



## GRABBING YOUR ATTENTION

**9F02M482594**

– Jim Kreuz

**T**he Premier Award is the ultimate achievement for those focused on restoring their car for concours competition. In poker language, it's only for those that ante "All In." For non-poker players, the car is prepared to meet the most stringent criteria that SAAC has put together: the automobile must appear to be almost 100% original. Not surprisingly, this award is rarely handed out because of the difficulty in attaining this high level of originality. [Judging is based on 900 total points. Premier cars must attain a minimum of 882 points between authenticity (at least 588 out of 600 points) and workmanship (at least 282 points out of 300).]

It's a pretty high bar. Just ask someone who's gone through the process, like Michael and Darcey Smith. Their 1969 Grabber Yellow GT350 satisfied the judges at SAAC-35 at Infineon Raceway in August, 2010. While their story may not make a good script for a movie like "Seabiscuit" or "Rudy," it is an entertaining tale well worth telling.

To earn any trophy like this typically requires a team effort, and this was no exception. If you would have been present at SAAC-35's Awards Banquet you would have been at a loss in determining who was prouder—the Smith family or the guys from the restoration shop.

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I happen to know quite a bit about this '69 GT350, 9F02M482594, because Michael Smith has the good fortune of being my brother-in-law. OK, maybe it's the other way around. Fifteen years ago he

and his wife Darcey (my wife's sister) could only dream of owning this car. It was at this point in their lives that they took their small family-owned Smith Two-Way Radio business and put it on steroids. They grew it by getting into the cell tower market. Today they own over fifty towers in Northwest Arkansas. This success in their business helps explain why Darcey didn't get too upset with her husband in May, 2007 when he peered out of his son's Little League baseball dugout during a game to announce that they'd just won an eBay auction for a 1969 Shelby GT350, for a measly \$60,000. She didn't have any idea Michael had been bidding on the car.

My brother-in-law sent one of his radio technicians to Indianapolis, Indiana shortly thereafter to trailer the car back home, and when his eBay purchase arrived, he was thrilled to find all of the original parts either still on the car or in boxes. Little did he know how important that would be two years later, when he undertook a complete restoration.

The Indianapolis seller happened to be a doctor who was only the second "caretaker" of this Shelby, and he kept it in a climate controlled garage for the entire ten years of his ownership. He had not driven it much in the last five years and decided it was time to let someone else have the pleasure of owning it. Smith's technician could tell that the seller was still attached to the car when he was invited to spend the night at the doctor's home before heading back to Arkansas.

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I'm as much intrigued with the owners of a Shelby as I am of the car itself. What is it that drives them to purchase one of these fine automobiles? Is it the same thing that drives an individual to collect rare and expensive artwork? I think so. Paintings by the masters such as Rembrandt and Monet evoke awe from their viewers. Even a person with only a minimal understanding of art would react with interest if told they were in a room with an original Picasso. It's the same with these cars. Say the word "Shelby" in an auto parts store and it looks like an EF Hutton commercial—the entire store goes quiet and everyone turns their head towards the person that uttered the word "Shelby."

While a car enthusiast might be impressed if he or she were told you owned a Deist landscape, you could really grab their attention if you said there was a Shelby behind your garage door. The car owner, though, has the edge on the art collector. Both can look at their "work of art" but only the car owner can drive his as well as be soothed by the quiet rumble of the exhaust system.

I share this awe with a pinch of jealousy. For me, it all began in 1976 when a fellow student in neighboring Schumacher Hall on the campus of Texas A&M University showed up one day with a gorgeous 1966 black and gold GT350 Hertz Shelby. He had purchased it from a used car lot in West Texas for the proverbial song. It was love at first sight for me, and like true love it has never wavered.

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1970 vs. 2011. A young Tom Dankel has his picture taken with a yellow '69 Shelby behind him at a parade in British Columbia, Canada. Forty-one years later, Dankel is pictured with the same car behind him. Cue "Twilight Zone" theme...

This Grabber Yellow 1969 GT350 was delivered from the factory to Fogg Motors in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada with a 351 Windsor and four-speed transmission. Fogg Motors was a big supporter of the Shelby line, and much has been written about their involvement in this effort. The original owner entered his Shelby in the New Westminster May Day Parade in 1970, and as luck would have it, long time SAAC member Tom Dankel had his picture taken next to it on Water Street [see the photo of ten year-old Tom, standing beside the line of Shelybs.]

Tom and his father were there that day showing their Lime Gold 1967 Mustang GT-A fastback (K code 271 Hi-Po 289) that had also been purchased from Fogg Motors. The parade was put on by the Vancouver Ford dealer, Musgrove Ford, and their car club, the Musgrove Mustangers. Two other attached photos of the Grabber Yellow Shelby are provided by Tom from 1979-80. He took them at a car show in Burnaby, British Columbia and at Westwood Mountain High Raceway in Coquit-

lam, British Columbia. The car was on the track during parade laps between vintage races. Not only did the car make an impression on Tom back then, but he kept the pictures all these years. Today he is very involved in the Nor Cal region of SAAC, attending events and contributing to their monthly newsletter.

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At SAAC-35 Tom noticed the Fogg Motor window decal on the car and began asking around about who the owner was. The Fogg sticker is very distinctive because the cursive "F" is identical to the "F" in the Ford emblem (not by coincidence). Mike and Tom finally made contact via e-mail after the August 2010 event, and a friendship was struck. Not remembering where he was standing in 1970 in relationship to the Grabber Yellow Shelby, he had tried to recreate the photo in 2010 [above, right]. You have to admire Tom. In 1970, when his friends were dreaming of playing center field for the New York Yankees, he was dreaming of one day owning a Shelby Mustang. His dad raised him well. Proof in

point: Tom presently owns two Shelybs: a 1968 and a 2008 GT500 KR.

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The original owner kept the yellow 350 car until 1997, when he sold it to the Indianapolis doctor. In 2007 Michael Smith became the third owner. After almost forty years the car was still in pretty good shape. The paint was only slightly faded and a few chips had been touched up with non-matching paint. The interior was clean and did not show its age. It remained a "driver" at its new home in Fayetteville, Arkansas and I even got to take it out for a spin whenever we came to visit. My friends are still envious of these driving experiences, that I have actually been behind the wheel of a classic Shelby. Don't tell my brother-in-law but I was satisfied with just sitting in their driveway, listening to the car idling. I didn't need to go anywhere.

After a year, Michael began bringing up the subject of putting the car in a shop to do a complete restoration. I thought he was crazy. OK, maybe my comments were rooted in the thought that if this were to



Tom Dankel recalled taking pictures of a yellow Shelby in 1979-1980 in British Columbia: at a car show in Burnaby and also during a lunchtime break during the vintage races at Westwood Mountain High Raceway where they invited spectators to take a parade lap. Dankel and the yellow GT350 kept crossing paths. Cue "Twilight Zone" theme again.

happen, my days of driving this beautiful classic automobile would quickly end. It would be too valuable to drive on the road. So I spent every spare moment trying to talk him out of his insane plan.

The Smiths made the short trip to the Mid-America Ford Nationals in Tulsa in the summer of 2009 and began the search for a quality restoration shop by quizzing other car owners who were there. After looking over Kirt Fryer's impressive 1969 Grabber Blue GT500 convertible, they knew the hunt was over. In December, the Grabber Yellow Shelby was dropped off at Billups Classic Cars in Colcord, Oklahoma—only a forty-five minute drive from the Smiths' home in Arkansas. Michael's request to Jason Billups was short and simple. "I want to win the Premier Award." No other words were needed. In the following seven months, I wonder how many times Smith told his guys at the 2-way radio shop he was headed out to check on a cell tower site when he was really headed to Billups Classic Cars to check the progress of his future show car.

Michael spent \$110,000 on the Shelby's restoration and as part of the deal his wife Darcy received a "kitchen restoration" (for an amount considerably less than what was spent of the GT350). Both were very happy with the results. My father cringes when I mention the restoration cost (the car—not the kitchen), but when considering a set of 1969 Goodyear Polyglas tires with small white raised letters cost them \$5,000, it is probably understandable. When that didn't satisfy my father, I added that a pair of authentic shocks set them back \$3,000 before refurbishing. Just don't mention to him that the car is not being driven any more. In fact, don't mention that to me, either.

The body was stripped, painted and



The Smiths' GT350 is driven into Billups Classic Cars. Most enthusiasts would grimace and grit their teeth at the thought of a car like this being torn apart and restored to perfection. It's too nice for that. But the search for perfection doesn't have a bottom level starting point.

re-assembled to appear as it did when it was delivered to Fogg Motors in British Columbia. In the summer of 2010, after completing the work, Michael Smith and Jason Billups took their "work of art" to the Tulsa Mid-America car show and anxiously awaited the judges' results. I'm not sure what word would best describe their reaction at the awards dinner: amazed, thrilled or pumped when they won the Diamond Heritage Elite class award, the top prize handed out at the show.

My reaction? I told them both it was all in the paint, a single stage urethane Grabber Yellow supplied by BASF. Oh, did I forget to mention I've worked for BASF since graduating from college back in 1979?

Two months later, Jason hauled the GT350 out to Sonoma, California for SAAC-35 at Infineon Raceway. The Smiths flew. On the way across the Arizona desert Jason's truck overheated. He only had a few pint bottles of drinking water on hand and nothing else—except for the fluid in

the Shelby's radiator. He used it to give his truck an emergency transfusion and was on the road again an hour later.

Upon arriving at the track they noticed one of Michael's trailer light fixture covers had come loose and fallen onto the covered Shelby, scratching the paint. The Billups crew worked into the night buffing out the scratch. Then, on the morning of the judging, they had to contend with a dead battery and a non-working head light. A set of the correct replacement 1969 headlights set them back \$350, but they were thrilled to even find a set.

As mentioned previously, I'm still wondering who was more excited when the SAAC-35 judges announced that the Smiths' '69 GT350 had won a Premier Award. The owners and the restoration shop crew were both on hand. What made the top trophy even sweeter was the fact that someone at the Tulsa show had told Michael he would never come home from SAAC-35 with the Premier Award. Guess what?

The story isn't over. If you had thought the Billups crew had all their bad luck behind them, you would have been wrong. On the way back to Oklahoma with Smiths' award-winner in their covered trailer, Jason Billups and one of his top shop hands took one wrong turn and spent almost four hours in downtown San Francisco during rush hour. They thought they'd never find their way out. Fortunately, a pedestrian pointed them in the right direction and they were on their way.

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What's next? Jason is about to begin another restoration on another Smith automobile, a 1969 Shelby GT500 convertible with a Super Cobra Jet engine. Yet to be determined is which room Darcy will be getting restored next. Stay tuned.





At SAAC-35, Michael and Darcey Smith's Grabber Yellow '69 GT350 was ready for judging. Would it go two-for-two as a double top award winner? And is an MCA top award in its future? '69-'70 head judge Ed Meyer is pictured behind it, ready to pass out the clipboards. Let the judging begin!



### SAAC Premier Award Winners

**SAAC-28** Nashville Superspeedway  
May 23-24-25, 2003  
289 Cobra - Joe Angeleri

**SAAC-29** Michigan Intl Speedway  
July 2-3-4, 2004  
1966 GT350 - Julius Wright  
1970 GT500 - Al Fiedel

**SAAC-31** VIR  
July 1-2-3, 2006  
1966 GT350 - Brent Galloway  
1967 GT500 - Jim Hull  
1965 GT350 R-Model - Bob Dockery

**SAAC-32** Miller Motorsports Park  
July 6-7-8, 2007  
1965 GT350 - Rick O'Mara

**SAAC-34**, BeaveRun  
August 6-7-8, 2009  
289 Cobra Dragonsnake - Steve Juliano  
1969 Boss 429 - Jim Zappala  
1965 GT350 R-Model - Bob Dockery

**SAAC-35** Infineon Raceway  
August 27-28-29, 2010  
1967 GT500 - Michael Poston  
1969 GT350 - Michael Smith