

Meet Shelly Ward

A True Driving Force



Karen and Shelly Ward in front of their Marathon coach.

by Sharleen Nelson

If it has wheels, he'll drive it. If it doesn't, he'll find a way to attach some to it. To say that Shelly Ward has a passion for driving is an understatement. Not only does he drive high-performance vehicles for a living, he also spends his free time driving—everything from motorcycles to buses to off-road vehicles. Shelly's passion for motorized vehicles began at an early age. He was the youngest driver ever, at age 16, to finish the Baja 1000 solo, a challenging point-to-point race that begins in Ensenada, California, and finishes in La Paz, Mexico. Later, he had

every teenage boy's dream job—working in the hot pits of Riverside and Laguna Seca raceways as his father's crew chief and chief mechanic. "I didn't go to my high school graduation so I could race in the Baja 500 in Mexico," Shelly said. "I had my priorities."

It was only natural that his early exposure to dirt bikes and race cars would lead Shelly to pursue a career that had something to do with wheels. As a Los Angeles native, the film and television industry provided an obvious avenue for him to drive "camera cars," which are used to film other moving vehicles, and to work as a stunt driver. In 1979, he established "Shelly Ward Enterprises" in North Hollywood to provide vehicle transport and preparation to the film and commercial industries. Before a vehicle is used in a film or commercial, it may need to be repainted, detailed, or prepped for a stunt.

Along with the car prep end of his business is "Pursuit," the camera rigging division of his company. Rigging cameras to cars was another skill Shelly acquired in his youth. "It's because they wouldn't let me drive the cars, but they'd let me mount the cameras on them. I was only 12 or 13 years old," he said. In the industry, they call "Pursuit" the "guru of camera vehicle mounts" because of its innovative design technology. Looking like some sort of extraterrestrial contraption, the mounts attach to any vehicle and provide optimum camera angles when filming other moving vehicles is required. "There is an entire specialized world of mounting cameras," Shelly said. "And they can be mounted to anything—cars, race cars, diesel trucks, stagecoaches—everything. We provide the rigging and somebody else brings





In this industry, the car with the camera mounted on top is called the "camera car." The car being photographed is the "picture car."

the camera."

For Shelly, however, the preeminent aspect of the business is the stunts. "The fun part is actually going on the shoot and being part of it all—and driving the car and the motorcycle, or whatever. Sometimes it's not even a car, it's just an engine and a set of tires," he said. "I don't look at it as a job."

During his career, Shelly has performed hundreds of driving stunts, from spinning doughnuts and driving at high speeds to doing roll-overs and crashes. He admits he has had some close calls, but he has never had to wear a cast! He's been a stunt performer in scores of films such as, *The Island*, *Rush Hour 3*, and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, to name a few. "In every one of those films I'm in a big semitruck running into something," said Shelly. "I like driving diesel trucks best." Most of his body of work, however, is in television commercials.

Who wouldn't jump at an opportunity to drive a semitruck through a gas station that blows up? Shelly did just that in a controversial commercial spot called "Driver" for Monster, Inc., owner of the searchable job search Web site Monster.com, which aired during the 2003 Su-

per Bowl game. The ad ran only two times before it was pulled. Angry trucking executives and the American trucking associations were upset that their reputation for safety was being undermined. With the Super Bowl becoming less about the game and all about the commercials, Shelly's busiest time is late fall, when agencies gear up for their campaigns.

This year, he was involved in FedEx's Super Bowl 2008 promotion that had carrier pigeons dropping FedEx boxes from the sky and wreaking havoc on the city below. In it, Shelly drives a city bus that's swerving to avoid hitting the boxes. Viewers voted it the number one ad of Super Bowl XLII. "Just another day at the office," Shelly said. "You grab your gear bag and your helmet and see what's in store for you that day."

Working in commercials has taken him to exotic locations. Several years ago, Shelly visited 8 countries in 29 days filming a single commercial for Mercedes' ML sport utility vehicle. And his extraordinary driving ability has firmly entrenched him with NASCAR. "We do a lot of crazy stuff for Toyota—just crazy stunts and stuff with race cars," he said. Shelly and other





Shelly gets to do a lot of stunts driving NASCAR cars, which he loves!



Shelly and his crew designed the bus' hydraulics for this Taco Bell commercial, and Shelly drove the bus in the stunt.

stunt drivers recently did a Toyota commercial at Charlotte Motor Speedway in North Carolina called, "Fan Controller." Kids with remote control devices take command of the race cars on the oval. "Four stunt drivers went down for the shoot, but only two of us drove the Tony Stewart car. I'm in the car when it's spinning

around," Shelly said. NASCAR fans chose the commercial as the best new ad of the season, according to votes cast on the racing Web site NASCAR.com. He also provided all the cars. "We have upward of 10 NASCAR Cup cars, and we use them for stunts and crazy things," Shelly said. "We paint them and re-decal them each time. And if a car isn't getting blown up, it gets reused. "One week you're doing a Toyota job, the next week you're doing a Sprint job, so everything has to change," he said.

When he's not driving, he's coming up with design ideas for commercials. In 1980, Shelly won a Clio, a prestigious creative advertising award, for a spot called "Piano Movers" for Anco Wiper blades. His contribution: motorizing a piano. According to Shelly, his clients come up with all manner of wacky ideas, and then it's his job to figure out whether the ideas are actually doable. But it's a luxury, he said, to have more than a couple of weeks to put everything together, even for a huge project. "Most projects, we'll have three or four days to assemble the whole thing, test it, make sure it works, and go on the set and do our thing," he said.





Shelly is the stunt driver of the car in this Mazda commercial.

Although he balks at the “inventor” moniker—the word conjures up visions of Thomas Edison—he is a creative genius when it comes to stunts, such as figuring out how to attach a chainsaw motor to a BMX bicycle or finding mechanical solutions using hydraulics to tip a bus sideways and drive around on two wheels. Shelly says what he does isn’t very technical, but rather, requires hands-on knowledge that he’s accumulated over the years. “I’m kind of old school,” he said. “Everybody wants to ‘CAD-draw’ it on the computer. I still draw it out in pencil on a sketch pad. I engineer it in my head and design it in my head. I don’t even have a blueprint. I just walk into the shop on Monday morning and draw it on the bench. Then my guys build it.”

As passionate as Shelly is about his work, he equally enjoys getting away, but because his profession is an extension of his life, getting away typically involves doing something on wheels. Shelly has four or five dirt bikes and a pick-up that he frequently takes to Baja. Karen, Shelly’s wife of eight years, often accompanies him. “She doesn’t drive, but she’s pretty good at ‘passengerin,’” he said. Karen is no stranger to vehicles, however. She grew up around cars in North Carolina, and raced a Shelby Cobra with the Vintage Auto Racing Association until 1994, when she hung up her helmet. Karen also managed North Hollywood Honda for 20 years, which is how she met Shelly, through her boss

at the dealership. Karen and Shelly’s mutual interest in cars and racing instantly drew them together. “Pretty much from the moment we met, we knew we were perfect for each other,” said Karen. Many people worry about a spouse who has a potentially dangerous job such as Shelly’s, but not Karen. “The calculations Shelly does prior to every stunt are so precise and so accurate, I don’t worry at all,” she said.

Karen is also a huge NASCAR fan, so every spring the Wards take off on a month-long trip to attend a few races and visit her family in North Carolina. Shelly and Karen dry camp in their Marathon coach for 10 days at Daytona. They love the fact that they can camp right there. “You don’t worry about traffic. You walk to your seats each day and walk back to the coach each evening, and if you want to cook you can, if not, you don’t,” Shelly said.

Considering his fascination for anything with wheels, it’s not surprising that Shelly would be attracted to a Marathon coach—one of his first coaches was a converted vintage 1950’s 40-foot GMC PD-4501 Scenicruiser. “I was around 19, and we used to load it up with motorcycles and take it to Baja for a month at a time.” He agrees that their Marathon is quite a step up from the old Scenicruiser!

But besides using their coach for their yearly vacation, the Wards also take it on short get-aways, such as to Indio, which is a three-hour drive from Los Angeles. “We park at Outdoor Resorts for a week or two to visit and socialize,” Karen said. “And because all of our Marathon coach buddies are there, it’s perfect.”

So the next time you’re watching a TV commercial, Shelly may have been the person responsible for the hydraulics that lifted the bus or perhaps the driver of the semitruck that T-boned that car. Or, you may see a contented man on his motorcycle, cruising along with his pretty wife “passengerin” behind him, or behind the wheel of a diesel truck, or a race car, or a Marathon bus. That’s Shelly doing what he loves best—driving. •