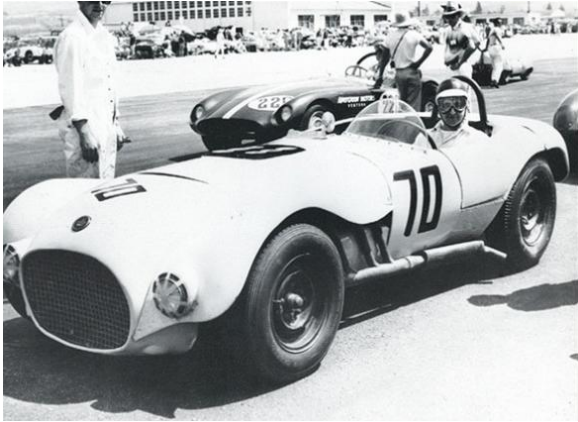


Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Ol' Yeller

Hilarious scene: On all those classic Memorial and Labor Day weekends of the 1950's and 1960's, everybody in sports car racing was up in incredibly blue-skied Santa Barbara and the Goleta airfield, 90 miles north of Los Angeles, for the season's two biggest meets. And just as everybody was awaiting the majestic arrival of all the most well-heeled teams - John von



Neuman Ferraris, John Edgar Maseratis, Lance Reventlow Scarabs up the ying-yang – there came, blasting across all of tony Santa Barbara, an ominous deep-down groaning rumble of an un-muffled behemoth Buick nailhead.

Next, and even before anybody could yell “It’s Max!” notoriously shabby Ol’ Yeller would come bursting into view, with Max Balchowsky, wife Ina, and maybe even their trademark golden retriever pooch all bundled together inside as usual, having commuted up from L.A. The worst mongrel mutt among all Santa Barbara’s thoroughbreds, Ol’ Yeller was also the sole sled licensed for the highway and even packing Idaho street plates, 14898 Famous Potatoes.

Following the dramatic arrival, nothing was left but for Ol’ Yeller to line up for the main event’s pole position and for Max – dressed down not in a hero driver’s suit of lights but a set of common garage-man’s coveralls - to take his place in the raunchy wheelhouse. With offbeat sports cars came offbeat senses of humor. If Max was feeling mischievous, he’d next fake a fast case of the epileptic shakes, or the jumpin’ katzenjammers, all for the benefit of the confused and horrified nabobs starting in Ol’ Yeller’s wake.



Moment of fun over, the green flag dropped, Ol’ Yeller disappeared and Max – his Near Eastern kisser a mask of flat indifference – proceeded to blow off by the numbers all of Santa Barbara’s cosseted, high-strung, crapola Ferraris and Masers.

It was hard saying who was having the most fun, his seven or eight different junkyard wrecks – all named Ol’ Yeller and all painted a 1955 Chevrolet truck shade – or Max himself,

whose odd taste for nailhead ordinance had made him the hero of all blue-collar racers and the hate object of sports car racing's snobs.

A terrible eyesore and apparently a foul brew of scrap, everything shakily held together by discarded and worn-out components that Max, on scavenger hunts, had filched from junkyards, Ol' Yeller – the appellation borrowed from the canine hero of a tearjerker Hollywood movie - appeared to be nothing but a potpourri of blasted parts and miscellaneous ugliness : tin hood, snout of cracked fiberglass, bulbous Chevy truck fenders and a Harley Hog windscreen.

But its mastodon Buick juggernaut was a real piece of work: a boomer radically bored and stroked with six Stromberg 97 downdrafts and also benefiting from Eddie Winfield camshafts which genius Eddie shared with Max and nobody else. Meanwhile, a bewildering blanket of misinformation swirled around Max Balchowsky. He was alleged to be a barmy Balkan and penny-pinching miser who was too tight-fisted to buy a trailer for toting around his Ol' Yellers and who lubricated their worn-out nailhead innards with used motor oil and was a slob in grease-stained overalls foraged around in garbage cans for discarded spark plugs, and who took his Ol' Yellers into battle on cheesy white sidewall rubber.



No one remembered who started all this, but the end came out on the L.A. county fair grounds at Pomona, when one of Max's yellow juggernauts turned rogue and charged the crowd. A spectator died. And then a giant lawsuit (later dismissed) was brought against Max and everybody else involved in the crime of "permitting a defective vehicle to race...." It was prove positive that shysters, too, had bought into the spurious legend of Ol' Yeller.

The reason every Ol' Yeller was licensed for the boulevards was because Max had no dynamometer except for Angeles Crest Highway, thousands of feet above sea level, and, knowing by memory every kink and hairpin, many a midnight sent Ol' Yeller hurtling across the San Gabriel Mountains.

In addition to being a Buick Guru, Max was a good and fast driver, and he learned his trade to escape the monotony of the Appalachians, where he started hauling illegal hooch between Winchester in Virginia to Baltimore. But he only did it once – he lacked an appetite for crime and, besides, the liquor police almost nabbed him.

During the Second World War the Air Force shipped him to the West Coast to learn about the B-24 bomber, But Max's education about dry lake and sports car competition was acquired first at Muroc and Bonneville and later at Torrey Pines and Santa Barbara. After constructing an unsuccessful road-racing hot rod called "Whistlin' Willie," he next invented his first Ol' Yeller in the 1950s, and continued the practice throughout the 1960s.

He also courted and won the pretty hand of Miss Ina Wilson, as good-looking as Ol' Yeller was bad, and the two of them lived one of the great automotive romances. In 1950, for example, they had Max's Studebaker President straight-eight on the Pan American highway to Nogales to start in the inaugural Mexican Road Race, but broke down in the middle of the Sonora desert instead. The claim that Ina was the real panjandrum behind Ol' Yeller was more apocrypha, but she was so deft that she could change, swap, and completely rebuild a center

section off Ol' Yeller in less than 40 minutes, as well as take it apart in the first place.



Ina was equally deft at keeping the books for Hollywood Motors, Max's demon hop-up parlor, and she also shielded her husband from answering questions whenever he was experiencing the mental hell of synchronizing Ol' Yeller's six-pack on Stromberg 97s.

Frequently Max would remove himself from the Ol' Yeller saddle and, as an act of charity, come to the assistance of temporarily out-of-work winners such as Dan Gurney, Carroll Shelby, Ronnie Bucknum, Bob Bondurant and his favorite, Birdcage Bobby Drake. And Max's driving instructions were concise and always the same: be sure to have Ol' Yeller well and truly pointed before you dropped the hammer; and, most important of all, remember to hold onto your ass, because otherwise all that nailhead wham was sure to rip you a new one.

DRIVERS

MAX BALCHOWSKY
CARROLL SHELBY
DAN GURNEY
BOB BONDURANT
BILLY KRAUSE
BOBBY DRAKE
PAUL O'SHEA

SAN FRANCISCO
WAKE VALLEY
JULY 9 & 10 1960
REGION Contestant

Santa Maria
ROAD RACES
JULY 2 - 1960
PARTICIPANT



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