

# WINGIN' IT



## *Thoroughbred Coachworks Recreates the Gull Wing Coupe*

*story & photos by Joe Greeves*

Some cars have the ability to make an indelible first impression. There's something in the design that calls to us and the connection is immediate. Once the thunderbolt strikes, our fate is sealed and the attraction can transcend time, space, and often economics as the dream of ownership gets stronger over the years. For many, the replicar industry has eased the pain while accelerating the timeline, allowing individuals to own iconic vehicles whose cost and rarity would otherwise put them out of reach.

Mercedes-Benz has been creating iconic vehicles longer than anyone. They are proud of their cars and equally proud of the dilemma they cause beleaguered automotive journalists who regularly run out of superlatives. The car that has been garnering a collection of superlatives since its introduction back in 1954, is still listed after today. Often the crown jewel in many collections, the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gull Wing Coupe is one of those cars that

needs no introduction. Like a Cobra or a Lambo, it is immediately recognizable, even though few enthusiasts have ever been behind the wheel of a real one.

With only about 1500 made from a 1954 to late 1955, the low numbers guarantee exclusivity and put the price out of reach for all but the most persistent. Since supply always responds to demand, the replica market now offers a way to experience the joys of ownership previously reserved only for those who travel in seven-figure circles.

Gil Longnecker has been making dreams affordable for the last 35 years. One of the pioneers in the replica vehicle business, Gil and his wife Shirley enjoy their 27-acre homestead in Mount Dora, Florida where Gil and the staff of Thoroughbred Coachworks create one of the most unique cars ever to emerge from the Fifties. In their 10,000 square-foot production facility, the team handles virtually everything in-house, a design strategy resulting from some hard knocks along the way. Over the years, Gil has learned

that the best way to ensure a headache-free production line is to maintain control of every step in the process. When you can't provide a windshield, you can't sell the car.

Control begins with the unique wrap-around chassis that makes the car what it is. Its wide sills gave the car rigidity (and success!) on the racetrack but forced the original M-B stylists to devise a new means of entry. By default, they created the now famous gull wing doors and the rest is history. Thoroughbred's jig-welded chassis imitates the original wide-sill design but substitutes two-inch square tubing for the one-inch round tubing used in the original. Mustang II suspension components are modern alternatives with the independent front end equipped with vented disk brakes and power rack-and-pinion steering. The rear uses a solid axle held in place with a four-link set-up. Four Superior adjustable coilovers allow easy changes in ride height and firmness. Power for the car comes from a 350 Chevrolet crate motor producing more than 200



horsepower but two higher output versions are also available. Most owners specify an automatic transmission but standard is available.

Like the chassis, the fiberglass body is built on site, using molds taken from an original car. Gil says they are absolutely accurate. The outer shell is molded in one piece and the inner shell is bonded to the outer shell while it is still in the mold, guaranteeing accurate alignment. A steel subframe creates a roll cage around the car, with the first hoop following the curve of the windshield and the second conforming to the rear curve of the roof. Rectangular steel tubing connects the hoops, making a solid platform for the roof-mounted door hinges. The subframe allows metal-to-metal contact, securely bolting the body to the chassis.

Gil creates and installs a complete upholstery package, then details the car with accurate accessories. A glass manufacturer in England now produces those windshields that several years ago shut down his production line. Gil casts his





own bumpers, headlight trim rings, taillight frames, and more at a local foundry. He's even found a way to create his own accurate taillight lenses using a special tinted acrylic resin.

You can purchase the Gull Wing as a kit (\$25,000 - \$30,000) that includes the body, chassis, hardware, upholstery, gauges, glass, trim pieces, and more. The customer provides the suspension, powertrain, fuel tank, wheels, tires, battery, etc. Gil will also create a turnkey car for you and its \$90,000 price tag includes a 350 crate motor, leather interior, air-conditioning, and more, a bargain compared to the \$400,000 to \$600,000 price of a restored original. If you call today, you can have a kit in about a month. There is currently about a one-year wait for a turnkey but production output is expected to expand.

If making an indelible first impression is on your list desirable aspects for owning a specialty car, this Gull Wing Coupe replica would be hard to beat. **KCB**

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