

Sheehan Speaks

by Michael Sheehan

Your Basic Million-Dollar Toy

Most Americans think the Mille Miglia Storica is a grueling event; in fact it is a tiring, lengthy 1,000-mile parade where your greatest danger (in an open car) is having the top of your head bruised by all the Italian fanatics who like to give you a pat as you inch along in traffic.

By comparison, in an event like the Tour Auto or the new Modena Cento Ore Classic, the hillclimbs are flat out over unknown roads (one Ferrari wrapped itself around a tree after it became airborne on a rough stretch), the transits require a continued, relentless high-speed pace and the races are real races, on tracks like Imola and Paul Ricard. Standing starts. Roll bars. Fire suits and helmets.

For these intense European events, the vintage Ferrari of choice is often the dual-purpose SWB (short wheelbase), built from 1960-62. While 158 SWBs of all types were built, having one of the seventy-one alloy-bodied competition cars is the only sure way to be accepted in premier events.

Let's suppose you've tired of polishing your chromed gas tank for the FCA (Ferrari Club of America) concours, or have decided that the long-distance American touring events, with their emphasis on five-star accommodations and lack of true competition, just don't cut it. Luckily, you sold your Amazon stock a few months back when it was actually worth something, and have some bucks to spare, so you go looking for an SWB.

Prices vary substantially based upon race results, the correctness and originality of the body and engine, and current condition. An alloy car that never raced will cost about \$900,000, a car with period race history will break the magic \$1,000,000 mark, and a SEFAC (Societa Esercizio Fabbriche Automobili e Corse Ferrari) "hot rod" will cost in excess of \$1,500,000—if you can find one for sale.

In this country, the most common option is to buy an SWB with an older street restoration and prepare it for racing. Now the education process really begins. The buyer has to understand that the massive hours that go into a street or show restoration share little with the directions and goals of race

preparation. Concours are beauty contests, showcasing mirror-smooth sheet metal, leather seats with perfectly aligned stitches and under-hood areas detailed to a perfection that Ferrari never dreamt of attaining. Bluntly, any attempt to make a run at a top-three finish at Pebble Beach or the FCA Nationals will cost well in excess of \$200,000 in restoration costs alone, and you'll end up with a car that you'll be afraid to drive.

Racing preparation isn't necessarily any cheaper, you just spend your money in different ways. It centers on blending thirty-year-old technology and design idiosyncrasies with modern technology and decades of hands-on experience. With the SWB, its entire suspension is non-adjustable, and came from the factory with the wrong camber, no castor, overly soft springs, inadequate sway bars and flaccid shock absorbers. All must be subtly modified, updated and corrected so an inspection by anyone other than a suspension expert will reveal nothing. Add in a clever rebuild of the brake system and the total cost will exceed \$20,000. In exchange, you can expect a reduction of about five seconds a lap at a track like Laguna Seca.

While a 250 SWB engine was state-of-the-art in 1960, the carburetors, cylinder heads, pistons, connecting rods and nearly every other moving part can be, and usually are, subtly modified to be lighter, stronger, and more effi-

cient. Expect real dyno horsepower to jump from the original engine's output of just under 300 hp to well over that, and the bill for this to exceed \$30,000. How far beyond 300 hp you want to go is directly dependent upon how much over \$30,000 you are willing to spend. For instance, updating to the exotic SEFAC cylinder heads will add another 25 hp to the dyno sheets and, coincidentally, yet another \$25,000 to the final bill.

An original looking but much more efficient set of modern exhaust headers and exhaust pipes, a modern clutch and flywheel, improvements to the cooling system and related under-hood components will further lower lap times and add another \$10,000 plus to the bill. Throw in a much-improved limited-slip unit and short rear gears for the differential, close-ratio transmission gears and a lightweight driveshaft, all invisible to any inspector's eyes, and add another \$10,000 plus to the final billing. Don't forget the myriad of miscellaneous items needed, from competition seat belts to fire systems, spare tires to testing time, and the racing preparation bill will soon exceed \$100,000. And we haven't even talked about freshening the paint or cleaning up the interior.

Also, today's owners often forget that these were expendable race cars when new. They were expected to be worn out during a season, and thrown away when no longer competitive. No one ever dreamed that forty years later they would still be actively campaigned, and in fact achieving faster lap times than they did when new. How long you'll go between engine and transmission rebuilds depends on how badly you want a podium finish in your vintage event.

On the other hand, when you're finished, you'll have a rare, attractive car that provides predictable handling, prodigious power and yet can be driven on the highway. If that's worth a million or so dollars to you, then let the search begin. ♦

