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PERFORMANCE
RESTO: 308 GT4

DEREK BELL'S
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DARK HORSE

The 308 GT4 doesn't get the same recognition as its sleeker, two-seat stablemates. But this tastefully modified 3.5-liter example deserves serious respect.

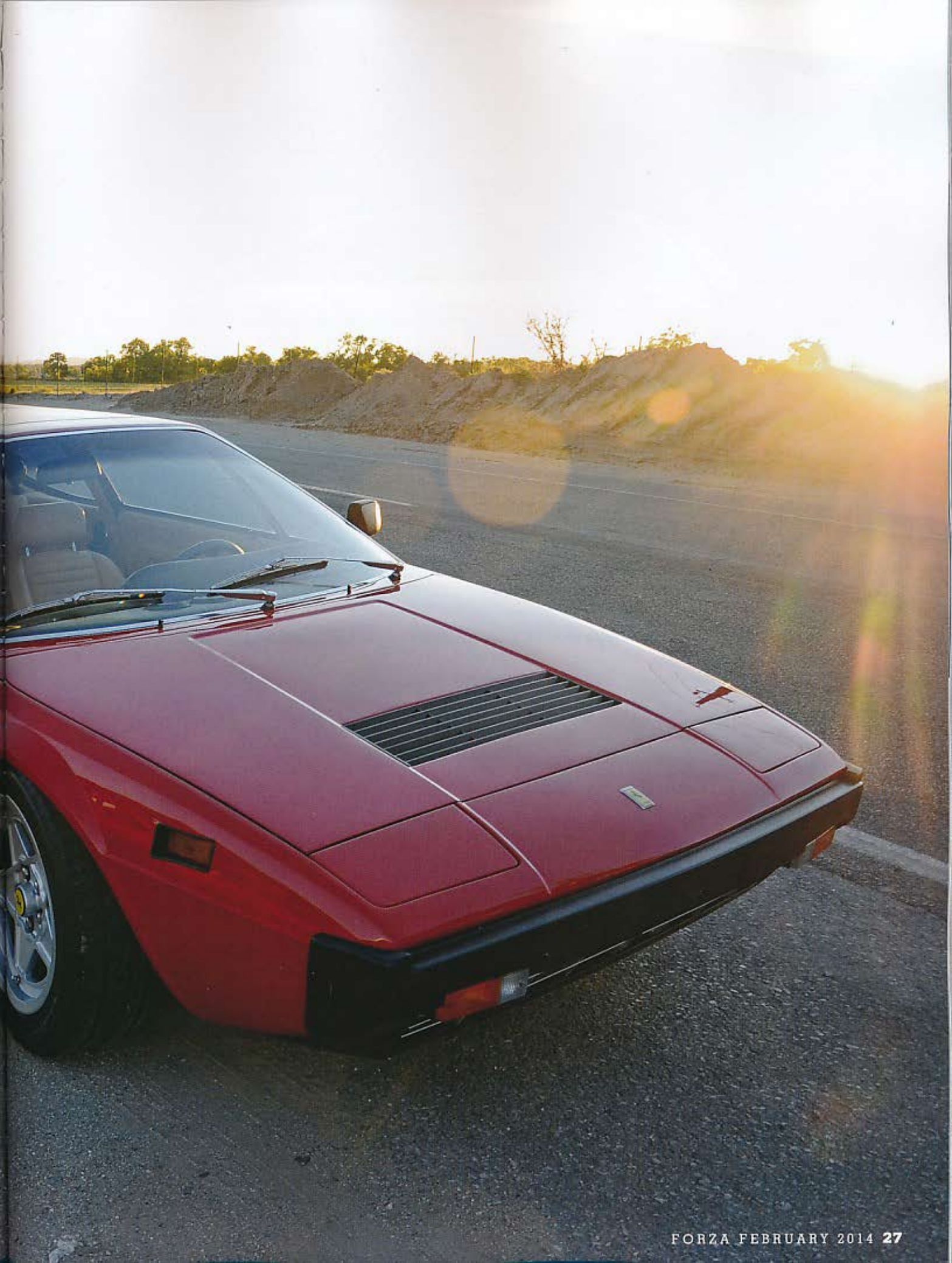
STORY AND PHOTOS BY ZACHARY MAYNE

Ed Brown likes unusual vintage cars. For example, he's owned an ASA 1000 GT, a sleek-and-diminutive Italian coupe powered by a Ferrari-designed four-cylinder engine. He's owned an Intermecanica Italia, an Italian/American hybrid that combined a brawny V8 with swooping bodywork. The recently retired doctor has also owned Fiats, Alfas, Triumphs and all manner of other weird and wonderful automobiles.

Brown's penchant for derivative cars makes it all the more appropriate that he bought this 1979 308 GT4 (s/n 15234), a model he arrived at after owning several other Ferraris over the years, including a Dino 246, a 330 GTC and a Mondial t Cabriolet (that last one being another unusual choice). Like the Mondial, the GT4 struggles to attain the level of respect so generously lavished on other Ferraris. But, if you ask an owner about his or her car, their response will likely be nothing but praise for the angular, wedge-shaped exotic.

"A lot of people seem to think that they're ugly, but I've always liked the styling," says Brown. The car's design, he adds, "speaks European in a way that the 308 GTs and GTBs don't."







As a kid, Brown hung around his father's auto-repair and body shop, and so was indoctrinated early into the world of American cars. But even in his early teens, he just couldn't see the appeal of the big, lumbering behemoths that the U.S. car industry was churning out. "American cars always seemed to be twice as big as they needed to be," he recalls, but smaller European cars were just his speed. "They were pared down and you could actually feel some feedback through the steering wheel."

So it was that, at age 15, Brown and his father spent a day looking at as many small British sports cars in and around the Dallas, Texas area as they could—and Brown ended up with a Triumph TR3 as his first car. A succession of British sports cars followed as he navigated his way through college, then medical school. Eventually, he drove a BMW

2002, which he describes as "a quantum leap above what I had been driving." More German cars soon followed, including several Porsche 911s.

In 1990, now fully immersed in his career as a doctor, Brown decided to take the plunge into the world of Ferrari ownership, starting with the aforementioned 1967 330 GTC. "It was glorious, a really beautiful design and an enchanting car," he says, "but it drove like a truck."

Like a lot of car guys, Brown goes through a lot of cars, buying and then selling them as it suits his mood and desires. In 2009, having been without a Ferrari for a while, he began to search for a 308 GT4. In addition to liking the model's looks, Brown enjoys the feel of sitting so far forward in the cabin, which he calls "race car-like." In addition, he says, "I love the big windshield and the great visibility. It's a smooth, fast car, and

with the carbs makes really good sounds."

Brown wanted to buy the best example he could find, and with that mantra in mind he booked a flight to Florida to look at two GT4s which were advertised as being some of the best around. The first one purported to be a Platinum-winning show car, but it didn't hold up very well under close inspection. The second one, however, proved to be as nice as claimed.

The car was being sold by Steve Fabiano, a longtime Ferrari mechanic and body man. "When he sent me a photo of himself block sanding a Cal Spyder, I knew he was the real deal," says Brown. The car had obviously been well cared for: "It had had the same owner for 27 years, had 40,000 miles and drove really well."

The 3.0-liter V8 engine was strong, although it wasn't quite running right. Brown figured a little carb tuning would sort that

out, so he went ahead and bought the Ferrari from Fabiano.

As is often the case with classic-car ownership, things didn't exactly go smoothly after the Ferrari was shipped to its new home in Albuquerque. "The engine never really ran as well as it did on the test drive in Florida," Brown says. The 3-liter V8 wouldn't pass New Mexico's required emissions test, either.

In an attempt to get everything sorted, Brown delivered his new GT4 to Carobu Engineering in nearby Estancia. Soon thereafter, he got the call that every Ferrari owner dreads; the car had dropped a valve. "It's not a matter of if, but when, one of the fragile OE sodium-filled exhaust valves will snap," says Bert Wehr, Carobu's engine guru. "It can happen anywhere from 40,000 miles to 60,000 miles."



Ed Brown's 308 GT4 looks mostly stock inside and out, but its standard 3.0-liter V8 has been upgraded to 3.5 liters and 280 horsepower.

In this case, the valve broke when the engine was idling. While the low revs likely reduced the amount of damage done, the free-floating valve head still broke a hole in the top of the piston. As a result, the engine would need to be rebuilt.

When presented with the five-figure repair bill, however, Brown balked. He pulled the GT4 out of the shop and, after researching various options, shipped the 3-liter V8 to another Ferrari engine specialist. Where it sat. And sat. "Nine months later, I called and told them I was pulling the motor out of the shop," says Brown. "I kind of had to go crawling back to Bert at Carobu."

Never one to hold a grudge, Wehr presented Brown with a range of options, the cheapest being a basic rebuild with a new piston and liner to replace the broken parts, as well as rebuilt heads with new valves. At the other end of the spectrum was an increased displacement 3.5-liter conversion. Brown couldn't resist, and checked the box for more performance.

The 3.5-liter conversion is based around a Carobu-designed 78-mm billet stroker crankshaft, which mimics the design of the factory Ferrari crank, bolts to the original flywheel and weighs 10 pounds less. The stock connecting rods were reused, but they now actuate Carobu's 85-mm Razzo Rosso pistons inside Razzo Rosso liners. The heads were rebuilt with new valves and Carobu's proprietary camshafts, and the intake side was ported and polished for better airflow. On an engine dyno, the 10:1-compression V8 produced 280 horsepower and 240 lb-ft of torque—up from the stock engine's smog-crippled 205 hp and 203 lb-ft.

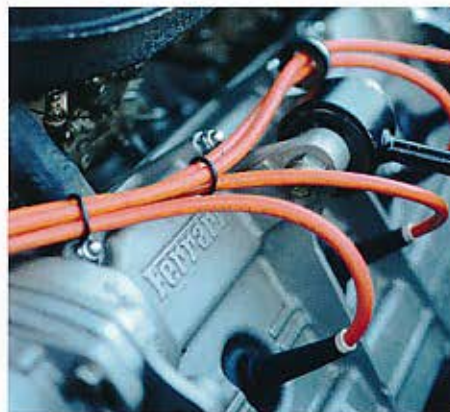
To handle the added output, Brown wisely chose to upgrade the Ferrari's suspension. The original Koni shocks were rebuilt and, at the same time, converted to a threaded body, which allows the ride height to be raised or lowered easily. Stiffer aftermarket springs were fitted in place of the factory items. At the rear,

the stock anti-roll bar was replaced with a larger unit to reduce understeer and balance out the handling. The original 14-inch wheels were ditched in favor 16x7-inch front and 16x8-inch rear wheels from a later 308 *Quattrovalvole*. These are shod with Bridgestone Potenza RE70 Sport tires.

With so much pricey mechanical work going on, Brown decided to take the plunge and have the Ferrari repainted. "I really grappled with preservation versus restoration," he recalls. For the most part, the car still wore its original paint, though it was checking in a few areas. Brown knew that the paint could be hiding rust that would have to be dealt with eventually, so he had the car stripped to bare metal.

"I thought when my body man, Steve Hancy, got into it, he would find all sorts of rust," Brown says. "When we sanded it to bare metal, though, there was only one, dime-sized bit of rust."

The condition of the sheet-metal was all the more remark-



able considering the fact that the Ferrari had spent the majority of its life on the East Coast. With the lone rust repair completed, the GT4 was primed and sprayed with multiple coats of Rosso Corsa paint.

While the 308's exterior looks stock aside from the wheels and slightly lowered ride height, sharp-eyed enthusiasts will also spot the tucked bumpers. Brown had initially wanted to fit sleek European-model bumpers, but soon discovered it wouldn't be a simple job to do right; removing the U.S.-spec bumpers would have exposed numerous cutouts in the car's sheetmetal which would have to be filled in and painted. Instead, small holes were drilled in the stock bumpers' hydraulic rams so that the oil inside could be drained out. The bumpers were then pushed back several inches and small screws inserted to keep them in place. *Voilà*—a much more streamlined Ferrari.

The GT4's interior proves to be as immaculate as its exterior, and, to my mind, more appealing. Anyone who has never driven (or at least sat in) a GT4 is missing out: The cockpit has a surprisingly airy and spacious feel that belies its relatively compact dimensions. The

wide instrument binnacle adds to this impression of roominess, although, in typical Ferrari style of the era, the footwells are cramped. Outward visibility is far better than in a two-seat 308 GTS or GTB.

While the engine was being rebuilt, Brown had the front seats recovered in new leather and the rest of the interior hides dyed; as a result, the cockpit looks, feels and smells practically new. The steering wheel is new, although period-correct, and Brown even retained the period-correct (and still functional) aftermarket Blaupunkt stalk stereo controller that sticks up next to the driver's seat. This device may be kitschy now, but it was state-of-the-art back in the late '70s.

Brown did make a few contemporary upgrades, including drilled alloy pedals and a titanium shift knob. But he's most proud of the surround for the sunroof handle. "The old surround crumbled like an old mummy when I first touched it," he recounts. "I finally found a company in Idaho that CNC-machined an aluminum copy of the piece. It took four or five months of back-and-forth with the company, but the result is perfect."

When fired up, the 3.5-liter engine sounds pretty much like

a standard 3-liter version, albeit with a slightly deeper exhaust note spilling from the tailpipes. (The Ferrari still wears its factory headers, but the catalytic converters were deleted and an X-Ost Maranello sport muffler added.) Blipping the throttle gets the dual downdraught Weber carburetors *brap-brapping* as they deliver their cocktail of air and fuel to the enlarged V8.

Not surprisingly, Brown's GT4 is considerably quicker than a stock example. Peak horsepower arrives at a lofty 6,600 rpm, but it's the newfound and plentiful torque that makes this Ferrari so beguiling to drive. By 3,800 rpm, the engine is already pumping out over 96 percent of its maximum twist, which translates into effortless speed any time I get on the throttle. At the same time, the V8 revs so eagerly that it feels like it will happily sail past the 7,700-rpm redline. The car's shift action is also particularly nice, snicking through the gears smoothly and lightly.

Thanks to the Ferrari's wide, flat windshield, the road comes at me in Cinemascope, rushing up to the car as the Ferrari surges forward—and the sound is absolutely glorious. The deeper, sharper exhaust note complements the snorting carbs, and as the revs rise the

engine's song changes from a growl to a shriek.

Though the suspension has not been drastically modified, Brown's well-chosen upgrades transform the Ferrari's behavior when the road begins to wind. The lower ride height, re-valved shocks and stiffer springs reduce body roll around corners, along with squat under acceleration and dive under hard braking. The larger rear anti-roll bar goes a long way towards eliminating understeer in tight turns, making it far easier to rotate the back end. Thanks to their longer wheelbase, GT4s have more predictable handling than the slightly twitchy 308 GTB and GTS models, which also helps make Brown's car very easy to steer with the throttle; the chassis' setup seems to encourage a tail-out driving style.

The sporting result is predictably exhilarating, but the GT4 has another trick up its sleeve. At the end of my drive, I'm faced with an hour-long freeway cruise, and the Ferrari reveals itself to be a proper GT, with a smooth, comfortable ride.

Brown is the first to admit that he has more money in his GT4 than it's worth, but he couldn't be more happy with the results. More so than any of the other unusual cars that have passed through his garage, this Ferrari is a keeper. ●

Larger 308 QV wheels, coil-over suspension and a bigger rear anti-roll bar have significantly improved this Ferrari's handling.

