

# **Joe Scalzo's**

## **City of Speed and elsewhere**

### **Blood Sport**

I used to fantasize about riding shotgun in a blood red, front-engine, two-seat, open-cockpit, Ferrari sports car, one of the big, booming, 4.9s, 4.9 being the most weighty and prestigious numerals going. I additionally fantasized about writing up a totally brilliant account of the ride afterward, then having my literary tour de force published on the slick and glossy pages of some eminent motoring journal.

All because I'd set my brains aflame reading and re-reading Ken W. Purdy's "Blood Sport." "Blood Sport" is a long short story, one of Ken W.'s best. And its climax comes when the fable's hero driver straps his dishy girl friend into the shotgun saddle of a ferocious and blood red 4.9. for a trip around a monster road course, most probably the old Nurburgring.

Then the hero does all the hot Purdy things: "His arm hit the gearshift lever, his left foot hit the clutch, his right stamped on the accelerator." And the 4.9 does all the righteous blood red Ferrari things: the tranny howls, the brakes wail, the banks of V-12 cylinders fire – "The soft evening air was torn wide open as 400 horsepower slammed into the clutch." And the dishy girl friend wets her pants.

Out in the Los Angeles of the 1950s and 1960s, where a great sports car racing civilization was flourishing, everybody read and was shaped by Purdy and "Blood Sport," and of course wanted to grow up to race a sumptuous blood red Ferrari 4.9. Three of the most passionate were named Dan Gurney, Tony Settember, and Ron O'Dell. Amazing as it's going to sound, all three realized this dream, and all in the same blood red Ferrari 4.9. The first one, Dan, moved on to become a lion of the racing hall of fame. The second one, Tony, should be better remembered than he is for joining the original cast of L.A.'s Formula 1 celebrities. But the third, Ron, an unfortunate deader-before-his-time, is remembered, I sometimes think, by nobody but me.

"Blood Sport" was published in the Saturday Evening Post of 1957, and anybody wanting ride-along duty that season in a blood red Ferrari - though not a 4.9 but an even faster 4.1 - would have chosen to passenger the biggest romantic going, the Spanish nobleman Fon de Portago. An American named Gurner Nelson did. And the poor guy hit the jackpot: traveling clear to Italy to chair with Fon in the ultimate road race, the Mille Miglia.

Everything was going to plan until the crossover at Rome where Fon, randy as ever, noticed some blond honey in the crowd and swerved to a halt to kiss her. Soon afterward he and Gurner Nelson had their Ferrari hauling the mail all over again when a wheel flew off and they went into the spectators, killing eleven in addition to themselves.



Their fates posed a terrible moral for a potential Ferrari ride-along like myself but I never accepted it. Back in L.A., the only racing personality who'd ever been a Ferrari ride-long had been Richie Ginther, who accompanied Phil Hill in the 1953 Mexican Road Race, which had terminated with Hill crashing and wrecking their dorsal-fin Ferrari, without physical injury to himself or Richie. In any event, and notwithstanding Fon's and Gurner's fates, 1957 had been a racing bonanza. Radical millionaires had always weirdly flourished in L.A., buying up blood red Ferraris and hiring L.A. heroes to race them at Sana Barbara, Palm Springs, and Riverside.

The strangest millionaire scuderia of Ferraris by far belonged to Anthony Parravano, who, per the unreliable L.A. gossip mill, was some kind of mysterious criminal entrepreneur in business with the mafia. This was incorrect; Anthony never was mobbed up. He was an incompetent and mundane businessman who disappeared after turning into a tiresome income tax deadbeat.



Whatever, in 1957 this appealing man of mystery still had a potent reputation for conducting private test sessions out in the desert at Willow Springs where he rewarded drivers he fancied by adding them to his scuderia.

And young Dan Gurney, just home from serving on an ack-ack squad on Korea's 32th parallel, was growing bored out of his skull from racing nothing but production Porsches and Alfas. Anxious to saddle up in a Ferrari 4.9 like the one in "Blood Sport," he inveigled an invitation to one of the mystery man's Ferrari-chauffeuring seminars, which he succeeded in flunking.



Dan, however, was on the make; refusing to quit, he continued scanning the L.A. horizon for something with serious firepower, finally glomming onto one of the first four-on-the-floor, 283 horsepower out of 283 cubic inches V8 plastic elephants – a bad, black Corvette. It belonged to one Cal Bailey, who was a lousy driver but a mouthy palooka with muscular and

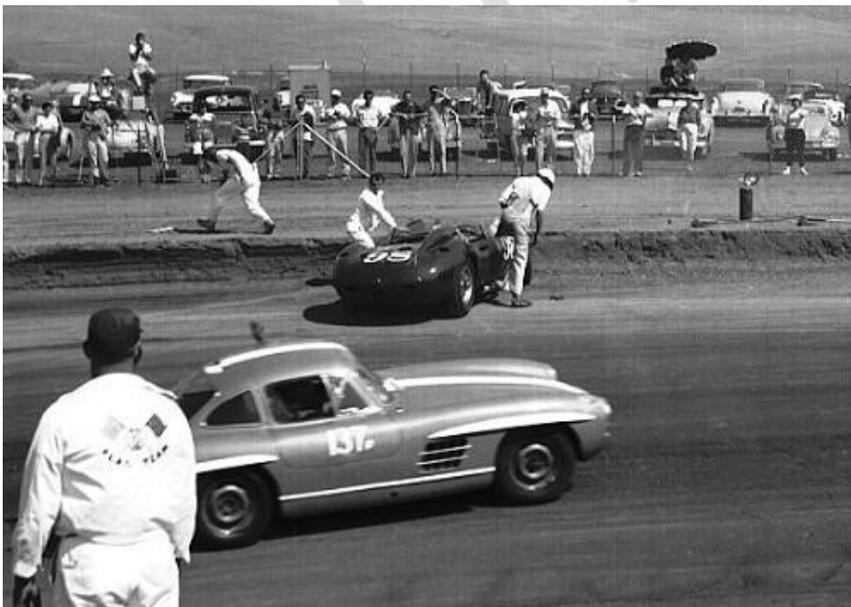
**hulking shoulders, a baleful face, and straining, slightly crazy, eyes.**

**Sometimes you'd be in L.A.'s Grand Prix Bar and Restaurant and listening to Cal mouthing off that he was "Mr. Corvette," plus lying like a psychopath about all the burglaries and bank robberies he'd pulled off without getting caught. Only Mr. Corvette hadn't been blowing smoke after all. Years afterward, we could read about his sad suicide in the public prints. Dressed up in a ghoul's mask and flourishing a hog leg pistol, he had traveled to the secluded Hollywood Hills and let himself into the exclusive estate of tire & rubber rajah Leonard Firestone, whom he was scheduled to kidnap for ransom. Entering the Firestone living room, Mr. Corvette was greeted by a cannonade of gunfire from all the barricaded homicide detectives who'd been waiting for him.**

**Prior to Mr. Corvette's colorful demise, Dan had raced his bad, black velocipede just once, but it was enough. In September of 1957, the weekend Riverside International Raceway opened, not only did Dan devastate RIR's production car feature, but he finished a hot seventh in the over-1,500 modified go.**

**Seventh was two places better than where a somewhat woebegone Ferrari 4.9, ex-Parravano, now belonging to Frank Arciero, paisan of Sophie Loren, had finished. Meaning that Dan's great wish to be a "Blood Sport" type 4.9 gunner was about to be fulfilled.**

**At this time Frank, instead of being an eccentric millionaire with his own scuderia of Ferrari 4.9s was a fringe player – a war refugee and one-time ditch digger with large ambitions. Long before he ever came to own it, his 4.9 had never accomplished much. A lot of its pedigree had gotten knocked off courtesy of Carroll Shelby, who'd managed to mangle and seriously wound it, plus wreck a lot of other iron, in an almighty smashup on the starting line at Palm Springs.**



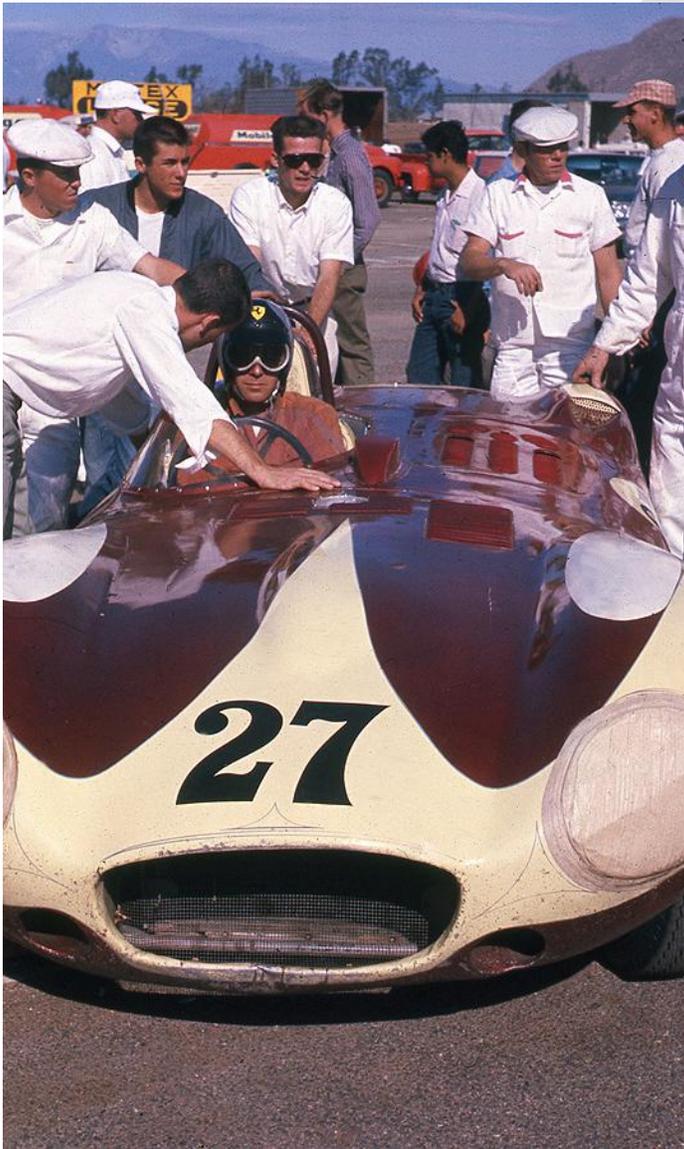
**But back at Riverside that same November with Dan instead of Shelby in the bucket of Frank's revitalized 4.9, Dan placed second in a famous main event won by "Ol' Shel," this time in a Maserati 4.5.**

**Other strong showings in 1958 and 1959 with Frank's 4.9 became Dan's ticket to Europe and Formula One. But he raced it once too often. Again at Riverside, the seemingly-jinxed 4.9**

involved itself in still another massive starting line wreck. After stalling, it took a hurtling, hybrid, Pontiac-powered Aston-Martin raced by a San Jose plumber straight up its tailpipe. The impact split open the 4.9's huge fuel tank, allowing hundred of gallons of high-test to gush everywhere, but there was no fire.

As for Dan, the impact whiplashed his helmet against the roll-over bar, severely rang his bell and knocked him unconscious, and he was forced to do time in the crash house recovering from concussion and shock. Frank's 4.9 was wounded even worse than at Palm Springs and had to visit Willie Sutton for a total rebuild. Dan never raced it again.

But Dan's employing a plastic chariot as his ticket to a Ferrari 4.9 caused other L.A. "Blood Sport" aspirants to look at GM's Corvette with fresh eyes, among them Tony Settember, a gullwing Mercedes 300 SL star. Tony had previously been the worst enemy of the whole Corvette clan, because he and his gullwing had, on the lethal and pine-lined lanes of Pebble Beach, gone up against the factory Corvette driving dentist Dr. Dick Thompon, and had waxed the jawbreaker. But Dan's success in the late Cal Bailey's bad and black plastic-mobile had clued Tony to the significance of 283 horses out of 283 cubes. Switching alliances, Tony took up Corvette-racing with a vengeance, then waited for some millionaire scuderia to come calling.



He was almost too late; the scuderia tradition of the 1950s had fallen upon hard times – almost all of the radical and fascinating millionaires with their Ferrari 4.9s were gone from sports car racing, either hiding out from the IRS or else being dragged into the divorce courts to have their ex-spouses strip them of their toys. Yet L.A. remained a magical ciudad where anything might happen, and this was when a scion of some kind of family fortune named Hugh Powell entered Tony's life. Wild gig! So strongly did Hugh get behind Tony that he ended up taking him clear to Europe and buying Tony his own Formula One team.

Well before that happened, though, Hugh had made Tony's Ferrari 4.9 fantasy come true. After meeting Frank Arciero he got hold of Frank's now legendary 4.9, crash-battered though it was. Crash-battered wasn't the half of it. Not only was the 4.9 six or more semesters old, it was

mechanically suspect. Back at Riverside, in a big newspaper Grand Prix, Tony clocked a stout speed in time trials, but an expensive-sounding rattle deep in the V12 innards make him quit the GP early.

By the time Riverside's next GP rolled around, matters were desperate. Ferrari 4.9 mystique had worn thin – not even a big 4.9 was going to hack it anymore. So, in order to compete with the big boys, Tony was going to have to race something like a Lotus model 19, or a pointy-finned Monaco Cooper, or possibly Billy Krause's big D-Jag full of teeth-rattling stovebolt V8. This last was what Hugh Powell purchased for him but it flopped. And now all Hugh could do was put the 4.9 out for rent, and at a cut-rate price, which was all Ron O'Dell could afford.

A drop-dead handsome stud with a mustache who also was a soldier of the Carrera Porsche, Ron had a Ferrari 4.9 appetite and Carrera Porsche budget. He was a good sports car driver, but like many good sports car drivers, never made a fetish out of steady work. What Ron was most dependent on was the income of his wife, a lady barber who dragged in a fast \$150 a week. Lack of funding notwithstanding, Ron afterwards always could say he'd done the "Blood Sport" number and raced Hugh Powell's 4.9. Unhappily, Ron's first lap around Riverside or Pomona also was his last lap. The 4.9 tied up in third gear and that was that.

I wish that Ron had gotten his money's worth, because not long afterward he met a destiny identical to that of Cal Bailey, Mr. Corvette. Ron and his 150-dollar-per-week hairdresser spouse were not well-suited. According to court records, the O'Dells "Maintained a dispensation to be quarrelsome." Mrs. O'Dell was a firecracker and Ron kept a blue-steel .357 magnum around the apartment for his own protection. But one midnight when they were in the middle of yet another big quarrel Ron was surprised when his wife took the .357 out of a drawer and got off two fast rounds. The first round missed; the second found Ron.

## Skeet Expert Shoots Mate With Pistol

HUNTINGTON PARK (AP)— Police say an expert woman skeet shooter shot her husband dead today during an argument.

Officers found the body of Ronald O'Dell, 33, in the couple's flat. The dwelling was filled with trophies attesting her marksmanship and their joint ability in sports car racing.

Blue-eyed, ash-blond Mary Ellen O'Dell, 32, was booked on suspicion of murder. The death weapon was a 357-magnum revolver, fired twice. One bullet broke a window, the other hit the victim in the chest.

Police Capt. Charles Jacobson quoted Mrs. O'Dell as saying: "I don't recall shooting him. We loved each other very much."

Not long before the widow O'Dell was convicted to a lenient sentence of second-degree homicide I at last was treated to a Ferrari passenger chair ride in the old 4.9 of Dan's, Tony's, and Ron's. Tony was the driver. We set about Riverside with the 4.9 chugging and clearing its pipes. Then all the V-12 cylinders snapped in and Tony did all the mandatory stuff that the hero of "Blood Sport" did. Maybe he did it even better.

But it was stale stuff. Not even a ride in a 4.9 could compare with the wild earlier passenger chair lap I'd taken around Riverside with Don Hulette. Don's old Pickford Special was falling apart underneath us, but he stood on the gas anyhow. Boy, he could stand on the gas. That one put me in white-trash heaven.

Memory-addicts still remember the young man with the rough mouth, the rag-tag and underage pit crew and the truly terrible backyard bomb of a racing sports car that was a heroic underdog at every track in California, from Santa Barbara to Cotati. That was Hulette. His background was confounding. He was a classic pianist running his own rathole garage behind a gas station. And he'd drifted into the L.A. racing milieu when the city was a hotbed – everybody aspiring to pilot Formula One cars, or win the 24 hours of Le Mans, or get invited to the Indy 500, or take by storm NASCAR, as quickly as possible.

Don Hulette, too, aspired to be an internationally acclaimed race driver as fast as possible,



So, at a bargain-basement rate, he had acquired the blasted remains of the old Pickford Special. Once it had been a choice amalgamation of clamshell fenders, Borani wire wheels, tuned torsion bars. But by the time Hulette purchased it, the Pickford had been raced well beyond the age of senility: so deteriorated had it become that race stewards everywhere from Santa Barbara to Cotati unanimously regarded it as a candidate for a black flag.

Hulette waged spirited but usually fruitless war, making impossible pass after impossible pass, occasionally gaining the lead. But then worn-out pieces began collapsing or falling off and he either reeled backward or got disqualified. He was growing impatient, and understandably so. His antique car, his ridiculous pit crew, and his rathole garage weren't going to carry him very far from Santa Barbara or Cotati. Still, to off-the-wall personalities go off the wall racing sports cars. Next Hulette gained the stovebolt Lister fate had waiting for him. Its owner was a woman who liked sports car racing, who had acquired it from her

**father, a plumber who liked sprint car racing, who had acquired it from a moving van president who liked Indy car racing.**

**Hulette accepted the Lister as his life raft to the big time It was going to be the Kon Tiki that floated him to the cover of “Car and Driver.” But just as Hulette’s Lister was negotiating Riverside’s section of switchback esses it dashed itself against a ditch, somersaulted, and exploded into bright orange flame. C and D published the picture, but not on its cover.**



**“Am I a race driver,” Don Hulette once demanded, “or a fink?” He proved he was a racing driver in a Sebring 12 hours when he was in a tiny Elite model Lotus that first lost its brakes, then had to pass the nighttime hours having Ferraris and Maseratis fill its mirrors coming 100 mph faster.**

**I still read “Blood Sport” from time to time. Parts if it still grab me.**