

Best Bets in Cats and Snakes

Nobody will ever mistake a leaf-spring Cobra for a “kit car” and Tigers cost pennies on the dollar against anything else as interesting

by Colin Comer



Comer's Purple People Eater

Cobra for a “kit car.” I think this contributes to the recent price surge.

Now for the big dog—the romping, stomping, CSX3000 427 Cobras—also known as the coil-spring cars. Always at the top of collectors’ lists, they are far scarcer than the leaf-spring cars with just 260 “street” cars produced.

But while values have doubled from \$300,000 five years ago to roughly \$600,000 today, the 427 cars have not experienced the proportional increase of the earlier cars. A number of factors contribute to this; historically 427s have been twice as much as the leaf-spring cars, and buyers perhaps gravitated to the less-expensive car as an alternative.

While one cannot deny the pure automotive swagger of a 427, it has to contend with being the most replicated car of all time. The sheer number of 427 Cobra replicas—good, bad, and ugly—has weakened the market for original cars.

Shelby himself diluted the number of buyers by offering the new 4000 series Continuation cars, a very accurate replica of the originals. At roughly \$100,000 for a Shelby-blessed CSX4000 car, I’m guessing many people opted to go this route even though they could buy the real deal. As an original 427 Cobra owner, I contend there is no substitute and I’m sure other purists agree.

Thomas Schmuck

As the rumble of Shelby auctions in Arizona and elsewhere fades away, it’s time to look again at the Cobra market and include the underdog Sunbeam Tiger.

The original CSX2000 leaf-spring 260-ci and 289-ci Cobras have shown enormous strength in the past five years. Prices seemingly vapor-locked in low six-figures are roughly \$400,000 now.

With 515 “street” cars produced, these have always been desirable, but nowhere near as exclusive as a 250 GTO. However few cars have captured the magic of the original wire-wheel, slab-sided Cobra.

LOOKING FOR DRIVERS

While an admittedly crude creation, Shelby managed to combine the automotive equivalent of oil and water. This reason—along with the recent trend of collectors wanting cars they can drive—has sent leaf-spring Cobra prices to their current level.

I love leaf-spring Cobras, and will never be without one. They are usable, beautiful, and dead simple to maintain—all with parts from your local NAPA outlet. But the best part is that nobody will ever mistake a leaf-spring

SHELBY'S STEPCILD

The red-headed stepchild of the Shelby world is unquestionably the Sunbeam Tiger. It was produced by the Rootes Group in England when Ian Garrard hired Carroll Shelby to transform the anemic Sunbeam Alpine into a performance car.

The addition of the 260-ci Ford V8 (similar to the Cobra, but the two-barrel, 164-hp version) made a car worthy of being called “Tiger”—after the 1926 Sunbeam land-speed record holder.

Never intended to be a stark sports car like the Cobra, the Tiger is a highly competent touring car. Fitted with a standard 2.88:1 rear axle ratio and Borg Warner T-10 4-speed, it’s a relaxed and capable high-speed machine with better than 125 mph on tap.

Tigers aren’t particularly rare, with over 7,000 produced from 1964 to 1967, but they’ve always had a loyal following. Production was split into three groups, consisting of 3,763 Mk I cars, 2,706 Mk IA cars, and 534 289-ci Mk II cars.

The problems with Tigers are modifications and abuse. Finding a stock Tiger that hasn’t rusted out or been cobbled into an unrecognizable form is a challenge.

This makes it difficult to pin down an exact market value for an “SCM Approved” stock Tiger, as few of them change hands. I purchased a fantastic Mk IA example in the late 1990s for \$11,000, and a one-owner Mk IA in similar condition in 2000 for \$25,000, then a record price. The prevailing market today for a spectacular Mk I car is roughly \$30,000 with a similar IA bringing \$5,000–\$10,000 over that.

The Mk II market is more difficult to peg. I’ve only seen six Mk II cars sell in the last ten years, and only one was spectacular. OK, I bought it, paying an out-of-the-park record price of \$59,000 on eBay Motors last month (item #4625301384).

I saw value in stepping up for a true 100% original, untouched, example of a Mk II—and I have since spent roughly \$5,000 doing “might as well” maintenance and detailing. I don’t regret it; these cars cost pennies on the dollar against anything else as interesting. I consider a great Tiger a solid buy.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Buy the best Cobra you can find. Thanks to the “Shelby American World Registry,” details of every individual car’s history are available. Production differences abound, so know what you are buying. Check for worm-and-sector or rack-and-pinion steering, and 260-ci or 289-ci engines. By the way, did you know 100 or so “427” Cobras left the factory with 428 engines?

Read and study the “Registry,” and before buying a car join the club and contact Ned Scudder, Cobra Registrar, to ask if any new information is known about a particular car. Many Cobras led difficult lives, but seem to have more than the average cat. New bodies, new frames—some new cars have been built around little more than a serial number plate. So do your homework.

What might seem insignificant in the red-mist, pre-purchase euphoria can be a huge issue after your check clears. Paying a world-record price may get you teased,

but not as much as if you buy a pig in a poke.

Tiger buyers have a more tedious path. Many cars have been cloned using the Alpine shells, and the resulting “Algers” are not always easy to spot. Specific details can help authenticate a real car, beyond VIN tags and data plates. The International Registry of Sunbeam Tigers is available online, as is the Sunbeam Tigers Owners Association (STOA) and their current list of “TAC’ed” (Tiger Authentication Committee) verified cars.

A few hours using Google to track down Tiger details may avoid a red face later. Another resource is the out-of-print “Book of Norman” by Tiger guru Norman Miller. It contains the complete list of original Tiger VINs and production details.

WHERE ARE THEY HEADING?

Since my crystal ball fell off the bookshelf and broke, I look back to predict market trends. Historically, leaf-spring Cobras have traded at about one-half coil-spring Cobra values. Demand for the leaf-spring cars far outstrips supply, leading me to predict great examples will be \$500,000 in the near future.

Following this, the 427 cars will be next. Tiger values have been on a steady upswing for some time, as educated buyers seek out great examples. I see no reason that a 20% annual appreciation won’t continue.

The bottom line is find the right car, make sure it IS a right car, and buy it because you want it. Use it, enjoy it, and rest easy knowing that truly fine examples offer greater rewards to their owners than mere financial ones. ♦

COLIN COMER is founder and president of Colin’s Classic Automobiles as well as an avid collector and enthusiast.

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