



KING GEORGE

89-Year-Old 356er Proves Racing Isn't Only for the Young

By David Mathews

Photos Courtesy Jessica Johnk, Gordon Jolly, Mary Meissner and David Mathews

You've recently celebrated your 60th birthday. The rippled six-pack beneath your ribcage now resembles a loaf of Wonder Bread. Your mailbox is crammed full of advertisements for hearing aids and retirement communities. H-O-R-S-E with your grandson replaces one-on-one basketball. Pickleball replaces singles tennis. Your knees hurt, your back hurts, your hands cramp, and you mumble and stumble over the names of each of your children before landing on the right one. Your options for fun stuff are thinning as rapidly as the hair on your head. Now what?

If you are George Balbach, you go out and find a 356 race car and proceed to compete wheel-to-wheel with drivers half your age at tracks throughout the United States... *for the next 30 years!*

For many young men and women who dreamed about sportscar racing in the 50s and 60s, Road America at Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin,

is Mecca. For decades, the four-mile track has lured an international field of drivers and exotic race cars to its high-speed straights and 14 turns that snake through the hills and ravines of the glacial Kettle Moraine. George frequently made the pilgrimage from Lake Forest, Illinois, to watch D-type Jaguars battle with Ferrari Monzas, thinking perhaps, someday, he might join them on track...

In July, 1990, with thousands of other enthusiasts, George headed to Road America to attend his favorite event, Joseph Marchetti's Chicago Historic Auto Races. All manner of race cars filled the entry list, from the spider-like, small-bore monopostos, to the thunderous Can-Am UOP Shadows. George's favorites, however, were the Group Three cars, particularly the 356 racers. The best of all was Mark Eskuche's light blue #0 Roadster. George was amazed how quickly and smoothly Mark powered through the corners with no drama whatever. "I gotta meet that guy," George thought.

The time was right. George's kids were grown. His business was booming. He walked into the pits and found Mark. He told Mark

Above: George Balbach at the 2019 Elkhart Lake Vintage Festival at Road America.

how much he admired his driving, adding how much he, himself, wanted to drive. And then he asked if Mark would show him the ropes.

The next step was a leap of faith. George accompanied Mark to Blackhawk Farms, a 1.95-mile, seven-turn racetrack located near South Beloit, Illinois. During the little time available between practicing, qualifying, and racing, Mark still managed to introduce George to the track behind the wheel of George's Mercedes Benz 190E sedan. Hot shoe that he is, Mark "demonstrated" the intricacies of braking, the all-important turn-in, the criticality of a late apex, and the impact of applying full throttle out of the turns.

"After a few laps, when we came into the pits, smoke was bellowing from all four wheel wells," recalled George. "I thought the brakes were actually on fire. But forget that—I was hooked."

Later that year, Mark found a 1961 T-5 Roadster for George that had been "driven hard and put away wet," as the saying goes. Nearly used up on the California SCCA circuit, "there wasn't a straight panel on that car. The body and the floor were full of holes." Mark worked all winter on the car's engine, transmission, and running gear, while a local body shop endeavored to put the Humpty Dumpty body back together again, with a coat of Light Ivory paint. That beat-up T-5 Roadster became #34, George's weapon of choice for the next 30 years.

Brimming with enthusiasm and self-confidence, George went racing. "My first race was at Mid-Ohio. I finished eighth. I'm not telling you how many cars were in that race." Not long after, George and other racing cronies formed "The Round Belly Racers," a tongue-in-cheek band of brothers who shared three common characteristics—expansive girth, self-deprecating senses of humor, and racetrack rapidity.

As Mark related, "When George joined me in vintage racing in 1990, he had no racing or track driving experience. I was amazed at his dedication and how quickly he became a good racer. This was pre-Google and YouTube, so George searched out professional drivers' tips and articles about how to drive each track. His notes with diagrams and track maps were so copious that they filled his repurposed hard-back leather briefcase. Pretty soon other drivers asked if George would share his knowledge, so he started giving his own seminars, typically at lunchtime on Saturdays at each track." Many times, 20 or more racers came to absorb George's advice.

"George took me to the next level and taught me to be the best I could be, that I should use the best parts and do the best work possible to achieve great results. Then he pushed me even further by insisting on more development and testing. He benefitted; I benefitted; we all did."

*Mark Eskuche,
1958 356A Speedster #58*



A mid-1990s podium finish at The Mitty at Road Atlanta.

In the early years, George and Mark traveled to racing events pulling a 22-foot enclosed trailer. Two cars, each about 13 feet long, in a 22-foot trailer? Yep. Mark engineered a kind of rack/ramp contrivance that allowed one car to fit on top the other... sort of.

Eventually, Mark's growing business necessitated more appropriate transportation, so he purchased an 18-wheel tractor-trailer to serve those needs. From a vagabond outfit to a major operation, Mark's Ecurie Engineering grew to provide full-service trackside support for 15 vintage Porsche race cars as recently as the July 2020 WeatherTech International Challenge.



Not always a hot shoe, George enjoys a drive around the neighborhood in his 356SC cabriolet.



The Ecurie Engineering gang at the 2020 WeatherTech International Challenge. A mix of drivers and wrenches... one big happy (and successful) family.

“I raced with George out of the Ecurie camp early in his career, from 1993 through 2002. We had great times together, traveling from New York to Florida to Colorado to California, racing our hearts out and enjoying every minute of the racing and the total experience.”

Bob Tenges, 1960 T-5 Roadster #3

Since meeting that day in 1990, George and Mark have maintained an enduring friendship and racing relationship. George continued, “We’ve raced at probably 30 tracks around the country, from Watkins Glen to Road Atlanta; from Sebring to Laguna Seca; from Mid-Ohio to the Circuit of the Americas.” And, of course, George’s favorite—Road America.

“A race is won in the turns, and Road America has 14 of them, so if you pick up a tenth or two in each corner, well...” George says. “I used to count the Corvettes as they passed me on the straights, then I’d wave when I passed them in the turns. Driving fast through turns is an art that takes hours of practice. All the speed is in the corners.”

Some drivers become tentative in rainy weather; George excelled in those conditions. Mark recalled, “He quickly became an excellent rain driver. At a race at Road Atlanta, it was raining so hard that all [George] could see in his mirrors was his wake and spray. George got into the lead immediately. Of course he was worried that cars would try to pass, so he drove at the fastest pace he felt comfortable with. When the checker flew for George, the next car was half a lap behind!”



Road America, 2019, Elkhart Lake Vintage Festival.

“George is a smart and talented driver, as talented as anyone I know. He has a sixth sense as to when and where to put that 356 nose, and more importantly where not to put it. I’ve watched him construct and complete some amazing passes that were so smooth, they were a thing of beauty. Some have left me smiling under my helmet and wondering how in the world he pulled them off so cleanly! He is an incredibly tough competitor who will race you door-handle-to-door-handle, never giving an inch—he brings out the best of us who have gone head-to-head with him. It is stunning to think George did not start driving until 60.”

*Jeff Johnk,
Austin-Healey 3000 #28*



George leads the pack at the 1995 Sebring HSR Challenge.

George's son, "George Lite," as friends call him, followed in his father's footsteps. Attending track events with his dad fed his growing interest. It wasn't long before young George began attending racing schools and seminars where individual track characteristics were discussed.

"Dad always attended sessions like that," said George Junior. "He analyzed every track he raced at. He still has a file folder on each track. I'm more of a seat-of-the-pants driver."

George's home office is loaded with trophies, plaques, plates, and ribbons. Various photos hang on the walls, both action shots and images with friends. The "King" always raced hard, but off the track he remained friendly and approachable.

David Mamet's oft-quoted adage, "Old age and treachery will always beat youth and exuberance," does not quite fit George. In his case, old age is merely a state of mind, and treachery may be too strong a word. Calculated planning is a better term. Take Rennsport Reunion VI (2018), for example. In the vintage Porsche world, the Rennsport Reunion is heady stuff. Only the best Porsche race cars and drivers were invited to duke it out, and George and his Light Ivory T-5 were among them.

George studied the track and researched the best gearing for Laguna Seca, and brought two sets of tires of different diameters so he could choose the most appropriate for race-day conditions.

"George's unassuming character masks the fact that he is a racer at heart... unless you saw him at the track. He is calculated when driving, a smart driver. When I say smart, I'm referring to his blend of risk-taking and skill. At the track, I never saw George get upset, regardless of the mayhem occurring around him. George's motto was 'Have fun at any cost.'"

Fritz Seidel, 1973 Porsche 911 IROC #85

He held off aluminum cars like the RS60 and RSK driven by professional drivers to finish fourth overall among 36 entries, and was the second 356 among 26 entries to reach the checkered flag... behind another Ecurie-built 356. In 2018, George was 87 years old!

Was George born with that proverbial silver spoon in his mouth? No. He came up the hard way... harder than most. While a young man, George had a serious car accident. He tangled with a telephone pole after hitting a pothole and suffered multiple injuries, losing the full use of his left arm. Did it stop him? No. George took up downhill skiing at the age of 53. And then, of course, racing. Some may consider his injury a disability. But to George? "You know, it's just a part of life. I don't even think about it. Disability? Hell, no."

In 30 years of racing, what stands out? What is memorable? "Well, Vic [Skirmants] and Mark were always the best drivers out there," George said. "They raced hard and, between them, they won most

of the races. I remember one time when Vic and I were trading places throughout a race at Road America. On the last lap, I was slightly ahead of Vic at Turn 14. He wasn't about to let me win so he gave me a little tap, causing me to spin. Then I got chewed out for the contact. When I could beat either of them to the checkered flag, which was not often, I was pretty happy."

"We raced together for years. George is pretty quick and a capable competitor. Great guy. His car is always one of the best-prepared. I have the highest respect for George."

Vic Skirmants, 1961 T-5 Roadster #70



George and Vic Skirmants share a tender moment when not duking it out on the track.



Headed for another checkered flag at Road America.



George fights off Eric Bretzel (red coupe), Reid Vann (blue w/stripes), and Chuck Schank (dark blue Roadster) at Road Atlanta.

“King George is a fierce competitor, but a gentleman as well. At a race at Road Atlanta, he and I were trading places for the lead, lap after lap. He was in front at turn five but went a little wide at the exit and drove into a hole in the red clay past the exit, giving me the opportunity to get by him and retake the lead. Unfortunately, George’s car suffered a broken sway bar bracket that made his car loose and difficult to handle. While we battled for the lead, George accidentally hit me. Immediately after the race, he found me, apologized, and offered to pay for the repairs to my car.

Besides being one of the best vintage drivers out there, he is a gentleman and a good sport.”

John Schrecker, 1964 356SC #777

And the future? Time is no man’s friend. Racing toward Road America’s Turn Five while battling competitors who all want the same piece of real estate... at 125 miles per hour... demands steady hands, razor-sharp focus, nanosecond reaction time, and eyes in the back of one’s head.

No matter what the future holds, King George has made his mark—his friendship is treasured, his coaching valued, and his smile welcomed. Mark sums it up this way, “George has driven at the top of his class for 30 years. Many times he beat everyone, including Vic and me. He is the epitome of a skillful driver while remaining humble, friendly, concerned, giving, and thoughtful. He’s the true godfather of 356 racing and the embodiment of a gentleman—that’s why we call him the King.” ³⁵⁶

