

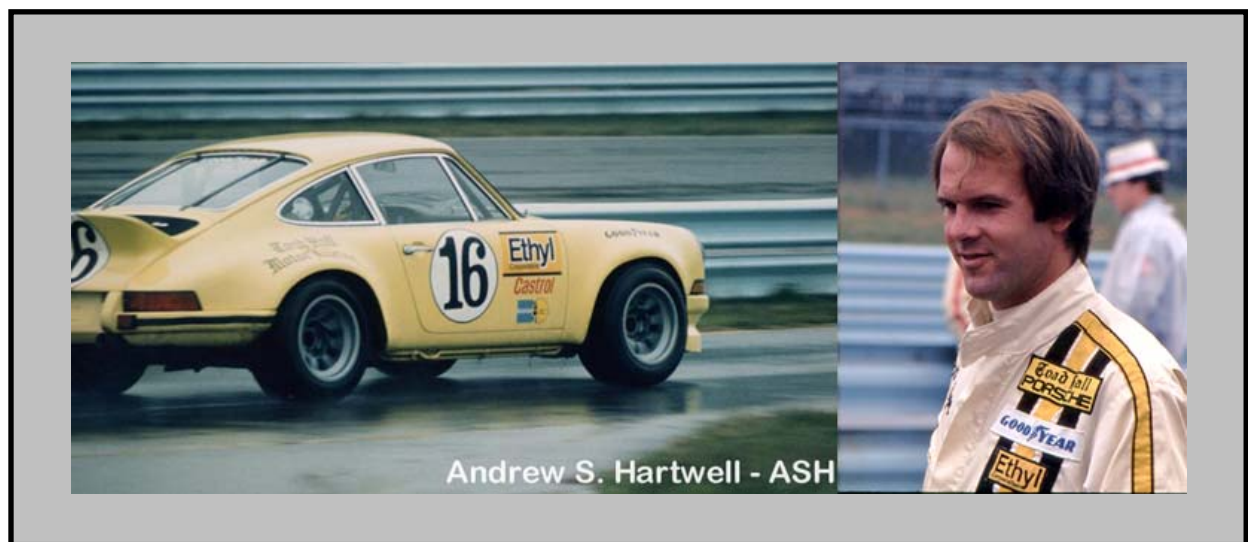


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Michael Keyser –A Man Fast With Words, Cameras, And Wheels

10/24/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell



At the age of 61, Michael Keyser can look back on a childhood growing up on a farm, a summer as a young adult exploring Europe in style, then on to a variety of adult experiences that would include time spent as a newspaper reporter, a professional photographer, racing driver and team owner, a film maker, a balloon seller, a writer, a publisher, and a web entrepreneur.

Who is Michael Keyser? He's a man who first raced in SCCA amateur races, then in the old IMSA Camel GT series, back in the 1970's. Later he'd go on to make an incredibly interesting and beautifully filmed documentary about the world of international sportscar racing called "The Speed Merchants". He's also produced two books of the same title.

In future decades he'd go on to author a book on the making of the movie "Le Mans", considered one of, if not the best movies about sportscar racing ever made. In the early 90s he created a company, Autosports Marketing Associates, Ltd., that markets his books, DVDs, and a large assortment of his original photographs from the 70s.

In his days spent behind the wheel, Keyser raced with or against some of the best of the 1970s, including Peter Gregg, Hurley Haywood, Al Holbert, Milt Minter, and many others. He finished 3rd in the 1972 IMSA Camel GT Challenge series, 2nd in the series in 1973, 3rd in 1974 and 8th in 1975, all in Porsches. In 1976, he teamed with Al Holbert to win the 12 Hours of Sebring. That year, for a run at the IMSA championship, he switched from a Porsche to a Chevy Monza

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where he ran against Holbert, also in a Monza. He ended up finishing 4th in the Camel GT series.

In 1971, in his little GT class 2.0 liter Porsche, he ran on the high banks of Daytona at the same time the all-conquering mega-Porsche 917s and Ferrari 512s were melting minutes into seconds and setting the racing world ablaze with amazement. Can you say, "WHOOSH"?

We've known Michael Keyser for many years, but never really sat down and talked with him about his past, his upbringing, and how he came to be so involved in racing in so many different respects – from writer to photographer to driver to film maker to publisher to merchandiser.

We'll let Michael tell his story. After all, he might as well drive this piece, having had the experiences first hand and because, after all, he is a writer.

"I grew up on a farm in Reisterstown, Maryland, about a half hour northwest of Baltimore. I was one of three children, with two older sisters. My Dad owned a newspaper, a weekly, but his real passion was breeding cattle; Angus, then Charolais. During the summers I worked on the farm, starting by driving the hay truck when I was 11 or 12. They'd pull the choke out a little, put the truck in first gear, show me how to use the clutch and I'd drive the truck from one hay bale to the next while the guys threw them onto the back of the truck. That was alright until they made me throw the heavy bales! That wasn't so much fun.

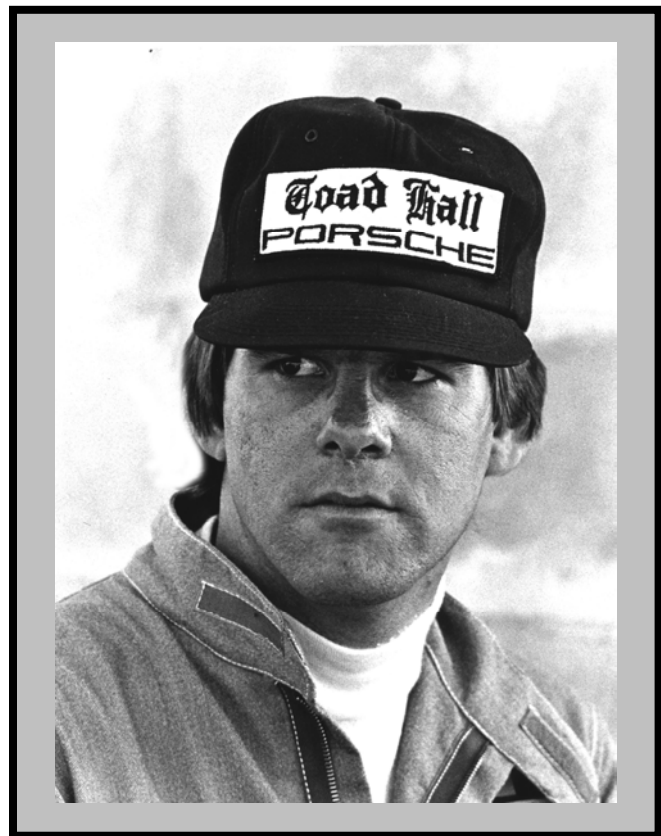
"In 1957, when I was 10 years old, my Dad bought a Porsche Speedster which he let my older sister drive. We had a driveway that was about a half mile long and I used to bug my sister to let me drive the Speedster from the main road to the house. She finally relented and let me take it up the driveway. Not a bad way to start driving – in a Porsche Speedster!

"Later my Dad bought a Jeepster, a kind of a sporty thing made by Willys, which he

allowed me to drive around the farm. It was about a half mile from the main road to the house and another half mile down to the farm. There were a lot of dirt roads around the farm and I used to slide it around the tight corners and through the curves, having a good old time. Perhaps that's why, when I started racing in a 911, it never bothered me when the tail came out.

"When I got my driver's license at age 16, I never had my own car. My family always had several around, so I drove whatever was available. I remember we had a Borgward that I drove quite a bit. We also had a Karmen Ghia. In 1964 my Dad bought one of the new Mustangs which I was allowed to take when I went out on dates.

"When I was 12 I was sent to Indian Mountain, a boarding school in Lakeville, Connecticut. On Labor Day we could hear the cars at Lime Rock a few miles away and we were taken there to



watch the races once a year. At that time I wasn't thinking about racing cars. Ten years later I'd be in the thick of it at Lime Rock.

"After Indian Mountain I went to Taft, a prep school in Watertown, Connecticut. When I graduated, by the skin of my teeth - I was a horrible student - my father sent me, along with three other friends from Taft, on an incredible trip around Europe. Listen to this itinerary: New York to Copenhagen, Copenhagen to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Cologne - in a rented VW fastback - then from Cologne to Wiesbaden, on a six-hour boat ride down the Rhine. From there we drove to Stuttgart, where I picked up my Dad's brand new green Porsche 911 at the factory. Now the four of us had a VW fastback and a 911 to tool around in. Not bad for a couple of young guys just out of high school!

"We drove from Stuttgart to Strasbourg, Strasbourg to Paris, Paris to Beaune, Beaune to Dijon, Dijon to Geneva, Geneva to Lausanne, Lausanne to Zurich, Zurich to St. Moritz, St. Moritz to Innsbruck, Innsbruck to Munich, Munich to Salzburg, and then Salzburg to Bad Ischl, where my father leased a trout stream with a retired General named McCrystal. The General's wife owned the Bristol Hotels in Salzburg and Vienna. On the river Traun in Bad Ischl we were taken fishing by a man named Johannas. He had been Hermann Goering's personal guide during World War III!

"From Bad Ischl, we continued on to Cortina in Italy, then to Venice, Florence, Siena and on to Porto Ercole where my father had built a villa overlooking the Mediterranean in 1960. Today Porto Ercole is a fancy Tuscan resort. Back then it was just a fishing village. From 1960 on I spent many of my summers in Porto Ercole, hanging out with the sons of the barber, butcher and candlestick maker, learning Italian in the process.

"After a few weeks in Porto Ercole, we spent a few days in Rome, and then flew back to New York. During our insane trip we stayed in top-of-the line hotels, all paid for in advance. Our normal routine was to check in to each hotel, take a shower, go out to dinner, then chase women in some night club. We did manage to take in a few sights along the way - a church here a museum there. The trip took about six weeks.

"Before returning to the U.S., my Dad arranged to have the 911 shipped back to Maryland. When he got it, however, he found he couldn't drive it worth a damn. He was used to a more sedate car like a Mercedes, so he gave the 911 to me.

"When I first returned from Europe, I went to Boston University....for one semester. When I flunked chemistry and psychology they showed me the door. I then went to work at the Baltimore Sun newspaper. My father was friends with the Managing Editor, which didn't hurt. I started out as a copy boy. One of my jobs was to make "copy books," several pieces of paper with carbon sheets sandwiched in between that the reporters used to type their stories on using their old Remington typewriters. They'd yell "Copy books!" and we'd run over and give them several books. When they were through typing they'd yell "Copy over!" and we'd get the book and take them to the copy desk, or send them to the composing room. I ran around all over the place a lot.

"After writing a few articles for the Managing Editor, one on bullfighting on TV, I was moved up to a feature called Direct Line, a reader assistance column. People would call us or write us telling us things like they had rats in their back alley. We'd call a guy in the Baltimore Sanitation Department, and, using the power of the press, get someone out to cure the problem. We'd send a photographer out to get photos of the clean-up and then I'd write the story.

"In the summer of 1968, my Dad died of a heart attack while vacationing at the Villa in Italy. I was working at the paper at the time and I remember getting a call from my mother in the early morning hours. She was a pretty tough woman. She told me, "I'm sorry to tell you this but your father died of a heart attack last night. We'll be home in a few days. I'll be in touch." Click. I cried a lot for the next few days.

"My father left me a considerable amount of money when he died. It didn't take long before I quit the paper and started Photographic Unlimited, I'd become interested in photography, so I took a few correspondence courses and started a business. We did general commercial stuff, photographing almost anything.

"In the spring of 1969, John Shaw, my partner in the photography business, went to Sebring. We knew a mechanic in Baltimore who worked for Bruce Jennings who was racing a 911 there. John came back and said, 'This racing stuff is cool. We ought to get into it.' So we bought another 911 and had it converted to racing specs for the 1969 Trans-Am series. Bruce drove it and John and I paid the bills. We called the team Toad Hall Motor Racing because I lived in a house called Toad Hall, 'Wind In The Willows' having been one of my favorite books in my youth.

"In the fall of 1969 I decided to try my hand at the wheel. To that end, I attended an SCCA driver's school at the now defunct Marlboro Raceway. In 1970 Bruce drove the car at FIA events at Daytona, Sebring and Watkins Glen. In the spring of 1970 I went to Bridgehampton for my second driving school, and then I raced the car in SCCA Regional and National races. In 1971 I drove at Daytona in my first FIA race with Bruce and Bob Beasley. We were on the track with the Porsche 917s and Ferrari 512s. That was a trip, having them fly by at 200 miles an hour while we were doing 140! I'd see a spec in my rear view mirror and then it was by me.

"Later I drove at Sebring and Watkins Glen, where Herbert Muller rear-ended me with his Ferrari 512M about three laps into the race. A guy spun in front of me and I hit the brakes. When I looked in my rear view mirror all I saw was red. I have photos of the accident that appear in the second version of my book "The Speed Merchants" that was published in 1999.

"I sold what was left of the 2.0 liter 911, and then ran a few races with a guy named Bob Bailey in a 2.3. In 1972 I bought a new 2.5 liter Porsche from the factory and hired a mechanic, who'd worked for Peter Gregg, named Hans Mandt. This was the year we traveled around Europe and produced the film "The Speed Merchants." I used the 2.5 car as a camera car during the film. I raced it throughout that season and at Daytona in 1973, and then I bought a 2.7 RS. My first race in the car was at Sebring, with Milt Minter.

"The car caught fire – with me in it – after the first pit stop! I was going through big bend when fuel was sucked out of the breather and onto the left front disc brake. All of a sudden I heard a tremendous WHOOMP! The fire crews got to me just in the nick of time, thank God! I'd just written a substantial check to Porsche! I climbed back in the car, where there was extinguisher foam all over the place, including the windshield. I thought, 'What the hell'. The car fired up, but I had to open the door and lean outside to see to drive back to the pits. The crew cleaned it up and Milt and I ended up finishing second in the race!

"I raced that car for the rest of 1973, sometimes with Milt, sometimes with Bob Beasley. In 1974 I bought a new RSR and raced it that year and throughout 1975. In 1975 I finished second in the car at the Daytona 24 Hours, then, in 1976, I won Sebring with Al Holbert in his RSR."

Returning to 1972, Keyser switched from still photography to film making, producing a documentary film about the world of international sports car racing that would be called "The Speed Merchants," like his books of the same name.

"In 1971 I'd watched an ABC documentary about stock car racing called "The Hard Chargers". Many of my friends knew nothing about motor racing, so I thought I'd make a similar film about sports car racing. One thing led to another very, very quickly. Before I knew it, I'd hired a producer, a director and a number of camera crews and we were filming at Daytona for the 6 Hour race in 1972. I called my new company Toad Hall Productions. We went on to film at Sebring, the Targa Florio, the Nurburgring, Le Mans and Watkins Glen. In the end I spent over a million and a half dollars making the film, and this is 36 years ago.

"During the editing process we screened the film for Robert Redford and Paul Newman. They liked it, but their managers decided it wasn't the "right" vehicle for them. So I did the narration as sort of an "omnipotent" voice. Having spent a considerable amount of money on the film I wanted to get it "out there" while the season was still semi-current. Once the film was completed I tried shopping it to major studios. They weren't interested. Not enough sex or blood, they said. I knew I had to add some names to the film to generate some interest so I approached Mario Andretti and Vic Elford about doing the narration. They agreed, so I rewrote the narration for them. We did a lot of editing, remixed the film and finally thought we had something we could sell.

"Eventually we hooked up with a distributor, not one of the big studios. He agreed to pay us \$1,800,000, plus a percentage. The fly in the ointment was that I only received about \$250,000 up front. It was really a tax scam they were playing. They made a feeble attempt to market the movie, showing it here and there around the U.S., at a lot of drive-in theatres, exhibiting it just enough to prevent suspicion by the IRS. Then they pulled the plug and wrote off the balance of the \$1,800,000. The IRS soon closed that loophole.

"In 1987 the rights to the film reverted to me, per the terms of the contract, and I've been selling it in various formats ever since, through my Autosports website and through various distributors. After more than 30 years I haven't gotten my investment back, but that's beside the point. I was able to make a film I hope is a credit to motorsports."

No matter how much of a financial advantage one might enjoy going into the sport of racing as a participant, history teaches us that virtually all fortunes will diminish in size with every waving of the next checkered flag. As the often times repeated saying goes: 'To make a small fortune in motorsports, start out with a large one'. This was the case for Keyser in 1977.

"When BMW showed up in IMSA in 1977 with David Hobbs driving their 320i, I knew things had become too expensive for me to continue racing. I sold my two Monza's and drove for a few people in Ferraris and Corvettes off and on, and with John Paul Sr. in his Porsche 935 once. That was about it.

"In 1979 I started a balloon business. I was one of the first people to deliver balloons instead of flowers in the U.S. I called my company Balloons Over America and obtained a trademark on the words "Balloons Over," starting several franchises around the country. We used to do the White House Easter Egg Roll every year. We had to blow up 20,000 balloons before 10 A.M.! I finally got sick of that business and sold the company in 1981.

"Then I wrote several books. One, "Token Soldier", was the story of a friend of mine who was in Vietnam in a mortar squad. He was wounded twice, almost court marshaled, then involved in a

theft ring. A second book is "A Prancing Horse Ransom". It is a novel about a kidnapping in Italy. Neither has been published, but they may be one day.

"I next got into the dog fence business; something like Invisible Fence I called it the Guardian Pet Containment System. That's a long story.

"I got back into racing in 1995, not as a driver but working with Brian Redman helping him promote the Jefferson 500 vintage event and producing the program. I also produced the programs for the Porsche Double Fifty and the first Rennsport Reunion (at Lime Rock Park). Suddenly I realized I had a pretty good collection of photos that had been rotting on the shelf for many years, so I began selling them.

"In 1995 I produced a poster/print called "Battle of the Titans" – a collage of 24 photographs I'd taken at the 1970 24 Hours of Le Mans. I set out to obtain the signatures of 25 drivers who had competed in the race. During my trip to collect the 25 signatures I met Jonathan Williams who'd driven the Solar Productions Porsche 908 camera car in the race. While he was signing the print I told him that one day I'd like to write a book about the 1970 24 Hours of Le Mans and the making of Steve McQueen's film "Le Mans." One thing led to another, and it happened. Working together with Jonathan, we wrote "A French Kiss With Death". At the same time Bentley Publishers wanted me to redo the original "Speed Merchants" book. The new edition, published in 1999, is completely different from the original version published in 1973, with new photos and a new text.

"It took me about four years to research and write "French Kiss". In 2003 I began working on a book with automotive photo-journalist Bernard Cahier which I published in 2007. "Bernard Cahier: F-Stops, Pit Stops, Laughter and Tears" is now in its third printing. In 2005 I published Paul-Henri Cahier's book, "Ayrton Senna – Through My Eye". For the last few years I have been working with Brian Redman on his biography, "My Life At The Wheel." We hope to have it out sometime next year."

We're looking forward to Brian's book with a high degree of anticipation. For those of you who didn't know Keyser the racer, he's certainly presented you with enough opportunities to get to know him as a writer and filmmaker. We suggest you visit his website autosportsltd.com or Google his name, or both.

Earlier we said that "Le Mans" is considered one of the finest films ever made about racing. We can honestly say that Keyser's "The Speed Merchants" contains some gripping action footage that rivals that found in "Le Mans." His film also takes some time to show us the behind-the-scenes lives of several of racing's greatest legends of the 1970s, Brian Redman, Helmut Marko, Jacky Ickx and Vic Elford. We've thoroughly enjoyed watching "The Speed Merchants" (each time we watch it we see something new, something subtle we missed before) and reading his books. We've also enjoyed spending time talking with him about his multi-faceted life.

For the past 25 years Michael has been happily married to Beth, who he says, has somehow managed to put up with him.

Keyser has kept busy, having just completed, "Behind Le Mans" a 95-minute DVD broken down into three featurettes 1) "Le Mans - The 24 Hours, 1970" an overview of the actual race using stills and selected footage; 2) "Le Mans - The Race, The Movie" a 15-minute documentary film that gives an insight into what was involved in the production of the film, and 3) "Le Mans - Behind the Scenes" a mixture of still photographs and film that focuses on the major players involved and the part they played in the production.

We have to wonder what he'll do once Brian Redman's book is finished. Perhaps the greater question is, will he have enough energy to do more?

"At this point, there really isn't anything I'm burning to do. A book with David Piper would be interesting. I would probably have to put that one on the fiction shelf! These books take a lot out of you. It took me four years to research and write "French Kiss" then another four on Bernard. That one took twelve trips to France to interview him and go through his archives, a week or more each time. Bernard demanded two sit-down meals a day with all the bells and whistles...caviar, pate, steak, French fries, wine, cigars, cognac. Then I was supposed to go back to work? It takes a lot out of you."

C'mon Michael. A few more laps before the final checkered flag, please. We'll be watching from the sidelines.

