THE LONG ROAD TO SUCCESS

This fabulous Saoutchik-bodied Mercedes-Benz just won 'Best of Show' at Pebble Beach. Time to unravel a long and curious life history

Words David Burgess-Wise // Photography Dirk de Jager
THE FIRST LINK in a chain that led to victory at this year's Pebble Beach, Charles A Levine was said to have been 'a hustler'; he was certainly a character. Born in North Adams, Massachusetts, in 1897, he grew up in Brooklyn, where his father Isaac ran a scrapyard. After leaving school, young Charles worked in the scrapyard for a while, but his heart wasn't in it and he found employment as a mechanic at a Long Island aircraft works. His father tried to persuade him to come back to the family business, but in 1916 the 19-year-old Charles set up on his own, selling and repairing secondhand cars.

Yet in the aftermath of the First World War there were rich profits to be made in the salvage business, and in 1921 Charles Levine founded Columbia Salvage, buying and reprocessing war surplus brass shell casings, a venture that made him a millionaire by the time he was 30. His early fascination with aviation still lingered, and in 1926 he and Sicilian-born aircraft designer Giuseppe Bellanca formed the Columbia Aircraft Company to exploit a Wright-Bellanca monoplane that had remained in the air for over 50 hours and which Levine had acquired from the Wright Aeronautical Corporation. Their aim was to compete for the $25,000 prize offered by New York hotelier Raymond Orteig for the first aeroplane to make a non-stop flight from America to France.

In January 1927, Charles Lindbergh had tried to buy the Wright-Bellanca monoplane from Levine, but the terms were too severe - Levine wanted absolute control over who flew the plane - and Lindbergh stormed out. Crossing the continent, he hurried to San Diego and commissioned the Ryan NYP Spirit of St Louis, in which he set off on the first solo flight across the Atlantic from Roosevelt Field in New York State on 20 May.

In another hangar on Roosevelt Field was another contender for the Orteig Prize, Levine's Wright-Bellanca Miss Columbia, which was to be flown by Clarence Chamberlin, embroiled in a legal spat over who was to be his co-pilot. The gifted young custom coachwork designer 'Dutch' Darrin, who had founded America's first scheduled airline in 1920 with war surplus flying boats, had already turned down Levine's offer to partner Chamberlin, and Levine had just arbitrarily dismissed hopeful co-pilot Lloyd W Bertaude, who sued.

With the dispute settled yet too late to win the Orteig Prize, a new challenge was set: to reach Berlin non-stop. Chamberlin was ready to start on 4 June 1927, but the second seat was empty. Levine, who had come with his wife and friends to see the plane begin its attempt, broke away from the group and jumped aboard Miss Columbia, still wearing his business suit, as Chamberlin prepared to take off. His wife screamed 'Stop him!' but it was too late. The crafty Levine had stowed his flying gear aboard the Bellanca.

On 6 June, short of fuel, Miss Columbia landed some 40 miles short of Berlin, having covered around 3900 miles in 42 hours 31 minutes. The record-breaking achievement and Levine's claim to have become the first transatlantic passenger were overshadowed by the continuing razzmatazz over Lindbergh's solo odyssey.
But when Levine and Chamberlin arrived in Berlin, they were feted by the Germans, who gave them an aerial tour of the city in a 'plane piloted by Germany's only licensed woman pilot, Thea Rasche, and hosted them at the spa town of Baden-Baden. Other highlights of their visit included visits to the Zeppelin and Dornier factories on the shores of Lake Constance, where they were shown the giant Dornier Do-X twelve-engined flying boat and Zeppelin airships under construction.

It is possibly because of the flamboyant cars he saw during his protracted stay in Germany that Charles Levine was inspired to order a stunning, Saoutchik-bodied Mercedes-Benz Type Cannes 'Torpedo-Sport' roadster from the German company's New York branch in October 1928. Though published accounts all aver that the car was ordered by Levine's wife, Michael Bock of Mercedes-Benz Classic confirms that the order, with commission number 40156, was placed by Charles Levine himself.

Bock elaborates: 'The chassis was delivered to

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J Saoutchik, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, on 2 August 1928. Saoutchik manufactured and mounted the sports two-seater body and charged 72,327.25 French Francs (equalling 11,572.35 Reichsmarks) to Daimler-Benz in December 1928. The exact date of delivery of the complete car is not documented, but it was very probably early December 1928.’

Ferdinand Porsche had developed the 6.8-litre 680S as a more powerful, lower-slung, sporting version of his 6.2-litre K-Type launched in 1926, with which it shared Mercedes' 'at will' system of supercharging, intended to give a temporary power boost when the throttle was flat to the floor. The 680S had made a stirring debut at the Nürburgring's inaugural meeting in June 1927, when Rudolf Caracciola had won the 12-lap over-5-litre race and set the fastest time of the day with an average speed of 101.1km/h.

The 680S was a dramatic statement in a Germany just recovering from the runaway inflation that had blighted the early years of the post-war Weimar Republic administration, and production was necessarily small, with just 26
units built before the more powerful 680SS model was introduced in 1928.

The choice of a flamboyant Saoutchik-bodied roadster would have seemed a natural move for the attention-seeking Levine. France’s most fashionable coachbuilder, Jacques Saoutchik – born Jakov Savchouk in Minsk in 1880 – had come to France in 1905 with his immediate family to escape the anti-Semitic pogroms that were sweeping Tsarist Russia.

A skilled cabinet maker, he quickly became fascinated by the fashionable world of the automobile, and in 1906 – the year of his marriage – he quit his workshop in Suresnes and opened a coachworks at 46 bis Rue Jacques Dulud in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, proudly proclaiming himself as ‘Jacques Saoutchik, carrossier de luxe’. By late 1908 the business was established enough for Saoutchik to take a stand at the Paris Salon, where he exhibited a landaulette and a limousine.

Immediately following the end of the First World War, in which he served as a volunteer ambulance driver on the Western Front, Saoutchik took French nationality and returned to the craft of coachbuilding, where the quality of his workmanship soon brought him international fame when movie royalty, ‘World’s Sweetheart’ Mary Pickford, commissioned a Saoutchik coupé de ville on the luxurious straight-six Delage CO chassis. Real royal orders followed, and during the 1920s the kings of Siam, Norway, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia and Egypt all ordered Saoutchik-bodied cars.

‘Dutch’ Darrin, though a rival to Saoutchik in the Parisian custom coachwork trade, was an admirer of his competitor’s style: ‘That guy was a real artist. I particularly recall the finish of his superb interior fittings. Yes, there’s no question but that he had ideas all of his own.’

The Saoutchik Type Cannes ‘Torpedo Sport’ – 12 of which, all differing in tiny details, would be fitted to 680S chassis, with a further half-dozen on the more powerful 680SS – was the most stylish of all the custom bodies available on this exclusive model. A triumph of Art Deco styling, its long bonnet and short rear deck made the most of the dramatic proportions of Porsche’s chassis. Subtle copper/nickel-alloy edgings accented the wings’ sweeping curves, while a daring break with tradition was the lack of running boards.

Saoutchik’s mastery of folding tops (a distinct contrast with the clumsy appearance presented by so many folded German hoods) was demonstrated by the way the roof disappeared completely beneath the rear deck and the side glasses rolled down into the doors to create a clean, perfectly proportioned side elevation accentuated by the low, vee-shaped windscreen. An exotic touch was the ‘Alpina’ reptile-skin upholstery.

The gorgeous car could well have been intended as a present for Levine’s wife, since he flaunted his wealth by lavishing her with extravagant gifts – a 1931 newspaper report tells of Mrs Levine being robbed of $91,000 worth of jewellery while holidaying at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Atlantic Beach – but, whatever the background to the order, when the Mercedes arrived in New York, the ‘irascible, pompous,
difficult Charles Levine refused to take delivery, apparently because the style and colour of the finished car were not to his wife's liking.

A 'low windshield' Saoutchik Type Cannes 6805 had been displayed on the Mercedes-Benz stand at the October 1928 Paris Salon, and it seems that Mercedes-Benz Inc took what advantage it could of Levine's refusal to take delivery of the 6805 and exhibited the car at the 1929 New York Motor Show, held in the Grand Central Palace on 5-12 January.

Whatever the reason for Levine's welshing on the order, the S-type remained embarrassingly unsold in the New York Mercedes-Benz showroom until an enterprising salesman persuaded an existing Mercedes-Benz owner, 38-year-old Frederick Henry Bedford Jr, a director of the Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company of New Jersey (and the son of one of its vice-presidents), to buy the car. Bedford was reluctant at first, deterred by the steep price of the car, but for years afterwards Bedford's family would recall how he had succumbed when a generous discount was offered if only he would take the car off the company's hands!

Early in 1929, Frederick Bedford drove the car to his home in the exclusive Connecticut enclave of Greens Farms, on the shores of Long Island Sound within yacht-commuting distance of Wall Street. A near neighbour was Briggs Swift Cunningham, a young sportsman who would make his mark equally on motoring and yachting history and who later the same year married Frederick Bedford's cousin Lucie. Honeymooning in Europe, Cunningham visited the London Motor Show and ordered his own Mercedes-Benz, a four-seat supercharged SS 38/250 phaeton, from the Mercedes-Benz stand.

Romance was in the air for Frederick Bedford, too: on a trip to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in his S-type, he met 24-year-old Margaret Stewart at a party at the Rolling Rock Club in nearby Ligonier. The attraction was mutual: she found Bedford 'a lot of fun and a good dancer'. When the time came to go home, she abandoned her date (an old friend who she found 'rather boring') and
accepted Frederick Bedford’s offer of a ride home to Pittsburgh in his Saoutchkik-bodied Mercedes-Benz.

‘I saw his car and that was it!’ she told her granddaughter Muffie. Although her abandoned date tried to follow them in his car, it was no match for the ‘speed demon’ in the supercharged Mercedes and, recalled Margaret Bedford, ‘we could see him fading away in the rear-view mirror. After that there was no-one else for me!’

During the course of a successful business career, Frederick Bedford also organised the Atlas Supply Company, which ran a DC-4 aircraft named Atlas Sky Merchant, fitted out to display automotive and aviation accessories. He visited 11 Central and South American countries aboard Sky Merchant, while in 1948 the ‘plane made a world tour of 30,000 miles in 100 days, visiting 26 countries. It was recognised as the first global merchandising flight.

Perhaps because of its romantic associations, Bedford never sold his Mercedes, but kept it until his death at the age of 61 in 1952, after which it was laid up in the family garage at Greens Farms. It remained there for almost 30 years until 1980, when his widow was about to celebrate her 75th birthday and her granddaughter baked a special cake shaped in the image of the Mercedes, which was delivered along with a poem about how the car had brought her grandparents together.

‘My grandmother refused to cut the cake, and I had to buy another one,’ recalled Muffie. ‘Then when it was my 30th birthday, grandmother surprised me with the news that she was going to restore the car and give it to me!’

Margaret Bedford commissioned Gus Reuter of Ridgefield, Connecticut, who had been maintaining exotic European automobiles since 1929 and had restored many of the vehicles in the noted James Melton and Henry Austin Clark collections, to bring the 680S back to life. Two years later, the Mercedes emerged from Reuter’s shop and shortly afterwards won a First National Prize at an Antique Automobile Club of America concours.

In 1986 the Mercedes was selected by Mercedes-Benz to be a featured car during its Centennial celebrations. There it was spotted by James S Rockefeller, a descendant of John D Rockefeller’s brother, who was founding chairman of the Owls Head Transportation Museum in Maine.

The family link intrigued James Rockefeller,
and he negotiated the loan of the car to the Owls Head museum, where it was a prized exhibit for the next two decades, carefully maintained and occasionally exercised.

During the 2006 Pebble Beach week, the one-family-ownership Mercedes finally changed hands for the first time, when it was auctioned in the Christie’s sale held at the Monterey Jet Center on 17 August and sold for $3,645,000 to J Peter Ministrelli of Michigan and California, ‘a respected US collector and philanthropist’.

Less than two years later, on 9 February 2008, for whatever reason the 680S was back on the auctioneer’s block at the Bonhams Retromobile sale in Paris, where it made a less-than-estimate €2,100,000 before premium and tax when the underbidders, apparently thinking that the car hadn’t reached its reserve, kept their hands in their pockets in the expectation of striking a post-sale deal: big mistake!

The Mercedes had been snapped up by the astute dealer Lukas Hüni, who two years later parted with it to Paul Andrews, founder and CEO of the Fort Worth, Texas, electronic components company TTI. The Panther City Collection owned by Paul and his wife Judy is a comprehensive collection of American and European Classics, hot rods and sports cars.

The purchase had actually been made by Chris Andrews, the curator of his parents’ collection. Says Chris: ‘It is quite an amazing engineering marvel, in addition to its killer coachwork. I thought it was worthy of a thorough and authentic restoration, and therefore contacted Paul Russell, who I had known for years.’

Well-respected in the restoration field, Russell founded his company in 1978, initially specialising in Gullwing Mercedes, but soon widened its remit to cover limited-production European classics. With a purpose-built facility in Essex, Massachusetts, staffed by a skilled crew, Russell had, declares Chris Andrews, ‘all of the qualities that were necessary to proceed with this car, so I had it shipped direct to him from Switzerland. I spent many days on trips back and forth between Texas and Boston, but they did all the “heavy lifting”. Paul’s team proved to be immensely knowledgeable and thorough; they researched every detail of every part and knew that we not only wanted a beautiful showpiece, but also a car that had to be ready for long-distance touring, as we really enjoy getting out and driving our cars.’
A bonus, adds Chris Andrews, was that Paul Russell had seen and photographed the 680S in the 1980s ‘before it had been quasi-restored.’

Of that time, Andrews says: ‘Remarkably, the car was very complete. All the pieces of wood and small trim items had the original job number stampings on them, and it still had the original lizard interior trim underneath canvas covers.’ And of the recent work: ‘The only part that needed to be replaced was the front bumper.’ In addition, the lizard-skin upholstery had to be replaced, using surviving cars as reference, since Reuter had incorrectly retrimmed the car with red leather.

The culmination of the restoration was the sought-after ‘Best of Show’ at the 62nd annual Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance on 18 August, signifying that the Saoutchik 680S had outclassed 219 other cars from 33 states and 15 countries; to be declared Best of Show, a car must first have won its class. Among the other contenders for the event’s top award were the 1935 Gurney-Nutting Duesenberg J Speedster that the late John Blatchley rated as the best of all his designs, a 1931 Duesenberg J Derham Tourster, and a 1933 Alfa Romeo 6C 1750 Figoni Gran Sport Coupé.

Still elated by his victory, Paul Andrews told me: ‘As the Pebble Beach Concours is the top event in the world, I feel like I’ve won Gold at the Olympics. I’m in awe of the organisation of the Paul Russell Company — the professionalism of the people, the depth of research and the timeline schedules that were developed and adhered to. A neat detail: Paul Russell located a 1928 Saoutchik sales brochure showing all the body styles they promoted for that year.

‘Our team did a wonderful job in this project. There cannot be a greater honour than to win Best of Show at Pebble.’