



RENTING A RENT-A-RACER

– Greg Kolasa

When Shelby American and Hertz teamed up to offer an only slightly detuned version of the 1965 SCCA B-Production championship car to the general car-renting public, you'd have to be delusional to think that there wouldn't be clandestine racetrack uses for these rental cars. As soon as their availability was announced, you could almost hear the wheels turning in the heads of weekend racers as they concocted their dastardly deeds. Even some Ford brass believed the cars would find a large underground client base because in a late 1965 memo on their evaluation of the GT350's suitability for rental use, the prophetic statement appeared: "*Hertz may have a run on rentals on drag race night.*"

One of the more colorful scraps of the GT350H myth concerns cars which were allegedly rented for weekend-only use. There are stories of cars which purportedly had roll bars welded to their floorpans and were then raced on road circuits. They were returned, so the stories went, on Monday morning with their roll bars hacksawed off and the carpets replaced, the tell-tale evidence being burned carpeting from the welding torch.

Other Hertz cars were rented on Sundays and drag raced. There is even the story of how late one Sunday afternoon, a New York State Trooper stopped a truck and car trailer rig on one of the highways bound for JFK airport. Speeding was not the reason for the stop. Rather, someone had reported that the car on the trailer—a black-and-gold fast-back Mustang—was being worked on while the rig was in motion! The story goes on that the car (a GT350H) was bound for JFK and a return to the Hertz lady but the reinstallation of the engine (borrowed for a Sunday afternoon race) could not be completed by the time the race track closed, so the work was done en-route to the Hertz agency.

Tales like these tend to sound rather far-fetched but they do make for entertaining bench-racing sessions. Documenting such rental abuses is next to impossible, although, in some instances, they likely did take place. A concerted ef-

fort was made to try and locate specific instances of these heinous abuses and see if they could really be substantiated, or if they were just so many "urban legends." An interesting question was whether the myriad stories of the cars being raced were total fabrications, or were only exaggerations of events that had some basis in fact. Several ex-rental Shelbys have gone on to greatness in racing. Perhaps most notable was 6S1828, the famed "Bolus and Snopes" car. However, the subject of the Hertz GT350s being raced (or otherwise abused) specifically while still under Hertz ownership, has been a continual subject of interest. Any stories to this affect are investigated, not only by SAAC Registrars, but by other Hertz owners who are merely interested in this type of history. To this end, some documentable instances did, in fact, occur.



Perhaps the best-known (and best-documented) account of an outside-of-the-rental-agreement use for a GT350H was when one black-and-gold car was used as a combination tow vehicle and potential engine parts source for a 289 Cobra race car. It took place Thanksgiving week in 1966, during the SCCA's annual American Road Race of Champions, held at Riverside, California. Cobra racer Mel Wentzel from Rye, New York had his Cobra trailered to California for the race by a friend, because he was not able to take the time off to make the cross-country drive him-

self (he arrived in Los Angeles by air). As soon as he had received his invitation to the event, he succeeded in getting Shelby American competition director Lew Spencer to promise him the use of a company GT350 pool car for the week. By the time Wentzel and his mechanic arrived at Shelby American, however, all of the company cars had been taken by Ford executives who were in town for the races. Spencer profusely apologized, but said there was really nothing he could do. The cars were gone and that was that.

Wentzel was relentless. Without telling Spencer exactly why it was so important that he have a GT350 to drive, he was eventually able to get Spencer's assistance in renting a GT350H from LAX's Hertz agency. This was a trick in itself because Wentzel was under 25 and Hertz rules required GT350H renters to be 25 or over. Spencer had some pull there, and

the requirement was somehow overlooked. Within an hour or so of picking up the car, Wentzel and his mechanic were in the race shop of Mike Goth (the



Cobra's previous owner and a friend of Wentzel's) in Corona del Mar. Wentzel's mechanic—at that time a little-known Shelby enthusiast named Rick Kopec—went to work installing a Sears trailer hitch which Wentzel had brought in his checked baggage. This was why getting the use of a GT350 had been so important. Wentzel's meager racing budget did not include the cost of a tow vehicle for the week of the races. The use of a Shelby company GT350 was the perfect (and no cost) solution. To install the hitch, Kopec drilled a pair of 1/2" holes into the car's floorpan and a pair in the rear bumper. He also spliced into the GT350H's rear wiring harness. While he was under the car he fabricated a plug for the hole in the side of the automatic transmission—which resulted from his removing the speedometer cable. This was necessary because rental cars had special, tamper-proof locks on the speedometer end of the cable.

There was an added (and more importantly, no-cost) benefit to having a Shelby GT350 as a tow vehicle. The car's engine had a large number of spare parts which could be transplanted onto the Cobra should the need arise: heads, push rods, rocker arms, distributor, water pump and, if the worst-case scenario became reality during the week, the entire short block. Luck was on their side (as well as Hertz') because the Cobra did not suffer any engine problems and the GT350H's hood never needed to be opened. A week later, the car was returned to Hertz with a mere 70 additional miles on the odometer.

At the SAAC convention in Ann Arbor, Michigan in July of 2004, a Hertz car, 6S2094, was examined and tenta-

tively identified as the Wentzel tow car. This was based on the butchered taillight wiring and the 1/2" holes which had been drilled in the car's floorpan. This pronouncement, it turns out, was a little premature.

A year or so later some original Shelby American documentation surfaced that called into question the fingering of 6S2094. A list of license plates (at that time) of in-service Hertz cars showed that 6S2094 did not carry the "SVS-728" plates as shown in pictures taken by Kopec in 1966. That car had actually been registered with California "SEU-990" plates. Unfortunately, the list did not identify which car did carry those "728" plates, so the only thing that can be said for now is that documentation indicates that the car was likely not 6S2094.

How many Hertz cars could there be running around today with 1/2" holes in the floorpan? There can't be a definitive answer, but the number is likely "more than one" because during a 1980 restoration of Ohio-based 6S1900, a series of 1/2" holes were found in that car's floorpan, in a location that strongly suggests this car also had a trailer hitch. Additionally, there were also traces of modifications to that car's taillight wiring harness. Of course, this could lead to all sorts of wild speculation (especially given that 6S1900's "home turf" of Dayton was only 120 miles from Mansfield, and the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course). But it would only be speculation. There is no indication of whether the holes were actually drilled during Hertz's ownership, so only the fact that holes were found can be reported with certainty.

There is one in-print telling of the GT350H legend, this one in Leo Levine's

excellent history of Ford racing, *"The Dust and the Glory."* It mentions how one racer, for participation in the 1967 Daytona 24 Hours, rented a GT350H, pulled the engine and installed it in his Falcon race car. Wondering if this was a tall tale or one that could be documented, research was initiated. One fact that seemed unusual was that by February of 1967, it was thought that all Hertz Shelys had been turned in to Ford for resale. A look at the entry list for the race showed that there was only one Falcon entered in the subject race, that belonging to Pennsylvanian Ray Heppenstall. A few years before his passing, Ray was contacted for verification and perhaps some additional details about the alleged incident but upon reaching Ray, we were informed in no uncertain terms that the story, as printed, was dead wrong. Ray did install an engine in his Falcon, and it did come from a GT350H (serial number, sadly, unknown) but it was not the usual "rent/race/return" scenario. Ray had purchased a GT350H that was crashed on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and cannibalized it for parts for his Falcon. So this story gets only partial credit—it was an instance of a GT350H engine being pulled and installed into a race car, but it was not from an active-duty rental car. It also demonstrates how the stories associated with GT350Hs have become embellished, making the mundane sound all the more fantastic.

In 2006, an interesting photo surfaced on the Internet. It was a frontal view of a GT350H squealing around an empty parking lot. Accompanying it were pictures of various other vehicles, all photographed from the same location and all exhibiting varying degrees of body roll in the corner. Multiple gracefully-arched skid marks suggested that this particular area in the parking lot had just seen some enthusiastic cornering by more than one car. The date was given as being in June of 1966, and the location was the vacant parking lot of the Charleston (West Virginia) Civic Center, where an autocross was being held. Sadly, no other information is available about the event, such as the all-important serial number of the car in the photograph. It carries no front license plate (common in West Virginia in the 1960s) and there are no other distinguishing marks on the car. It is identical in appearance to nearly 800 other black-and-gold GT350Hs.

A search through the registry files indicate that only four black cars went to Charleston in 1966 (there was a fifth, a red one, but it is obviously not the car in the photograph) and if you make the as-





This GT350H at an autocross was captured on film in Charleston, WV in June of 1966. While not a superb quality image, it is one of the very few (and possibly the only) period image of a GT350H being driven in competition while it was still a rental unit.

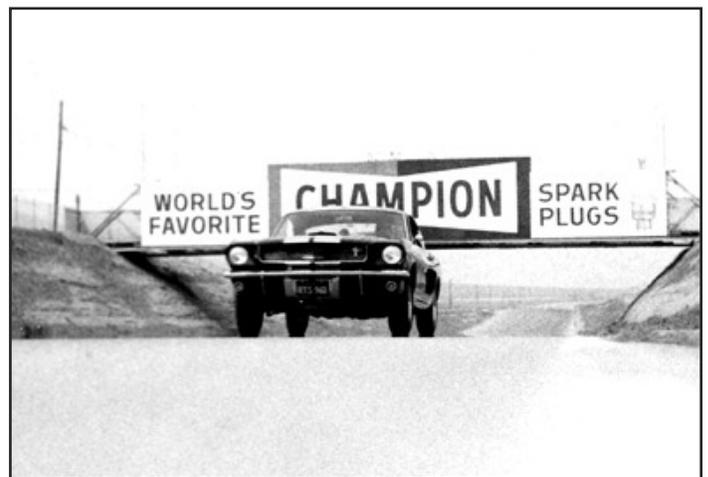
sumption that this is a “local” rental, the chances are one in four that the car can be identified by serial number. But that’s as close as it gets.

What makes this image really unique, though, is that it appears to be the only photographically-documented instance of a GT350H being used in a manner so often told in bench racing stories (and also clearly in violation of the car’s rental agreement). It may not be a great quality photograph, but in some ways it would be like a blurred, waterspotted photograph of the Titanic slipping beneath the waves—it’s the only game in town.

Another instance of a Hertz car taking to the track was caught for posterity on film, but this time it was completely

legitimate. In a series of photographs dated March 29, 1966, photographer William Eccles was assigned to go to Riverside International Raceway with Ken Miles and photograph him driving a GT350H. Miles, wearing a tie and blazer, is shown putting the car through its paces at a track he knew so well he could do it blindfolded.

Mr. Miles was, indeed, a busy man because the date on the photos are only three days after his surprise win at Sebring in the MKII roadster. Some of the slightly-blurry images capture him solo and others show him with passengers. The photos were not accompanied by any notes, memos or other correspondence, so the exact circumstances surrounding the event are, sadly, lost to time. The only things that are clear and might someday (but not today) lead to the ultimate identification of the car are a four-speed shift lever and the California license plate “RTS-960.” What is also interesting about the license plate is that it indicates that the car had already been accepted and registered by Hertz (as opposed to being a Shelby American demo car that





would likely have carried “MFG 013” plates).

An incident involving a Hertz GT350 took place at the Marlboro (Maryland) Trans-Am race, held on August 14, 1966. In that event, sedan driver Tom Yeager (co-driven by Bob Johnson and Don Sessler) was running his blue notchback racer when it developed carburetor problems. His mechanic, Tom Greatorex, worked to solve the problem, to no avail. Then he spotted a black fastback Mustang with two wide gold stripes (the rental ride of then-SCCA chief John Bishop) in the parking lot that, conveniently, had the same type of engine and carburetor as Tom’s racer. The Hertz car’s carburetor was “borrowed” (without, of course, the knowledge of the car’s renter) and installed on the Yeager racer. He didn’t win, but neither was he rewarded with a “DNF” at the event. He actually finished fifth in class, ninth overall and still in the money. Afterwards, Yeager and Greatorex re-installed the Holley, fessed up to Bishop, and the three all had a good laugh—although you have to wonder about the wisdom of using the rental car



of the chief of the sanctioning body of a race you’re trying to win as a parts source.

So what does the preceding text say? After literally decades of trying to sort out Hertz fact from fiction, it suggests that while the magnitude of the “shenanigans” (that is, Hertz cars being entered in actual races without the knowledge of the Hertz lady) may well be exaggerated,

these stories very likely have their basis grounded in actual fact. The research that was recently conducted indicates that intuitive speculation has indeed been confirmed: the tales, it seems, are creative embellishments of actual events, rather than complete fabrications. What people claimed to have happened may very well have actually happened, although not to the extent that the legends would have it; embellishment has turned the mundane into the extraordinary. The ultimate piece of information, the serial numbers of the cars involved in these “crimes,” still remains elusive. However, given that at one time there was never thought to be any chance of ever documenting any of the events, hope does spring eternal.



Tires by Goodyear, shocks by Koni, carburetion by...Hertz??? When photographed by Roger Blanchard at VIR in July of 1966, Tom Yeager’s Mustang was running on its own carburetor. A month later at Marlboro, MD it finished a 12-hour Trans-Am race with the carb surreptitiously borrowed from SCCA chief John Bishop’s rental GT350H.