

SportsCar December 2008



ROCKY'S ROAD

MIDWEST DIVISION
BY ROCKY ENTRIEN

KNOP'S SHELBY WAS THERE WHEN THIS ALL STARTED

One car stood out as unique among all the vehicles filling the paddock at Heartland Park Topeka (HPT) during the 2008 Tire Rack SCCA Solo National Championships – Don Knop's 1966 Shelby GT350H. The black and gold Shelby was the only car at HPT that also had been in the paddock at Mid-America Raceway in Wentzville, Mo., in 1973 for the first SCCA Solo National Championships.

Mostly it sits in storage now. "I've autocrossed it maybe once a year since 1990," Knop says. "But to be able to take it out and take it down to Nationals this year was really a thrill. Even though it was not competitive, it was more fun than I could imagine."

It is nearly impossible these days for a 1965 vintage car – even Carroll Shelby's wonderful creation – to be competitive against 21st century technology in a Stock class. Indeed, a Shelby won F Stock – a 2007 model. The next-oldest car in F Stock was a 1993 Firebird, which Firebird owner David Gushwa even called "Knife to a Gun Fight Racing." Still, Knop was not last in the 27-car class, placing 25th.

Back in 1973 the Shelby ran not against the F Stock pony cars, but was deemed so hot it was classed in B Stock against the Corvettes – and it held its own there. Knop finished third that year. In all he ran the Shelby 17 times at the Solo National Championships with five trophy finishes, as high as second place in both 1975 and 1981. After 1990, he parked it save for its annual outing, ran a Firebird for three years and a Camaro since then, and still has a 1965 Mustang as a daily driver.

Don Knop raced his 1966 Shelby GT350H at this year's Solo National Championships – he raced the same car at the first Solo Nationals event back in 1973.

"I had my '65 Mustang that I bought new. The '66 Shelby was sitting on the corner of 21st and 'O' (a used car lot in Lincoln, Neb. – his home) for several weeks. Finally I stopped in one night with my wife-to-be, Carol.

"We took it out, it went clink, clink, clink, in the rear end, it ground in second gear and when we took it on the Interstate it coughed and spluttered.

"They wanted to trade me my '65 for the GT350 and led me to believe my '65 would never be worth more than [it was] that night. They wanted \$2,495, and they got it down to where my Mustang and \$1,000 would buy the car."

Knop didn't go for the deal. A few days later he stopped for the traffic light at the intersection and the salesman ran out and flagged him down.

"Now they wanted \$2,200 for it. We settled on \$2,050, we shook hands on it, and I kept the Mustang."

Knop fixed it up, doing all the work himself; even painting it in his own garage.

"I bought the car in March of '69, we got married in June of '69. I asked my dad if he would loan me a little money to buy it and he wouldn't do it, but he gave us a pretty good wedding gift that paid off the Shelby."

Shelby GT350H – the "H" stands for Hertz. The car was one of a special run made for the auto rental agency. There are stories in SCCA lore of racers in the American Sedan Club Racing class back in the day having engine woes early in the weekend, going to Hertz, renting a GT350H, pulling the engine and stuffing it in their car for the race, then putting the rental back together again and returning it with very little apparent mileage run up.

Rather than doing that, Knop slapped

numbers on his and went autocrossing.

"I heard about a gymkhana out at the Lincoln Airpark by the Corvette Club. I worked my way out there and started autocrossing," he says. "I went to my first Divisional in Iowa in '73, then went to the first Nationals. We drove the car down to St. Louis."

Today, the car has 140,000 miles on it (and his '65 Mustang has over 300,000). He's not really sure what the Shelby is worth now.

"At Barrett-Jackson they go one after another at over \$200,000, that's the only valuation I have. It doesn't mean too much to me because I don't ever plan on selling it."

P.S.: Even Don Knop thought his car was sharing honors with my G Prepared Spitfire at this year's Solo National Championships as the only vehicles competing this year that were also at the 1973 Nationals, until he asked me about it. But no, the honor is his alone. My Spitfire made its first appearance in 1974, so my Spitfire holds the distinction of doing the most Nationals – all 35 since then – but not the first. I drove a Pinto in G Stock that year.

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