

## An Interview with Pete Hylton about “Gentlemen’s Club”

### **1. How was it different writing this book than when you researched Ghost Tracks?**

Ghost Tracks stories require a completely different type of research. Stage one is the digging through old magazines, newspapers, and other SCCA records for data on long-lost tracks, followed by travel to as many of the sites as I can manage. That is the really cool part, actually visiting the old tracks and walking them, taking pictures, trying to match today’s setting to old photos from 20, 30, or 40 years ago. I love it when a couple of pieces of old history come together with something modern to produce the neat little tidbits that make the Ghost Track stories so popular and interesting. The Gentlemen’s Club was different. No travel....but many phone calls and emails to people who had old stories to tell. And, of course, some digging in musty old boxes looking for information that everyone had forgotten.....or in some cases, that very few people ever knew. The neat part on this book was uncovering the little known facts that filled in the blank pages of our history.

### **2. You state in the book that the original founders of SCCA expected ARCA to reactivate after WWII and supply the organization for road racing. If ARCA had survived, do you think SCCA would be around today? If so, in what format or for what purpose?**

I honestly think that if ARCA had started back up after the war, SCCA would not be here today. If the folks who wanted to participate in speed events had been given the opportunity to participate with ARCA, I think it would have filled the void that became SCCA’s destiny, and probably ARCA would have began a slow expansion into a nationwide club, following much the same track that SCCA eventually took. If that had happened, then I think that SCCA’s founders would have kept the club closer to its original purpose, which had nothing to do with racing or speed contests. SCCA would have remained a small, niche organization for owners of vintage sports cars and I doubt that it ever would have become very large. As the old Mercers and similar cars became less and less obtainable, I suspect SCCA might have quietly faded into the night while ARCA took the spotlight for sports car racing in this country. Ironic how little twists of fate frequently lead to completely unintended directions in our lives.

### **3. The book is filled with names of men and women who made great contributions to the sport, and the organization. Is there any one person whose contributions, in your opinion, stand out more?**

I occasionally get some argument on this point from members who feel that the bulk of the credit for SCCA's situation today lies with Ted Robertson, or Cameron Argetsinger, or John Bishop, or even Nick Craw. But I would have to say, without any doubt or reservation, that I feel the single most important person in SCCA's history was Tracy Bird. He was in the right place at the right time, during a period of great controversy and great change within SCCA. He had a cool head. He could be very calculating. He understood how to work within the political realities of a member-driven organization. And he had a great vision for what SCCA needed to be in order to not only survive, but to take its place as one of the top racing sanctioning bodies in the world. My research has always pointed to the fact that he did not really seek to lead the club. But in multiple instances, when sound leadership was needed, he happened to be in a place well suited to lead the change. It is my belief that without Tracy Bird, the club might look quite different than it does today, and that is why I place him at the top of my personal list....and by the way, why he was a unanimous selection in the very first round of balloting by the SCCA Hall of Fame Selection Committee.

**4. Do you have a favorite driver?**

I think Mark Donohue was the smartest driver who ever strapped on a helmet. Some would say he was the most talented. I would argue that many have been as talented.....but few have ever been as smart. He was methodical, analytical, and a great problem solver. And, he was the first person to really couple engineering logic with auto racing. Today the motorsports industry is full of engineers. But Donohue, in my mind, broke new ground in this approach. I guess, I am trying to emulate him, in some small way, as I am often credited with starting the first Motorsports Engineering Bachelor of Science degree offered by any engineering school in this country. So, although he is long gone from us, I would have to say, he remains my favorite.

**5. You described the Second Generation Can-Am as a much maligned and overlooked series. Why did you explore in such depth this book?**

Because I felt that it had been overlooked by most previous writers. The original series has gotten the bulk of the attention, and yet the second generation was a fine racing series in its own right. So I took advantage of this book to correct a small amount of the historical oversight.

**6. Was there a chapter you wanted to include in the book, but had to leave out...this time?**

The Gentlemen's Club covers 1944 until the 1970s. I suppose we could have gone on and continued the story all the way up to today. And someday that part of the story

probably deserves to be written. But it simply did not fit into our current schedule for this book.

- 7. Some would say this has been a “challenging” year or so for sports car racing. There was the merging of Champ and IRL, and now many teams are struggling for survival with as corporations reduce or eliminate their financial support. Can you compare this to any other year in the history of sports car racing?**

I remember a tumultuous period in the early seventies when inflation was high and interest rates were high as well. Then, to make things worse, a number of Arab oil producing nations reacted to America’s support of Israel during the Yom Kippur war by refusing to ship crude oil to the US. It suddenly became very hard to get gasoline in this country. I remember long lines at the gas pumps, limits on how many gallons you could buy, and eventually, gas stations that were shut down completely because they could not get any gas to sell. I remember that races were shortened by sanctioning bodies so as to appear that the sport was conserving fuel. Crowds at the races went down, because it was costly to travel to the events. There was a great deal of talk, on the street, that racing should be stopped all together, because it was too wasteful of valuable fuel. Some people within the sport were prophets of doom, saying that motorsports had no future. Yet here we are, over 30 years later, having gone through what is arguably the biggest growth period in the sport’s history. So I have a hard time buying any of the doomsayer theories this time around. Arguably, we’ve already been through worse.

- 8. What do you think your successor will write about in a history book about the next 50 years of sports car racing?**

A period of exceptional growth, interspersed with multiple challenges. But it will be a story of survival and success. I suspect that tracks will have changed once again, and there will be a whole new generation of Ghost Tracks to write about.

- 9. I hear there is another Ghost Tracks book on the horizon. Any hints as to what tracks you will cover this time?**

Wow, the list is really long. We visit Ghost Tracks of the Gulf Coast, of Texas, and of the Midwest states. There is also an extensive chapter on forgotten airports, from all over the country. And upon the suggestion of a reader of the first book, there will be a chapter on Ghost Hillclimbs. There will be a single chapter that covers Watkins Glen and one that talks about the safety of the track designs of that era. All-in-all, I expect to have nearly twice as many tracks covered in the second book as there were in the first.....plus an index that covers both books. That is something that many people have asked for.

