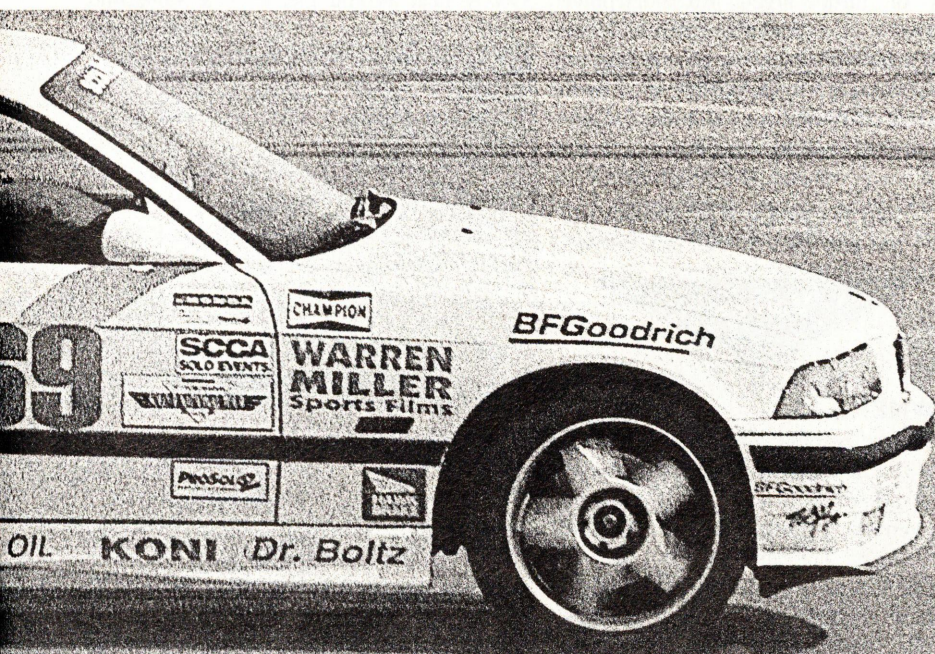
Yet no car was more of a surprise, a revelation, than Chris Gardner's 1938 Talbot-Lago roadster, custom built by Figoni et Falaschi for the Countess de Covilha of Portugal. Set on a Talbot-Lago 150 Competition chassis and penned by Figoni himself, the car reflected the Countess' aristocratic tastes in all ways.

The Countess wanted the roadster to appear as if it were cresting the waves as it tooled down the coastal road from Lisbon to O'Porto. She had the voluptuous car painted light and dark blue, the colors of shallow and deep water, and had it bedecked with chrome waves on the pontoon fenders.

Gardner bought the car in 1991. It had been preserved in a climate-controlled garage in Portugal until 1977, and then in a museum in Perth, Australia. It is absolutely original—unrestored, perfect, stunningly beautiful. Amelia was the first time it had been shown in America, and the car was awarded Best in Show.

"A Figoni et Falaschi body is probably the highest point of automotive art and design," Brock said. "To find it perfect and unrestored? It's just amazing."

The Talbot-Lago is the car-collecting world's latest star, and Amelia its newest starmaker. ■



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