

HI-TECH: REAL OR REPLICA?

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REAL *or* REPLICAS?

Aluminum-bodied 289 and 427 Cobra replicas that seem real.

BY BILL MOORE

Since few of us can actually afford the \$175,000 or *more* that it would cost to own an authentic Sixties-era Cobra from Shelby American, or the \$500,000 or so that Carroll Shelby is selling his new/old cars, we have to start looking for alternatives.

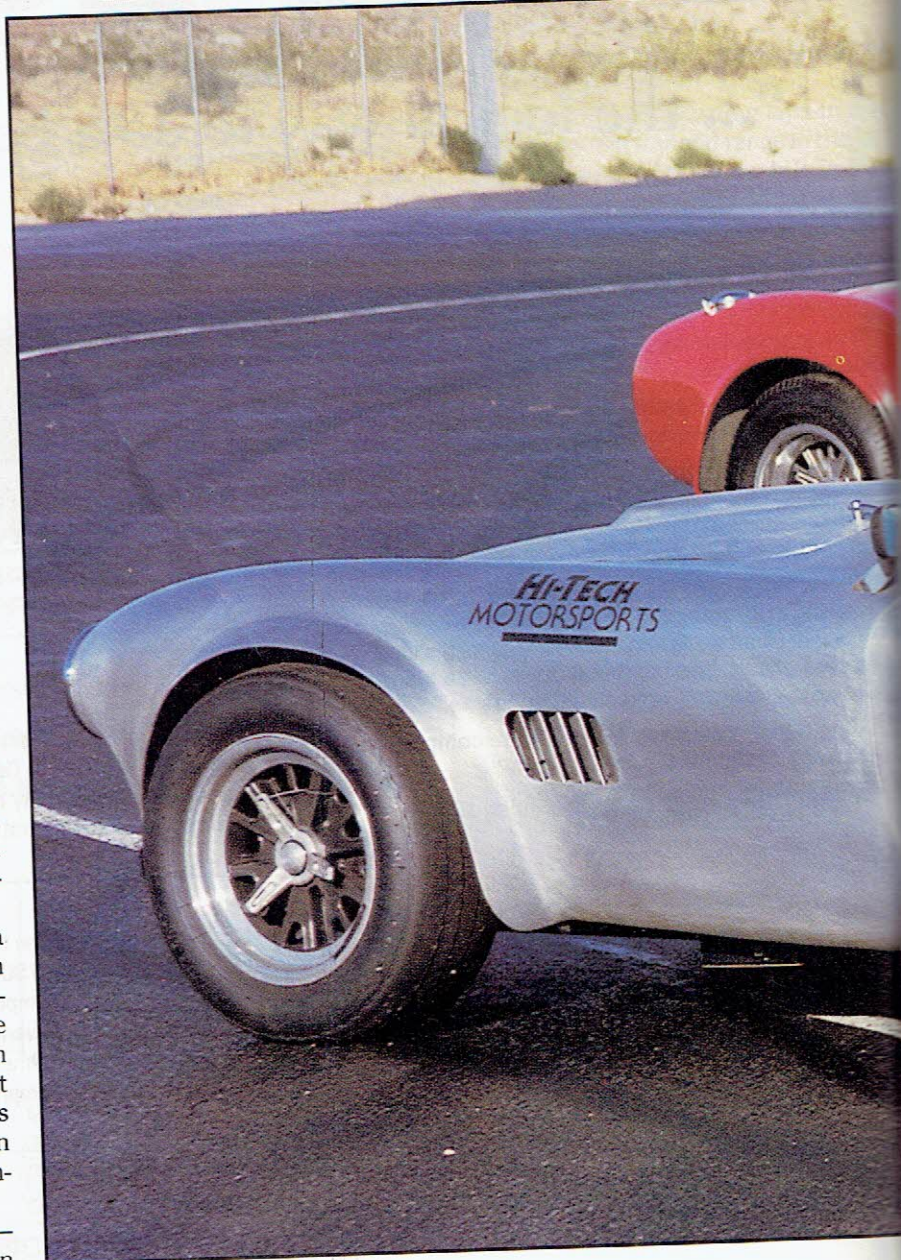
The first alternative has always been a fiberglass car — and that's exactly where Tom D'Antonio started a dozen years ago in his Phoenix shop. While it was made out of fiberglass, it was as exact to original as Tom could make it. However, this painstaking process meant that Tom produced just a few cars a year — and no matter how urgently you wanted that car — it wasn't done until it was finished to Tom's satisfaction.

Enter Tim Gunning (and Don Roberts) and things started to change... slowly at the start.

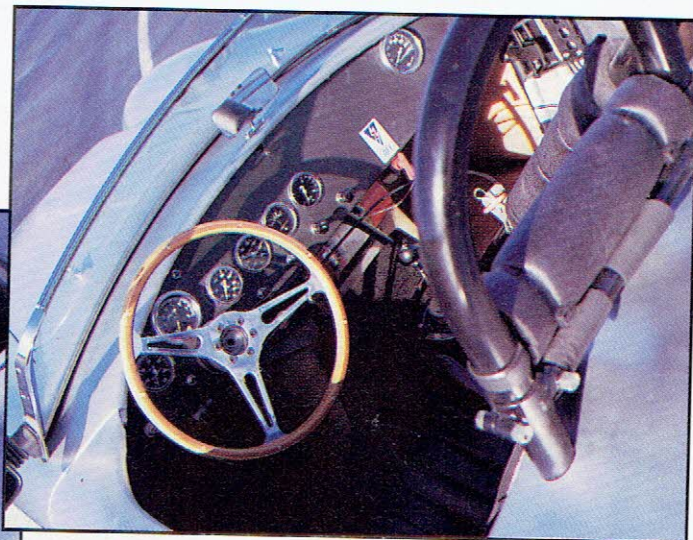
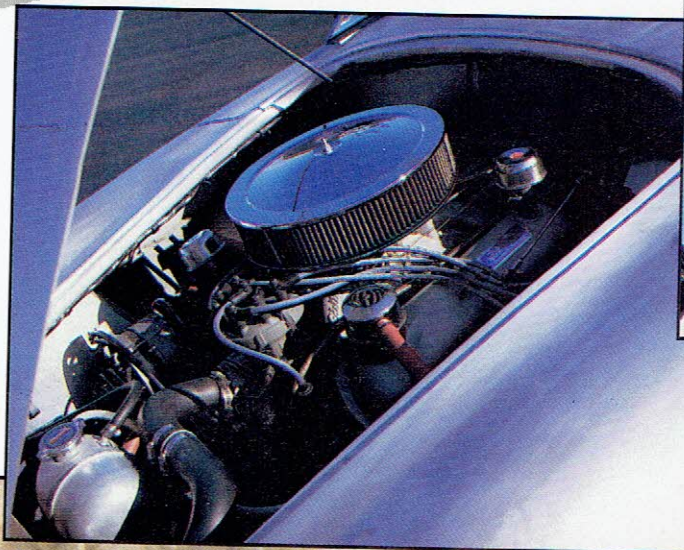
First, they moved the operation from the rats nest that Tom called his shop into an 8,500-square foot facility in Scottsdale which will soon see even more space being added to the operation.

Next, they got Roberts, who drove a 289 Cobra to the 1968 B-Production National Championship, to help develop the car with test sessions at race tracks around the Southwest. And even more importantly, they ran the car at the Shelby American Automobile Club's National Convention at Watkins Glen and actually took the car racing at vintage events around the country.

What you see here is — basically — the culmination of their efforts. It's an

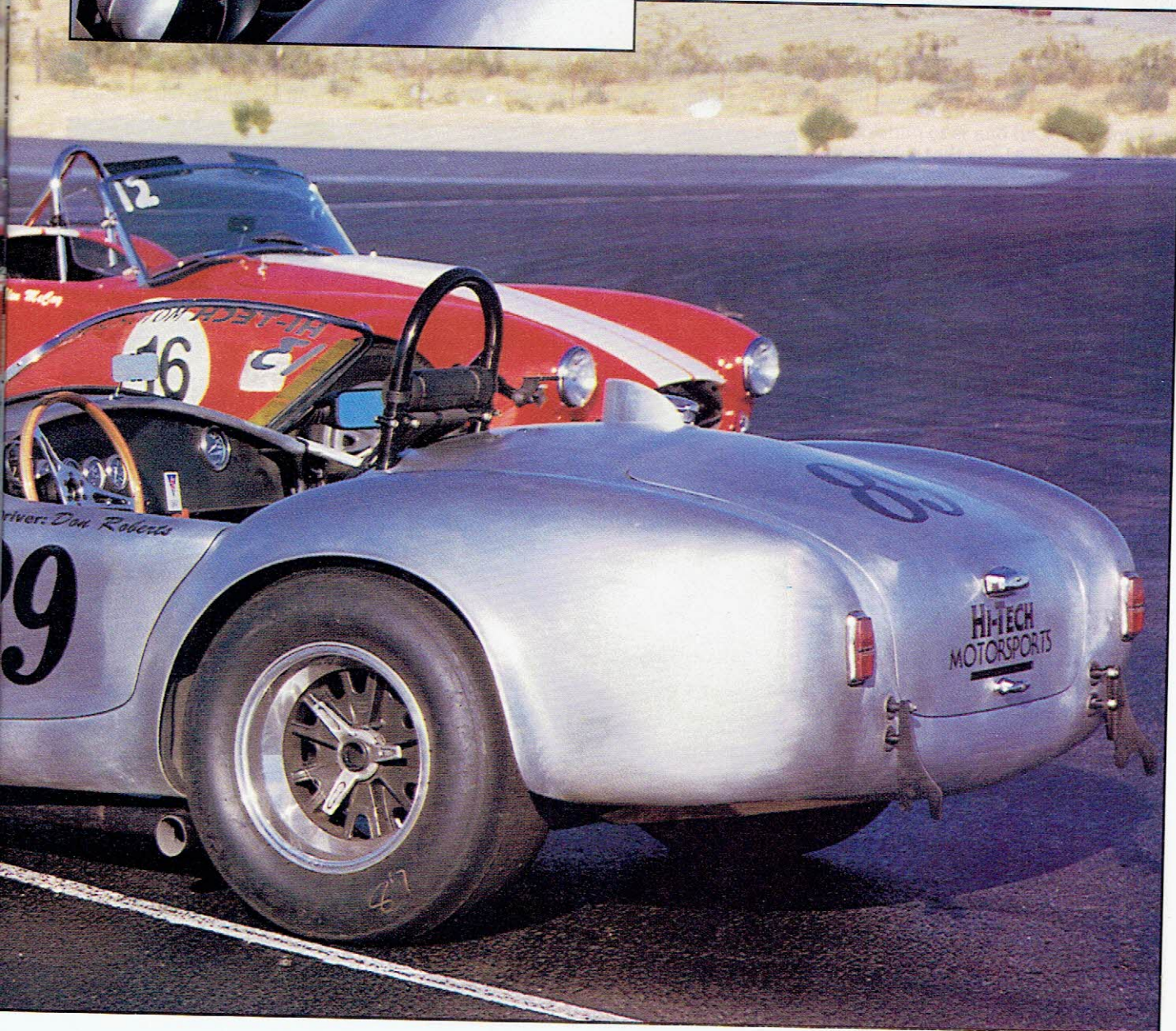


BELOW - In the engine bay we find a 1963 289 Ford V-8, for old time's sake.

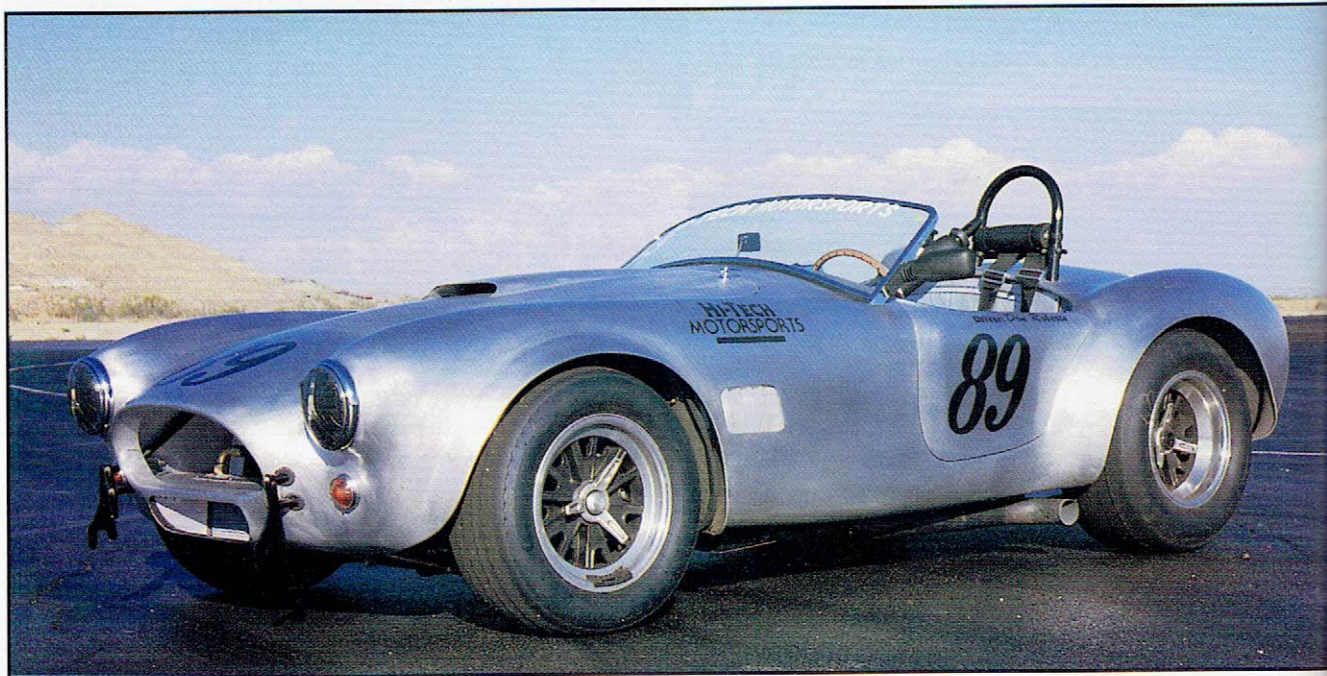


ABOVE - Here's a good look at the cockpit, a place meant only for serious business.

BELOW - In the foreground is Hi-Tech's aluminum 289 FIA version, while the red car is one of the company's fiberglass 427 models.



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After the man-made thunder faded, Mother Nature looked like she might fire off some fireworks of her own as high clouds rose above the desert.

aluminum-bodied car that takes you back to the Sixties, with the real skin and the real feel of the original, as original as a Cobra can be produced in the Nineties.

The cars come as both fiberglass-bodied 427 S/C and 289 FIA models, and just about anything you want in aluminum because those cars are more or less made to order. The price range is extremely broad, starting at \$27,900 for the fiberglass kit, and \$56,900 for the aluminum. Tom D'Antonio, though, is quick to point out that Hi-Tech's fiberglass kit includes everything except the drivetrain and wheels. He asserts that if you compare it with other top kits, the base price would be something like \$13,900. At that price, you'd still have to spend all the extra money to get up to the point of putting in the drivetrain and bolting on the wheels, so where's the advantage?

Finished automobiles are also available in both fiberglass and aluminum, with the fiberglass cars selling for about



ABOVE – Continuing a long tradition, Don Roberts has his customary 89 on the car, which he has been developing for vintage racing.

LEFT – Here, Don roars past while testing at Willow Springs International Raceway.



Tom D'Antonio may look like he's just along for the ride in Tim Gunning's Hi-Tech 427 replica, but Tom is the guiding force behind all of Hi-Tech's cars.

\$40,000 — depending on engine used — to about \$80,000 for the metal car.

Despite the prices — no matter what you decide to purchase, you know that an authentic Cobra racer has looked them over and they meet his approval.

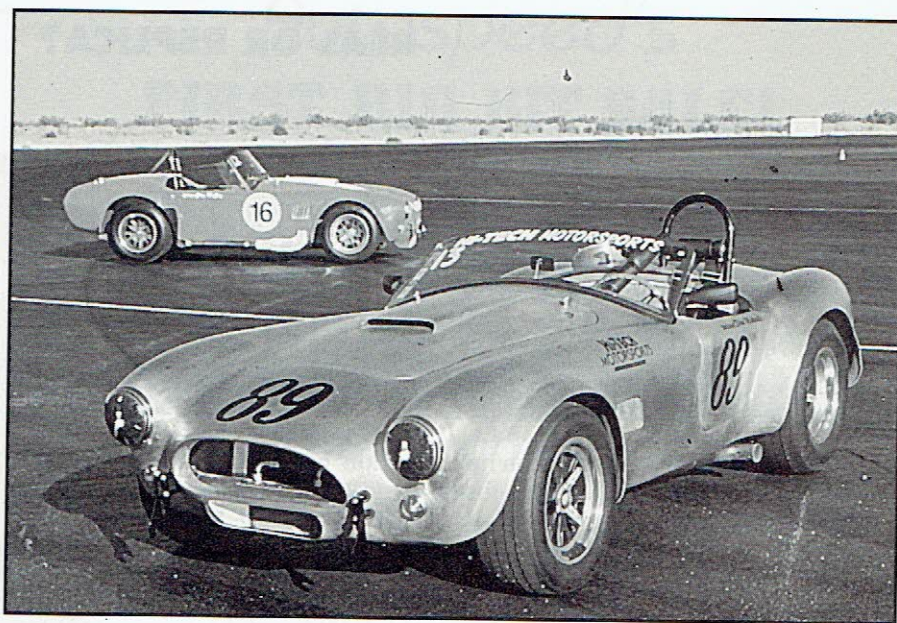
During a testing session at Willow Springs International Raceway we got an opportunity to don a helmet and go slam-dancing as a passenger while Don roared around the Streets Of Willow. Yes, it was awe-inspiring. We had just gotten a five or six lap ride around the short course in a fiberglass replica from another manufacturer, and while the car was superb and the driving skillful, it was not the same loop as taken with controlled aggression by Don.

Realize, of course, that Willow Springs is in the high desert of Southern California. It was noon, at 2,000 feet above sea level, in late August. The temperature was over 100 degrees. The sun was beating directly down on the unpainted aluminum, and the skin was hot. I had no steering wheel to hold onto, so it was hot aluminum I clenched, wondering all the while where my asbestos gloves were.

"I noticed a couple of the cars were having trouble with the heat," said Don. "But I ran those Hi-Tech cars all day and didn't have any problems. That's a real testament to them."

How did Roberts, this most authentic of Cobra race car drivers, get involved with Hi-Tech and its replicas?

You can picture Don smiling. "Oh, I've known Tom forever. We had a parts store and Tom came in one day and said



he was building a Cobra replica — and he wanted me to loan him parts from my (authentic) Cobra so he could reproduce them. Well, I didn't know him and said no. Then, Mike Shoen (Don's friend, and author of the marvelous book, *The Cobra-Ferrari Wars*, loaned him some parts, so I went ahead and loaned him some of my things as well."

Tom started life on Long Island, where over the years he went through stages of building cars in the Sixties and on to building and improving machine tools, then one day he up and moved west to Arizona. "I just started working on a kit," says D'Antonio, "and really got involved in improving it, and it turned into a business."

"One day I went over to his shop," says Don, "and discovered that he is an absolute craftsman. Just a first-class fabricator. I think it was back in '81 that I first met up with him. I got to the point where I'd tell people if they wanted to get a Cobra replica, 'Go see Tom!'"

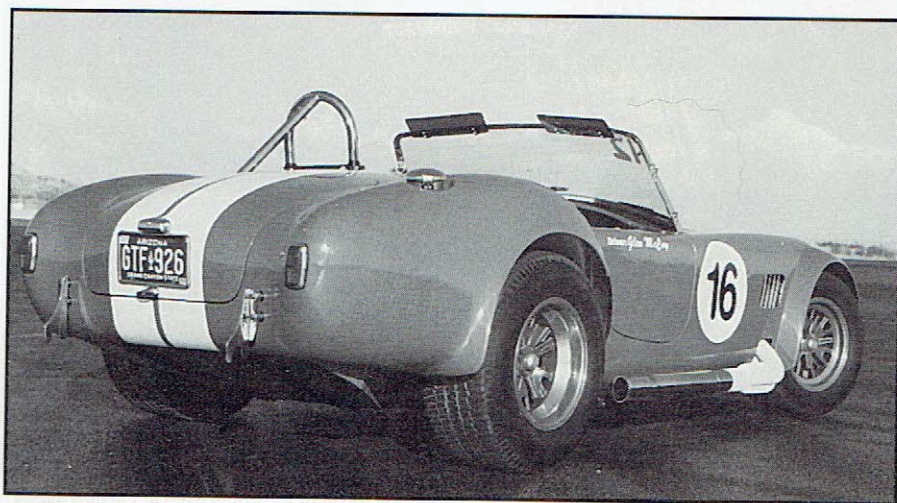
"Then," continued Roberts, "Tom got involved with Tim Gunning. Tim came into town after selling his *Auto Trader* back in Pittsburgh. He wanted a replica and went to another company, and I told him, 'No, no, you want to buy a Hi-Tech.' I took him over and he said, 'Wow!' He was totally awestruck.

"Then, three years went by. Tim would go out to help Tom so he could get his Cobra finished. He ended up buying the company to speed things up. . . . He was willing to spend his money to get this company off the ground."

Tom laughs at that story and says, "I have a reputation for making something nice, but taking forever! But we have taken care of the *forever!*"

In the new facility, D'Antonio says they are looking forward to producing up to 40 kits a year, and maybe three or four finished automobiles.

Tim Gunning's story is very interesting. Seems he spent some time as a Secret Service agent, then as a customs



The 427 has an awesome symmetry to it!

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agent chasing drug smugglers in airplanes from California to the Bahamas. "We went everywhere they did," says Tim. "I really enjoyed jumping out of planes and screwing a gun into a guy's ear."

But he realized that a job like that could not go on forever, so he started to enjoy retirement and collecting cars that he hadn't time to play with while working for the government. And, when he saw the potential of Hi-Tech, he got involved. "The bottom line," says Tim, "is I enjoy it, but it's Tom's life. He needed some help and I was able to be of assistance."

Tim is dedicated to being sure customers get their cars quickly, and that means within 60 to 90 days from placing an order. Considering the quality of the cars, that's like getting fast food!

Speaking of the new, aluminum-bodied car that he's been fine tuning for competition, Don says, "Tom built that car from the ground up without a jig! It's a neat car, if you can call a Cobra a neat car! Basically, the design of a 289 is totally archaic — but it doesn't do that badly if you just drive the bejeebers out of it! I think this time next year, it will be a winner."

The car has been run at Watkins Glen for the SAAC Nationals, but that was a

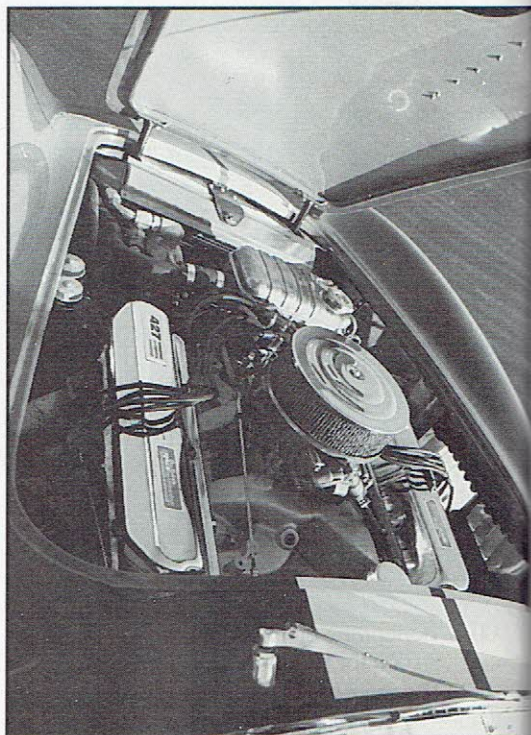
chance to show it off, and not really a competition.

It also ran at the Chicago Historics at Road America, in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, where Don finished sixth in B-Production, complaining all the way about how they classed the cars. "A Porsche Carrera RSR is *not* a B-Production car — and that's what it was classed as. If it hadn't been for that, we would have finished maybe third."

"The guy who won was Carl Schiffmayer, the leading restorer out there. I was 1.5 seconds off his time, but with a stock motor — and nothing sorted out — I still felt we were within striking distance. Of course, that's racing talk! If we run him again, I feel we can beat him."

The reason for being at Willow Springs — where these photos were taken — was somewhat different. "We basically went there to get the word out about the car. The people who were there were impressed by it."

Actually, Hi-Tech arrived with an



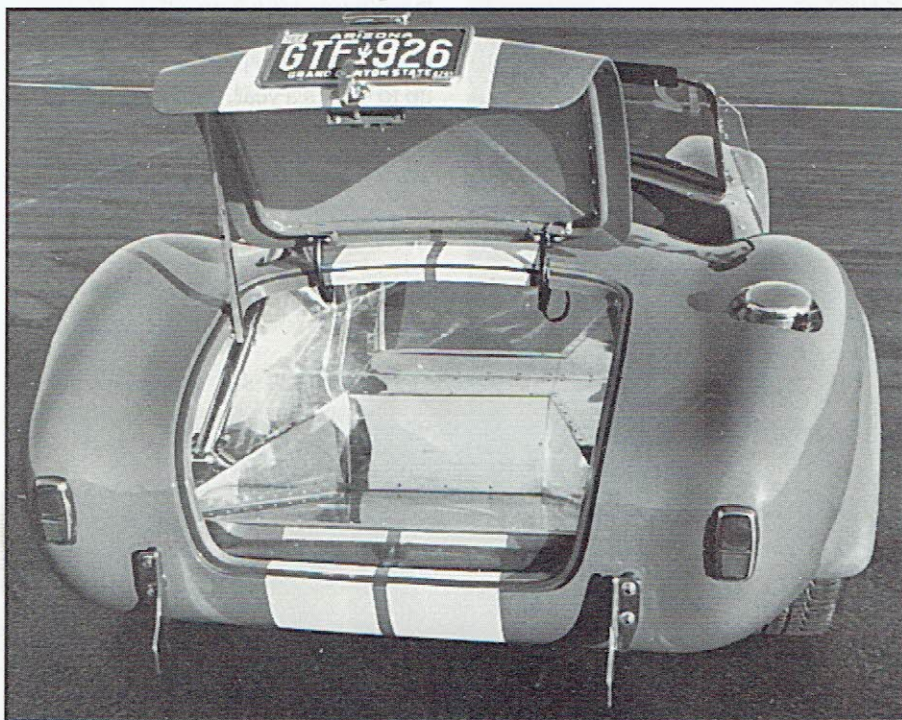
This is a 1966 427 side-oiler sitting in the engine compartment of Tim's personal car. Notice how tidy the whole affair is, from engine cover to engine!

enclosed car transporter which contained two Cobras. Not only was Tom and Tim and Don there, but so were the wives and Glen McCoy, a driving instructor at Bob Bondurant's School of High Performance Driving who was on hand to drive Tim's bright red fiberglass-bodied Hi-Tech 427 S/C Cobra.

How do the cars compare, this new aluminum-bodied Cobra, and the No. 89 that Don Roberts drove to so many victories that many call him the winning Cobra driver?

"They are very similar," says Don. "The only difference is the new car was more closely built to FIA specs. My old car had iron brakes. This new one has true calipers. It stops in a straight line. I think the car handles identical to my old car."

And this is important. Don is one of the very few men on the planet (427 S/C driver Dick Smith, is the other) who can relate back and forth between an original car and a replica of it — because Don has raced the old No. 89 for so many years in true SCCA racing, and then a series of vintage events, the last being at Palm Springs in 1992. "I can compare any Cobra with that car," says Don with true conviction. "And it's a fast runner — even today."



If you don't go for the aluminum-bodied car, you can still get loads of aluminum even in the fiberglass version.



You want authenticity? Why the aluminum 289 FIA replica even has a splash guard for the fuel filler cap.

Roberts is confident about this new aluminum-bodied car, that Tom D'Antonio and Tim Gunning have worked so hard to make as authentic as possible. Yet, he says, "I think it should be as fast as old No. 89 — or even faster. Depends on how all this stuff works. We've got the brakes almost dialed in — now we just have to dial in the chassis and handling. I think we've got a real car there!"

These guys, by the way, are not thinking small time. They're thinking globally.

"I was talking to Tim," says Don, "and said, 'Why don't we take it to Europe?'"

Ah, but now we run into reality. In order for Hi-Tech to be successful on the race track, in a series of vintage car events, it must be successful in the marketplace. "If we could sell a couple more of these cars," says Don, "then the racing program could really get going."

How likely is a European adventure? "I think . . ." says Don. "Shoot, we could do it!"

And you know something, it's a good possibility. After all, Hi-Tech Motorsports has this guy, Tom D'Antonio who is an absolute craftsman; and this guy, Tim Gunning, who has enough money to make it all work; and this guy, Don Roberts, who knows how to wring a car out and turn it into the closest thing to a Sixties-era Cobra.

And hell, you know us, we want to go along so we can report on the whole damn thing for COBRAS readers.

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