
Honoring and Preserving the Sports History of Chautauqua County



Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street - Jamestown, NY 14701

April 2019

CSHOF President Randy Anderson, along with CSHOF inductee Greg Peterson, recently had the opportunity to interview Falconer resident Don Short about his participation in a very unique road race through Mexico in 1954. The following story by CSHOF inductee Frank Hyde, then sports editor of the Post-Journal, sets the stage for Short's adventure.

Randolph Team Enters Car In Pan-American Road Race

Three unassuming young men from Randolph will be on their way south Monday hoping to put New York on the big time automobile racing map.



Buck Lilienthal, Wendell Anderson and Donald Short (left) will wheel a 1954 Ford in the Pan-American Road Race - 1,906 miles of racing savagery that has proven to be a top test of the world's best drivers.

“We’ve always wanted to drive in the big one, so we just got together, bought this car and entered.” Buck a slim, quiet 26 year-old who is no stranger to the roaring ovals, explains.

Buck, who operates a speed shop in Randolph, finished sixth in the Daytona Beach classic in 1950. He rolled over at Heidelberg, Pa. in 1952 and injured his back. The Pan-American will be his comeback.

Leave Monday

“Thought I might as well take a crack at the granddaddy of all road races as a return to the game,” he tells you quietly.

The trio will leave Monday, check in Nov. 16 and make first preparations for the long grind which starts Nov. 19 and ends Nov. 23.

Anderson will ride with Buck and serve as co-pilot, taking his turn behind the wheel when needed. Short, just out of the Air Corps after a hitch in Korea, will handle the mechanical duties. He will drive a station wagon south and move ahead of the Lilienthal entry, leading far enough in advance of the racing car each day to be ready for various stops.

10 Tires, Other Supplies

The boys are taking 10 tires and a vast assortment of mechanical equipment with them.

Buck is married and the father of two children. “Kentucky, that’s the missus, says we’ve got it won,” Buck smiled yesterday as he made final preparations for the trip.

Anderson isn’t exactly small potatoes as a driver himself. He’s lead-footed at area tracks for several years and was holder of the New York State roadster championship in 1946 and 1947.

The trio are all married men. Anderson is 28 and has two children. Short, is actually a resident of Poland Center.

Entry Fee \$280



Lilienthal explained the entry fee is \$280 and licenses for drivers and mechanics will add up another \$60 to the output.

The long grind starts at Tuxtla Gutierrez and ends at Juarez near El Paso. Laps or days runs average from 280 to 410 miles.

C. D. Evans of El Paso, Tex., driving a Chevrolet, won-last year’s grind with an average of 76.9 mph for the class in which Buck and his partners will be competing – the special series stock cars.

The Randolph trio is the only entry from the Northeastern section of the United States.

Buck and his partners stand to win a share of the \$10,080 in prize moneys. Lap awards can swell a driver’s take considerably although he may not place among the top finishers.

“We’re shooting for that big money,” Buck grinned.

If quiet confidence can turn the trick, Randolph may be home to three of racing’s more celebrated figures when the dust has settled down Mexico way.

So how did Don Short and his team do in the race? The following article by Dave Powell that appeared in the Post-Journal in December of 1954 tells the story.

Lure of Pan-American Road Race Grips Randolph Men; Would Defy Death Again

Convinced that he could have placed among the first six except for mechanical trouble, Robert "Buck" Lilienthal, 27, says he'd like another crack at the Pan-American Race in Mexico next year.

But next time, he says, he wants a sponsor. His was the only one of the 167 cars in the race that wasn't sponsored, and he figures that the trip and the race cost him and his companions about \$8000, including the car, expenses and lost time.

Buck drove the 1,908-mile suicide course Nov. 19-23, with an official finishing place of 21st. He used a 1954 two-door Ford, bought especially for the race.

ORIGINAL

Reg. Núm. Forma G. H.-88
Con Anexos. 19-776

RECIBO OFICIAL N° 22052242

El Paso, Texas a 12 de noviembre de 1954

LIQUIDACION a cargo de DONALD SHORT

Importe: \$ Dls. 3,00 (TRES DOLARES)

Concepto: IMPUESTO DE MIGRACION que le corresponde en su calidad de NO INMIGRANTE por seis meses de acuerdo con el Art. 50 Frac. III de la Ley General de Poblacion, vigente.

No. 52416

EL CONSULADO
LIBRO N° 1000

RECIBI el importe de la liquidación que antecede.

EL CONSULADO
LIBRO N° 1000

NO ES VALIDO SIN EL SELLO OFICIAL Y FIRMAS DE QUIENES DEBEN AUTORIZARLO. T. I. E. y V.-MEX - 18689-50Mboes.2.51

He gives a lot of credit to Wendell Anderson, 28, East Randolph his "co-pilot," and to Donald Short, Dry Brook Road, his mechanic. Don's job was especially rough, Buck says-he had to drive the service truck, keep ahead of the racers (which was not easy, since the roads were not blocked off for the trucks), buy the supplies, make room reservations, and help the others keep the car in shape in closely limited time.

Standard Car

The car was standard, except for added roll bars, an extra 40-gallon fuel tank, belts to hold the doors shut, safety belts, and heavy-duty shock absorbers.

The tires were kept inflated to 45 pounds, for greater speed, to hold the extra weight and for traction on the curves. After each 300-mile leg, the men changed tires, spark plugs, oil, shock absorbers, and refueled-and had to do it in one hour, not a second more.

The race is not for children. There were five drivers killed and 21 injured during the race. Buck drove at speeds up to 135 miles per hour - the speedometer wouldn't register that high, but a tachometer indicated the speeds.

First Leg Toughest

The nastiest part was the first leg, over treacherous mountain country, around curves with only six-inch shoulders, no guard rails, and nothing between the road and bottom but 2,000 feet of air. Buck likens it to the road from Onoville to Kinzua.

The roads have no white lines, which help a great deal in gauging curves. The pavement is rough, he said, but will allow higher speeds than those in this area because there is no frost-heaving. Road signs were no help - they were all in Spanish.

He had some close calls. The first day, shortly after the start, a little girl ran into his path, and he had to slow from 85 to 30. Five miles farther on, he rounded a sharp left turn at 100 M.P.H., and found the road covered with cattle. He ducked through, but one animal's horn left a deep scratch from the left headlight to the door, before the horn broke off.

Drain-Ditch Hazard

The towns have no underground sewers, he states, but instead have several drainage ditches, about 40 inches deep running across the roads. These are marked with banners over the road.

However, somebody took down a banner, and he hit a ditch at 90. The car flew 10 feet into the air, and dented the bumper on the way down.

On another turn, which he took at 110 M.P.H., the rear wheels skidded to within six inches of the edge of a precipice, and the bumper was hanging over the edge. Another time, while he was racing to catch two cars just ahead, he skidded into a cement wall, ricocheted across and nearly went over the edge. "That one was my fault," he admits, "I was just going too fast."



Neat Observation

Bud Anderson gets credit for some observation which may have saved their lives. About half way through the first day, he noticed that a white rock, with a red circle around it, lay beside the road just before each of the particularly bad curves. They learned later that an Italian team had placed them there in pre-race runs.

The Mexican people make a national holiday of the race, and nobody works on the day the race goes through town.



They make it more fun, too. Stunts like the missing banner, hay bales in the road and gravel thrown on the sharp curves help add to the excitement.

At Mexico City, the half-way point, for 10 miles up to the finish line, the road was jammed with people. Buck just kept going - at 135 M.P.H. - and the crowd opened in front of the car, and closed behind it.

Car Falters

At Mexico City Buck lost his chance for a high placing. He says that when he drove the car into the impound area at night, it was in top shape. When he drove out the next morning, it just wasn't running right.

He drove the next leg - 400 miles - at only 92 miles per hour, because the overdrive wouldn't engage. The trio repaired it within their time at the next stop, and managed to get the speed up to 100 for the next 600 miles. Then they had a chance to readjust the distributor, which had retarded 10 degrees. They had dropped to 38th place.

Burn up 24 Tires

On the last day, they just let it go, and picked up again from 38th to 21st, where they finished.

The race burned up 24 tires - after each leg, the tires were worn practically to the casings. They also shot two sets of tires on the service truck, which wasn't exactly loafing along.

Time is the big thing, and they watched it closely. At the start of each leg, an official writes the time in a log, and at the end another writes the finishing time.

At one point, in that fast final leg, he ran into a sharp left turn at 75, and struck an oil slick. The car went off a 10-foot bank, just missed a stone water well, and plowed back onto the road. "We lost 11 seconds there," Buck says.

Bridges Create Hazards

He recalls two bridges, each 100 yards long, which allowed, for each tire track, boards the width of two railroad ties, and only wood railings. He rumbled over them at 110. The sway was the bad thing there, he says.

Buck was well received in Mexico City, where he was presented with a stuffed alligator for his “cool nerves.”

He was better received than he had planned at Juarez, the finishing point. They had opened the windows and were waving at the people, and three women pulled Bud right out through the window. After his rescue, he kept the windows closed.

All in all, Buck thinks that driving in this area is the best possible training for the Pan-American. Drivers here learn to look around curves, and gauge them at a glance.

After Mexico, he spent a few weeks in Florida, and admits that they drove 30 laps on the Daytona track, where the big race comes up Feb. 19. He shows a mild interest, but says he prefers the road race to tracks. “On a track, it’s the car that wins.” Ha says. “In the Pan-American, it’s the driver.”

As for the 21st place, Buck says he was disappointed until another driver pointed out that for a beginner, it was pretty good. A lot of them didn’t finish.

At any rate, he’d like to try it again next year.



But there would not be another year. Due to safety concerns and the expense to the government, the race was cancelled after a five-year run, 1950-1954. The cancellation was unavoidable given that cars of the period were of a high-speed, low-safety design, and drivers of a win-at-all-costs mentality. Only a third of entrants typically finished the race, and unlike more compact circuits, the long stage sections were impossible to secure entirely, making it possible for crashes to linger for

several hours before being noticed. 27 people had died during the five years of the Panamericana, giving it one of the highest mortality rates per race in the history of motor sports, primarily because during the years the race was held, automobile racing had undergone an amazing technical transformation to emerge as an advanced science, and a number of exotic and fast entries were often participating. The speeds had almost doubled as a result, but safety controls remained static and competitors, spectators and safety control personnel alike became casualties.