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Carroll Shelby: Racer, Constructor, Innovator, Philanthropist, Icon, Friend

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5/11/2012

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Carroll Shelby, a car guy's car guy and a longtime innovator and inspiration for Ford Motor Company performance vehicles, died May 10, 2012, at the age of 89 in California. Described by Edsel B. Ford II, great-grandson of Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company as "a great innovator whose legend at Ford will never be forgotten", Carroll Shelby was a larger-than-life presence in an industry filled with giants. Shelby helped Ford dominate racing in the 1960's, he was a long time partner in the development of Ford performance vehicles and, above all, he was a friend who supported numerous charities with his time, money and enthusiasm.

Shelby and Ford shared a connection that goes back to the beginning of his motorsports career. Known for his blue and white railroad coveralls, the inspiration behind the now famous "Shelby Stripes", Shelby drove a 1932 Ford in his first official race – a drag race. From there Shelby moved on to sports cars and Formula 1, driving for Cad-Allard, Aston Martin, and Maserati in the 1950s.

Named *Sports Illustrated* "Driver of the Year" in 1956 and 1957, Carroll Shelby may have been better known as a constructor than the man who

won the 1959 24 Hours of LeMans behind the wheel of an Aston Martin. Shelby stopped driving in 1960 after winning the USAC driving championship due declining cardiac health; in fact, Shelby had begun to drive with nitroglycerin tablets under his tongue in order to finish races.

In early 1961, Carroll Shelby had transitioned from race car driver to race car builder and team manager. His search for a powerful, light weight American engine led him to Ford's lightweight small block V8. Shelby-America's Ford powered aluminum-bodied 289 and 427 Cobra models changed the face of American road racing, with big wins over Corvette at Riverside, an impressive runs against Ferrari at Sebring and the GT class win at LeMans in 1964.

The rest, as they say, is the stuff of legend. Lee Iacocca's desire to turn the Mustang into a true performance car created a long-lasting relationship between Carroll Shelby and Ford. Shelby's vision of total performance transformed the 1965 Mustang into the GT350 street-legal race car, the Corvette killing Mustang GT350R, the 1966 GT350-H Hertz "Rent-a-Racer", and the big-block GT500 and the GT500-KR "Road-King". And that Cobra emblem? Rumor has it that it the name Cobra came to Shelby in a dream when he was building the first Cobra sports cars.

Impressed by Shelby's success at LeMans as both a driver and constructor, Henry Ford II turned the struggling GT-40 project over to the Shelby-America team. Their goal? To beat Ferrari at their own game, in Europe, at LeMans. After all, Shelby had beaten Ferrari at LeMans with a Cobra. The results of their collaboration can only be described as astounding. The GT-40 won its first race at Daytona in February 1965, delivered a 1-2-3 finish at LeMans that June, the first time an American team had ever won at Lemans, and went on to win Lemans four years in a row, from 1966 to 1969.

By 1970 Shelby had moved on to other projects. He was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in 1991 and the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 1992, due in no small part to his efforts at Ford.

In 2006 Shelby formed a new relationship with Ford Motor Company. Since his return to Ford, the 45th Anniversary Edition Shelby[®] GT350, the GT500, Shelby GT and Shelby GT500KR and the 40th Anniversary Hertz "Rent-a-Racer" Shelby GT-H have reintroduced a new generation of car buffs to the Shelby name. In 2009 Shelby was presented with lifetime achievement award as the Automotive Executive of the Year.

There was another side to Carroll Shelby too. He may have worn a black Stetson, but unlike the bad guys in Westerns, Carroll Shelby was one of the good guys. A sickly child, Shelby underwent a heart transplant in 1989 and later went on to establish the Carroll Shelby Children's Foundation[™] to provide assistance for children's acute coronary and kidney care.

A regular at the Barrett-Jackson collectors car auction, Carroll Shelby was involved in numerous charitable projects. The first 2007 Ford Shelby GT 500 auctioned off raised more than \$600,000 for the Carroll Shelby Foundation. He was part of effort behind the one-of-a-kind 2013 Ford Shelby GT500 Durability Car that was auctioned off for \$300,000 this past January to raise funds for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF). Shelby himself logged some time behind the wheel of the GT500 prototype, saying *"I'm really proud to have my name on this car that you guys [the Ford SVT Team] have put together working with my dreams of what I think a car should be."*

Carroll Shelby's dreams of total performance are as relevant today as they were 60 years ago. You can see them in every Mustang that proudly wears Shelby Stripes; you can hear them when a 427 Sideoiler Shelby Cobra fires up its engine, and you can experience them in the Ford Shelby GT500.

We'd love to hear how Carroll Shelby inspired your Ford Story. You can submit your stories, pictures and videos through Ford Social at [Your Stories](#).

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