

The Best Friend Carroll Shelby Ever Had

The Shelby American Automobile Club kept the brand name “Shelby” alive during Carroll Shelby’s self-imposed absence from the automotive world



Friend or faux? The Registry will tell you

Today Carroll Shelby is sitting on top of the automotive world. At 84, he is an automotive icon. The 1,003 Cobras he created from 1962 through 1967 are among the most sought after collectible cars of all time, evidenced by the \$5.5m result of CSX3015 at Barrett-Jackson this past January. A Cobra Daytona Coupe was recently reported sold for \$13m.

Any Shelby American factory team car has two commas in its price. Even “garden variety” original 289 and 427 street Cobras trade routinely for over half a million dollars. Shelby Mustangs, originally about \$4,500, can now bring 100 times that amount. Cobras are the most replicated car ever; currently, more than 50 companies all over the world crank out Cobra replicas. And Shelby is back with Ford making Shelby Mustangs again after 40 years. But it wasn’t always like this.

In 1970, Carroll Shelby saw the writing on the wall: performance cars were coming under the microscope. Federal emissions and safety requirements and high insurance rates were conspiring to make the performance car an endangered species. Shelby cashed in his chips and left the game, closing down his company. He preferred to spend his time hunting big game in Africa and dabbling in commercial real estate. His Cobras and Shelby Mustangs became just “used cars” and began the predictable downward slide of depreciation. Second and third owners began searching for parts to keep them on the road, and to find people who knew how to work on them. Authenticity was rarely a concern, nor was historical significance. That old race car, no longer competitive,

moved down the food chain from FIA champion to SCCA regional entry, to slalom or gymkhana weekend beater, to sitting engineless behind someone’s garage.

In 1975, there was no company for owners to go to for expertise or advice. Shelby was long gone from the scene, and the factory a distant memory. Former Shelby employees had moved on. Your local Ford dealer didn’t want to sell you parts for a ten-year-old used car—they were hopeful you’d give up and buy a new Mustang II.

Let’s get organized

So a handful of owners formed the Shelby American Automobile Club (SAAC; www.saac.com). They dedicated SAAC to the preservation, history, care, and enjoyment of Shelby automobiles. They formed a network to share parts sources and technical information. They sold and traded parts among themselves by way of classified ads in the club’s publication. They hounded the automotive buff books, bringing attention to Cobras and Shelby Mustangs whenever the opportunity arose. They held a national convention each summer where a couple thousand owners and enthusiasts gathered to revel in their unique cars. Days were filled with car shows, swap meets, and driving at speed on closed courses. Evenings were taken up with seminars, dinners, and guest speakers. Even Carroll Shelby’s interest was piqued and he was surprised to find himself the guest of honor and center of attention, receiving standing ovations and long lines of enthusiasts waiting patiently to get their pictures taken with him or to get his autograph. Shelby was back, and of Shel was a bona fide celebrity to the SAAC members.

The history of Cobras and Shelby Mustangs became very important to SAAC. The club tirelessly gathered information on every car and every owner they could locate. They researched serial numbers, technical details, and running production changes. They tracked competition cars, noting the races, drivers, finishing positions, and car numbers. Boxes of paperwork left behind at Shelby American and Ford, headed for the dumpster, were secured, with every page being scrutinized, filed, and recorded. Hundreds of members spent thousands of hours building databases of information, which led to publishing a registry. Every serial number was listed and every scrap of information was included.

From New to Now



**1965 Chevrolet
Corvette 396/425
Convertible**



**1965 Shelby Cobra
427 Roadster**



**1965 Ford Mustang
GT Fastback**



**1965 Shelby
GT350 Fastback**



**1967 Sunbeam
Tiger Mk II 289
Convertible**



**1964 Shelby Cobra
289 Roadster**

New	\$4,399	\$6,995	\$2,809	\$4,547	\$3,645	\$5,995
Now	\$125,000	\$675,000	\$25,000	\$275,000	\$60,000	\$500,000

A tome of snake stuff

And overnight, Shelby's cars—which had been orphans—became valuable. There was now an official publication to validate the genuine cars and expose the fakes. Make no mistake, as values climbed, the number of counterfeit Cobras and Shelby Mustangs increased. Fortunately, the club's registrars were able to keep track of the originals. Their dedication served to protect the marque and is responsible, now some 30 years later, for the current confidence in Shelby cars, due to the accuracy and accessibility of the club's documentation. In fact, those looking to "correct" history or exhibit selective amnesia about certain details of their car's past refer to SAAC's registrars as "The Untouchables." Privileged information and private notes kept by the Registrars are just that—they are protected fiercely by SAAC for the good of the cars.

The Shelby American Automobile Club kept the brand name Shelby alive during Carroll Shelby's self-imposed absence from the automotive world. When Shelby signed a contract with Chrysler in 1983 to build 4-cylinder "performance cars," SAAC continued to stoke the fires

of Ford enthusiasm. In the 1990s, when Carroll Shelby decided to capitalize on the renewed enthusiasm for his cars and the power of his name, he began building Cobras again. SAAC had kept his fans like a good getaway driver keeps your car, "close and running." Of course, these fans also had their checkbooks in hand.

SAAC continues to collect information, expanding its databases to include the new Shelby cars. Every ten years, the club publishes an updated version of its registry; the last edition is a staggering 1,333 pages! The club holds national conventions every summer, each one bigger and better than the last. In fact, they have become so large that the only facilities capable of accommodating them are major race circuits. Amazingly, the club has remained under the same stable volunteer leadership for 32 years. And members? Almost 5,000 worldwide, and for the last 15 years, SAAC has had an 85% membership renewal rate. This is serious dedication.

Throughout the years, Carroll Shelby has recognized the value of SAAC and has supported the club and its goals. The result speaks for itself—compare Shelby values and club support to similar manufacturers like Cunningham or Allard. Shelby correctly realized that manufacturers never run good owner organizations—enthusiasts do because they secure a large number of dedicated volunteers, enabling their club to provide exactly the kind of organization its members desire. This leaves manufacturers like Shelby free to concentrate on building cars. It is a perfect symbiotic relationship.♦

COLIN COMER is a Shelby collector, racer, and long time SAAC member.



GT350 R values owe something to SAAC and its quest to separate wheat from chaff