

# Shelby Sacks SAAC

## After 32 years, Carroll Shelby no longer officially recognizes SAAC

In my May 2007 column (p. 60), I wrote about the 32-year relationship between automotive icon Carroll Shelby and the Shelby American Automobile Club (SAAC).

I said then that SAAC is the best friend that Shelby ever had; it has steadfastly preserved the legacy of Shelby American and made Ol' Shel a celebrity in the process.

To recap the history of SAAC briefly: In 1975, there was no Shelby American to go to for expertise or advice. Shelby as a manufacturer was gone, and the factory a distant memory. Even the newest Shelby was a five-year-old used car. So a handful of owners formed SAAC, which was dedicated to the preservation, history, care, and enjoyment of Shelby automobiles.

The history of Cobras and Shelby Mustangs became very important to SAAC. The club and its members tirelessly gathered information on every car and every owner they could locate. They researched serial numbers, technical details, and running production changes.

All of this information led to a registry. Every serial number was listed and every scrap of information was included. Shelby's cars, which had been orphans, became valuable. There was now an official publication to validate the genuine cars and expose the fakes.

This dedication served to protect the marque and is responsible, 32 years later, for the current confidence in Shelby cars, due to the accuracy and accessibility of the club's documentation. Today, SAAC is stronger than ever, with over 5,000 members worldwide.

### In with the new, out with the old

Recently, Shelby had the idea to start his own club, Team Shelby, scheduled to launch on January 11, 2008—Shelby's 85th birthday. "People have asked me for years to form a club that will help them really enjoy their Shelby car," Shelby stated, according to Team Shelby's press release.

"There's a new generation of cars, new faces at Shelby, and people who want to enjoy their vehicle in new ways. The world has changed over the past 42 years, so we need a club to meet the needs of this new generation."

As a Shelby owner, I thought this was great news. Until I read further and saw that it will be the "only club officially recognized by Shelby for all Shelby-built automobiles."

Hmmm, that's odd; Shelby has officially recognized SAAC for 32 years, and he even gave them a licensing agreement on January 31, 1996, to supersede the handshake agreement that had been in place since the 1970s.

How Shelby intended to "un-recognize" SAAC was sent unceremoniously to Rick Kopec of SAAC via facsimile from Shelby's attorney, M. Neil Cummings, on November 14, 2007.



*Shelby, Rick Kopec, and Ken Eber—in happier times*

The letter (a copy of which is posted at [www.saac.com](http://www.saac.com)) has five demands, in addition to stating that Shelby Licensing will not renew SAAC's license upon its expiration on January 31, 2008. This license was given to SAAC by Shelby in support of the club. The licensing fee? \$1 per annum.

### Shelby's SAAC demands

1. Shelby orders SAAC to immediately cease and desist using any of Shelby's intellectual properties, such as Shelby, Cobra, 289, 427 S/C, GT350, etc.
2. Shelby demands the return of documents loaned to the club.
3. Shelby demands all documents used for the Registry since January 1, 1996.
4. Shelby demands all unsold SAAC merchandise, literature, and other items be delivered to him.
5. Shelby demands all SAAC financial records since January 1, 1996.

Shelby did indeed license SAAC to use his intellectual property for the past ten years, but he is now asking for items in addition to simply canceling the agreement. I'm not an attorney, but I fail to see what right he has to do this.

The documents loaned to SAAC were discovered, with Shelby's blessing, in his attic and used in part for the 1997 Registry. However, according to Kopec, in 1999, Shelby commended him on the 1997 Registry and told him he could keep the documents previously loaned to SAAC. Another interesting fact is that while Shelby is requesting all of the Registry information, very little actually came from him. The lion's share was collected from owners over the last 32 years, and approximately 75% of the original Ford VIN records were obtained from other sources not connected to Shelby.

According to Automotive News, Carroll Shelby says he is angry with the 33-year-old organization. He says Kopec and other club directors have excluded him from decisions on how the club is run and have not shared financial information.

"I'm tired of them," Shelby says. "I want the registrations and the records under my control. They've made a lot of money but never counted me in on anything. I don't

want my legacy to go down under their thumbprints.”

According to Kopec, the only input Shelby has offered recently was to strongly suggest that the club's convention evening programs be upgraded with gourmet food, a jacket-and-tie dress code, and to basically create a country club atmosphere. “I told him he was in outer space there,” said Kopec, “but he didn't want to hear that.”

### What legacy?

Shelby talks a lot about his legacy. Shelby is indeed a brilliant marketing machine and highly gifted at surrounding himself with incredibly talented individuals. But Shelby's key to success has been taking what others have built and putting his touch on it. AC Ace = Cobra; Ford Mustang = GT350/GT500; Dodge Omni—well, let's skip that one.

So is destroying SAAC the way to form his own Shelby club? Isn't this like throwing a bunch of sand off of your property because you have no more need for it, only later to find the neighborhood kids and all of their friends have built a nice sandbox using your sand? Kicking them out and making it your sandbox is not likely to make you friends.

It seems it all boils down to money, and what really upsets Shelby about SAAC is that they never, in his own words, “counted him in” on it. The ironic part is that the club is not wildly successful financially. I would guess that Shelby has made a fair amount from his association with SAAC. In past years, he has used the club's annual national convention as a gigantic marketing opportunity to show (and sell) his products to the most receptive group of consumers imaginable. And SAAC has not been given any compensation for this opportunity.

### Can't we all just get along?

When there is already one enthusiast club in operation, which is doing an excellent job, why introduce a second club into the mix? Only because you can't control the former and can the latter—if you own it. The bottom line may be control, if it isn't money. Many other marques and groups have multiple clubs from which to choose. For example, Corvette enthusiasts have Bloomington Gold and the NCRS. Vintage racers have the SVRA, VSCDA, HSR, etc. Most people I know are members of all the clubs that relate to their passion. How many SAAC members are also Mustang Club of America (MCA) members? I bet a vast majority. Is the Shelby world big enough for two separate clubs, each dedicated to different generations of Shelby cars? I'm betting it is.

Why can't Shelby and SAAC shake hands on the kind of gentleman's agreement that seems to have served them both so well for the first 20-plus years of SAAC's operation? That would keep the lawyers and their 29-page agreements out of it and just let everyone play in the sandbox. After all, isn't this supposed to be about enjoying Shelby's cars and keeping his legacy alive? Or am I missing something here? ♦

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