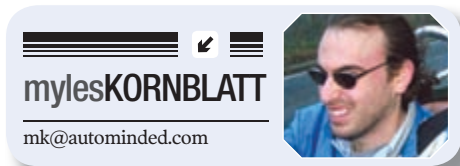


BEHIND THE WHEEL

Amelia Island's true winners don't always get awards



Don't judge a book by its cover, and don't judge the best car show purely by its biggest winners.

The Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance awarded Best of Show to a 1929 Duesenberg J/SJ Convertible and a 1963 Ferrari 250/275P for the separate sports car class. While both are rare, beautiful, exotic and valuable enough to deserve these top accolades, spectators shouldn't expect this from the rest of the field, because many of the cars were better.

For example, this year's honoree was racing legend Emerson Fittipaldi. He never competed in the best-in-show Ferrari, but the show was a reunion for nearly all the cars that he drove to victory. It included a distinct bright pink 1977 Chevrolet IROC Camaro Z/28, and a diminutive 1965 Renault R8 from the first race Fittipaldi ever won.

South Florida resident Dan Johnson grew up hearing stories about his grandparents' road trips through the Midwest in their 1929 Peerless sedan. He spent his childhood gathering as much info as possible about the car, then spent decades trying to track down a suitable copy.

Johnson eventually found an 8-125 sedan similar to the family vehicle. While it was going to be the star in his garage, a little research discovered it was already a Hollywood star. The Peerless was owned by 20th Century Fox studios, and then it was sold to Desilu Productions where it appeared in TV shows like *The Untouchables*.

Only three other sedans like Johnson's are known to be in existence. Today, his is arguably the finest restored example around (Peerless is a brand that faded away so long ago that even his branded sidesteps are worth a small hatchback today.)

The show also featured more modern classics, including an entire class devoted to Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. This designer truly had flair to mix art and science into his hot rods, including once combining red, green and blue lights to create one white headlight. It's rare to see such wild creations on such a well-manicured lawn like the Ritz-Carleton 18th fairway.

Amelia Island was also chosen as the place to re-debut a sports car few people knew existed. Carroll Shelby was the legendary creator of the GT350 Ford Mustang and a force behind the A/C Cobra. Few people knew that in 1968 he attempted a new racecar project. There was only one Lonestar prototype ever created, and it finished restoration in time to celebrate its 50th anniversary.

So with all these great cars showing up to this year's concours, why didn't any of them win the two top prizes?

Concours events are about a parade of opulence and million-dollar cars. The awarded Duesenberg and Ferrari represent the traditional highest echelons of rarity, value and esteem. In fact, these two would be rivaling for top spots at other prestigious events like Pebble Beach.

If only looking at the winners, it's easy to accuse Amelia Island of maintaining the status quo. But just as it's not a good idea to have a caviar buffet, they seem to understand that overindulgence in the world's highest-priced cars



1964 Alpine M64 prototype



1968 Shelby Lonestar



Best of Show
1963 Ferrari and 1929 Duesenberg



1957 BMW 507 and 1960 Datsun Fairlady



Big Daddy Roth Outlaw



Emerson Fittipaldi race cars
Penske Mercedes PC-23 and Renault R8



Lancia Martini Racing Team



1929 Peerless 8-125



Big Daddy Roth cars with an Alfa Romeo 6c



1960 Plymouth XNR
winning prototype class

creates an instant desensitized feeling. That's why Amelia Island offers a much more diverse selection, even if the most intriguing vehicles don't take the top honors.

In the same way a restaurant will always tell you about its market-price lobster, Amelia Island is likely to continue giving its top awards to the accepted highest echelon of traditional classic cars.

But for those who visit this Florida event enough, we know the most delicious pizza you've ever had is always available and never on the menu. ■