



## AN INVITATION TO - “UNSERVILLE” -

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*Bill Byrne*

**“On March 24, 1986, an Audi 5000CS Turbo Quattro set a one-lap closed course speed record for four-wheel drive vehicles at Talladega Speedway. The Audi, with Bobby Unser at the wheel, reached a one-lap average speed of 206.825 mph over the 2.66 mile high-banked superspeedway.”**

That was the backdrop against which my unlikely friendship with the three-time Indianapolis 500 champion began. It wasn't going to be a smooth ride, as he quickly let me know.

In 1986, I supervised the Auto Show program for Audi at a time when “Sudden Unintended Acceleration” for Audi vehicles was occupying the news. It was a difficult time both for Audi, which saw its sales plummet from a high of about 75,000 in 1985 to below 15,000, and for me, the face of the manufacturer at these very public events. As soon as I was identified as an Audi executive, I was sure to get a lecture on “those ‘killer cars!’” thanks to what proved to be a bogus Sixty Minutes program.

To counteract some of the SUA publicity, the marketing department thought that highlighting some of the engineering and performance characteristics of its signature all-wheel drive sales leader Audi 100 (5000 CS Turbo Quattro in the United States) might help. So, the corporation air-lifted a specially outfitted version of the car and a cadre of factory engi-

neers from Germany to Talladega Raceway for an attempt at the one-lap closed course speed record that had stood since 1975. Bobby Unser was to drive the car, not a popular decision with the German crew who would have preferred a familiar factory European driver.

Together with the Audi exhibit design company, I thought a display featuring a film of the event coupled with a replica of what we dubbed the “Stealth Quattro” might just add some excitement to the show. Several days before the proposed date of the land speed attempt, I arranged for a film crew to join me at Talladega. Anybody who has worked on an “industrial film,” as this would be, knows that it is an always frustrating undertaking. Trying to “catch the moment” and still not get in the way calls for super human management skill. Compounding the difficulty of the project was the conviction of the German engineering staff that Bobby was abusing the car, while Bobby thought the engineers were not listening to someone “who knew a thing or two about setting up a race car.”

A day before the final attempt, I approached Bobby after lunch in one of the raceway buildings and introduced myself. He was wearing that morning’s frustration on his fifty-two year-old face. I made my pitch, telling him that I would like to have him attend the Audi Auto Show circuit and autograph a picture of himself to give the Auto Show attendees while this film we were shooting played in the background. Then I made a tactical error. I added the phrase, “I would build you up at each show . . . !” Those who’ve seen coach Jim Mora’s video of him repeating in a high pitched voice “Playoffs?. Playoffs? Are you kidding me?” can substitute Bobby Unser here addressing me – “Build me up? Build me up? People know who I am! What did you say your name was?” He left me chastened and bloodied but undaunted. I would have to watch my word choice and remember that greatness operates on heightened ego. I had to remind myself continually that I was dealing with someone who had won the Indianapolis 500 three times, stand-

ing alone as the first driver to capture that race in three separate decades (1968, 1975, 1981).

Later that year, Audi asked Unser to attempt a record at the July Pikes Peak Hill climb in its 600hp monster Sport Quattro SI. Unser accepted, anxious as he was for some competition after five years of retirement. Once again he drew on his decades of knowledge about the Pikes Peak Highway's 150-plus turns and sharp corners. Unser claimed he could negotiate the road blind folded, and there was no disputing that claim based on his record. The result was unforgettable. Unser flawlessly rocketed to the 14,110-foot summit in 11 minutes, 9.22 seconds—more than 16 seconds faster than the previous record, giving Unser 13 victories on the mountain over a span of 30 years.

My plans for the Audi Auto Show now included a bigger video display of both the land speed attempt and the victorious Pikes Peak Hill Climb victory. We had the core of the hill climb footage from the local Colorado Springs news station which filmed the race at various spots along the highway and from the air via helicopter. 303 Studios and its talented director Tom Davies, himself a retired race car driver, created an after-the-event script that we prepared to shoot in late August, just before they closed the highway to visitors.

The first meeting at Pikes Peak with Bobby and Tom got off to a rocky start. Bobby took a dislike to Tom for some reason, probably over some racing disagreement. Bobby sought me out and threatened to leave. I remember him poking a finger in my chest and saying, "Get rid of this 'runt'—(Tom is about five feet tall)—or I'm gone!" I managed to mollify him and told him I would handle Tom. To his credit, Bobby changed his mind about Tom when he saw the final edited copy of both films. Tom "knew a thing or two" about good racing film work.

As best I can figure, Bobby harbored some resentment over our first meeting. He asked me had I ever been to the Peak's summit, to which I responded "No." He informed me that the passenger side seat belt was broken on his rental, and

remembering my ‘legend’ etiquette, I didn’t make any effort to see if he was right. We proceeded up the mountain as only he could proceed up that stretch—pedals to the floor, hair-pin turn switchbacks, and me bouncing around uncontrollably. I remember seeing a lot of blue sky and sheer drop offs. When we reached the summit, I’m sure my face and demeanor showed three different shades of terror. I could swear I picked up a hint of a snicker from him. Payback, Unser style!

The display at the auto shows with both films and Bobby’s live presence worked out well. He and I spent a great deal of time together during and after each day’s show. He had a rule about who would drive a rental in each city—it was Bobby. He would speed up from traffic light to traffic light and then jump on the brakes, proving that you can take the race car driver out of the car, but you can’t take the car out of the race car driver. He regaled me with details of his life on the race circuit, and while I had no reason to doubt his storied life, several of the things I’ve come to know astounded me. When he tested a car for GM, he routinely wrote his fees on any scrap of paper that was handy, and Sandy Corporation, then a GM satellite company, would handle the reimbursement. Bobby claimed that the race cars with which he won each of the three 500s were part of his race spoils. He had several barns (museums) in which he stores these, along with assorted trophies, housing the collections in Colorado Springs and Albuquerque. Now they all are housed in the Unser museum in Albuquerque, run by his brother, Bill. Bobby often spoke of his relation with the multi-billionaire Chinese entrepreneur Teddy Yipp, a patron and friend to Bobby. Most were not about racing, but they were racy none the less.

Unser’s Indy 500 victory in 1981 was delayed over a controversy in passing cars during a caution. Bobby claimed that the delay cost him a million dollars in endorsements. Still, he did manage to represent companies such as Amsoil, a synthetic lubricant, Turbo Washer, and Chapparral and Polaris snowmobiles to name a few. He tested multiple brands of racing tires

for Goodyear, Pirelli, and Bridgestone. He was willing to sell me one of his “Bobby Unser “ designed snowmobiles at a discount, but I couldn’t find a reason to invest in one, given my aversion to the cold! Tires I would have considered.

Because he was such a well known figure, I got to meet many of the racing nobility of his day—Johnny Rutherford, Mario Andretti, the Unser family, “Big” and “Little” Al, to mention a few. I shook hands with Roger Smith, Chairman and CEO of GM and Lee Iacocca, Chairman of Chrysler at the 1987 Detroit Auto Show. I was struck by how much reverence Bobby had for both of these automotive giants.

On the occasion of the New York International Auto Show in April of 1987, the New York chapter of the Polish Racing Club staged a promotional driving program outside the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. It was a timed drive around some cones, involving some tricky maneuvers. I was co-pilot, naturally, as Bobby drove us to a second place finish. I have that trophy, a reminder of our time together.

We stay in touch, off and on. Since we are both the same age, we trade aches and pains, but in the main we feel we are lucky to still do what we do—I teach writing classes and he lends his legend to charity events around the country. The closed speed course record set in 1975 of 275mph still stands, and Audi and Unser still hold the record for a “four wheel drive” vehicle, something of a hollow victory since no other “four wheel” manufacturers have attempted to best it. Sudden Unintended Acceleration is a thing of the past, as the probable cause was driver error. Hence, the safety device on all cars now, which won’t let you drive until you step on the brake pedal.

A couple of things endear him to me. He is loyal to those whom he has known, and I am lucky to count myself among them. As he ages, he values things that have nothing to do with money or fame, things like family and past and present friends. When I moved from Audi Auto Show Czar to Audi Public Relations in 1989, Bobby wrote me to thank me for our time together. He wrote: “Hey, Bill. Don’t ever think of coming out

West without coming to Unserville (aka Albuquerque) . We would love to have you and I'm sure we could think up something to occupy you for s few days." I'm looking forward someday soon to take him up on his offer of a guided tour of the museum.