



BS Levy in the Collier Collection Ferrari 250LM at Roebling Road Raceway

## WHO IS "THE WORLD'S FASTEST NOVELIST?"

Burt Levy always had two great dreams: to become a great novelist and write books that people wanted to read and to become a racing driver and drive all the greatest cars on all the best racetracks in the world. Burt dabbled in writing, drama, literature, history, sports cars and motorcycles during his high school and college years, but like others in his generation he dropped out in 1968 and spent two years bumming around the country as a hod carrier in Michigan, a motorcycle mechanic in Chicago, a dishwasher and then cook in

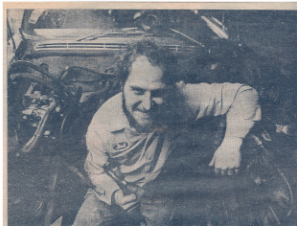
Boulder, CO., and the foreman of a hippie leather clothing company in Berkeley, CA. But the lure of motorsports (along with getting sick and tired of sleeping on floors) ultimately brought him home and into his father's packaging business. But this prodigal son's 'pound of flesh' was his first-ever racing car: a clapped-out, road-grader orange Triumph TR-3 bought off the back corner of the local Saab dealer's used-car lot for the munificent sum of \$600. "It doesn't seem like a lot of money today," Burt allows, "but it seemed like an awful lot back then. In fact, I'm pretty damn sure we were over-charged." Indeed. Wheels fractured off the TR-3 in two of Burt's first three races, but the hook was set anyway. "Racing was one of two things I've found where the actual realization was even better than all the dreaming and anticipation that came before," he says with a smile. "I leave it to your imagination what the other one might be..." Burt continued racing, wrenching, buying trick hop-up parts and learning the ropes on a series of TR3s that went, as he puts it, "faster and faster for shorter and shorter periods of time."



Eventually Burt sold off the last of the TR3s, met wife-to-be Carol on a blind date and married her on her birthday (also Valentine's Day) and together they opened infamous sports car shop Mellow Motors on Chicago's soon-to-be-trendy near north side. "I had it in my head that I was going to become a professional racing driver, so I figured I needed some kind of shop as a base of operations. It hadn't exactly occurred to me that I didn't know jack shit about fixing everyday road sports cars (which, unlike racecars, are expected to run for more than 30 minutes at a stretch) or running a garage business.

But I was convinced that my raw enthusiasm and general love of automobiles would get me through any shortage of skill, knowledge or experience. I was wrong, of course (we once had to buy a customer's Volkswagen Type 3 because it was cheaper than trying to undo how badly one of our so-called mechanics had messed it up!) and it was really a pretty tough time for

us. But we stuck it out for three years and the experiences and tribulations we had there not only strengthened our marriage (it'll be 37 years next February 14th!) but became the source and core background for the books and stories I've been writing ever since."



### Of Repair and Replace

What the shop manuals don't tell you

By Burt Levy  
 Today's subject is an engaging species, *Stenobothrus*, also known as the "hobby" beetle. The small, slender, wingless beetle is the character back parts of auto-repair and mechanical magazines. It is a very common pest in many automotive garages and is a major cause of engine and electrical problems. It is a very hard to identify pest, but it is the only beetle that can be identified by its color and shape. It is a very hard to identify pest, but it is the only beetle that can be identified by its color and shape. It is a very hard to identify pest, but it is the only beetle that can be identified by its color and shape.



Burt and Carol eventually sold Mellow Motors (“we really deserved to go broke”) and Burt found employment as a service writer at a Lincoln-Mercury dealership working for “one of the biggest assholes I’ve ever met.” So he answered an ad for a service manager at a Mercedes-Benz dealership. After the interview, the general manager told him there was no way he could hire Burt as a service manager - he just didn’t have the necessary experience - but that he’d hire him on immediately as a salesman. “With your line of bullshit, that’s what you should be doing,” the GM told him. So Burt decided to give it a try. He ultimately wound up selling cars for Loeber Motors (Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, Alfa Romeo and Rolls Royce) on Chicago’s upscale Gold Coast. He did well there (see picture at left) and, with some help from the dealership and a few hustled-up sponsors, Burt and a few of the dealership mechanics turned a totaled Alfa Spider into a racecar. “We had our cheating down pretty good and won five Midwest Council championships with that car, including two undefeated seasons, and then got a little help from Alfa and some sponsors and went SCCA National racing in 1983. We won four out of the eight races and qualified for the National Championship Runoffs at Road Atlanta, but went through the Week From Hell down there, blew up our good motor and finished up 11th while guys I’d been racing head-to-head with all season came home 2nd and 3rd. It was on our way home in a borrowed van with my wife beside me, our 4-year-old son in back and every credit card in my wallet either at or past its redline that I decided I really needed to find another way to go about this. Then my mechanic, Eric, put the final nail in the coffin when he took my car through Drivers’ School the next spring and rolled it over on his first solo lap! But I can’t really complain too much about that since I was his instructor!”



Burt had already done some magazine writing for *Alfa Owner*, *AutoWeek* and *On Track* “mostly as a way to get my name around and hopefully attract some sponsorship and attention” and *On Track* had asked if he wanted to cover the big pro races in the Midwest for them (“magazines are notoriously cheap and they always prefer to find a local guy so they don’t have to pay air fare!”). So, with the racecar banged up and no money to fix it, Burt became a race reporter “as a way to stay involved.” It turned out to be a great year to cover IMSA and the SCCA Trans-Am, and Burt learned a lot about writing and deadlines and made many lifelong friends among the ranks of the professional racers he met along the way. But what he *really* wanted was to get back behind the wheel....



Burt eventually lucked into a drive on a low-level pro team running the Firestone Firehawk and Playboy Escort series with longtime racing friend and future World Challenge star, team owner and multiple series champion P.D. Cunningham. “It was great experience and I loved the 24-hour races, but I eventually came to the somewhat unhappy realization that I was never going to make it as a professional racing driver. I could run



pretty much even-up with all the other drivers on the team - and we had three or four past National Champs - but everywhere we went, P.D. was just that little bit quicker. Plus he was easier on the car and got through traffic quicker. I damn near wrecked one of the team cars trying to prove that I could do what he could do, but eventually it started to dawn on me: "Burt, he's just *better* than you, and if you can't run with your own blessed teammate, you're not going to have much of a future as a professional racing driver." In retrospect, it was a pretty good thing to know."



It was an assignment for *AutoWeek* that Burt attended his first-ever vintage race at Road Atlanta. And he promptly fell in love. "Here were all the cars I'd grown up longing for and lusting after, and they were out on one of my very favorite racetracks running flat-out and wheel-to-wheel rather than hiding behind velvet ropes in some dusty museum!" Burt also made the happy discovery that he could "write" his way into racecars he could never dream of owning! "He's gone now, but Chicago restaurateur/Ferrari trader/founder of the Chicago Historic Races (now Kohler International Challenge) at Road America Joe Marchetti is the guy who really got me started. I wrote some stuff for his race program and, much to my amazement, he gave me a couple of his Ferraris to drive. I wrote my very first ride-mooch story (for *AutoWeek*) about driving his 250 Short Wheelbase Berlinetta at Road Atlanta. Then he

let me co-drive his 250LM at Road America - I'd never even sat in the car until I climbed in during our pit stop! - and that turned into the first ride-mooch story I ever did for *Vintage Motorsport*. And what a great car to drive!"



"Joe also backed me in this kind of rare, AUSCA-prepared Alfa Duetto racecar I knew about that was literally tucked away in a barn out in Sterling, Illinois. It had originally been built for racing from brand new by Horst Kwech (who ran the factory-backed Alfa effort in the U2.5 Trans-Am series) and it had a lot of nifty stuff underneath. Not to mention that, since it was made into a racecar from brand new and had never been out in the weather, it was about the only Alfa Spider I ever saw where you could jack a front corner



up in the air and still open the door on that side! Anyhow, I made a pitch that Joe would put up the money- it wasn't all that much by Ferrari trader standards - and I'd build the car and race it and when the time came to sell it, he'd take his original investment off the top and we'd split the rest. Much to my surprise, he went for it! We ran that car for two-and-a-half seasons, I drove it in 15 races and we won our class in 13 of them. Including Tamiami Park in Florida where the vintage cars served as curtain raiser for the Indycar season finale. The track was smooth and flat with a lot of hard braking, tight corners and not too much straightaway, and it was just perfect for the Alfa. In front of a big crowd and with jumbotrons everywhere we came home 1st in class and 3rd overall (behind



Brumos Porsche's Bob Snodgrass in a Chevron B16 and Bob Bondurant in a Shelby Cobra) and that was pretty damn special! We also won our class and beat a Ferrari GTO and a NART Daytona in the 'round-the-casino street race in the Bahamas and scored back-to-back under-two-liter wins at Joe's own event at Road America. In the end, he wound up buying me out of the AUSCA Alfa because he wanted his son to start racing in that car. But that was okay with me. I was getting a lot of other ride offers from people who wanted me to drive their cars (and write them up in the magazine, of course!) not to mention that my wife wanted a new kitchen at the time. I don't think I have to explain to any of the married men out there how that particular deal worked out...."



So began Burt's career as the world's most shameless and successful racecar ride mooch, which has seen him behind the wheel of everything from Bug-eye Sprites to Bugatti grand prix cars, Lotus 7s and X180R Turbos, Chevron B19s to NASCAR stock cars, Le Mans-winning type Ferraris and Ford GT40 Mk. IIs, one of the three original Reventlow Scarab sports cars, the original Jim Hall Chaparral, two of the five Corvette Grand Sports, three Cheetahs, both the front-engined and rear-engined Scarab Formula One cars, a Kurtis 500G Indycar and many, many more. Along the way, he's scored something like 100 race and class wins in a truly incredible variety of cars, co-driven with the late David Whiteside to back-to-back Rolex Vintage Endurance Championships in David's 1959 Lotus 17/Climax in 1993-94 and regularly serves as a racing instructor for race-sanctioning bodies and car-club track days (including Lotus, Ferrari, Viper and Lamborghini).

