

Our Oscar

by Pete Lyons



Oscar Koveleski called the other day, and when our talk was done I felt like I always do—as if I'd just been inside a dyno cell with a red-hot race engine at fever pitch. The man must be a decade richer in experiences than me, yet I'm left panting by his everlasting enthusiasm, energy, and endurance.

Had I ever been a Can-Am driver, as Oscar was, I imagine I'd have felt like that every time Denny Hulme blew by.

It's thanks to the Can-Am that I met Oscar, and the grand old series keeps bringing us back together. At one reunion I was supposed to step up and say something. Sensing my panic, Oscar offered kind advice: Keep it short and simple. I did, and the ordeal was over before I knew it.

Not that he follows that principle himself. Koveleski's calls are always entertaining and enlightening, but they tend to be monodirectional. Oscar seldom finishes a sentence, as his supercharged mind keeps packing one new idea, memory, comment, question, quote, or joke on top of another in a breathless stream of incandescent consciousness. It must be like standing in the

middle of the grid as the flag drops.

He might start musing about reviving the Can-Am, say, then shift to driving advice Mark Donohue once gave him, veer to international trade, drift toward military history, carom into the state of motor sports today, brush the guardrail of national politics, downshift to a story of racing Jackie Stewart at slot cars, chicane neatly into the latest news about his own beloved Kidracers (child-sized electric cars), and powerslide out with one of his favorite quotes:

"If everybody's thinkin' the same, nobody's thinking. Know who said that? General George Patton."

It was Oscar's inventive brain that came up with a way to enliven Can-Am lunch breaks: mechanics' creeper races. He also established the Pole Position Pole, an actual metal stave awarded for... Well, I never quite grasped the rules.

Of course Oscar Koveleski will live forever as president of the Polish Racing Drivers Association, founded in 1970 with two fellow fun-lovers, driver Tony Adamowicz and PR man Brad Niemcek. The PRDA's rules I did get. You were eligible to join if you were a Polish racing driver, a non-Polish racing driver, a Polish non-racing driver, or a non-Polish non-racing driver.

I was pleased to find I qualified, and Oscar tells me I am member no. 54.

Everybody is—just like his racecars. Yes, that's in honor of the old "Car 54" TV show.

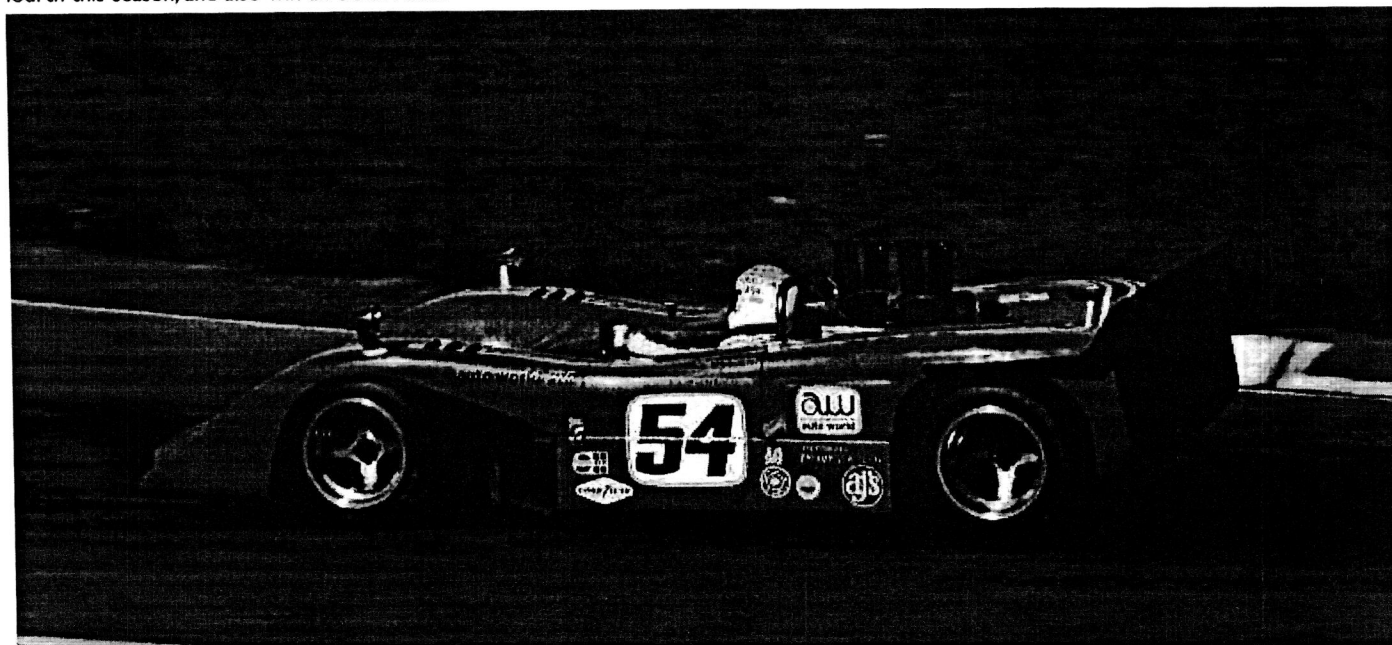
One time, an official PRDA manila envelope arrived. Inside, I found a single sheet of entirely blank paper. I still count this among the most informative press releases I've ever received.

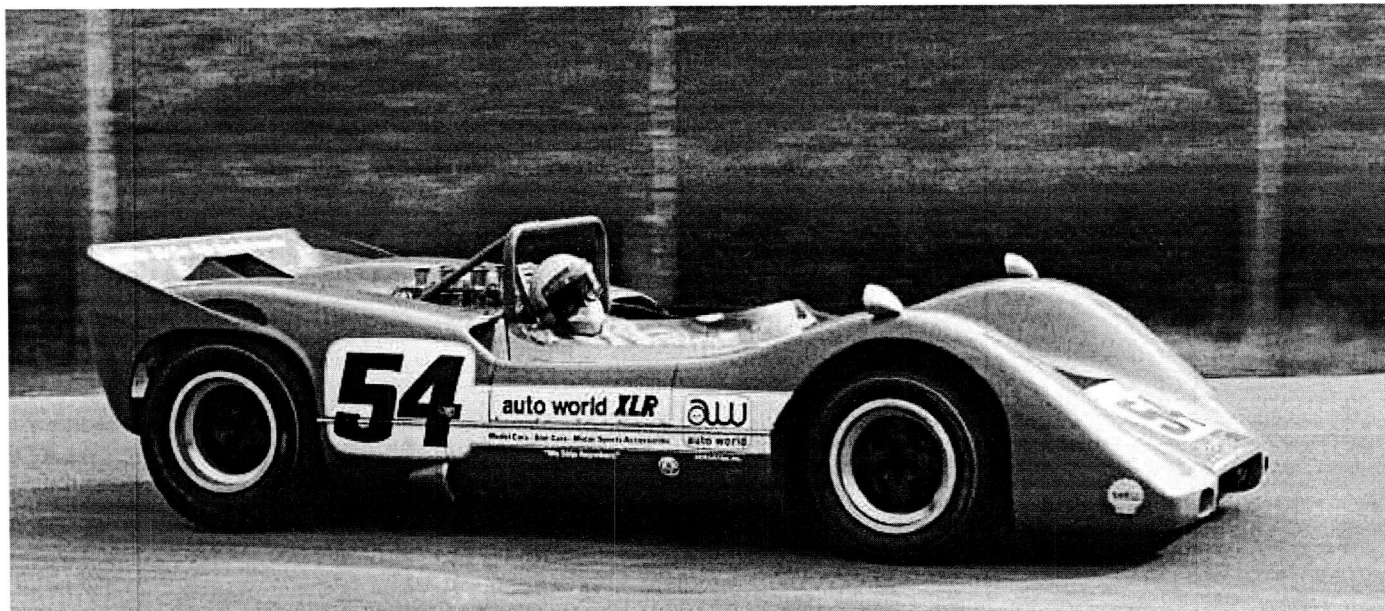
In 1971, Brad, Tony, and Oscar competed in Brock Yates's inaugural Cannonball Baker Sea to Shining Sea Memorial Trophy Dash. While Yates himself cadged a Ferrari Daytona and talked Dan Gurney into driving it, the PRDA entry was a Chevy van stuffed full of gasoline barrels and a bunk bed in a bid to go nonstop from New York to California. It might have worked but for a fuel system glitch that cost time. The Chevy van finished 2nd to the 172-mph Ferrari by a scant 53 minutes.

After years of SCCA club racing (MG TC, Chevy-engined Ferrari), Oscar came into the Can-Am in 1969 with a McLaren M6B. He was an instant breath of fresh air. That was the year the McLaren factory team won all 11 races in their winged M8Bs, so to match their technology Oscar fitted an airfoil just like theirs...but on his helmet, not his car.

At the end of the season, he bought Bruce McLaren's championship-winning M8B and campaigned it through the next two years, scoring a career-high 4th place at

Oscar takes Moss corner at Mosport in the opening Can-Am of 1970. His new Auto World toy is the McLaren M8B that Bruce McLaren drove to the previous year's championship, minus its rear suspension-mounted wing, which was banned by rules changes. Koveleski would place as high as fourth this season, and also win an SCCA title.





Pete Lyons - www.pete.lyons.com

Peering past the McLaren M6B's distinctively high front fenders, Oscar aims his first Can-Am car into St. Jovite's tight Namerow Corner in 1969. The big side number was a deliberate reference to a humorous TV show.

Road Atlanta in 1970. At the same track, the same car took Koveleski to an SCCA National Championship.

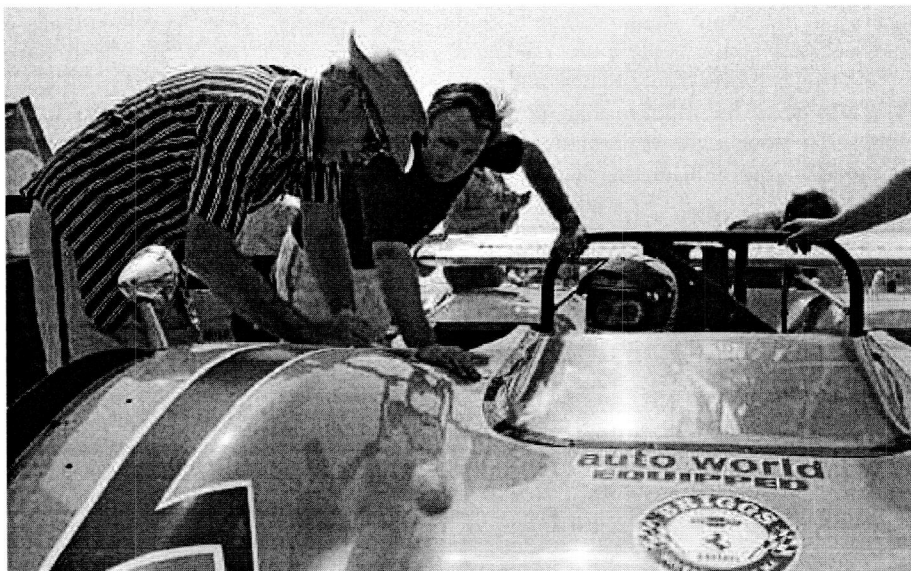
Partway through Can-Am 1971, he stepped out in favor of Adamowicz, who immediately started qualifying the two-year-old chassis 7th and 8th on the grids and finishing as high as 3rd (Mid-Ohio). Though Tony "A-to-Z" only ran six of that year's ten races, he placed 7th in points.

The Clown Prince of the Can-Am—I've called Oscar that, but the fun he was making had a purpose. As a cast member of the Bruce and Denny Show, the businessman in him well understood the bad rap the McLaren-dominated series was getting for being too predictable. Boring, some called it. Oscar took it as his mission to liven things up.

In this PC world, it's only among fellow racers that he could get away with this one: hauling me and designer Peter Bryant together with himself and yelling, "Hey, look—a Polak with two peters!"

I've even fallen victim to a pure-Oscar joke on the highway. As I overtook his motor home, he turned his head and grinned *with vampire fangs!* Imagine the effect on motorists who didn't recognize him.

Oscar credits his wife, Elaine, and Terry Deren, wife of crew chief Jack, for the best Can-Am gag I knew of. Cleaning out a tin of Johnson Wax, the orange goop made by the series sponsor, she refilled it with butterscotch pudding and conspired to be eating it just as the head of the company walked by.



Pete Lyons - www.pete.lyons.com

After 1971's first Can-Am, the boss traded helmet for cowboy hat and plugged fellow PRDA founder Tony Adamowicz into the M8B. The effect was immediate, with four fourth-row starting positions and three top-five finishes in only six races. Here at Watkins Glen, Oscar's long-time crew chief Jack Deren (center) awaits the next instruction. Sadly, a few years later a new owner would crash and destroy this sole survivor of McLaren's unbeaten 1969 season.

Oscar is a promoter by birth. When he brought his father to a race it was like being with twins. Anthony Koveleski is well remembered in the hobby world for his miniature cars and model kits, so in 1958, it was natural for Oscar to open a mail-order business he called Auto World. He also started a magazine on car modeling. Later, he organized and promoted SCCA races at Pocono, and recently he and Jack Deren released their own Can-Am DVD.

He inaugurated Kidracers in 1988 with

and event at Watkins Glen. Since then Oscar reckons he has introduced "probably 50,000 or 100,000" children ages 3 to 7 to driving and to racing. What a great project (see kidracers.com).

See what I mean about inexhaustible energy?

Oscar often signs off by saying, "You're my buddy an' I love ya." I know he says that to everybody, but I do feel the same. 