

Steve Knoll, Group 44 Racing and the creation of the Escuderia California

A series on characters associated with the Del Monte Trophy Race Group and the Pebble Beach Road Racers. **Steve Knoll** has been a friend and co-conspirator of **Rob Manson** for some 20 years and was present in Barcelona when the idea was born that Rob should go motor racing. Rob's brother-in-law **Don "Slim" Pepperdene** was at the same meeting; the initiative and a future collection of race cars was named Escuderia California. Rob has gone on to a stellar race career in a works Mallock Clubmans car in the UK and with his historic hot-rod road racers in California.

5 Purveyed from Steve Knoll's conversation with Marcus Bicknell, 31 August 2025 at Lime Rock CT.

Steve, let's start with your career, like outside motor racing. What have you done in your profession?

I was a philosophy major so coming out of college, so naturally I became an iron worker. I answered an ad "learn the steel business from the bottom up" because I thought, why is there air? Well, when you hit your head against a girder, that's real, right? I enjoyed my time in the steel business because of the range of jobs I did and the interesting projects we did. The first of my two careers was in manufacturing, in which I held operations, logistics and other roles; engineer-to order capital equipment mostly; major structural steel fabrication and later high precision industrial gearing. We built major bridges and buildings, large weldments for nuclear power plants and such, as well as routine highway bridges. I later moved to California and went to work for another manufacturing company .

15 After a year and a half in California is switched to my second career, consulting, helping companies implement Enterprise Resource Planning systems like SAP, Oracle, and suchlike. They are database systems that integrate financial and accounting functions with manufacturing planning and operations.

20 Have you got family?

I'm single. My father was in the Air Force, Colonel Helmut J. Knoll USAFR. He joined the US Army Air Corps in 1939, had a career in the Air Force and later with the DIA, thru the Cold War. Nukes, both with SAC and later at the Pentagon. His big moment was the Cuban Missile Crisis during which he was briefed the Joint Chiefs every day. At the end of his life, he was had nightmares about it. He was born German. In 1926, he came over as a young boy; out of one depression into another. He worked his way through college at Northeastern University, Boston, earning a degree in civil engineering. He joined the Army Air Corps in 1939. Both my parents' roots are in New England, in the Boston area: my mother's side goes back to the late 1600s/early 1700s. The American Revolution was our civil war on that side, because half of them were loyalists and half of them were patriots. The loyalists had to get out of town and became a prominent family in New Brunswick.

30 I was born in Wiesbaden, Germany, but I was just an infant when we were transferred back to the States in 1949. I don't remember dad's first stateside posting, Nebraska I think. We lived the nomadic life of a military family.

Let's talk motor cars. When did you first get interested in them and what did you have?

Well, my mom kept a baby book for my sisters and me, scrapbooks to immortalize your first words, photos and all that stuff. My first word was car. It was not momma. My first car? I was not allowed to actually have a car in high school. Nonetheless, together with my buddy, I bought a BMW Isetta for \$28 until my mom found out I and I had to sell my \$14 share. The plan was to somehow get it into James Madison High School and drive it around the halls until the officials came down on us. I've not had a lot of cars but I've had some very good ones that I've loved and I did get to crew on some great race-cars when I was quite young.



My most exotic car, was a Mazda Miata. It was exotic because it was the first one in California to my knowledge, as I bought it about six weeks before they went on sale officially. I just wanted a sports car and I'd been going to the dealership for months offering \$1,000 down and list price when they were released. The salesman would always be excited to go back to the sales manager: nope we ain't doing that. An incident at work really just pissed me off one day, so I left the building to cool off for a bit and a Miata drove by. I knew where it came from and followed it to the dealership: it had just rolled off the transporter. I bought it on the spot, only paid \$1,500 premium for the car which was cheap considering they sold used for \$30,000 for a while as they went "viral" immediately. There is an uphill grade entering Laguna Seca, with a long stop and go queue for The Monterey Historics, mostly stop. The Aston Martin DB6 driver abreast of me, was worrying about overheating and/or frying his clutch. He looked over at my Miata, which was the most exotic car in Monterey that week. I mean, people who wouldn't look twice at a "normal" Ferrari would do a U -turn and run me down. He asked me if I wanted to swap?; kidding, of course and I declined the offer ☺

I had 2008 Porsche Boxster, the most capable and expensive car I've owned: over-engineered in my opinion. I did have an opportunity to mingle with Porsche designers at Rennsport. The Boxster had cup holders that were articulated and stowed using lots of moving parts; flimsy and awkwardly located which struck me as German engineering satire, an engineer's revenge on the marketing department's insistence that the market demanded them. At least they weren't powered. So anyway, I'm in the hospitality suite with a couple young Porsche designers with whom I shared my opinion that a cup holder is just a hole. It doesn't need moving parts. As it turned out one of them had designed them ☺ There were other things about the car that were way over engineered, but it was solid; it felt like it was machined out of solid titanium. It was a very capable car, but in my opinion , you can't responsibly use them as designed. On the other hand, the Miata encourages play, like old British roadsters at a pace unlikely to require bail. So, to me, that was the far superior car, and it was dead simple too. Best sports car ever built. But other than that, I've had cars that I loved, but nothing exotic.



As far as race cars are concerned, I was lucky enough to crew for **Group 44**¹ very early on, 1966-69; I spent more time in the garage than doing homework and boring things like that. I had the use of the very 1st Left-Hand Drive Triumph TR6 as a company car ☺ So I hung out in the garage. 1967 was the first full season and I was doing race support. People won't believe it, but John Kelly once said we were poor as church mice but we never let it show, which was true. We did have the only tractor trailer in the United States except for Shelby's. Not Can-Am, not NASCAR, nor Indy Cars; no one else had one back then. We psyched out most of the competition just showing up and won about 70 % of our races in that period. My job was mostly dumb end of the tape measure stuff. We were a small team, only a couple guys that were mechanics and there was a lot of grunt work; loading and transporting cars, machine shop runs and suchlike, cleaning parts, clean the cars, clean the shop, and clean the cars again. Gopher stuff. And that's what I did thru the end of the 1969 season

Was that after the two metal jobs?

No, that came a little later, after I graduated from college. I worked for Atlas Machine & Iron Works in Virginia and later for Philadelphia Gear for 7 or 8 years each. Engineer to order capital structures and equipment. Later, I got rid of everything that wouldn't fit in my car and headed west to California. My cousin had a place in San Francisco at the time and I stayed with him for a couple months, getting my resume and marketing together. I hadn't done an interview in a long time, so I answered an ad just to get some practice, in Monterey improbably, a great place, not known for manufacturing. I wound up getting a job in 1989 at Graco as materials manager, where I met Slim Pepperdene² and Dave "DZ" Zurlinden³.

We bonded, right off the bat: it took a couple minutes before I figured out there was a couple of racers and I introduced myself right away. DZ wanted to get into racing. Slim pulled his old Formula V out of retirement and we started going to races together.



Malboro Speedway. Steve Knoll photo

¹ In 1965 Bob Tullius established his racing team, **Group 44**, Incorporated. Co-founders included mechanic Brian Fuerstenau and New York advertising executive Dick Gilmartin, both of whom were also race drivers. Group 44 ran vehicles from British Leyland, initially fielding Triumph TRs and Spitfires and later campaigning models from MG and Jaguar. When Group 44 entered two Jaguar XJR-5 cars in the 1984 24 Hours of Le Mans, it was the first time a Jaguar had raced at Le Mans in 27 years. See Annex.

² Slim is Don Pepperdene, Monterey resident, Rob Manson's brother in law.

³ David "DZ" Zurlinden is a successful single-seater racer who now with wife Veronica "V" O'Shea shares a garage, a marriage, and a pair of Huffaker-built 1964 MGs. DZ races an MGB; V campaigns a Midget.

I left Graco pretty quickly, after about a year and a half, for a road warrior gig, which I was able to do based in Monterey.

So let's get on to the Escuderia. What took you to Barcelona?

5 Well, I met Rob Manson indirectly, through Slim's partner Marty, Rob's sister and a great friend. I hit it off with Rob, both of us are car guys of course, but beyond that he's a very interesting and outstanding man. I'm very pleased and honoured to be a friend. Rob was a member of the RACC⁴, the race organizer and he extended an invite us to visit him for the Grand Prix. He was something of a grandee there so we had VIP
10 access. I had a billion frequent flyer miles, so it was a no-brainer 1st class all the way. It was a \$600 vacation, and hanging out with the King of Spain great fun. His other guest was Carol Perez, U.S. Consul General at the time, whom he picked up in his Lotus Elise; after the race we went back to the American Consulate and solved the world's problems over wine and cheese. It was just a wonderful vacation not
15 withstanding learning a lesson about pickpockets the hard way ☺

Somehow we persuaded Rob to go racing. Actually we didn't persuade Rob, he was going to do it; it was more a matter of how to do it. Slim and I have the same story, Rob's is a little different, but I think ours is closer to the truth⁵. Rob wanted to go racing and was seeking advice as to how to go about it. We wanted to know what his goals were, but Rob holds his cards close to his chest and was not very helpful on that point so I'm sceptical of the value of our advice. Slim is an excellent driver, mechanic and coach, so longer term he helped Rob a lot. I don't know about drunken, but we were happy. Two bottles of cava between three adults; that's happy, but not a falling down drunk. ☺ We were in his flat and he's saying "I want to go racing what do you
20 guys think?" We asked, "what do you want to do?" Not getting a clear answer, we opened a 2nd bottle, and the ship was launched. The first crew of a newly commissioned Navy Ship are plank holders, so we're Escuderia California's plank holders. To this day I don't know what his plan was, but I'm pretty sure it's grown a mite ☺

30 On that day, did you come up with the name Escuderia California?

That was Rob's idea, I don't recall if he came up with it then or later



⁴ Reial Automòbil Club de Catalunya (Catalan for Royal Automobile Club of Catalonia)

⁵ Slim remembers it thus: "I met Steve when he was hired by the company I was working for here in Monterey. He was hired in 1989 or thereabouts in our production control dept. Once he learned both DZ and I were racers, and we learned he was a racer and ex group 44, we were stuck with each other. Rob invited Marty and I, Buck and Eugenia, and Steve to attend the F1 Grand Prix in Barcelona in 2002. Steve and I arrived earlier than the others. On our first evening, having little or no dinner or sleep, but sharing 2 bottles of Cava on Rob's deck, the exact words from Rob were "How do I get into this vintage racing stuff?". The rest is history. First was the Winkleman FF, then the Lotus 7, the Merlin, and soon followed by the Manning and the Baldwin Mercury, etc."

To your memory, did Rob go racing immediately with something American, or was it the Clubman's campaign when he lived in England?

He approached it very logically; he's very good about stuff like that. He bought a Formula Ford and took it to driver's school starting with lower level vintage racing. I think his next car was the Merlin MK6A, similar to a Lotus 23 twin cam and with a distinguished history in the UK⁶. It was a much more capable car than the Formula Ford that he'd been racing previously. He grew up in Pebble Beach. He saw the races at Pebble Beach with his dad as a kid. I suspect he had racing those cars in mind from the beginning

So when you originally created Scuderia California, he did not have in mind that that was going to be Californian V8 Specials, because first he went into Formula Ford and Merlin.

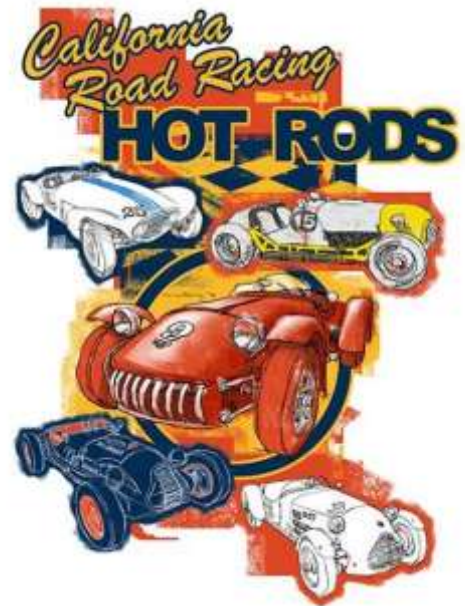
Well, it might have been his idea from the first, but he had never raced, and so he wanted to learn his craft and set about doing it. After the formula cars he bought the first of the big specials. The Manning was the first one, 2005 I think. He bought that from John Streets. We had no idea that he was going to collect them and build the Del Monte Trophy Group to what it is today, especially in light of the upcoming 75th anniversary bash in Monterey this year.

Rob is a gentleman as you well know and a gentleman racer. I'm very proud of my friends because we seem to be in an era where character seems not to matter much, but it's everything to me. I respect that a lot, you know, it's something to aspire to and a lot of people aspire to it.

Most of his cars took a while to sort, so DZ and Slim were really helpful. Later he hooked up with Mike Ryan and John Buddenbaum as well. The cars developed and got better and better. As you know, John and Rob have raced fender to fender because the Manning and the Parkinson Special are evenly matched. They swap victories; the winner is anyone's guess. Rob's competitive, but he's happy when anybody wins, there are no team orders.

You can imagine for me, 2015, I'd been racing with Rob invited me in 2015 to come over to Redwood City to meet the Manning and John Streets. There's the car looking absolutely immaculate and we take out the three balls (in the colours of FC Barcelona) in the intake stacks, John Buddenbaum is there from around the corner, John Streets is there tickling his beard and Rob says, get in, start it up.

Well, it's a flathead Ford, as well you know. It's not like it's a Ferrari. So if it blows up, you just fix it. They're not complicated and parts aren't expensive relatively speaking. Easy for me to say, I'm not paying the bills ☺☺ You've done the Scuderia proud Marcus, I'm so pleased to have this opportunity to get to know you. The next one after the Manning was the Baldwin Mercury Special. Rob likes to surprise us, so cars pop up unannounced and it might be a year before I even know he has one. I'm pretty sure the Baldwin was the second. The cars find him. Jim Herlinger was a friend. He was very ill



⁶ Marcus adds "Rob was a very smooth driver with the works Mallock when he lived in the UK for five years. He and the car were always well-prepared, I was competing in the same series, BARC Clubmans Championship, and we were about the same speed. We'd be going down the Wellington Straight at Silverstone and I would say 'your corner Rob, yours please' and he would say 'thank you, you can have the next one'".

and wanted Rob to have the Baldwin. As you know the community is small and Rob is well respected. Many of the owners want to see their cars find the right home, so when it's time for a new steward, Rob is often their first stop.

Let's get philosophical for a moment. We were talking with Steve Earle last night and he said "our vintage motor racing is theatre. We, the drivers and the owners and the tracks, put on plays for both the drivers and the public."

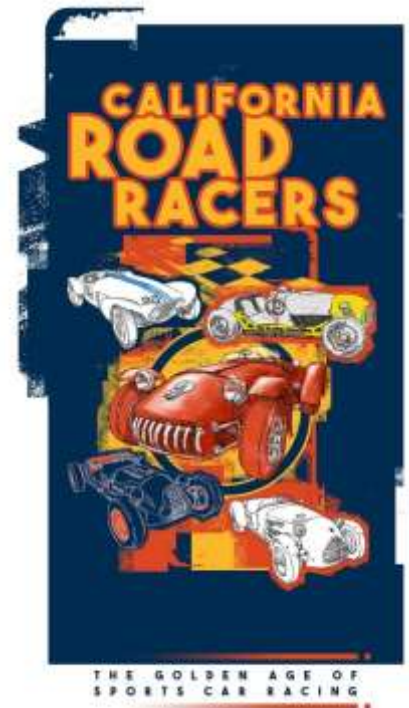
Okay, I was a philosophy major, so we can do that. I totally agree with that. Stanton, Virginia, where I live, is a home to Blackfriars, the only reproduction of Shakespeare's indoor theatre in the country. Staging conditions are as period correct as possible. "All the world's a stage" Right?

The Trans Am Group, for example, puts on great, show, with a little bit of WWF. They swap leads and such, respect each other, but they drive hard. The cars are loud, fast and convincing, but you're not there to crash and nobody's going to win any championships. I'm amazed when I see the Goodwood racers at 10/10ths. I think, my God, that's crazy. But, that's their thing, and I appreciate it for what it is, but over here, it's bad form when you take out somebody's pricy Ferrari because of ego. I think in the Del Monte group we give quite a good show. Indeed, I would have loved to seen you all at Velocity on the podium with Jensen Button ☺ We're old farts and younger people are not as interested in them. I'm just glad that they're here, that they're shown so people can appreciate them. The fans like them and Rob's approach, presenting them as a group rather than random individual cars, makes for a compelling story, but they're not always going to be the stars of the show.

What else would you like to add about the importance of Rob, the Del Monte Trophy Group, the Scuderia California, from Steve Knoll's point of view?

Well, from my point of view, it's an opportunity to spend time with people I love and care about and, most importantly, respect immensely. Doing something that we love together, like screwing around with old race cars. And having the opportunity to share the experience with others, to pay homage to the people who built and raced the cars.

My road trips you have to have a goal, a quest. For example, when I first got my Miata, I drove all the way up the Pacific Coast Highway to Vancouver and all that, Victoria, and back looking for the perfect coffee cup. I never found the perfect coffee cup, but it's never about the perfect coffee cup. It's about the journey.



MS Word, USA letter size. Steve Knoll transcript MB 31Aug2025 SK 16May2026

Annex

Robert Charles Tullius (1930 – 2026),
American race car driver and **Group 44**
racing team owner

- 5 Tullius considered a career in teaching after
graduating from high school. He served a
term in the U.S. Air Force, and while there
quarterbacked the Chanute Air Force base
football team until a leg injury put an end to
10 his playing. Tullius took a job in sales with
Kodak, first in Rochester, New York and
later in Alexandria, Virginia. In 1960, Tullius
bought a Triumph TR3 for his wife. She
rarely drove the car. Tullius took the TR3 to
15 racing school himself, and won the
graduation race.



- Tullius' racing career began in earnest in 1961, when in his first four
races he finished first or second, and won the points championship.
20 For 1962 Tullius asked Triumph to provide him with a TR4 to race,
promising to "beat the pants off [their] TR4s with [his] TR3" unless
they did. Tullius and Ed Diehl built the proffered TR4 into a racer.
Tullius placed second in the TR4 in its first race at Lime Rock, but on
its next outing at Lake Garnett, the car was totaled. When Triumph
25 refused to replace the car, Tullius and Diehl bought two more
wrecked TR4s and built a replacement car using parts from all three.
His decision to pursue motorsports professionally was made in 1963.
His supervisor at Kodak forced Tullius to choose between his day job
and racing; Tullius opted for racing. He soon became the principal
30 driver for Triumph's North American Competition Director Kas
Kastner. In 1963 he also raced in his first 12 Hours of Sebring, and
went on to win six SCCA championship races in the factory TR4.

- In 1965 Tullius established his own racing team, named **Group 44**
35 Incorporated, to pursue his chosen vocation while supporting his
family. Co-founders included mechanic Brian Fuerstenau and New
York advertising executive Dick Gilmartin, both of whom were also
race drivers. Gilmartin left Group 44 in 1965. Group 44 developed a
three-pronged approach to their business. They raced their own
40 cars, built racing cars for paying customers, and ran an extensive
marketing and sponsoring department for vehicle manufacturers
and racing teams. The company originally used a color scheme of
white with black stripes, but added a green stripe when Quaker
State motor oil, a division of Royal Dutch Shell, became a sponsor.
45 This sponsorship lasted for several decades. The cars were not only
well prepared, but immaculately presented.





The team also used a unique articulated transporter painted in team colors to ferry their cars between races. For most of the years it was active, Group 44 was exclusively associated with vehicles from British Leyland, initially fielding Triumph TRs and Spitfires and later campaigning models from MG and Jaguar. When Group 44 entered two Jaguar XJR-5 cars in the 1984 24 Hours of Le Mans, it was the first time a Jaguar had raced at Le Mans in 27 years. When Group 44 cars traveled to an event their cars were displayed at the local British Leyland dealers and the team was promoted through local media. For a time almost all of British Leyland's marketing in the United States went through Group 44. Other team members with Steve Knoll included Brian Fuerstenau, Ed Diehl, Paul Brand, Bob Krokus, Glen Sullivan, John Lyster and Dick Gilmartin.

Steve was the accredited photographer for Group 44. See

"Former Group 44 team member Steve Knoll, who shot this month's cover photo, was a big help in finding old images. <https://classicmotorsports.com/articles/6-appealchapter-1/>" and

"We are very happy for our Video of the Week to feature a snapshot of a fantastic video for fans of Triumphs and racing alike. John Clancy at Triumph DVD has put out a new DVD that brings you the full story of the Group 44 Inc. race team featuring Bob Tullius, his crew and other important people who were there at the time. From their humble TR3 origins to taking Jaguar back to Le Mans in 1984 with the XJR-5 GTP cars, this is the complete, amazing history. Bob Tullius gives us the full, inside story with no holds barred of those exciting days and he is joined by many of his former colleagues and crew members. Amongst them are Ed Diehl, Paul Brand, Steve Knoll, Bob Krokus, Glen Sullivan, John Lyster, Dick Gilmartin and telling the story of that first meeting at Triumph's headquarters which led on to such remarkable achievements is Triumph Public Relations and Advertising Manager Mike Cook.

<https://justbritish.com/votw-group-44-with-bob-tullius/>"