

From Bob Bondurant

Farewell Mr. K, My Friend

I have lost my very dear and close friend Mr. K today. We communicated regularly over the past 5 years. He loved to get me and my wife Pat on Skype where we would express our gratitude for each other, send each other old and new photographs and talk about the old days. The 47th anniversary of my school is always on Valentine's Day. We had placed a call from Maui to thank him for believing in me and for his support; it was odd that he did not return my call. After quickly contacting his son Mitsuo, we learned Mr. K was doing quite well from a recent surgery. He passed along our well wishes and great appreciation to his father and kept us updated. Mr. K was happy to hear from us and joked about around about wanting champagne instead of pipe water. That goes back to the early days when we graduated students from the school in his 240 Z cars. We always had a champagne graduation celebration and Mr. K thought that was wild. Those days are long gone!

Mr. Katayama was the sole reason that the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving got any air under its wings 47 years ago. After my Can Am crash at Watkins Glen on June 23, 1967 nearly killed me, and being told I would never walk again, I had to make some big life changing decisions. First I had to learn to walk again, and secondly I had to stop racing and figure out a new way to make a living. Lying in the hospital bed in full body traction, I remembered training the actors for the movie Grand Prix to drive Formula cars and how that felt good to my heart.

The Big Guy up above helped me swallow and accept all the bad news and gave me the idea to take all I had learned as a Champion Driver and teach others how to drive correctly and to save thousands of lives. After months of recovery, I had a buddy help me write a proposal and to go to different car manufacturers to ask for full car sponsorship to start my driving school. Don Rabbitt, my old Shelby PR guy, would load me, with casts on both feet, into my 1967 yellow Camaro and throw my wheelchair in the back and headed me to the Porsche West Coast Headquarters in Newport Beach. I went to Porsche first because I felt Porsches were the best European car for the School. I liked European cars because I raced them and the car would need to take hard track conditions during training. They looked down at my feet in casts, sitting in a wheel chair, asking for cars and parts. Not a good visual. They asked "Bob, how do we know you can do this school?" After reminding them that I won races for them in Europe, they said they were not going to say yes, and they were not going to say no, they were just going to observe me and evaluate how well I would do. They eventually did come through, but not before Mr. K agreed to fully sponsor me first.

The same day I gave Porsche the proposal I stopped by the Datsun Headquarters. Datsuns were winning a lot of races in the U.S. and had a reputation of being a very well built car. The first guy I met was Mayfield Marshall, the Marketing guy for Datsun. He flipped through the proposal and said that Mr. K just happened to be in the office that day. They were standing in the hallway and I was in my wheelchair when Mr K came down and we shook hands. He said that Mayfield had shared with him that I wanted to start a racing school. He shared that he had followed my racing career and knew I had raced F1 for a full season. He was very impressed with meeting me, which helped! He wanted to know what I needed and I said I needed a 510 Sedan for an instructor car, a 1600 roadster and a 2-liter roadster and parts.

He just listened and then asked, "how many parts do you need?" I just kind of laughed and said, "I don't know how many parts I will need because I don't know strong your cars are!" We both had hard laughs over that comeback.

He said "I like you, I looked in your eyes and I knew I could trust you and I liked you right away." I quickly responded that I also felt like I could trust him to do as he says. He liked my reputation and I promised to help him sell the Datsuns with all my students, he and I went right to work on the collaboration, it was a fantastic relationship! He got the cars to me in a hurry and he stood by my side along with my very good friend and American International Racing business partner actor James Garner on February 14th, 1968, Valentine's Day, 47 years ago.

My first few days went hot and cold for students. The phone rang on my 3rd day. I had a call from Universal Studios that they were sending Paul Newman and Robert Wagner to be trained for the movie Winning. It was the day the school went into full gear and I called Mr. K to share the news with him. He told me to save the car that I trained Paul Newman in that it would be worth good money some day. I did and I still have it in my museum.

We went with the Datsuns for 2 years, and then Porsche came to the table. They said that they felt that I did better with the school than they could have imagined and they sponsored me with 911 racecars and 914/6 Porsches for the School. Mayfield Marshall denied me new Datsuns without Mr. K's knowledge, but once Mr. K found out, I was eventually outfitted with 70 new Datsun 240Zs and new instructor cars. Porsche was fine with the Datsuns and did not consider them competition. Mr. K was absolutely thrilled with the jump in car sales from the school students and at 105 years old would laugh and remind me that we had a good relationship that sold him many, many cars. Without his advice I also kept one of those 240Zs for my museum!

Mr. K became the President of the newly named NISSAN of North America. After 12 years of a full sponsorship of cars to the Bondurant School; Nissan Japan President denied Mr. K permission to continue the sponsorship. History went down and that was the reason I agreed to accept Ford's proposal in 1982 to become the new full sponsor to the Bondurant School. The Japanese upper management denial for the continued support to the school was a very hard blow for Mr. K and he worried it would affect our friendship that was much more than a business relationship. We had stayed in touch but re-united in 1997 at Elkhart Lake, where I gave my 82 year old friend hot laps around the track with such great joy. The irony of that day was that I had my two Giant Mentors who both entirely paved the way for my World success, both Mr. K and Carroll Shelby were friends and there they were, with me on the same day with the same amount of bragging rights on how they helped me get to my dreams.

Both of my greatest mentors are now gone. Mr. K please find Shelby and let him know that you are there to talk about the good ole days when men were men and cars were cars. And Mr. K, I will never forget the first day we met and how we trusted each other incredibly and with no reservation. I want to tell you just one more time, how much gratitude I have for you, for your unyielding belief in me, for the deeply emotional connection we shared for the past 47 years of your amazing life as a man who loved cars, loved people, and loved life.