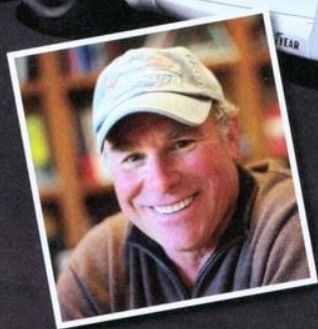
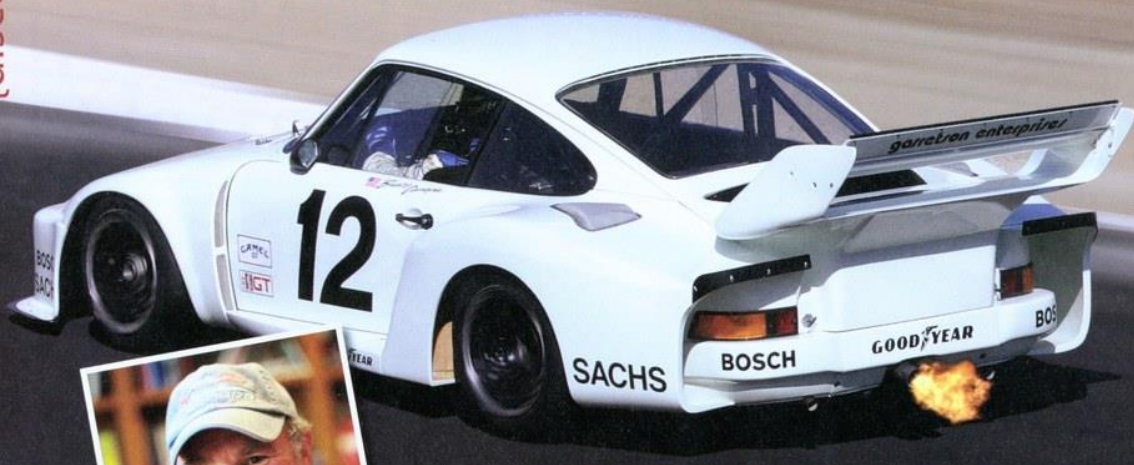


# Embracing the impossible

Race driver/designer Bruce Canepa goes full throttle



(Top) Bruce Canepa races a 720 hp 1979 Porsche 935 in the 1979 Portland Camel GT placing third. (Right) The last factory-built Porsche 935 as it sits today in the Canepa Museum.



Photos: Portrait: Dennis Gray; Sports: iStock.com; Porsche: Canepa Museum

By Stacey Vreeken

**M**ost people, knowing the odds were against them, would never strap themselves behind an 800-horsepower sprint car engine on the chance of winning a race. For Santa Cruz native Bruce Canepa, it just whets his appetite.

"All the things people tell you, you can't do? I ignore that," said the winning race car driver, auto restoration expert and innovative designer. "It doesn't mean you don't crash, but when I get up in the morning... I'm not afraid to take chances."

Canepa's go-for-it attitude has rubbed a few the wrong way from time

to time, but no one would deny he is the classic self-made man. He has a string of racing victories to his name, and owns Canepa Designs in Scotts Valley, which customizes and restores automobiles for clients such as Jerry Seinfeld. It also houses the Canepa Motorsports Museum, attracting more than a thousand visitors a year.

"Everything I do, I do fairly aggressively," said the silver-haired man. "Some people take offense, but I'm not doing it to offend." Canepa's interest is getting it

done, especially if others say he shouldn't or couldn't.

"I'm fine with apologizing," he said. "We couldn't do what we do without pushing boundaries."

What he does includes throwing himself passionately into the high-gloss world of the racetrack and showroom. When you accept best in class for your '72 Porsche 917/10 at the prestigious Concours d'Elegance in Pebble Beach, no one sees the 12-hour days, six days a week that go into Canepa Designs.



The Canepa Museum, which highlights automotive engineering and competition, houses more than 25 cars and motorcycles. The Museum is open to the public Saturdays 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.



A glimpse into the Canepa's shop shows collection of outstanding automobiles in various stages of restoration. The car in the foreground is the last Shelby Cobra ever built.



The Canepa retail showroom reads like a who's who of dream cars. With an ever-changing selection, it is like a second automotive museum but with the option of driving the cars home.





Bruce raced this 1987 Porsche 962 several times in the MZA GTP Series in '88-89.  
(The Porsche is now owned by a private collector.)



Photos: Canepa Museum

(Above) Bruce Canepa races in the Pike's Peak Hill Climb driving a 450 hp twin turbo Porsche. The race course is 12.42 miles, has more than 156 turns and climbs 4,721 feet to finish at an elevation of 14,110 feet. (Right) Bruce as young racer at the Watsonville Speedway.

That kind of schedule doesn't faze Canepa. He seems to have been born going flat out. At age 10, he was racing go-karts through alleys on the east side, especially near San Juan Avenue where he grew up.

His father, Angelo, who ran the Palomar Lincoln Mercury dealership on Water Street and Soquel Avenue, taught him to drive; by age 12 he could drive any vehicle in sight, including a 10-wheel big-rig truck. This led to a lifelong love for the big lugs; he set the course record for big-rigs at the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb and maintains a sideline custom designing high-performance transporters.

"These trucks are nothing but big cars and just as delicate," Canepa said.

Canepa was 15 when he started racing stock cars at the Watsonville Speedway. He soon graduated to sprint cars. They are his favorite to drive, he said. The fatality rate is daunting to many. Bruce keeps his original sprint car in the museum.

"They require the bravest drivers in the world," said Canepa. "You defied everything in that car."

In between races, he "worked harder

than anyone" at his father's auto dealership and enjoyed cruising down Beach Street at the height of the car culture.

"From the wharf to the (trestle) bridge, it took an hour and a half, solid with cars, both ways, all night long," he recalled.

Canepa went to the Speedway recently with his son Michael, who is currently studying film. His daughter Carly loves cars. She drives too fast but sticks to tech work in San Francisco, said her dad.

When he's not racing or restoring cars, Canepa often heads to West Cliff to relax and watch the surfers. He keeps it at a leisurely pace as he cruises down Highway 1 or over to Capitola Village for people watching. He loves going to the movies for mindless entertainment.

"Boring stuff, because the rest of my life is not boring," he said.

Looking back, Canepa is like most everyone who has learned from life's mistakes.

"I'm a lot smarter now," he said. "If I knew then what I know now, I would have won every race. I'm faster now than when I was young because of using (my) brain. You race until you're not strong enough. The kids can't beat me." ❖

### SEE HIS CARS

The Canepa Motorsports Museum, created from Bruce Canepa's private collection, features a broad spectrum of racing cars and motorcycles chosen for their contribution to the sport. Formula One, dirt track and sprint cars are featured as well as the championship cars driven by NASCAR's Richard Petty, Dale Earnhardt and others.

Also as part of the collection are the cars Canepa drove, including the Porsche Turbo 911 he raced to second place at the Pikes Peak International Climb in 1980 and the '79 Porsche 935 that has logged so many hours with Canepa he says it's like driving a toy. The museum is open 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday. Call (831) 430-9940 to schedule a guided tour.

### SEE HIM GO

▲ Bruce Canepa races historic Trans Am, IMSA, Formula One and Can Am cars at the Laguna Seca Raceway in Monterey. See him race at the Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion, formerly the Monterey Historic Automobile Races, Aug. 19-21. Three-day general admission is \$130 in advance. Call [www.mazdaraceway.com](http://www.mazdaraceway.com) or call (800) 327-7322.

▲ This summer, Canepa will attempt the land speed record at Bonneville in the Chevrolet HHR, a vehicle capable of over 250 mph.