The Jaundiced Eye

Forty Years of Writing, Reporting and Ranting from AutoWeek’s Publisher Emeritus

Leon Mandel

Edited by

Kevin A. Wilson
“The car enthusiast world loved Leon Mandel. He brought class and authority to the auto industry, in particular motor sports. As a journalist, he was very direct and sometimes feared, but always fair. And for that, he was respected. I am very happy to have called him a friend and to have enjoyed and appreciated his work.”

—Mario Andretti

“Leon was a great friend and a credit to the automotive journalism profession. He certainly had a great passion for life and cars. His wit and insight will be sorely missed. I'll always remember one funny story about Leon. Many years ago, he ‘rescued’ me along Jefferson Avenue in Detroit after the ‘gray market’ Range Rover I was driving broke down. Imagine my surprise when he pulled over to help. We both laughed about it then, but he never, ever let me forget that day.”

—Edsel B. Ford II

“For decades Leon was a lion in the automobile and motor racing world. Back when the print industry had enormous clout he was able to roar and when he did we paid attention. He brought integrity, passion, knowledge and a critical eye to every subject he wrote about. We miss him.”

—Dan Gurney

“Through the years, Leon and I shared a passion for the auto industry, in general, and auto racing, in particular. He was a dedicated, intellectual journalist who really understood the business. A tireless researcher, Leon would patiently wait until the appropriate moment to discuss the subject at hand. I always looked forward to seeing him and reading his work. He was a consummate professional and a good friend.”

—Roger Penske

“One of my most prized possessions was my friendship with Leon Mandel. He was the heart and soul of AutoWeek throughout the years, as the publication went from childhood to adulthood.”

—Carroll Shelby

“Leon’s words are more than just insight to the auto industry and to the business of racing. He had an extraordinarily keen understanding of life and the world around him. He shared his friendship and his counsel with me, and for that I’m forever grateful.”

—Danny Sullivan

“Talk about inspiring, 20 profanity-laced minutes in his office and I chucked a high-paying engineering job to follow him in a life of journalistic poverty. And I’d do it again.”

—Patrick Bedard, formerly of Car and Driver
“At his knee, a couple of generations of journalists learned to revere—and strive for—great writing. For those of us he mentored, this long-overdue anthology is definitive proof that he clearly taught by extraordinary example.”

—David Abrahamson

“Anyone whose major decision in life was whether to become a rabbi or a race car driver has the right priorities.”

—Tom Cotter, author of Cobra in the Barn

“In the landscape of automotive journalism, Leon Mandel was a force of nature. Direct, acerbic, informed and eminently entertaining, Leon had a unique style, which cut through the hype and hyperbole surrounding new car launches, auto shows and races. Whenever we met, Leon would always ask me to tell him what he should think, when, in fact, it was vice versa.”

—Matt DeLorenzo, Road & Track

“Leon Mandel was the master craftsman of our trade, the writing of stories about the automobile and those passionate about what we drove. We who were his apprentices could only imagine how Leon could tell those stories so vividly—and with a vocabulary that frequently had us going to the dictionary.”

—Larry Edsall, author

“Leon Mandel changed car magazines from sleazy product brochures into first-class literary publications with wide influence. There was a time when the editors of all the major car magazines were all his guys. It was all about the Leon Mandel Code of Behavior.”

—Michael Jordan, Edmunds.com

“Flaming arrows. That’s what I remember about conversations with Leon. One weekend we came together at a race I was writing about for his magazine, and I must have confessed to feeling a barrenness of creativity. His eyes brightened. He started talking. Into my mind came an image: a hillside covered with dry brush, and Leon’s words were shooting into it like firebrands, kindling ideas. Our chat left me invigorated, motivated, my brain nicely alight. He gave me a good weekend.”

—Pete Lyons, author

“Leon Mandel, a writer whose subject happens to be cars, always rewards anyone interested in either writing or cars.”

—Denise McCluggage, AutoWeek

“I worked with Leon at a formative time in my career, and he taught me some foundational journalistic principles. Most memorably: “You always have to answer the big, ‘So What?’”

—Kevin Smith, Edmunds.com
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Introduction

“History ain’t history until it’s writ.”

LONGTIME AUTOWEEK contributing editor Kevin Wilson plopped down in a chair in my office and, after letting out a deep cleansing breath, said, “This is not the book Leon would have chosen or wanted.”

Precisely because Kevin could make that observation is the reason he is overseeing this compilation project. He spent 16 years working with and for Leon, and through passionate pencil edits, laser gazes from over reading glasses, and top-of-lung rants and rails, Kevin got to know whether Leon did or didn’t approve of something.

Kevin had often seen the blank look I now gave him—a look I learned at the knee of my old man. I was waiting for the rest of the story and not giving “the tell” of curiosity. “Leon absolutely hated stories where the writer put himself into the piece, but some of his best stuff did that.” Kevin was right; nothing frosted Leon more than reading not about the subject but about the writer. He said the reader cares not about the author but about the experience. He was also right in that many of the stories chosen here include Leon front and center, and they are some of his best work.

Automotive journalism is about the experience. It delivers a fantasy. It puts a reader behind the wheel—whether it’s in a high-horsepower sports car slicing through a mountain pass or in the coddling embrace of a family minivan. Few were better than Leon at transporting the reader in words. He explained the intricate dealings of the automotive business, the sociology and psychology of collectors, the history of the car, profiles of racers, scoundrels and ne’er-do-wells, and did it with the right number of the correct words. He did this because he was a writer first and a keen observer second.

And Leon did not suffer fools. His craft was writing; not a day went by that he didn’t consume a book or correct someone’s
grammatical execution. He did this not to show a superior comfort with the language but because he loved words.

Imagine, then, growing up in a household with someone as passionate about cars and words as Leon. It was fun and precise, agonizing and challenging. But the wonder of the cars he brought home, the people he collected—and who collected him—and the places he went was intoxicating to the point where I knew it was the best job in the world.

Cars became central to his life. The first date he went on with my mother, Olivia Eskridge, was to a race at Watkins Glen when they were in college at Cornell. It was she who invited him. They later gathered their worldly goods and moved across the country in a Porsche. He sold British cars in Northern California. He became an active member of the Sports Car Club of America and started writing. In 1963, Leon joined a San Francisco-based automotive newspaper called *Competition Press*. He found his calling.

This collection should be enjoyed for the quality of writing first and for the historical significance and relevance of the automobile second. That might be difficult, because this collection hits the sweet spot of how the automobile affected the last half of the last century. The pieces describe the car as a societal tool, they share stories about those who profited from their sale and competed at the highest levels, they retell scandal and woe, joy and riches. Central to nearly all of these stories is the car—the lens through which Leon looked—and we look—at life.

And because it shows Leon’s love of the language, there’s even a fishing story in here, too. By the way, fishing was a pastime he absolutely loathed.

But writing he loved.

—Dutch Mandel
Grosse Pointe, Mich.
January 2010
Editor’s Note

ONE THING I’VE KNOWN FOR CERTAIN about this compilation of Leon’s writing: My selections from his vast body of work, some guided by his son Dutch’s advice, would not coincide with Leon’s own.

But that’s OK. Intentional, even.

This was never meant to a “best of” Leon Mandel collection so much as it is one compiled for and by people who knew, admired and, all in our own ways, loved him, including most of all his many readers. We’ve included stories and columns that make us say, “That’s Leon, that’s his voice, these are the topics that intrigued and motivated him, here are the people who engaged his interest, the places and activities that made his a full and well-lived life.”

Leon’s six books do not include a memoir, which is no surprise at all to those writers who worked for him over the years. None of us will ever forget his distinctive gravelly voice commanding: “We do not write about ourselves.” By this he meant to focus us on the readers and their concerns, not our own.

But of course we all do write about ourselves—and he did, too, probably more frequently than he’d have recognized, though almost always in the context of trying to convey a universal experience. His readers connected with what he wrote. They reacted and communicated in ways that made Competition Press and its successor, AutoWeek, “interactive” publications long before the Internet and Web pages made that word commonplace.

He delighted, disappointed or even infuriated readers with his views, which typically did not coincide with those of the mainstream. But his readers stuck with him, following him from Competition Press to Car and Driver in 1968 and ’69, to his books about William Harrah and Peter Revson in the early ’70s, even to Motor Trend later
that decade, and always when he returned to AutoWeek (he left three times and returned as many). Readers stayed with him even when he was irritating and when they thought he was wrong-headed. His work made it clear that he cared deeply about the same things his readers cared about. The cold, dispassionate objectivity of the itinerant reporter of news was not for Leon—he was one of us before he was a journalist, and he stayed one of us even as he stood up for the highest standards of journalism in the automotive arena.

This book won’t substitute for a memoir or autobiography, not least because he never chose to tell his readers anything much about himself before age 25 or so (those who were close to him didn’t hear much more than the readers did). But I do hope that this compilation will remind us all of who Leon Mandel was and of the important contributions he made to automotive journalism, motorsports and the auto industry. I’ve left out nearly as much excellent work as I’ve chosen to include, so if you don’t find your favorite Leon Mandel piece in this book, I apologize and encourage you—as Leon always did—to communicate that to the folks at AutoWeek.

—Kevin A. Wilson
Waterford, Mich.
January 2010
“Where, I wonder, are the concerned thinkers among you? Don’t you see the evils of motor racing; don’t you see its shining virtues? Or don’t you care? Or can’t you write? Or would you rather whine to your wife and slink away into a corner of your garage when you are raped by the likes of Douglas Toms or William Haddon or Shirley Povich? You can be passive if you wish, my friends. I will not.”
Leon insisted that automotive journalists should be just that—journalists first, with all the ethical standards that implies. In the late '80s, at an editorial-staff retreat, he distributed a summation of this ethic that I kept pinned to a wall for decades. Some excerpts:

**GOALS, HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS**

1. Best weekly in the country. By the way, the subject is motoring . . .

**SOME POLICY ABSOLUTES** and some not quite so.

- *AutoWeek* is part of a profit-making entity. One of its principal functions is to make money, but not at the cost of integrity. Money is made through excellence, liveliness, innovation.
- *AutoWeek* edit does not tolerate conflict of interest. This is the absolute among absolutes.
- *AutoWeek* is the reader's ambassador to the industry and to the racing community. It has entre everywhere. It keeps no secrets. It does not, for example, suppress or bend facts “for the good of the sport.”
- *AutoWeek* is written in the English language. Offenses against the language are forms of self-abuse, masochism. They will not be tolerated. This is the second absolute among absolutes.
- *AutoWeek*’s inventory goes down the elevator each night and comes back in the morning. Only the best and brightest will do.

Not all of that “inventory” stayed at *AutoWeek*, of course, so for a long while the majority of automotive journalists in America could include reference to the publication on their résumés, and that meant they'd all been exposed to Leon's approach (including the ones he'd fired, who for a while seemed to outnumber those who'd left of their own volition). Those who worked with and for him heard a lot of this kind of talk, while readers, appropriately, were better served by the application of these high standards rather than discussion of them. Sometimes, though, Leon found it worthwhile to lift the veil and talk about the journalist's role in the interest of providing readers with context. This chapter compiles a few of those examples.
Objectivity Be Damned

June 17, 1972

It's been nearly 40 years since Leon penned this statement of purpose and intent, so some topical references might elude the understanding of younger readers. If Formula B or Brett Lunger means nothing to you, you won't miss the point as a consequence. Where explanation seems essential, you'll find footnotes clarifying a point.

Mike Hansen, at least, has been paying attention. He not only read the race report on the Formula B event at Laguna Seca, he objected to it and went so far as to write a complaining letter to us.

It was not objective, he said. It was overly critical. How could we, who have gone on record as favoring the Formula B series, actually presume to rush into public print with the criticism that “outsiders” might read and believe? It was shocking, he implied, it was the act of a turncoat, it was . . . unAmerican.

Right, Hansen. Absolutely right.

Because, you see, the race was dreadful. It was boring. It was an endless parade of witless driving. It lacked drama, suspense and artistry. It was quite the opposite of what Formula B racing can and should be—and we, more properly, I, had the temerity to say so.

You had better know, if reading that piece and a Sebring race report some weeks ago had not already given you a clue, that I am no believer in objective journalism. Objectivity (as I wrote Hansen and am now telling you) is the province of the Christian Science Monitor and Consumer Reports. It has long been discredited as a realistic goal of modern journalists; even journalism schools, those citadels of contemporary William Jennings Bryanism, have abandoned it as a precept. You might get it from Knepper and his minions (who vastly outnumber me in both manpower and influence as well they should, he is the editor after all), but you’ll never get it from me.
(As an aside, the British motoring press is the great exponent of objectivity in racing journalism. I will content myself with quoting Raymond Chandler: “The English,” he said in The Simple Art of Murder, “may not be the best writers in the world, but they are incomparably the best dull writers.”)

The point to all this being I tend to think rather more highly of most of you than to be objective. AutoWeek readers (to whom I have been addressing myself, on and off, for now about eight years) are not your average strokes. They—you—are participants and competitors and car owners and other motorsports writers. In sum, the people who not only know the sport but have an investment in it. And they—you—are brave enough to be told the truth. Moreover, your faith is firm enough to withstand it. Even more than that, you deserve to know.

So if the town of Sebring is an execration, you will hear that from me, in addition to the race report, of course. You will even find out if the Florida heat is beating up on spectators again this year. On the other hand, if the L&M Continental 5000 is the best road racing ever, which it surely is, you will be so informed. And if Brett Lunger is the Hope of Heaven—which after his performance in Monterey is not out of the question—don’t be shocked if you read it here. To go even further, I am sufficiently unawed by shibboleths that if I see Benny Scott almost stuff a couple of other drivers into the cactus through sheer ineptitude, I’ll mention it—even if he is black.

Well, that’s what you’re going to get from me.

What I want from you is something other than apathy. At least Mike Hansen is not guilty of that. It seems to me that you—collectively—have two problems in your attitudes about motorsports and your willingness to express them. Either you’re willing to accept too many horrors attendant upon the sport: foul johns, rude officials, corrupt writers, avaricious promoters, indifferent sanctioning bodies, etc., because you’re afraid the hold that motorsports has on life is too tenuous to jeopardize by criticism; or your vested interest as an F/B freak or an Indy worshipper precludes the very thought of committing the sacrilege of questioning your values.
So the letters that come flooding into AutoWeek's offices are filled with platitudes or they carp about something so arcane that it simply doesn't matter to any but about one percent of the motorsports world or they are semi-illiterate flattery. Where, I wonder, are the concerned thinkers among you? Don't you see the evils of motor racing; don't you see its shining virtues? Or don't you care? Or can't you write? Or would you rather whine to your wife and slink away into a corner of your garage when you are raped by the likes of Douglas Toms¹ or William Haddon² or Shirley Povich?³ You can be passive if you wish, my friends. I will not.

¹. Toms was NHTSA administrator when Mandel wrote this piece.
². Haddon was Toms's predecessor, the first federal traffic safety chief.
³. Povich was a sports columnist for the Washington Post, a stick-and-ball guy often critical of auto racing, and also father of Maury.
So I am grateful to Mike Hansen. And to the bizarre lady who wrote in to say she thought it was a shocking violation of the Bill of Rights that I should presume to mention religion in a race report and to Sam Posey who defended his right to the lion’s share of the purse in the Continental with an unabashedly elitist argument and to John Timanus4 whose dry and convincing replies to the macho freaks among you who want to do away with safety precautions in motor racing are welcome whiffs of sanity.

I am on record as saying you will get no Crunchy Granola from me. Kindly do the same for us.

Only an ongoing dialogue by knowledgeable and concerned people can hope to influence the direction of motorsports in this country. It must be passionate and reasoned, mild and outrageous, relevant and peripheral. But most of all it must be. *AutoWeek* is your forum (as it is my platform and you do not notice me being diffident about using it as such); through the pages of this paper you can expect to be heard by the feudal lords of the industry and the sport. If you decline to do so, you are abdicating your right to be heard and you deserve whatever you get. You may even subject me to criticism if you choose. I have no desire to be enshrined in the *Reader’s Digest* as the kindliest character you have ever met—which seems to be the ambition of the majority of my fellow motorsports writers.

But I will do this for you. You have a right to know if something you read in *AutoWeek* has been contaminated by exposure to my typewriter. So I will petition Knepper to consider using a byline or initials on my submissions. If you’re going to have a bout of hydrophobia about something that appears in these pages—and I sincerely hope you do—you at least ought to know over whom to spew the foam.

I’ll be here.

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4. Timanus was SCCA’s technical chief for more than 20 years.
Pony Express Rides Again!

Sept. 22, 1973

This short piece resulted from Keith Crain and Leon teaming up to test the new Ford Mustang II by skipping out on the canned press introduction plan and driving the car from San Diego to Mexico.

Security on the Mustang II has been about as leak-proof as Watergate, admitted Ben Bidwell, general manager of Ford Division, at the car’s introduction on Coronado Island near San Diego.

And its reviews have been about as favorable, he might have added but didn’t. The Detroit News, whose auto editor is considered the single giant in a population of journalistic pygmies, ran without further comment excerpts from the buff books. Road & Track, Car and Driver and Car Craft. They were bad, almost without exception.

But what the hardcore porno enthusiast wants and needs is not necessarily what the public wants and needs. From a four-hour drive in the Mustang II, every impression is that it will be a car the public will want as much as its beloved uncle, the Mustang I.

The new car is not startling, but it is attractive. There are only two models, but between them they offer some 50 options, including a new U.S.-made 2.8-liter V-6 engine (the 2.3-liter, also made in the United States, is standard), steel-belted radials, velour seats and sunroof.

Ford has upped its production figures for the Mustang II from 300,000 to 400,000 for the coming year. If they have trouble selling all 400,000 in San Diego, they might try crossing the border. One comely lady in Tijuana, riding in the back of a pickup, spent four blocks looking at the front of the new Mustang, coming out of her reverie only when she realized it was something new in her experience. For the whole distance of Block Five she laughed and applauded.

And the hard-bitten customs and immigration agent at the crossing dropped her bored expression at the sight of the red fastback,
hitched her regulation .38 a little further over toward her right buttock so she could exit her cubby box, squealed in delight and engaged the publisher of *Automotive News* in intimate conversation about the car.

He thought about it all the way back to Charger Stadium and then announced that so far as he was concerned, ladies with .38s were a little freaky, anyway.
To Be Continued

July 27, 1974

Leon wrote this column when he left Competition Press and AutoWeek in 1974. This was the second time he left—the first time he went to Car and Driver for three years in the late ’60s. This article includes a little pocket history of the publication. This was only a few months after the publication of Speed with Style, which he co-wrote with racing driver Peter Revson, who’d died in an accident in South Africa just as the book was going to print. The book was well received, and Leon was pursuing other book ventures, which eventually included a biography of casino impresario and car collector William F. Harrah; American Cars, a history copiously illustrated with photos of Harrah’s collection; a mystery novel, Murder So Real, under the pen name Al Bird; and Driven: The American Four-Wheeled Love Affair, an analysis of both the benefits and the problems facing the car industry in the late 1970s. Before Leon returned to AutoWeek in 1983, he would toil three years as editor of Motor Trend and then write what turned out to be his last book, Fast Lane Summer, a first-hand account of a racing season with driver Danny Sullivan and Garvin Brown Racing in the second iteration of the SCCA Can-Am Series.

It is oddly difficult to remember the moment, 11 years ago, that I wandered innocent into the San Francisco offices of Competition Press asking for a job.

The moment of my arrival at Comp Press is gone, lost in the swirling mists of a middle-aged memory. Of course I remember the cast of characters: Bill Finefrock, now departed, a graduate of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, fussy, meticulous, a hard-nosed newsman; Don Bice, the prototypical art director type. He’s gone now too.

Russ Goebel is not gone. It’s hard to imagine that he ever will be. If you can anthropomorphize the generators at the Grand Coulee Dam
and combine their energy with the fierce and intimidating presence of
the mushroom cloud, you begin to see Russ Goebel.

There they were, on Boardman Place, right across from the San
Francisco jail. And although the days were full and the offices small,
I recall only a kind of tranquility, a peacefulness amidst the turmoil
of growth.
Growth there was, and at an astonishing rate. Finefrock, Bice and Goebel had bought the fortnightly *Competition Press* from *Road & Track*. It had been a disastrous adventure by *R&T* even though the magazine had hired the remarkable Jim Crow to be editor. Circulation was about 8,000, nobody advertised, nobody took the 12-page newsprint competition supplement very seriously.

But when the energies of Finefrock and Russ Goebel and Don Bice were applied, astonishing things began to happen. Circulation began a crazy climb; the book went weekly, people began to pay attention and almost before anyone noticed, *AutoWeek*, as it was newly named, had become a genuine force among car books and clearly the head-and-shoulders leader among motor racing publications.

By then, offices had moved to the San Francisco suburb of Lafayette. I had mixed feelings about that since the charm of the bail bond district of the city had showed itself in the occasional quixotic fashion.

Well, *AutoWeek* had moved to Lafayette in its inexorable climb upward and I suppose that made sense. My editorial associate then was Charles Fox, certainly the most talented motoring writer I’d ever encountered. I still think that’s true and I measure him against other alumni of *Competition Press* who are no slouches themselves.

For example, Denise McCluggage, a fine writer, a courageous driver, a lady whose mind is sharp as diamonds, whose wit is sharper than an Ehrlichmann’s tooth. For further example, Brock Yates, an early contributor of words and, believe it or not, cartoons. His drawing was execrable; his words were as filled with vitality then as they are now. Steve Smith, ex-editor of *Car and Driver*, and Mike Knepper, now feature editor of *Road & Track*, David Abrahamson, managing editor of *Car and Driver*. And, of course, Jim Crow.

All of this is to say that I lived in some very imposing shadows.

I thought about those people last week as I walked down the long, long hall in our immense new building in Reno toward the press room. We’d never had a press room before we came here. Somebody else had done our printing, somebody else our color separations, somebody else our mailing, somebody else our subscription fulfillment.