

## *Kjell Qvale Dies at 94; Married U.S. to Sports Cars*

By Douglas Martin

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Kjell Qvale, who fell in love with a forest-green, wire-wheel MG sports car in the 1940s and went on to become one of the earliest American importers of European cars, ultimately selling a million automobiles as a distributor and dealer, died on Nov. 1 in San Francisco. He was 94.

His family announced the death.

As a recently discharged Navy veteran, the Norwegian-born Kjell Qvale (pronounced shell KAH-vah-leh) entered the car business in 1946, using \$8,500 in savings to invest in a Jeep dealership in Alameda, Calif. He had no particular passion for cars at the time; to him, this was strictly a business proposition.

It was also strictly business when he made a trip to New Orleans to meet with an importer to discuss expanding his line by adding James motorcycles, a not-terribly-fast British make known for its Jeep-like practicality. There, Mr. Qvale found himself standing on a street corner when “this goofy-looking car pulls up to the curb in front of me,” he said in an interview in 2008. He asked the driver where it was made.

“England,” the driver said.

The car was the MG, and the driver turned out to be the importer of motorcycles he had come to see. He gave Mr. Qvale a ride.

It also turned out that the importer was looking for someone to market MGs in Northern California. Mr. Qvale returned to Alameda, which is just south of Oakland, Calif., sold the Jeep franchise and became an MG distributor.

The MG, the first imported sports car to appear in significant numbers on American highways, has been called “the sports car America loved first.” Its precision handling, accurate steering and zip made going to the grocery store a pleasure.

“It’s fun to drive,” Mr. Qvale told The Wall Street Journal in 1960.

In 2005, the trade publication Automotive News said the MG’s postwar popularity in the United States “was largely because of one man, Kjell Qvale.” It characterized him as “the most imaginative and probably the hardest-working” importer.

Mr. Qvale added more British cars — Aston Martin, Austin, Austin-Healey, Jaguar, Morris, Bentley and Rolls-Royce — and became the exclusive distributor of these brands in Northern California and other parts of the West. (His dealership sold more Austin-Healey 3000s than any other American.) He later added the German cars Volkswagen and Porsche and, later still, Japanese makes.

At his peak, around 1970, he operated 100 dealerships. He estimated that as a wholesale distributor and retail dealer, he sold a million cars representing 36 makes.

Mr. Qvale’s impact in popularizing sportier, more luxurious European cars in the West is often compared to that of Max Hoffman, the celebrated New York car importer who commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design his Manhattan showroom.



Mr. Qvale Qvale Collection

Mr. Qvale, like Mr. Hoffman, overcame stiff obstacles. He persuaded reluctant banks to finance his unfamiliar breeds of car and insurance companies to insure them. He also had the logistically demanding task of providing parts and service for the foreign brands.

He promoted sports cars by sponsoring rallies, time trials and other competitions. In 1949, he organized the first postwar sports car race in the West at Buchanan Field in Concord, Calif. The next year, he was chairman of the first sports car race in the forest at Pebble Beach, Calif. To accompany the race, he proposed a show of classic cars; it became the Pebble Beach Concours d'Élégance, one of the top events in the world for car collectors.

In 1956, when the Pebble Beach race moved to nearby Fort Ord, an Army base, Mr. Qvale contributed to the design of its famously treacherous corkscrew at turns 8 and 8A of what is now Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca. He also organized a sports car race on the public roads of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and teamed up with the racecar designer Joe Huffaker to race MGs at Indianapolis in the mid-1960s.

Kjell Qvale was born on July 17, 1919, in Trondheim, Norway, about 225 miles north of Oslo. His father, Bjarne, was a sea captain who commanded a freighter that operated between Chile and Seattle. The elder Mr. Qvale decided to leave the merchant marine and settle in the Pacific Northwest because it reminded him of Norway. Kjell was 10 when his mother

took him and his four siblings to join their father.

As a boy, Kjell sold vegetable graters and phonograph needles door to door and had a newspaper delivery route. He was a track star in high school and won an athletic scholarship to the University of Washington, where he was captain of the track team. He once ran the 100-yard dash in 9.6 seconds in a collegiate meet.

He joined the Navy after Pearl Harbor and flew transport planes in the Pacific during World War II. A wartime friend who was the San Francisco-area distributor for Willys-Overland Motors, which made Jeeps, helped him get the Alameda franchise.

In 1970, Mr. Qvale teamed up with the car designer Donald Healey to buy Jensen Motors, and together they developed the Jensen-Healey, a powerful sports car with a Lotus 907 engine. They sold the car from 1972 to 1976. As majority shareholder in Jensen Motors, Mr. Qvale also sought to acquire Rolls-Royce but was unsuccessful.

In 1998, Mr. Qvale and his sons, Jeff and Bruce, bought the rights to make the DeTomaso Mangusta, a high-performance sports car. They made and sold several hundred before selling the rights and manufacturing plant to the MG Rover group in 2001.

Mr. Qvale's other business interests included Britannia Jeans and the First National Bank of Marin. He bred and raced thoroughbreds and for a time owned the renowned come-from-behind racehorse Silky Sullivan. He also financed women's professional tennis.

Mr. Qvale's wife of 57 years (and his business associate for even longer), the former Kay Curry, died in 2005. He is survived by his sons, seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Always eager to try something new, Mr. Qvale started taking piano lessons at 90.