

THE INTERVIEW

(I Would've if I Could've)

DICK GULDSTRAND

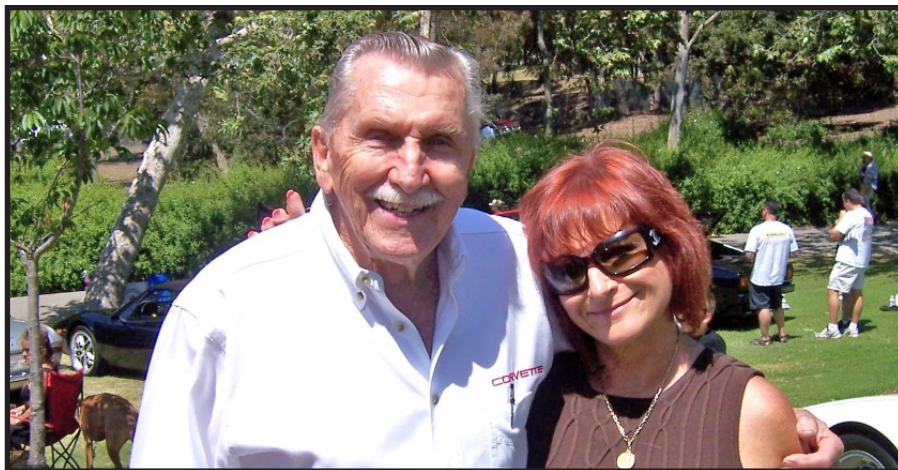
Known as Mr. Corvette but might he be considered a Mr. Pantera of sorts, too?

By Laurie Basile

Although Dick Guldstrand is most renowned for his work with Corvettes, his technical prowess and innovations helped all marques, our Panteras as well, especially Pantera race cars. As you'll see, in a way, we just might consider him another of our Mr. Panteras too. He was considered part of the "Old Guard" as he raced with Dave MacDonald, Mickey Thompson, Doug Hooper, Bob Bondurant and others. How does he belong in a Pantera magazine? It just so happens that he also had involvement with our Panteras in the early 70's as well. Sadly he passed away on September 2, 2015, at the age of 87.

I would have loved to have interviewed him specifically on Panteras and also wished to contact his wife, only to learn, alas, she had also passed on. I am close friends with Phil and Anne Roche who were personal friends of Dick's. After Phil's retirement he worked with Dick in his shop as he is also a "Car Guy." Phil's wife, Anne, and I worked together for years teaching high school. They are not Pantera owners but have a rare '63 Split window and a newer Corvette. You might be surprised at how many of our members have both these days! I was hoping to get some good old Pantera stories but none were to be had. What I did learn, though, is that one of Dick's sons, Gary Guldstrand, has been an Assistant Manager with Honda Motor Co., Inc. for many years and is involved with Honda Racing.

In a previous column I mentioned



Dick Guldstrand with Laurie.

driving my Corvette to Laguna Seca and being blocked from the Pantera Paddock. For this story, I'll begin with the time I drove my Pantera to a Corvette Meeting somewhere in the 90's. It's possibly an annoying non-conforming habit of mine but it just depends which is easiest to get to first. Lo and behold Dick Guldstrand was to be our guest speaker. Little did I know he'd rush over delighted to examine the lone Pantera amongst a parking lot filled with Corvettes and talk to me about his early involvement with Panteras. This was a big surprise to me. He retold stories of how he had been to Italy several times and had worked with Mr. DeTomaso on upgrades to the race Panteras. Dick had always been a great story teller.

Prior to my Pantera ownership I had previously been to Corvette Club meetings at his original shop in Culver City, before his business moved to Burbank. One of his favorite sto-

ries was telling of his experience racing in 1966 where Roger Penske had learned of his intuitive skills, his innovations and his many SCCA wins.

Penske offered him a pre-production 1966 L88 Corvette to drive in the 24 Hours of Daytona. During the race, the car collided with a slower car which blew most of the front off but was still drivable, so his team duct-taped flashlights to the tops of the fenders and proceeded on. The team won First in Class and placed 11th overall.

Then there's his story of the 1967 24 Hours of Le Mans, in a '67 427 L88 with Don Yenko and Bob Bondurant setting a new GT record of 171.5 MPH on the Mulsanne Straight until 13 hours into the race when a rod was thrown and they were "Out" but still ended up becoming fan favorites. There are more race stories than space permits but unquestionably he was a true racer at heart for his entire life.

I've researched many areas to learn more of Guldstrand and Panteras. In a De Tomaso Forum post from 2012, Mike Drew posted to Chris Kimball, in reference to Chris' fondness for the decklid-mounted luggage rack, Mike said that the rack was installed by dealers but was not a De Tomaso or Ford part. They were made and marketed by Gran Turismo. This was a company owned by Barry Gale, per Lance Nist. They specialized in aftermarket parts for the Pantera, and it was run by Guldstrand.

Guldstrand was also the official De Tomaso importer for factory race parts, even complete Gr3 and Gr4 race cars if one was so inclined. Mike additionally noted that Peter Revson also marketed the Gran Turismo line (Revson was a race driver and heir to the Revlon Cosmetics fortune). Mike has an original Gran Turismo catalog buried somewhere with a list of prices. The luggage rack in that catalog was \$139.95. If he's ever located that catalog, it would be a treasure for sure.

In my inquiries of late, I've learned that Les Gray's Group IV Pantera was originally imported to the USA by Guldstrand. Les is a former POCA President and terrific guitarist as well. Also, I was recently in attendance at the annual "Best of France and Italy" show, in Van Nuys, CA. I was speaking with one of our original POCA members, Tony Ward (Foothill Chapter). He told me he has the 180-degree Guldstrand exhaust headers he got from John Story.

In another Pantera connection, Lance Nist worked with Guldstrand on the engine computer and the fuel injectors from Siemens for Dick's NGV, Natural Gas Corvette. This would have been the perfect car for now with exception of the cost. I believe it to be the GS90. It appeared at the 1995 Auto Show, "Guldstrand's GS90, The Ultimate Vette" priced at \$135k, and had the option of a 400+HP CNG-fueled LT5 that cost about \$25k

more. Sadly only 6 were built out of the planned approximately 150.

As a Forum reader I've seen mention of Dick as a guest at a POCA Fun Rally in the past, perhaps around twenty years ago. I'm still searching for that. If anyone recalls it, I'd love to know the details.

What I do know however, is that Dick was a guest speaker at one of POCA's very first meetings in May of 1974. There were 64 people in attendance and 57 Panteras. It was at the Proud Bird Restaurant, right by the Los Angeles International Airport. The article was written for Profiles by Jerry Rogers. At the meeting Dick was introduced, with his connection to Gran Turismo Enterprises and as a veteran race driver and preparer. Dick introduced himself as a "Chassis tuning dude." He laid out his experiences with "Getting the most power to the ground." At that time he was deep into experiments with the Pantera and spoke of his visits to the De Tomaso factory in Italy and where he studied and drove the GT4 Panteras which De Tomaso prepared for the European race circuits, and which did well in the early part of the 1973 season. Guldstrand gave high marks to the Pantera as a production car. Modifications for competition performance included correcting the understeer, and fitting larger tires, which wasn't easy at the front. Rear suspension mods were aimed chiefly at lowering the car. In order to do this and still retain toe-in and camber adjustments, Dick modified the lower suspension arms. Spring rates could be changed, depending on the objectives, but Dick gave the stock shocks high marks. He said the stock braking system is good; different pads are needed for competition work, of course, and he was looking into new rotors for heat dissipation. Dick's designer was also working on other modifications and equipment, front and rear air dams to overcome lift problems, fender

flairs to accommodate the larger tires.

The article states that a beautiful butterscotch yellow Pantera was parked at the Proud Bird entrance equipped with these goodies for POCA members to drool over. Dick was working with several owners and drivers at the time who expected to get their Panteras into IMSA GT races that season, one of whom was in attendance, Jim Wilson. Guldstrand confirmed once again the great competition potential inherent in the Pantera design, and said that he hoped to see it in action at the forthcoming Laguna Seca Races.

A little of Dick's early years—his parents wished him to be a lawyer but he ended up in electronics. In high school he considered himself a "Hot Rodder." He says there were three type guys, Jocks, Rodders, and Candy Asses (I'm not quite sure what that means). His dad was interested in cars as well. Dick's first car was a 1929 Ford Model A coupe that didn't run; it cost \$50. He was thirteen at the time, just out of Junior High School. Thus he began his famous pastime of taking cars totally apart, leaving parts all over the house, even in the kitchen sink, and rebuilding them.

He later had a '27 Ford on '32 rails that he raced at El Mirage and Muroc. By fifteen he had a license. His heroes were the likes of Ed Iskenderian, Vic Edelbrock and Frank Kurtis, who helped him with a nose on one of his designs. He told of how fortunate he was to work with them. They, as he, were all military veterans as well. He was drafted at eighteen and served in the Army and was a USO singer. His college degree was in engineering from UCLA. As this was post-war time in Southern CA, the aerospace industry was quickly developing and Dick landed a job as an electrical engineer with German rocket scientist, Wernher Von Braun. Although it was a great and lucrative career, his heart was with cars and racing.

The engineering perspective,

however, changed his approach to making cars go faster and it served him well. In 1957, he bought a '56 Corvette and started racing his daily driver on weekends. He continued his suspension set ups and in 1961 he sold Chevys for H.E. Baher Chevrolet, Hermosa Beach. Baher became a sponsor of his early racing. Winning so many races pleased Baher so well, he bought Dick one of the first Stingrays to race in 1962. By 1963 his exploits and developments had become legendary.

In the interim, he married and had two great sons. In late '66 he was nearly killed in Atlanta and broke his back in two places. He was paralyzed from the waist down for a while. At that time, Roger Penske let him go and Dick said that Roger saved his life, as he'd surely have died racing had he continued driving for him.

His racing career has far more than listed here, but in addition to his early years and Le Mans races, there were fifteen years of NASCAR, mostly Chevys, some Fords, and worked with massive teams, Duntov, Mitchell, etc. In an interview with Bill Pollack at the Petersen Museum in 2001, he told even more

race experiences and stories. As an example, they speak of challenges at Daytona and how you have to just let the car go at the banking, while hanging on for dear life, and they likened it to the old banking at Monza.

In 1968, he opened his own business, Guldstrand Engineering, in Culver City. The racing history of Culver City is amazing in itself with race tracks, famous auto companies, movie studios. Here's an incredible must read: <https://www.culvercityhistoricalsociety.org/the-historic-culver-city-racing-scene/>

At his shop, Dick had many clients, some of whom were famous: James Garner, Bruce Springsteen, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Nicolas Cage, and more. Concurrently he continued his racing. He also developed many of his own modifications and specialty Corvettes such as the GS80, GS90, and his 50th Edition. He also worked on unique cars and racers such as Old Yeller. He raced all over the world, Canada, South America, Japan, Europe, Mexico, etc. This is a mere sketch of his racing and development history.

In 1999, he was inducted into the Corvette Hall of Fame,

quite a distinguished honor.

I recall one occasion when my brother and I were leaving the Huntington Beach Concourse in my 'Vette (a show he routinely attended). We were driving right next to Dick and his wife. They were in his stunning Super High Performance gold and blue 50th Edition 500HP Vette. We made a teasing racing gesture and oh boy, he took off like gang busters! He was in his eighties at the time. The next time I saw him I mentioned that incident. He clearly recalled it and laughingly told me how his wife had gotten on his case for "Forever acting like a little boy."

That was a wonderful side of Dick and then there was the sentimental side where he expressed how important and meaningful family and children are in one's life. He regretted his early years when he was so busy he didn't really appreciate family time, as he did in later life.

I'll close with a quote by his son Gary, "The difference between a disaster and an adventure is attitude." I'm quite sure his incredible dad had a wonderful influence over his family. I'll have to remember that quote when I need new car parts.



Dick Guldstrand at Sebring, 1966.