

Fumbler and the Glass Man
(George Follmer)

Los Angeles, 1998

George Follmer came down from his home near Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, trying to sell a Formula 1 Shadow he owns. We lunched at the stylish Peppertree Restaurant. The Peppertree used to be "Fumbler's" haunt when he was the dapper insurance salesman/tire dealer with the wild gleam in his eye who knew what to do with a racingcar's loud pedal.

The Chablis was chilled, the reminiscences worth repeating. George recalled the blood-boiling afternoon when he strapped into a 1,200-horsepower CanAm Porsche, aimed it down the backstraight at Riverside Raceway and then arrived at Turn 9 traveling 212 mph and somehow safely skated around without hitting anything. He remembered what it was like being a sportycar guy confronting Mario Andretti and the Unsers with a low-buck, ironblock stovebolt and savaging all their turbopowered Fords and Offys by a winning margin of 2 miles.

And getting back to the CanAm tournament again, he discussed the strange season when he'd had to go at top speed and make a race conclude in under 45 minutes. He was hurting from top to bottom with a torn rib cage, and after 45 minutes the numbing injection of Laticane he'd taken would wear off and the pain kick in like a razor.

Alert readers of these monthly epistles will know that in the popularity sweepstakes between goody-two-shoe racingdrivers and bad-boy racingdrivers, this website sides with the baddies. Dapper George was one. Roger Penske unfondly named him Fumbler and still calls him

that because, unlike Mark Donohue and Rick Mears, Follmer could be an incorrigible employee. Messes George brought on (not with Penske) included a dandy riot in the victory circle of a TransAm ponycar meet. Evading security cops, Follmer strolled up to the race winner and under the pretext of extending congratulations instead began swinging at him. The guy had earlier nudged him off the road, causing George to b-l-o-w.

To popoff Sam Posey, George was the consummate “outsider’s outsider.” Fast enough to win in any car and company, but seemingly at home nowhere, during the 1960s and 1970s he did F1, United States Auto Club Indycars, NASCAR Winston Cup, the Daytona and Indianapolis 500s, the CanAm, the TransAm, the U.S. Road Racing Championship (earning season titles in those three series), Formula 5000, and the International Race of Champions. Today he still does the occasional vintage race, always heavy duty on the loud pedal.

One of the most slambang George Follmer stories concerns the time he attempted to graft his roadracing licks onto the root-and-gouge world of California shorttrack stockcar racing. Never a dull moment.

His car owner was a 1960s L.A. racing folk hero called Nat the Glass Man, Nat Reeder, a self-taught artist of fibreglassing. If Von Dutch was the Picasso of pin-striping, Reeder was the Rodin of fibreglass sculpture. He did the coachwork of the Jim Simpson Special and was Indy car detail man for George Bignotti as well as the Granatelli clan. Reeder also owned a monster 427 Chevrolet Impala V-8 late-model that George coveted.

Glass Man in the 1990s does his socializing in less upscale quarters than George does his. To get his news, I met the Glass Man not at the Peppertree but for beers and a game of pool at a redneck tavern in the blue-collar belt

of L.A.'s extreme northern San Fernando Valley. Reeder is a comic and still a big Follmer fan.

Alarmed when he noticed that the bullring he and George were visiting at Vallejo came equipped with an unmovable dirt embankment and outside steel railing as tall as the Impala's door handles, Nat requested that George not be a bad boy.

"I said, 'George, I'd like you to keep it clean.' George answered, "Then you better go sit up in the grandstands and not watch. You're going to need metal work. It's going to get smashed."

"Well, good luck. George took off like a big bird. One fender went away, then another, then the grille and finally the deck lid. The Impala ended up on the crashwall."

"Did you get a new driver?"

"I couldn't wait to have George drive for me again. This other time, we were back in L.A. at Ascot Park, 200 nighttime laps on dirt. George was working his way to the front, crash, scratch, push. He came up behind Johnny Steele, who was a quiet stroker kind of guy, and hit Steele so hard that his axle lifted off the ground. And of course George never stopped. He just kept on truckin', lapping faster than everybody."

"Then what happened?"

"Somebody else flipped and got on fire. They had to stop the race, and the delay was lengthy, and when it got to be midnight, George told me, 'Listen, I've got to leave to catch a plane for a Firestone tire test back east. You'll have to race it yourself.' I went, 'Oh, really?!'"

"So what did you do?"

"I was sitting in the car wearing George's helmet when Johnny Steele came walking by. He'd had so much damage from George's hitting him he couldn't continue.

So I called, 'Johnny, come drive this freakin' thing.' He said, 'Screw you, Follmer.' I said, 'No, no, this ain't Follmer. This is Nat Reeder. I fired Follmer. Get your ass in here.'"

"And?"

"Johnny got in and finished the race for me. Did a good job."

At the Peppertree, I asked George if any racing hall of fame was preparing to entomb him, and he replied, "None that I know of." When it happens, maybe the Glass Man can be invited in to sing his praises.

When I was racing motorcycles, George behaved like a good guy – the only agent who'd sell me hospital insurance. In 1999, George got entombed in some hall of fame. But Glass Man, who left us last year, just a week before Christmas, shortly after making an appearance of his own on this page, didn't catch an invite to the ceremony.