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What It Takes to Compete in the Most Prestigious Car Show



PURPLE & GOLD PASSION: THE ULTIMATE LAKERS COLLECTION

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The Concours Journey



Though participants begin their day in the morning on the lawn (above, showcasing a 1933 Lincoln KB-267 LeBaron Convertible Roadster), their hope is to drive over the ramp as an award winner in the late afternoon (opposite).

*Think you can predict the
outcome of the Pebble Beach
Concours d'Elegance?
Think again.*



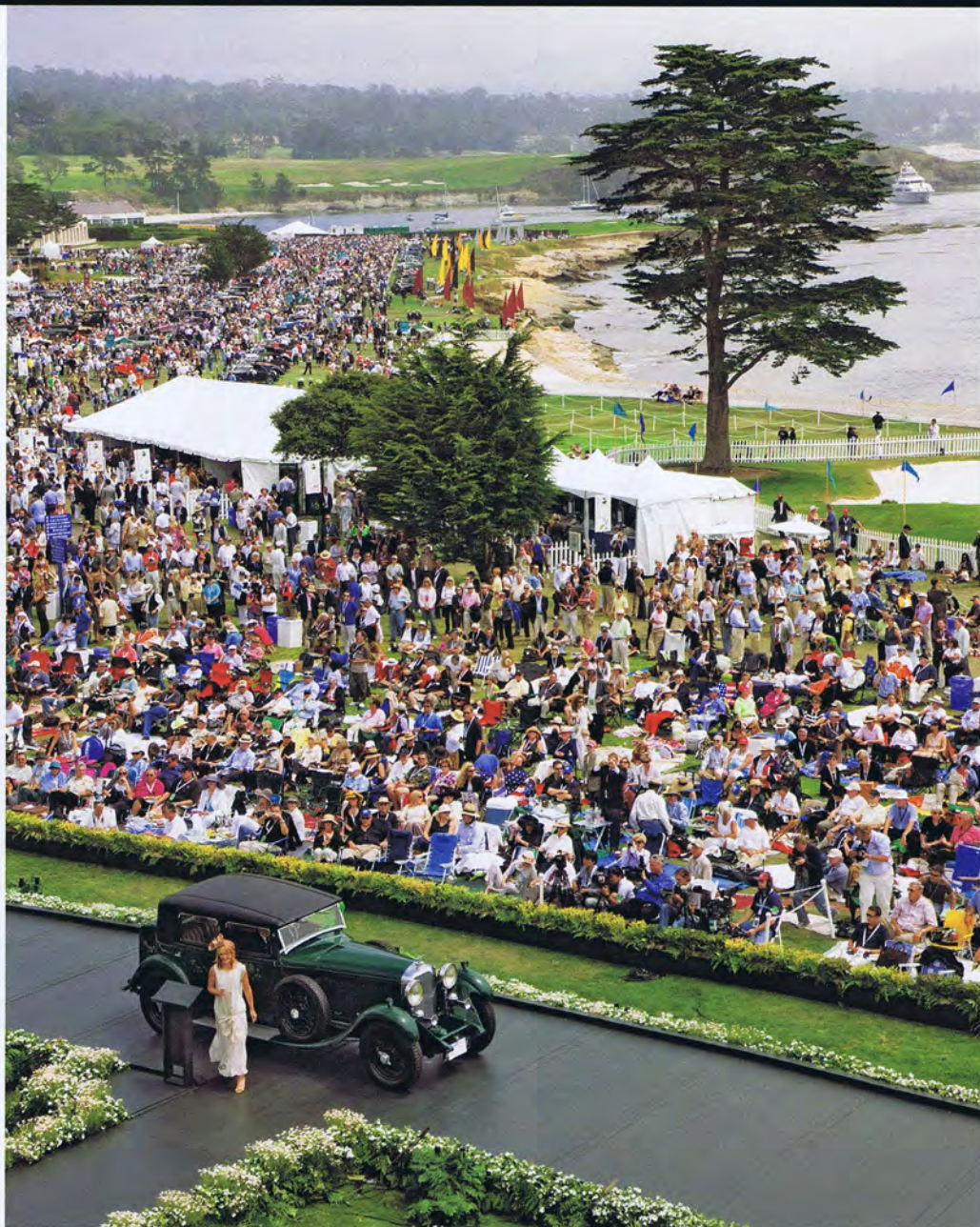
BY SHAUN TOLSON

THE SKY HAS JUST BEGUN TO LIGHTEN, and as dawn breaks the sound of the Pacific crashing against the shoreline is muffled by a cacophony of engine rumblings. For one day out of the year, the 18th fairway at Pebble Beach, a 543-yard emerald crescent hugging the rocky Monterey Bay coast, is transformed into an outdoor runway. It's a setting that, over the course of about 10 hours, will showcase the most immaculate and meticulously restored classic cars on the planet. A few hours from now, the scene will overflow with spectators, but at this early-morning hour, only the most devout car enthusiasts are awake. They've stumbled from their beds to take in the vista, to hear the engines of the automotive masterpieces roar to life, and to steal a few quiet moments of appreciation.

Many of these early-morning revelers likely can still smell hints of the castor oil fumes that had wafted from the asphalt track of Laguna Seca during the vintage races the day before; and many will return to this fairway in a few hours, dressed to the nines in bow ties, seersucker

LEFT: KIMBELL STUDIOS; RIGHT: CRANELL

To earn an award at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance is a crowning achievement, as Stephen F. Brauer experienced in 2009 with his 1931 Bentley 8 Litre H.J. Mulliner Weymann Paneled Saloon.



suits, and other period attire that complements the vehicles they have come here to show. The pomp and circumstance and pageantry of the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance (www.pebblebeachconcours.net) is unequalled, as is the magnitude of the First in Class and Best of Show awards that are bestowed to a lucky few participants each year. For a classic car collector, a win at Pebble Beach is the ultimate accomplishment. It represents the pinnacle of the hobby and, aside from offering prestige and well-deserved bragging rights, it also adds significant value to a winning car.

Much goes into preparing for the concours, and just as much effort and attention to detail defines the judging process on the lawn. But to uncover just what the competition is like for those participating in any of the 20 classes, one must go right to the source. The participants tell a unique story of the occasion; and as their previous experiences and current

preparations reveal, the event known around the world for its exclusivity also is famous for its unpredictability.

RICHARD GORMAN, the owner of Vantage Motorworks (www.vantagemotorworks.com) in North Miami, Fla., is a seasoned veteran when it comes to preparing a car for show at the Pebble Beach Concours. When he opened his shop 37 years ago, the business began as a repair facility for high-end automobiles, but it soon evolved into a self-contained facility specializing in complete restorations of classic Bentleys and Rolls-Royces. Currently, he's finishing up the restoration of a 1936 Lancia Astura Pininfarina convertible, which will grace the Pebble Beach lawn for the first time this year. In fact, this year's event marks the first time that the car will participate in such a concours since its first owner, a wealthy Italian merchant

from Genoa, entered the car in the inaugural concours of San Remo in 1937.

Yet, despite such a pedigree, and disregarding the confidence that Gorman has in his work and his past success (he estimates that at least 15 cars bearing his restoration work have claimed Pebble Beach honors over the years), the grizzled restorer has tempered his expectations for the car at the upcoming event. "You can never tell what's going to happen," he says. "You can think that you have the best car there and get nothing, or you can worry about the car that's next to you, and beat them. You can deliver the product; you can't deliver the judges."

Stephen F. Brauer of St. Louis knows all too well how that can happen. In 2003, Brauer brought a 1932 Duesenberg Model J LeBaron Phaeton, and with it, high hopes of taking home a Best in Class award. Such was not the case. "I had a fairly common body-style Duesenberg that scored very, very well," he says. "But there were three other Duesenbergs with more rare and exotic Duesenberg bodies against me that were also equally restored. It's one of those things, and it's happened to everyone.

"As I fly home from Pebble [every year] and look at who



got first, second, and third, there are always huge collector names and hugely valuable cars and spectacular cars that did not place," he continues. "It happens."

Entering such an environment for the first time can be a bit intimidating, but much like the Pebble Beach judges, who all have years of experience judging concours events (from the grassroots level up to prestigious individual and multi-marque shows), a first-time participant at Pebble Beach likely is a seasoned participant at other concours events. Such is the case for Orin Smith, a 76-year-old enthusiast who many decades ago was a major collector but only recently returned to the hobby. In the last four years, Smith

has amassed a collection of about 45 cars, many of which are replacements for the classic cars that he previously owned earlier in his life.

Smith has enjoyed considerable success in the last few years, bringing home a number of First in Class awards with various vehicles at numerous concours, but he's keeping his expectations low for his first foray at Pebble Beach. He's working alongside Gorman in preparation for the event, which no doubt explains his conservative disposition, and,



Longtime participant Stephen F. Brauer (top) first experienced the Pebble Beach Concours in 1991, when he was invited to show his 1937 Rolls-Royce Phantom III (above).

in fact, it's Smith's 1936 Lancia that Gorman has spent the last year painstakingly restoring. "Vantage has shown that they are capable of doing the kind of work that has won at Pebble Beach, and I hope this car will be another in that line," Smith says. "You can work to have the right car and have the car in the right condition, but you never know what the judges are going to feel or see on a given day, or what other cars are going to be there. I don't know what's going to happen; I can only hope that I do very well."

WHEN THE FIRST Pebble Beach Concours was held on November 5, 1950, there was no real spectacle associated with it. That's not to say the event wasn't taken seriously or produced at a high level, but its existence was seen as a complementary offering to the main event: the Pebble Beach Road Race. "It was a push from people who loved cars," says Sandra Button, the event's chair. "In addition to loving racing, they wanted to kick tires and show off their latest acquisitions. Back in the day, the concours started because the enthusiasts wanted to do it; but back in 1950, it wasn't the star of the show."

Sixty-two years later, it's no stretch to say that the concours is now the belle of the ball and that all the other events—the by-invitation-only parties, the vintage races, the auctions—exist to complement it. As Button explains, the event flourished and continues to succeed today because it is driven by what auto enthusiasts are seeking. There was a period of time not too long ago when high-gloss and glam-



orous restoration jobs were revered. With that trend, the concours adapted, and for a few years overly restored cars dominated the 18th fairway. Now, as collectors and enthusiasts put more value in restorations that turn back time and return cars to their original state, the emphasis and judging criteria have shifted. "In our class judging, we focus on originality and authenticity," says chief judge Ed Gilbertson. "It's not a pretty car contest and we're not searching for the cleanest cars or basing our choices on cosmetics."



Top and above: Brauer again drove across the ramp in 2011 with a 1969 Mercedes Benz 600 Presidential Landaulet.

BURTON

"All of that's been driven by the passion for the cars and the passion for excellence," Button adds. "And because Pebble is such a gorgeous place and the judging is so strong and winning means so much, that synergy all comes together."

Such a philosophy makes sense on paper, but it can become more difficult to understand when emotions are involved. When a spectator sees a striking car parked out on the lawn, a car that draws adoration from seemingly everyone that walks by it, and that car is not declared—at the very least—first in its class, confusion ensues. But therein lies the beauty and the bewilderment of the event. "You can have a spectacularly attractive and valuable car that to all appearances is restored perfectly, and it can be beaten by a less attractive and less valuable car based solely on the fact that the winner did everything correct in the restoration," Brauer says.

In the event that two competing cars both score equally high in their class, the tiebreaker, according to Gilbertson, is two-fold. Years ago, the car that participated in the Thursday driving tour would earn the advantage, but as more and more participants learned of that tiebreaking distinction, the more competitive participants all began to take part in the Thursday festivities. Therefore the second tiebreaker introduced is one that plays off of the event's name. Should two or more cars remain tied after factoring in the driving tour, judges are allowed to assign each car an elegance factor. It's entirely subjective, and Gilbertson acknowledges that, but in those circumstances, it becomes the only way to rank the cars.

Gilbertson says that the Best of Show is done much the same way, where all chief class judges and all honorary judges independently cast their vote for the most striking car out of all Best in Class winners. "The ballots are counted and majority wins," he says. "It's the most fair and democratic way that I can think of. No one has yet to come up with a better way to do it."

OF COURSE, to get to that point in the event, a participant must first win Best in Class, and that is dictated almost exclusively by originality and authenticity. It's why experts like Gorman invest thousands of hours into the



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—ORIN SMITH

research and subsequent work on rare and, in some cases, mysterious automobiles. Take that 1936 Lancia, for example. Rumors once suggested that the car was a gift from Benito Mussolini to Adolf Hitler, though Gorman's investigation disproved that. The rumors were born from a photo of Hitler with a Lancia at the 1937 Berlin auto show, but the car in that photo had a long wheelbase. Given that this particular car is a short-wheelbase model, the story was easy to disprove. "It's gone from 'this was Hitler's car' to Hitler touched the door of one that was similar," Gorman says with a chuckle.

What comes from the research can be quite surprising, and not always for the better. "This engine reportedly ran well," says Gorman, who jokes that Murphy's Law is far too optimistic for his trade, "but when we disassembled it, we found that due to interior lubricants available during the war in Germany, there was excessive wear. So we had to rebuild the

engine even though we didn't think we had to. You can estimate what you know but there's always something that you don't know that's waiting for you."

Such is the nature of classic car restoration; it's simultaneously stressful and exciting. To do it for an event like the Pebble Beach Concours, Gorman says, is an honor. But he also practices his craft in the same manner whether the car is destined to be shown or not. "If you're going to restore a car right, you should do it right whether it's headed to Pebble Beach or not," he says. "You have to remember that the owner still owns the car on Monday after the event. You're not tossing it in the ocean if you lose."

Winning may be the goal, to the point that Button says you can feel a crackle in the air on Sunday, but veteran participants have learned that there's something just as compelling that continues to bring them back. It's the sense of camaraderie. "I think most collectors enjoy showing their cars to their peers who understand them," Brauer says. "That's the experience at Pebble Beach. Pebble is as much the collection of collectors as it is the collection of cars."

"If you have something that's rare and valuable, it's the most fun to show it to a fellow collector who can understand its rarity and value," he adds. "That's one of the joys of collecting—sharing it with your peers." ☐