

THE MYSTERY OF THE LE MANS LOLA



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The mystery Lola T70 as it is today.

1978 Rondeau M378.01



Another shot of the car as it is today.

In my career as a writer on motor racing and a dealer in Historic racing cars, I have often attempted to find the trues histories of racing cars that have a question mark over their stories. This is, I find, an enjoyable activity, to me at least! I dearly like attempting to find the truth behind a car with a "story." Usually, through a Worldwide network of friends and acquaintances built up over many years, I am able to resolve matters. Occasionally, I come up against a frustrating brick wall. In these columns, I'm telling the stories of some of the cars whose histories I have been unable to resolve. If anyone out there in reader land can help in filling in the blanks in these cars histories, I should love to hear from them. Where possible, I have used real names. Occasionally, to shield someone, I have used an Alias!



And from the other side.

Years ago, I wrote a book on the Lola T70, that glorious "Big Banger" racing sports car ("Lola T70 – The Racing History.") I made a point of researching the histories of as many individual cars as possible and reported my findings in an appendix at the back of the book. It was a tortuous process. For example, I often comment that Lola built sixteen Mark III B coupes and there are only thirty-eight left – and counting! I kid you not.

However, the Mark III T70 was a more complex car to build and so I've never encountered a "fake" Mark III, which leads us into the story of this month's mystery car.

I first encountered this particular Lola when Julius Thurgood, now well known as the head of the "Top Hat" racing organization in England, called me one day in 1997. He asked me to go look at a Lola T70 that he'd just sold to his friend, Noel Butler, a local BMW dealer and repairer in Tyseley, Birmingham, England.

Upon arrival at Noel's shop, we were confronted with what appeared to be a 1969 Lola T70 Mark III B, except that this car, spectacular in yellow paint, had the cockpit/center section

bodywork of a Mark III coupe, with the typical gullwing doors of that car. (For those of you unfamiliar with T70s, the Mark IIIB had forward opening doors.) Upon further examination (as the police would say!) we found a strange mixture of a car.

The chassis looked as if it was originally from a Mark III, but had obviously had a heavy frontal impact at some time, as evidenced by the somewhat hasty and crude repairs that had been made to it. The front of the monocoque chassis, including its front suspension cross beam, was missing and had been paneled over, with a tubular subframe built onto it to carry the front suspension, steering rack and radiator. The rear of the chassis had likewise suffered damage. It would appear that, sometime in the past, the car had received impacts at the front and rear and the mechanic(s) who repaired it took the easy way out, instead of rebuilding the monocoque properly. The suspension and brakes were from a mixture of Mark III and F5000 T140. There was no chassis number but there was a ZF gearbox (T70s had Hewland boxes) sitting behind the typical Chevrolet V8 engine.

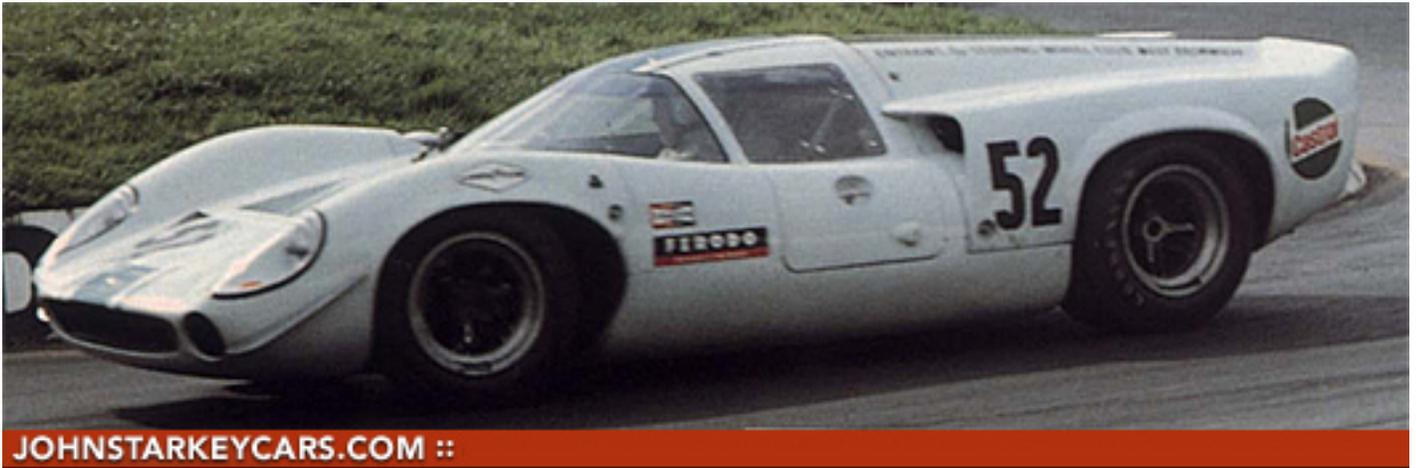
There was a badge of Franco Sbarro in the cockpit. At the end of the T70 Mark III production, Franco Sbarro, ex-Crew Chief of Scuderia Filipinetti, a skilled engineer who operates a race/prototype shop in Switzerland, bought up the remaining Mark III spares, including several chassis, from Lola and constructed five to seven cars for the street from these. (I know of one powered with a Ferrari engine in Washington and another with a "Big Block" Chevy V8 in Texas.)

I immigrated to America shortly after seeing the Lola and lost track of it, although I heard of it from time to time as it changed owners. Eventually, it was bought by ex-racer Mick Hill and he put it into the H & H Auction at Buxton. A friend in Britain contacted me about it, as he was helping Simon Hope, the Head of H & H Auctions. He wanted my professional opinion on the car and I gave it as: "Probably a Sbarro-built T70."

Franco Sbarro had also built up the very last Mark T70 III Coupe, chassis number SL73/135 and equipped it for the street. It was damaged in a fire in France, sold to the Gebhardt racing shop in Germany, sold to the current owner and is today under restoration in Zeckern, Germany.

I also learned that Lola Cars had given the yellow T70 a letter of authentication, calling it T73-135 but they did not know of SL73/135's existence in Germany when that was written. The car went through the auction and failed to reach its reserve. I then discovered that the car was entered in a Coys of Kensington auction where it was claimed to be the real SL73-135. It was sold to a Mexican at the auction and he called me shortly after taking delivery to ask me to find out exactly what he had. I asked him to send me all the paperwork that came with the car and, when that arrived, studied it all to find out as much more as I could. According to the auction catalog description, this car took part in the making of the film "Le Mans" starring Steve McQueen, in which several Lola T70s, masquerading as the then far more expensive Porsche 917s and Ferrari 512s were crashed. As far as my researches

show, the Lola disguised as a Ferrari 512 was SL73/134 and the one disguised as Steve McQueen's Porsche 917 was SL76/141.



Sid Taylor driving his new T70 at Mallory Park in 1968

SL76/134 had an excellent history, having been sold to Sid Taylor for Denny Hulme to drive in 1968 and then being sold to Gil Baird of Techspeed. He had entered Chris Craft in the Lola in 1969 in the British Sports Car Championship and it had won handily, beating the likes of Brian Redman and Denny Hulme in Mark IIIB T70s.

There is a photo on page 389 of the book "A French Kiss with Death" (Author – Michael Keyser) of two crashed Lola T70s after the filming of the movie and the one on the right, a Mark III, has suffered severe frontal damage to the chassis (see photo.)

There was, in the documentation that went with the car, a letter extant from Franco Sbarro saying that this is a car that he leased to Solar Productions for the filming. If so, Sbarro must have done this on behalf of Gil Baird, the then owner of SL76/134, who years before had told me that he had sold this Lola to Solar Productions. Sadly, Gil Baird is no longer with us.

I should also point out that, twelve years ago, I met a man in England, who had the chassis plate of SL73/134 that he had been given some years before. At that time he had a new Mark III chassis built and assembled the correct type parts to build up a Lola T70 Mark III Coupe, which would be the recipient of this original chassis plate, no doubt taken from the wreck at Le Mans.

I spoke at length with Franco Sbarro. He said he only bought pieces from the crashed Lolas from the film "Le Mans" – gearboxes and mechanical parts. He further confirmed that: "A little mechanic from Tours came to me to purchase some Lola parts." Sbarro also said that

the mechanic: "bought the Lola parts, mainly bodywork, to finish the car that he was rebuilding and showed me a photograph. It was this car." Sbarro says he cannot now remember the man but his check bounced, so he never heard or saw of him again.



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After the two Lola T70's were crashed during the filming of "Le Mans," the wrecks were photographed before disposal

[Photo: By kind permission of Michael Keyser.]

I went back to sources and called Noel Butler who had first imported the car into England. Yes, he remembered who he had bought it from, via Julius Thurgood. It was a man in Georgia called Guy Anderson. No, he no longer had his number, but thought he had first seen the car advertised in Hemmings, the motor trade journal. I emailed Julius to try to find Anderson's contact numbers. No reply. I tried to find Anderson through directory enquiries in Atlanta, Georgia. Nothing. To date, I have been unable to find Guy Anderson. I did, however, get to talk to Steve Kibble, a race mechanic from Atlanta. Yes, he confirmed that he had built up a Group Four De Tomaso Pantera for Anderson and that Anderson had owned a yellow Lola T70 coupe, which he thought was from Sbarro!

According to Coys' auction blurb, Anderson had bought the Lola from France, but from who was not recorded. Apparently, I discovered, it had been in a small museum in the South of France. That was possibly the "Musee de l'Automobile" in Mougins. The new owner visited them with no luck and I wrote to them and received a reply to the effect that yes, they had a Lola T70 in the museum many years ago but that it had long gone.

The Mexican owner became very disenchanted with a Lola that he could not find the history of, and sold the car to a fellow countryman.

And so this is where we are today. After a lot of searching, I am reasonably sure that this Lola is the mortal remains of SL73/134, but have yet to find the "Little Mechanic from Tours." Is he out there?

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