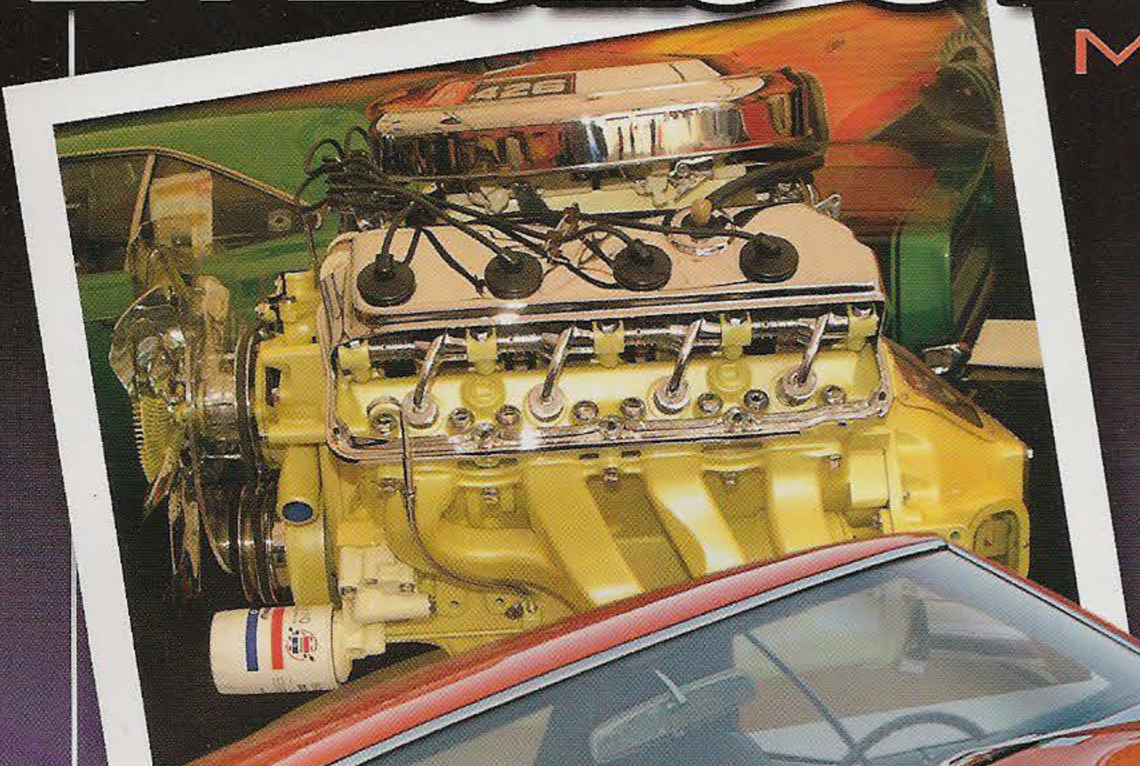
Top 10 Engines

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# MuscleCar MILESTONES



## LEGENDARY ENGINES

## COPO Camaro

> Pro Wrestler Goldberg's Collection

> Shelby's $5.5 m Super Snake

> "King of Hi-Performance"

US $4.99 / CAN $6.50

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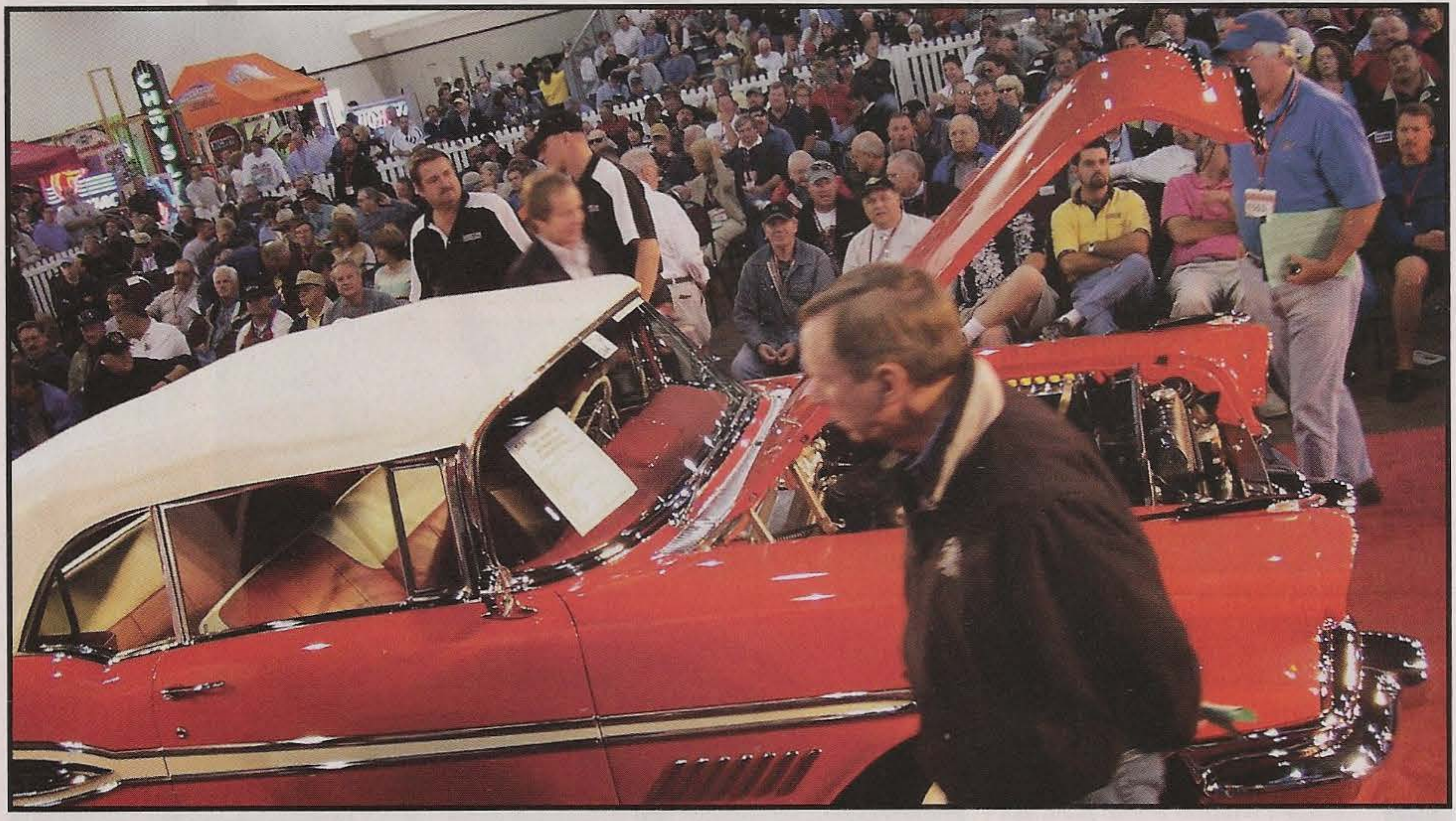
COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# MuscleCar MILESTONES

Text By Patrick Krook, Photos by Steve Temple and courtesy Mecum Auction, Inc.

# THE ART OF WAR

## Tactics and Strategies for Capturing Some Screamin' Deals at Auctions



The possibility of getting a great collectible muscle car is the allure that draws thousands to the auction tent every year. When attending an auction for the first time, though, it can be difficult to see all the variables that can affect the outcome of the event—and your potential purchase. You walk into the bidding arena, VIP pass around your neck, the stage is set, the red carpets are laid down and the lights are dazzling. The energy of the circus tent and buzz from the bleachers brings up the goose bumps. The chrome is gleaming, her body waxed to a mirror finish, perhaps looking the best she ever has behind the velvet rope. These and other aspects, though, can determine whether you end up with an incredible car for a paltry price, or a tremendous case of heartburn at the end of the day. That's why it's critical to draw up a battle strategy beforehand.

Weeks in advance of attending an auction, it's really important to do your homework. As in the art of war, a good general gets scouting reports and reviews his plan of attack. In advance of going into action at an auction, carefully consider what type of car you are trying to buy and the ultimate purpose of that car.

In addition, take a candid inventory of both what you know and don't know about making an educated purchase. Your ability to prepare and your willingness to walk away from the wrong situation can determine success or failure. You're attempting a conquest, and everyone else with a bidder's pass or a seller's slip is the adversary. Even the auction house is a fortress of divided loyalty.

"As an auction house we are in an interesting position," admits Dana Mecum, owner of Mecum Auction Inc. "We are there to get the seller the best price (for his car), and also want the buyer to feel he got a fair deal."

### THE CALCULATIONS

Know what kind and quality of car you want. And also realize that your desire for the car of your dreams may push you to compromise on quality.

Sharpen your pencil on your budget as well. Learn the market value for the car by studying the published results from previous auctions for similar cars. Talk to those in the club community about the direction of values, find out what similar cars have recently sold privately for.

If the market seems too high in general for what you can comfortably afford and you are really itching to buy something, consider the possibility that perhaps an auction is not the best place to buy.

Mecum offers this bit of reality testing: "Auctions are built on excitement," he points out. "A new guy can get caught up in that excitement and bid more than he expected."

Likewise, giving too much on quality to fit a price point for purchase can cost much more in the long run. Buying a "fixer-upper" through friends which hasn't been advertised may be more affordable than one effectively promoted at auction.

You also need to survey the surroundings. One veteran auction buyer we spoke to recommends first merely attending a few of the auctions run by the same auction house you intend to deal with, and not registering to bid. This approach gives you a sober prospective of the environment, just like that general getting a good feel for the battlefield.

Note how the ring men work the bidders, how the lights and the show stage affect the appearance of the car when compared to how it looks waiting in the corral.

Pay attention to what times of day the bidder's area is less crowded than others. Target opportunity buys that roll across the block during these lulls. Fewer adversaries to bid against mean a better gavel price for you.

Look at some of the more subjective aspects, too. Do they serve free alcohol to the bidders? Remember to stick to bottled water the day you plan to bid. Also look for weaknesses in the environment. Does the auction house tend to take on a large number of last-minute consignments? You can tell this by the number of lots that end in a decimal point, (e.g. 101.1). Does the auction house tend to run on schedule or run behind?

Early consignments do get advanced promotion that draws people intending to bid on specific cars. Last-minute additions are relying on incidental traffic, putting themselves at the mercy of the environment. If overall attendance is low, or too many of the same model show up, the last-minute car could be a very good buy for you. Take advantage of the seller's lack of planning by being prepared to evaluate these cars onsite.

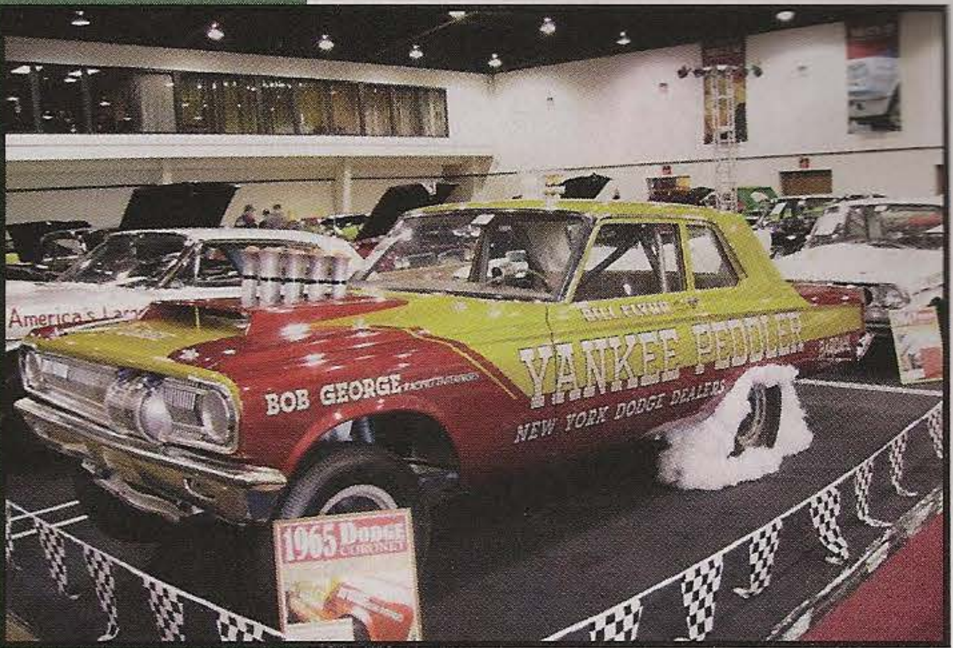
Take the time to assess your competition. Do you happen to see the same faces show up at auction after auction? Make note of what they bid on, their bidding habits, if they always gravitate to the same ring man, or maintain eye contact directly with the auctioneer, etc.

If it appears your tastes are similar to theirs, introduce yourself and tell them that you are new to the auction scene and want to pick their brain. Some experienced bidders might be willing to share a few insider observations.

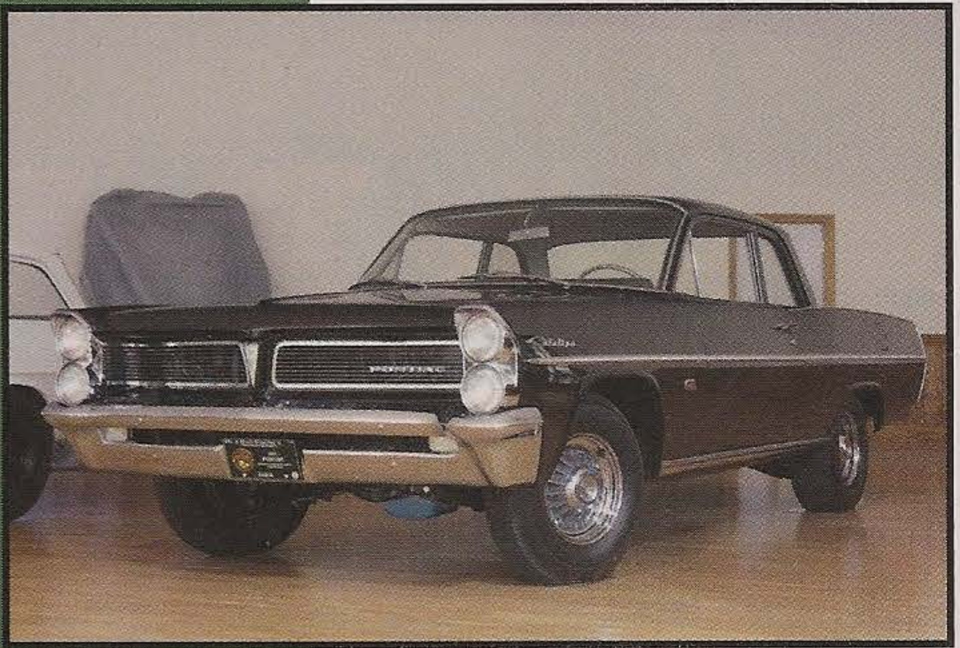
Practice bidding on paper, see where you end up compared to those placing live bids, in order to build your confidence and intuition. If you end up competing with more experienced bidders for the same car down the road, having learned from them you will be prepared to adjust your strategy accordingly.

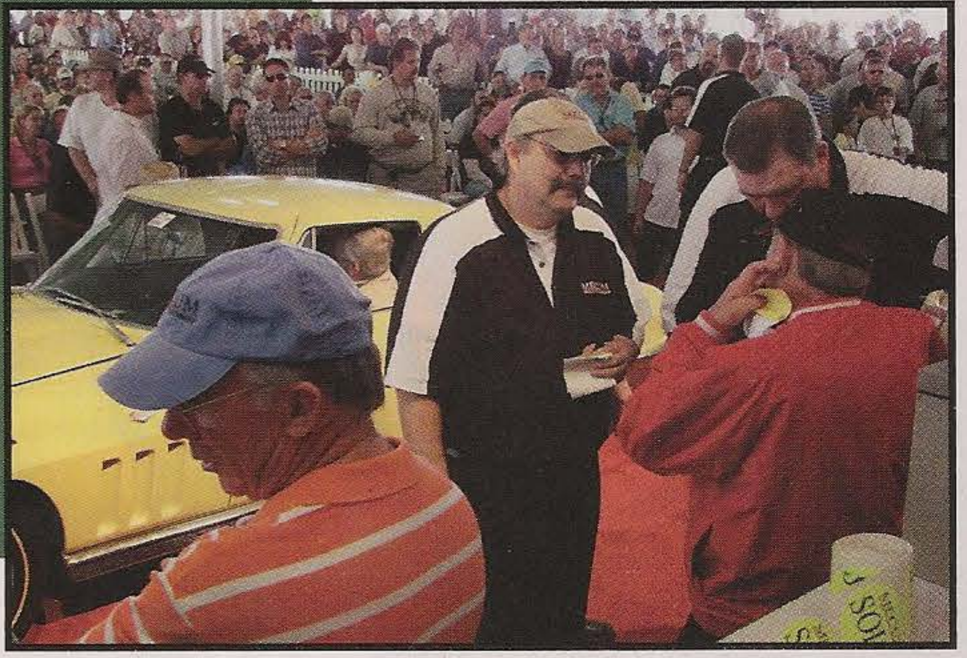
After you have surveyed the playing field and assessed your potential competition, take the time to crystallize the vision of your mission objective. Do the research needed to really assess the knock-out factors you will use to decide if a specific car is right to bid on, or if it is a particular make or model you are targeting.

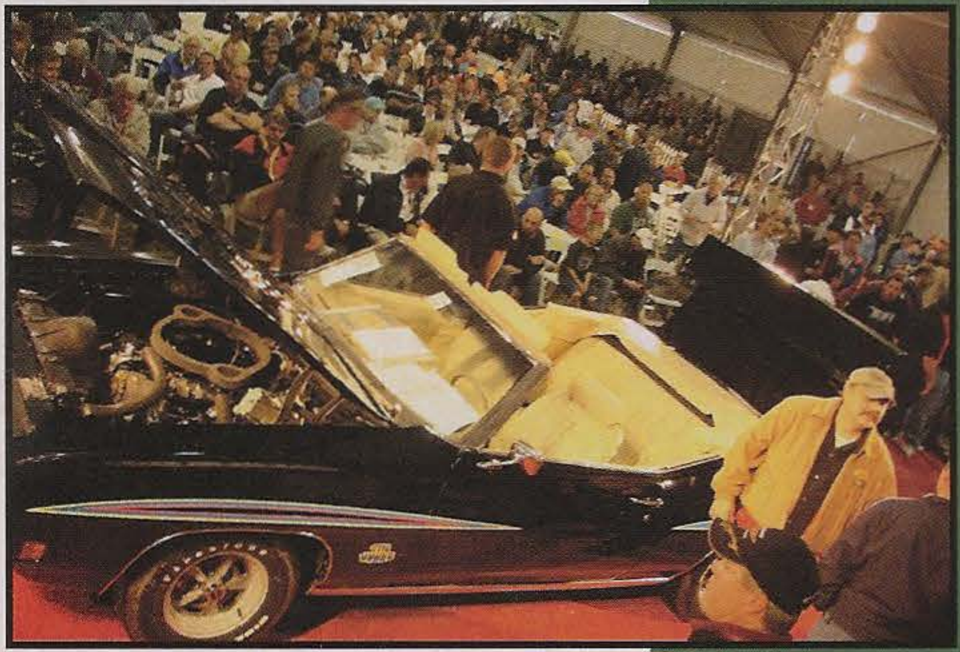
For instance, if you are looking for a 1969 1/2 lift-off hood Road Runner, you need to know a number of telltale indicators: where all the body numbers appear on the car, what the special notches look like on the front fenders, the stamp pad codes for a Six-Pack block are compared to a standard 440

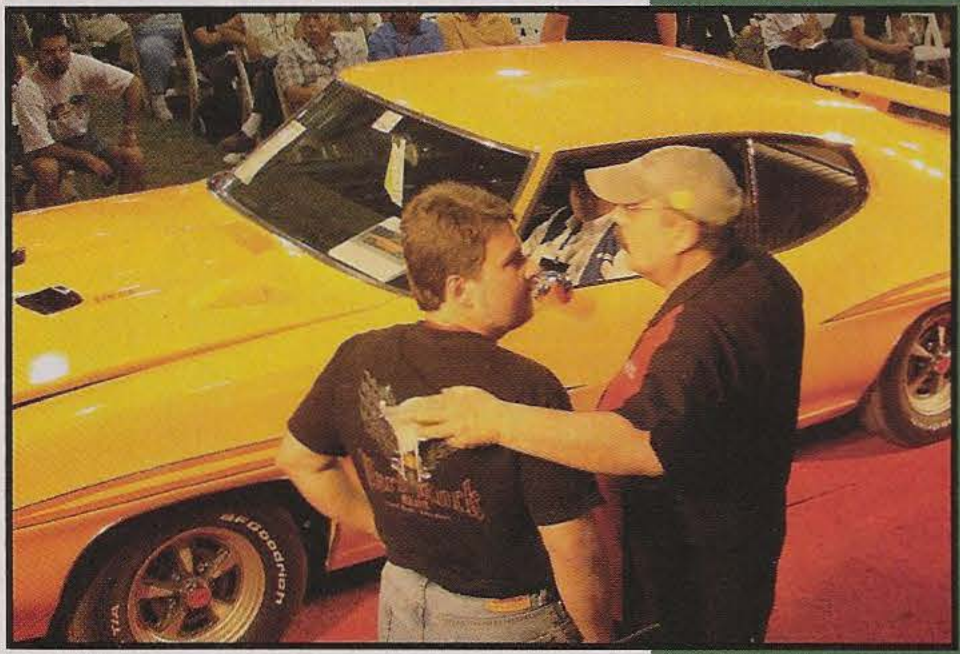












engine block, what typically came on an A-12 packaged car, what options typically appeared on the fender tag, how many still have the original motor, how to tell if the date codes on the intake and carbs are also original to the car, how to tell if the lift-off hood is original or reproduction, how to check the A-12 registry to get a history, etc., etc. As your buying objective progress closer to buying a concours-quality investment car, the more detailed your research needs to be.

For a specific car, use your club contacts, network relationships, and online discussion boards to trace the owner, any history, and the back ground on that particular car. Use this information to set your bidding threshold and also as a comparison to how the car actually presents during the auction event.

If you are targeting more than one car of the same make or just fishing for a good deal, use those same resources to learn what things typically are missing, incorrect, or wear out first, such as on a 1970 Boss 302 that might be lacking a snorkel, "S" tube, or rev limiter.

Also be certain to familiarize yourself with signs of abuse, or masked abuse. A front radiator support that has been replaced is a sign of front-end damage. Overspray on door seals, or rear valences that have been mudded in could point to hasty bodywork. Look at the frame rails and the inner fender aprons for evidence of welded-in patches or outright replacement. An engine bay could be missing thousands in original smog, air cleaner, and performance equipment. Sometimes an original block has been swapped out for a more common, later-model short-block or one cast for use in a truck. If any of these things are detected, be prepared to walk away.

In either case, if you realize your knowledge is limited, bring someone with you or hire a professional inspector who is well versed with that particular make do the evaluation for you. Acknowledging your own limitations can be a strength, just as a good general relies on skilled officers for input and advice. Your pocketbook will thank you later. The more homework you do, the more likely your success.

## ESTIMATE THE COSTS

When preparing for the main event, do some soul searching by asking yourself, "Am I going to enjoy myself if I invest the time and trouble to learn the auction environment, research the vehicles, and take the necessary time to work the auction to my advantage?" If you can't say that you will enjoy yourself, even if you don't come home with something, you may be setting yourself up for a bad purchase decision. The environment of an auto auction can be glitzy, relaxed, or even take on a casino atmosphere. Mecum provides this valuable reminder: "When you are buying a car at auction, you are conducting a piece of business."

In other words, keeping a detached, businesslike viewpoint can help you avoid a lot of pitfalls. As much as humanly possible, leave your emotional attachments at the door. There's always another muscle car to be had elsewhere. Comparisons with how you should approach other major purchases such as real estate or stock investments are valid here.

When you think with your heart rather than your head, let the buyer beware. Record prices set at auction are made by getting caught up in grudge match bidding with another buyer, rather than the intrinsic value of the automobile. These prices are seldom reinforced by the private market. Unless you are determined to buy a verifiable "one of one" super car and have the war chest to go belly-to-belly with the big boys, set a hard-line limit to your bid and stick to it. Keeping your cool is profit in your pocket.

Count all the hard costs end-to-end, the research, the inspections, the buyers premium, the transport costs, and the sales tax. Then compare that total cost to the market research you conducted. If the car is in a less than anticipated condition, add the projected cost of repair to the matrix. Divide the hard costs by your return horizon. If you plan to sell the car within the year, then the costs of transaction factor greatly, so keep your bid limit low and seek out opportunity buys. On the other hand, if this is a purchase you plan on keeping for five to ten years, then some of these costs factor minimally.

Avoid the prospect of borrowing heavily to stretch into the car you really want. The boom-and-bust cycle of the collector car market is due in part to people literally betting the ranch to get in on the auction action, anticipating they'll make a killing at the same venue next year. More often than not, they later need to dump the car out of financial hardship. You do the math and decide the best limit for you.

## PLAN THE ATTACK

Show up early. By showing up a few days before bidding opens, you gain access to everything you need to make a proper assessment of the car, all its paperwork, and direct access to the owner. Remember, that little card read by the auctioneer is provided by the guy selling the car, not an objective inspector with an expert eye.

Whenever possible, personally talk to the owner on car-prep day. Make note of any glaring differences between the catalog write-up and your personal assessment. This is a tremendous opportunity to inspect the car before it is in show-car detail, but also discover the seller's state of mind.

For instance, try to find out if he or she has to sell it. Or if it's reasonably priced but the owner is happy to take it back home, or just there to test the limits of the market.

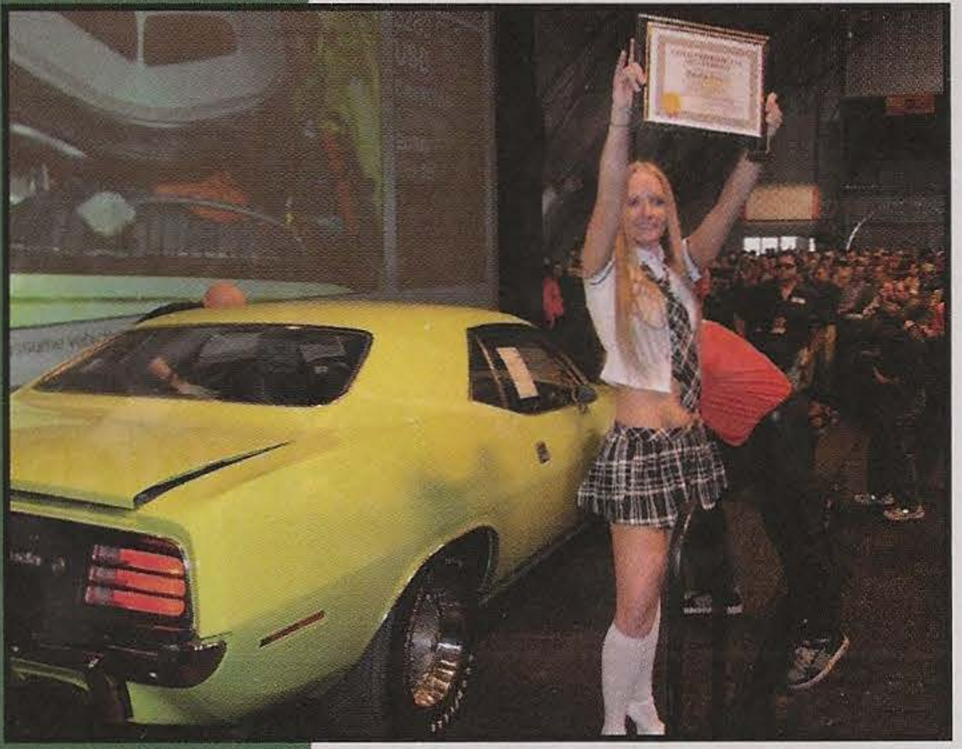
Give yourself enough time to get back to an internet connection, complete your research and run a VIN check through a collector registry or other resource. If you aren't expert enough to trust your own eyes, take photos and email them to a buddy who is.

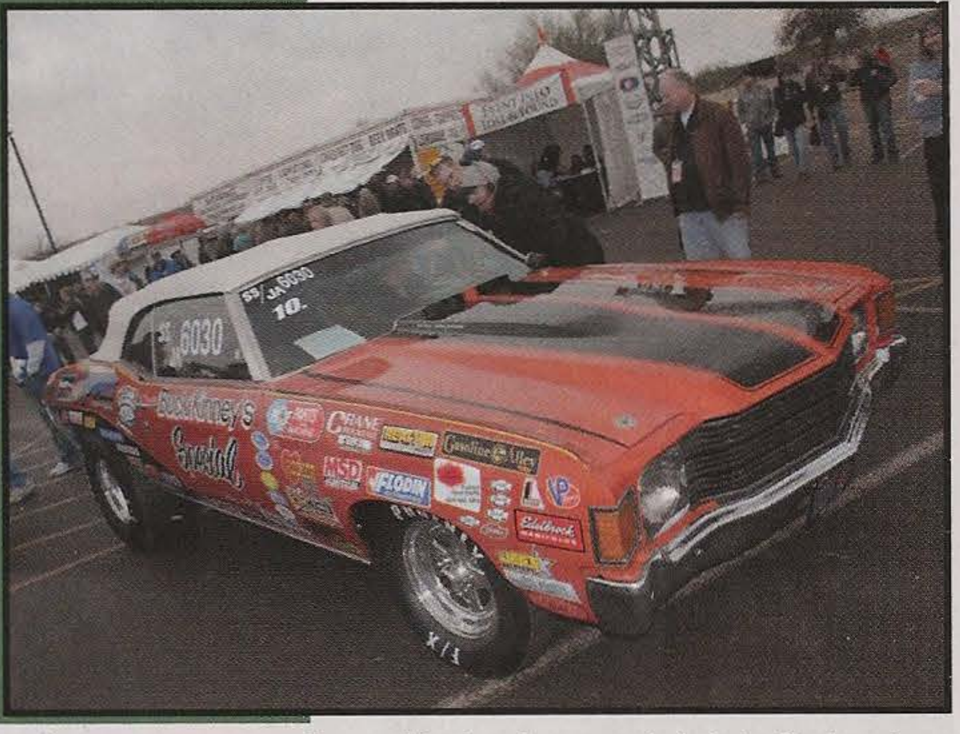
Find out when the car is set to roll across the block, double check the weather, and find out who else seems to be checking out the car and listen intently. Once you have fully examined the car and surveyed the competition, set your bidding limit and position yourself for the kill.

## POSITIONING AND DIRECTING

If you've been to a few auctions already, you know the environment is set up to seduce you (which is part of an auction's appeal). But you did your homework, keep in mind that this is a business transaction. You are detached, methodical, and focused. You can hit the beer garden after you are done bidding. Your seat, in the front few rows with an unobstructed view of the auctioneer, is set while you keep track of the auction results. Monitor the schedule, and the mood of the bidders around you. A win here looks like getting the car for your bid limit or less, or walking away without getting sucked into the game. In this position, there is no defeat.

When you look around, you see the other bidders with





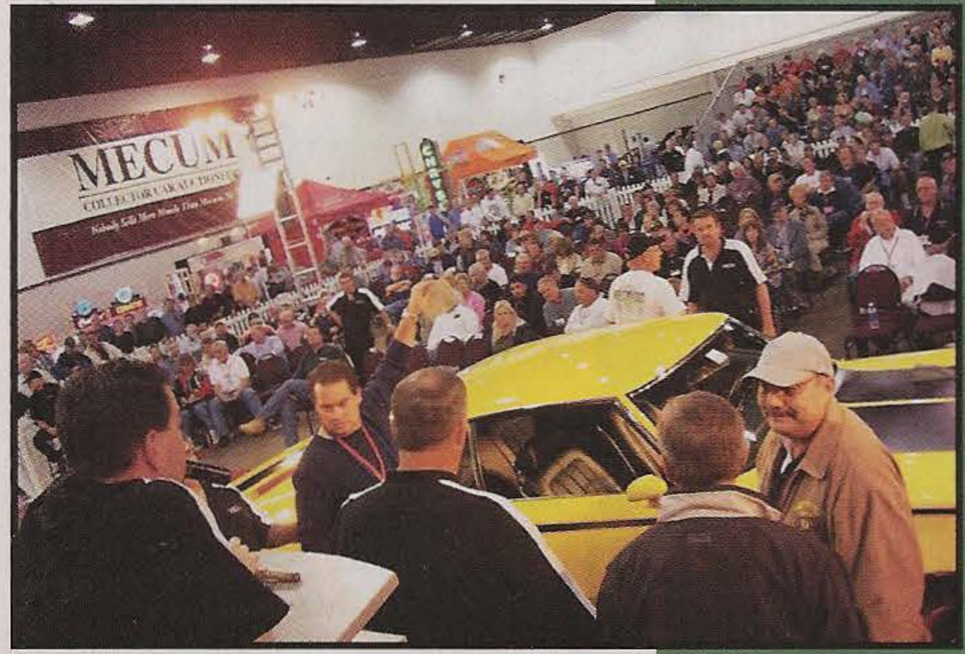
a ring man next to them. It's the ring man's job to find out who is a prospect on the car and communicate that to the auctioneer. That way, the auctioneer knows there is good competition and can keep the car on the block longer until someone raises their hand.

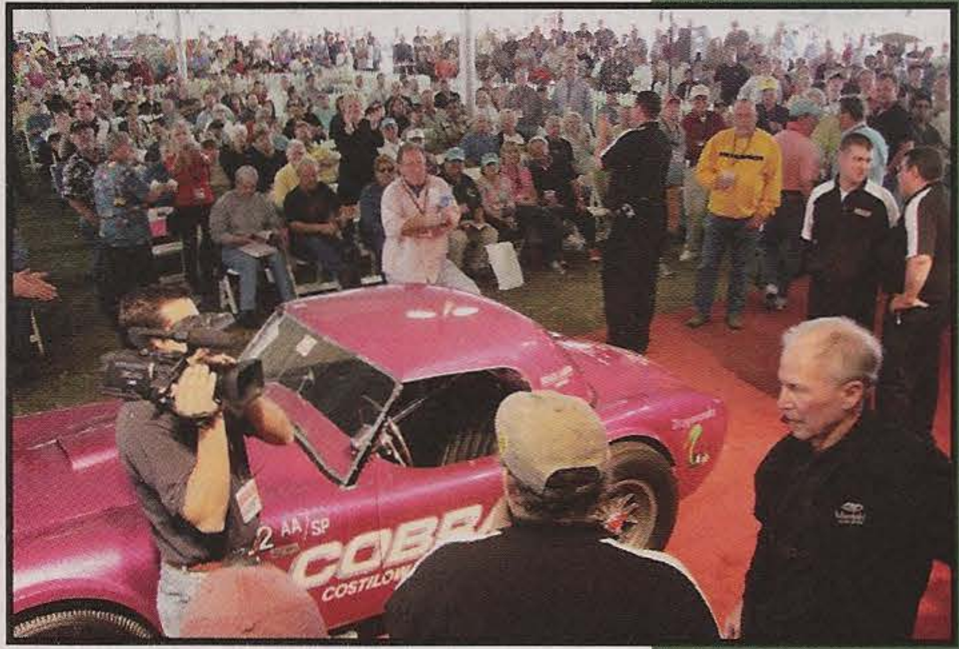
The auctioneer opens the bid by barking out a suggested price. This is an illusion. If they don't know you are a player on the car until you are a ready to place a bid, you give the illusion that there are fewer bidders interested in the car. If you listen to the auctioneer, he is dropping that suggested price until someone, "Falls into the bid". If you aren't paying attention to the ring men and other buyers, you can fall into the bid too high and dash all hope of ending up with your price.

You know from watching past auctions that the lower the opening bid, the shorter the gavel, the fewer the competitors. If this is a car you want, you want it on the block for as short a time as possible.

When you hear the auctioneer say, "Somebody give me a starting price" you the car is likely be a bargain. At this point you may see people inspecting the car for the first time, attempting to quickly assess a potential steal too late. Your competitors who have not researched the cars as thoroughly as you have can be scared off by such a low opening bid.

Even if it is low, do not be the one to open the bid. A short gavel may also force the seller to drop his reserve if there is one, thinking it may spur bidding. They usually sell well short of market value when that happens.



## GO AHEAD, TAKE ADVANTAGE

There are times when the auction environment shows its weakness. Things they can't control, like the elements. Bad weather can chase away a few of your bidding competitors.

Sometimes, an auction house has consigned too many of the same type of car. More choice with a limited audience means a buying opportunity for you. If they have taken on an excess of last-minute consignments (those decimal-point lots mentioned above), you may find a good car that hasn't been properly promoted. An abundance of late entries can also mean a crowded schedule, resulting in shorter block times. These situations may prove an advantage if they rush the lots. As noted already, the shorter the time the car you want is on the block, the better it is for you.

Poorly promoted lots not cataloged in advance mean fewer rival bidders. Featured premium lots can run late into the evening, thinning the bidding pool as the hours wear on. Keep track of the position of your target lot. Many a bidder has been caught off guard, missing their opportunity because they have not kept track.

"At any auction, even when you set world records, there are always cars that sell under value," Mecum observes. When the seller (and other bidders) fail to prepare appropriately, he gives you, the buyer, the advantage.

Enough sellers show up at the last minute with good cars wearing a poor detail job, with a bad battery, coughing on a stale tank of gas. This shortfall has produced an entire breed of flippers who specialize in buying them. These quick-buy artists know that $200 worth of failed prep can mean saving as much as $5,000 on the auction block. Give these "resale specialists" a little pushback when you bid and you could end up with a good car with plenty of value left over.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize when the auction environment is the strongest. The auction lots that have gotten the most exposure, usually found on the cover of the auction handout, bring out the big-money players and sometimes the TV cameras. For the average Joe, this would be a good time to sit on your hands. You are there to buy a car, not bid for your 15 minutes of fame.

## THE FIERY ATTACK

Be the "new money." The guy who opens the bid is rarely the guy who ends up with the car. If he does, he probably paid every penny and then some. Wait until they are just about to put the hammer down before you place your first bid. The auctioneer will utter excitedly "New Money!"

By this time your opponents have either bid their limit or lost interest. If the car does bid up more, you are likely competing against the last man to bid before you, not three or four people. When you emerge the winning bidder, having stuck to your bottom line, the crowd just might thunder in recognition of your victory—or at least privately acknowledge your auction acumen. Once you have maneuvered the situation to your advantage and secured the car you wanted at the price of your choosing, now go get yourself one of those free beers. **MCM**