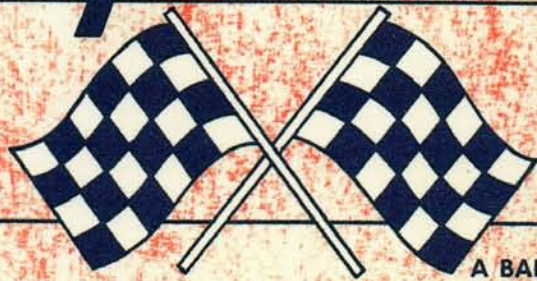


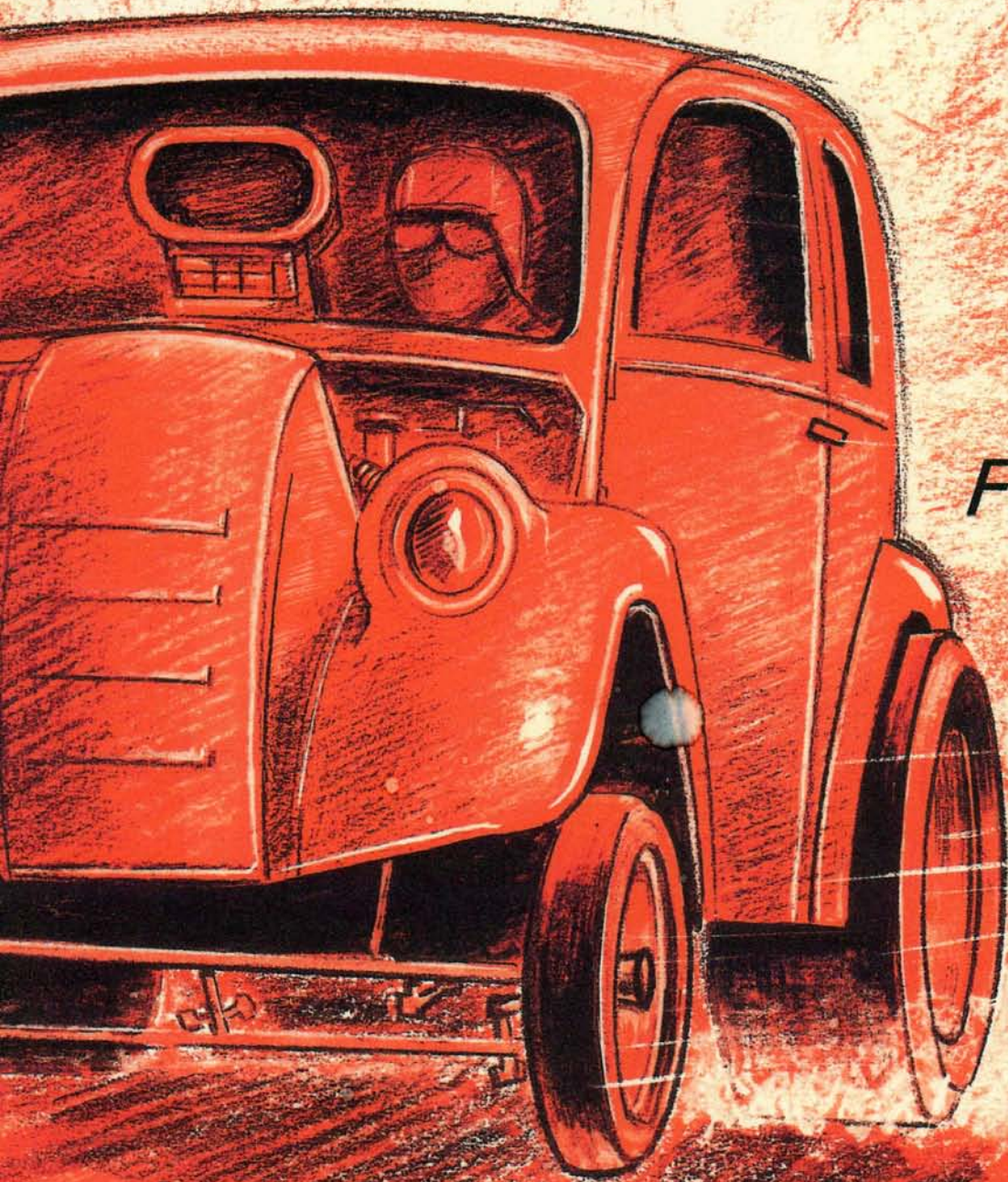
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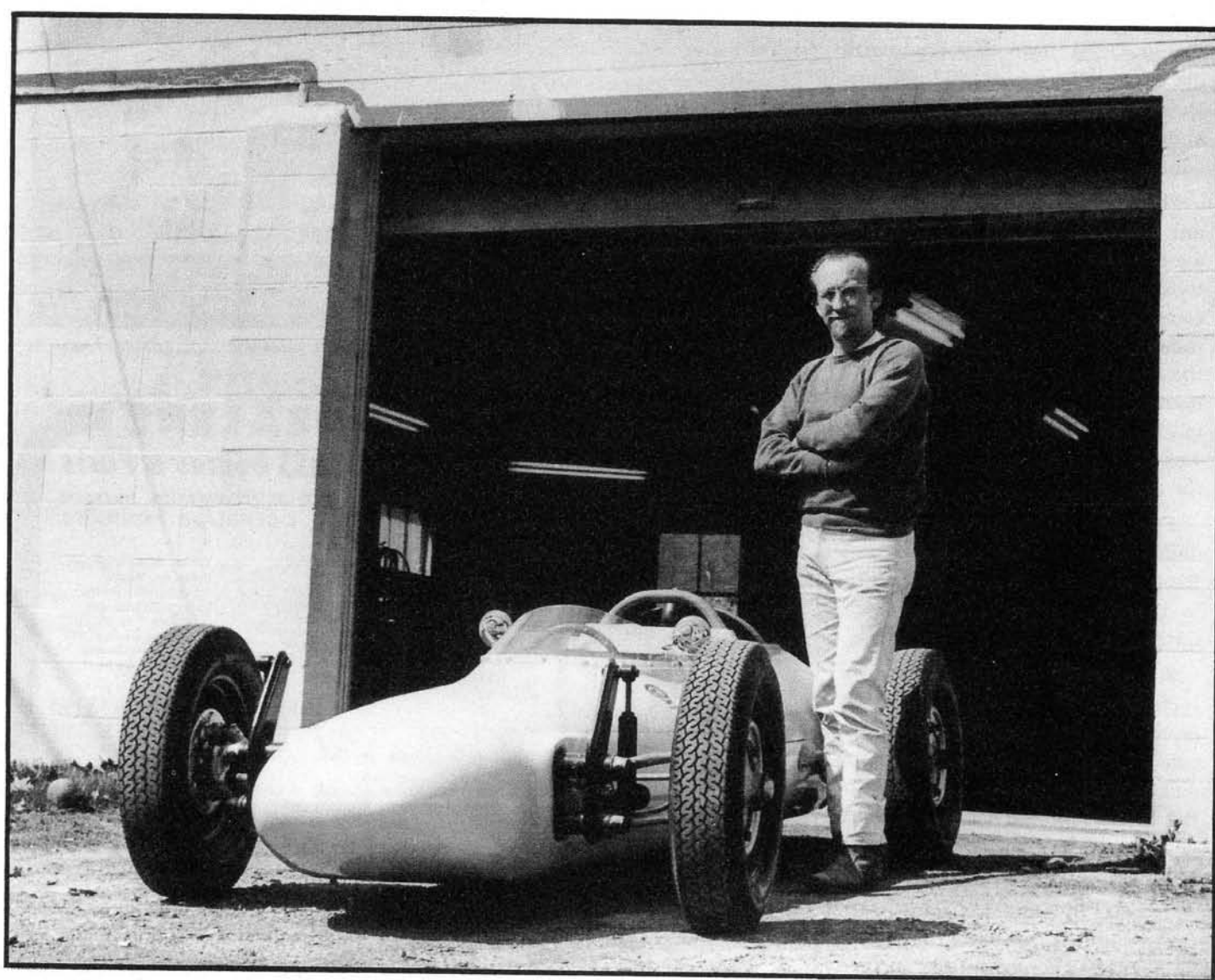
# DEALER

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*Fiberglass!*



## Fiberglass Unlimited

by  
Don Baker, Jr.

Since the introduction of fiberglass into the automotive field some fifteen years ago, its manufacturers have seen an easy production item. It is simple and not too expensive for a skilled mold-maker to form fiberglass molds of practically any configuration and then make thousands of copies from them.

With high production potential specialty one-off molds are almost

a lost art. One of the few in this country that fills this void is Ben Shoemaker of Fiberglass Unlimited in Massillon, Ohio.

Fiberglass Unlimited is an appropriate name for Shoemaker's operation. He has made everything from VW engine baffles to giant fiberglass domes for observatories. But his main interest and his most creative work has been done in the automotive field.

It all began just after the Korean War with Shoemaker's discharge from the army. He resumed his work in the floor covering business without much enthusiasm. At the same time he became interested in racing and decided to build his own car.

"I used the chassis and running gear of a '51 Ford," Shoemaker said. "Then I figured out how big the body would have to be to fit

over everything. I measured and fitted and guessed on the overall dimensions and made a laminar construction of the body I designed for the mold."

Prior to beginning the project Shoemaker read everything available on how to work with fiberglass. But he found that there weren't many definitive studies made at that time on what could and could not be done with fiberglass.

"I learned as I went along," he said. "I made mistakes and learned how to correct them and finally came up with a body shell that was as good as anything being marketed at that time."

This early Ford "special" bore a resemblance to today's Cobra constructed by Shelby-American. And like today's Cobra, the design appealed to enthusiasts fifteen years ago too because Shoemaker reported that he sold at least 40 bodies from the original mold. Even today this original body is in demand to the tune of about six per year.

Though the sale of these bodies was far more than Shoemaker had ever anticipated and though he had some indication of the potential of the fiberglass market, he felt that he wasn't personally ready to make the switch from floor covering to manufacturing.

"I just didn't know if jumping into this new business with both feet was the right thing to do," he commented. Shoemaker played it smart and only planted one foot in fiberglass manufacturing. He maintained his regular floor covering business and worked on special fiberglass orders at night. He didn't get much sleep nor have much free time, he admitted, but he learned a great deal about working with fiberglass.

One thing he learned quickly was that plaster molds, which were used almost exclusively in the business at that time, were just too unwieldy and fragile for specialty work. Instead he experimented with fiberglass molds from which fiberglass parts could be formed. Today the fiberglass specialists as

well as the production fiberglass manufacturers have mostly converted to this simpler method.

By 1960 his knowledge of fiberglass was extensive but his part-time fiberglass business was not. What changed all of that was a partner who approached Shoemaker about building fiberglass church steeples and observatory roofs which he claimed would make them wealthy overnight. Well, it didn't, but at least Shoemaker was in the fiberglass business on a full-time basis and decided to stay even after the partnership ended shortly after it began.

From that time in late 1960 Fiberglass Unlimited has ventured into volume production only twice and both for the same company. In 1963, when the Sports Car Club of America officially sanctioned Formula V racers (small, open-wheel single-seaters, powered by stock VW components) a local V builder engaged Shoemaker to supply the bodies. The builder was happy with the excellent quality of the design and finished bodies, but he felt he would rather sacrifice both to realize more profit from the V's and he started making his own bodies.

This same builder also turned out six to eight thousand dollar sports racing machines (SCCA category for unrestricted one-off specials) powered by more exotic engines. The builder felt that the customer had a right to expect the best quality for that kind of money. Fiberglass Unlimited was again asked to design and build the bodies. Today the builder's marque is passing out of racing because the market has almost been saturated, but Shoemaker retains the rights to the molds and still makes several bodies a year.

One of the most difficult jobs that Shoemaker ever attempted by his own admission, was the reconstruction of an \$11,000 Italian Fiat Abarth which was brought to his Massillon shop in hundreds of pieces.

*(Continued on Following Page)*



Fiberglass Unlimited has produced everything from boat tillers to church steeples.

"I learned about fiberglass as I went along. I made mistakes and learned how to correct them and finally came up with a body shell that was as good as anything being marketed at that time."



New body for the \$11,000 Fiat-Abarth

"Its owner had just brought it off the boat in New York and was very proud of it because it was the only one of its kind in the country," related Shoemaker. "He wanted to show a friend how well it handled. He overcooked it in a corner sending it off the road and into a large field in which the body broke into hundreds of pieces. When he brought it into the shop I found that the body was not only broken into a basket case, but the pieces that were large enough to recognize were riddled with hairline fractures."

After weeks of careful and tedious work Shoemaker pieced the original body together and made a new mold from it. The replacement body turned out much better than the factory original, which Shoemaker pointed out was poorly made in the first place, and, with the owner's consent, now has a set of very expensive molds from

which to make bodies.

In this age of specialization this kind of diversity can serve the speed dealer well. These men of diversity, machinists, chassis builders, and fiberglass craftsmen, are the experimenters for the speed industry. They don't enjoy the routine, but thrive on tackling new

problems, solving them and moving on to other things. Many speed dealers are asked for custom work and parts that don't come from a manufacturer's catalogue. He can make a friend and gain repeat customers by lining himself up with unlimited talents like Ben Shoemaker. **SCD**



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