Living with a Legend

10

Driving Lessons

– Steve Sloan

When it comes to sharing the automotive experience, I was not a good father. You see those stories all the time. Father-son auto restoration brings them closer together. Father and daughter bond over car project. I envy those dads. They had the time, talent, tools and space to do something I only dreamed of doing. All were things that I was lacking in when my kids were younger. Not to mention a scarcity of money.

To make up for that I did everything in my power to support the interests that my two children were drawn to. And for both of them that was music – specifically the trumpet. So when a few extra dollars did appear in the budget, they went for trumpet lessons, new horns and music related activities.

Mind you, I'm not complaining. Just listening to them practice brought joy to my heart. And I wouldn't trade anything for the pride of seeing them improve and advance in their own chosen field of endeavor. I got to attend loads of performances and improve my appreciation for various genres of live music. What a hoot!

And I must say that it worked out pretty well in the long run. Both David and Rochelle paid their own way through college with music scholarships, part-time work and small student loans. Accomplishments I primarily attribute to the strong values and sense of personal responsibility that my wife, Robyn, instilled in them.

What does this have to do with driving lessons? I'm getting to that.

With the college milestones out of the way and both children moved out and living on their own, my 1966 GT350 finally got the restoration it deserved; financed by borrowing from our retirement savings. Now I drive the car every chance I get – in part, making up for lost time. And for me, that driving experience is even better when it's shared. I love giving rides, and sometimes even turning over the driver's seat to a few select friends.

An interesting thing happened when I was taking my (now grown) son for his first ride in the car. He lives in Seattle these days and I'm just outside of Houston, so it was a few

The details of 6S087's 36-year rebirth were covered in the Winter, 2017 issue. Once the car was finished, Steve Sloan began picking up where he left off in 1979, when he bought the car. After being without it for more than three and-a-half decades, it was time to get reacquainted. He became, in effect, a new owner and experienced most of the first-time adventures that a new Shelby owner might typically encounter. This is the tenth installment.

months after the car came home from restoration before he got a chance to visit and go for a ride. He had always driven automatics and never expressed any interest in learning standard. But after that Shelby ride he suddenly showed a desire to learn to drive a stick. As he put it, "*It looks like the driver has a closer bond with the car – more control – like man and machine blending into one being for a specific purpose – to master the road.*" This observation actually shocked me a little. He'd been driving for over ten years and never expressed any thoughts along those lines. Hey, maybe some of my auto enthusiasm had rubbed off on him after all.

I offered, on the spot, to teach him in the Shelby. He firmly declined; mentioning that he would be too nervous making beginner mistakes in a car that was worth twice as much as the house he grew up in. I respected that and the lessons were delayed until "*someday*."

That "*someday*" came about a year later, on his next visit. With a few thousand break-in miles and a little dirt on it, the Shelby didn't seem quite as intimidating. And I suspect his desire to drive it had grown during his absence. So a morning was picked and the lessons were scheduled.

First I showed him the pre-flight drill – check the oil, coolant and brake fluid. Then I drove us to a local high school for the first lesson in the bus turn-around and parking area. I explained the shift pattern and had him shift through each gear with the engine off to get a feel of things. Then I explained the general idea of letting out the clutch pedal as you push on the gas. Finally I told him that if anything went wrong, just push down on the two pedals on the left.

Finally it was time to get things rolling. Push in the clutch, put it in neutral and start her up. So far, so good. Now push in the clutch and hold it down, put the shifter in 1st, give it a little gas and slowly let up on the clutch. Wowzer! We were rolling. Just like that! Oh sure, there was a little jerkiness involved, but less than you might think. I was impressed and I think David was surprised. It just seemed so easy.

I think that getting rolling is the most difficult part of driving stick, so we practiced that repeatedly before trying a gear shift. It started to feel like that first effort was just luck. The next few starts weren't quite as smooth. I was beginning to feel like a human bobble-head. But after ten or so repetitions things were smoothing out a little. He was certainly getting the hang of this quicker than I did back in the day. He only killed the engine once, and that was when backing up. So far, so good.

We advanced to shifting from 1st to 2nd and he mastered that like a pro. No problems whatsoever. Well, at least no problems after he was encouraged to put a little muscle into the task. I don't know about your car, but mine requires a little oomph on the stick to get from one gear to the next. It's not the butter-smooth, effortless glide between gears that newer cars offer.

Second gear was as high as we could get in that lot, so it was time to get out on the open road. I took the wheel to get us through some thick traffic on our way to a more open road. When we stopped for gas David took a picture of the car and posted it with this message on his Facebook page – "*Learning stick in a '66 Shelby carryover. What could possibly go wrong…*"

After gassing up we made our way to a nice open stretch of road – three lanes each way, separated by a wide grassy esplanade. A speed limit of 55 mph with very little traffic, and red lights spaced several miles apart. Perfect. A few drops of rain sprinkled on the windshield just before I turned the wheel over to David, but that didn't last long enough to get the road wet so we were still good to go. I know some of you are gasping that I'd have my freshly restored GT350 out on the

road when there was a possibility of rain in the forecast, but I have a different outlook on things like that. If a few drops of rain are all it takes to keep me from enjoying my car with my son then it's time to sell the car and take up a nice indoor hobby, like stamp collecting.

The moment of truth had arrived and David was up to the task. He pulled onto the road and accelerated through all four gears to a cruising speed of 55. The start was a little jerky and the shifts weren't exactly crisp, but overall it was a great first effort on the open road. And all the more amazing since he accomplished this in spite of his dad giving him constant and distracting "tips" about how and when to make every move. Ouch! Someone kick that guy out.

Things were going swimmingly until we pulled up to the first red light. Hmmm…. I think I smell something. It's familiar, but I can't quite place it. Oh, my! That smells like the brakes overheating. How could that be? David had barely used the brakes. Think, think… Uh oh! Hey son, would you go ahead and release the parking brake now?

Whenever I leave the driver's seat of my car I always do three things – put the trans in 1st gear, turn off the engine and pull out the parking brake. This pretty much guarantees that the car won't accidentally roll away and possibly run into something or someone. And it's what I was taught when I first learned to drive.

By now I'm sure you guessed what happened. When I turned the wheel over to David and we got out of the car to trade seats, I forgot to tell him to release the parking brake. He was faithfully following my instructions, but the parking brake wasn't included. My bad.

With the parking brake now released, we continued our practice session for another half-hour before we both agreed that was enough for the first day. So home we went; to the cool oasis of air conditioning. Did I mention this was in August in Houston and it was HOT?

The next day we followed up with another hour's worth of driving before succumbing to the heat again. Things that day were pretty uneventful until we were about a mile from home. When accelerating from a traffic signal, David had trouble getting from 2nd to 3rd gear. I grabbed the stick and attempted shift it for him, but no go. We were stuck in second. Bummer! And what's worse, this wasn't the first time that's happened in this car. I had been intending to adjust the shifter when I had a little spare time, but that hadn't made it to the top of my list yet.

We traded seats and I finished the drive home in second gear. Not really a problem accelerating away from a dead stop considering the 3.89 rear end, but a bit of a bother when attempting to cruise at anything higher that 25 mph. Oh, well. It wasn't far and we made it home just fine. After the car cooled down I reached underneath and jiggled the 1-2 shift lever to clear the jam, and moved the shifter adjustment a little higher on my to-do list. Ha, Ha!

That's all the time David had for driving lessons on that visit home. I think he had fun. I know I did. I love sharing my car with others, and having this experience with my son was one of the greatest events of my life.

Life is great when you're living with a legend, and you get to share the fun with your son.

All's well that ends well. But like potato chips, you can't just have one. There will obviously be more lessons to come.