



Charlie Johnson/Edwards Chevrolet

Best Mechanics

By Loyd McIntosh

If this list of Birmingham's best mechanics had been compiled 15 years ago, there's a good chance my father might have been on it. Or at least he certainly would have been the best mechanic to have been left off of the list.

My dad never operated his own shop. Instead, he held down a full-time job during the day and worked on cars in the garage of our house in

Trussville at night and on weekends. His specialty was in body work, detailing and painting. He painted cars, trucks and even boats from time to time in that dusty garage. And, at the risk of not sounding very objective, he was plain and simply the best there was.

Many times I played basketball in the driveway as dad pounded out and bonded dents in everything from

Corvettes to speed-boats. Sometimes these cars would be housed in our garage for what seemed like weeks on end. But patrons, and sometimes even companies, came to my dad for good and inexpensive body work.

There are still mechanics who not only do exceptional work, but also love what they do. They exist at auto shops all over the city, some in specialized areas, others servicing everything under the hood.


To locate the Birmingham area's best, we polled mechanics on who they recommend in the areas they don't handle themselves. Our survey was informal and, admittedly, unscientific. Some shops we called—nearly every one in the phone book—declined to participate, and in some categories the votes were distributed among so many different mechanics that the result was less than conclusive. So if you don't see your own mechanic here, it doesn't necessarily mean you should dump him or her—a mechanic who's earned your trust deserves your business, and there are plenty of good ones who didn't make this list. But if you're looking for a recommendation, we have a few of the best.

Best Dealer Service (tie): Edwards Chevrolet

It is the nature of the mechanic's business that he tends to see customers at their worst—when they're inconvenienced by car trouble and maybe an expense they weren't expecting. "It's challenging, to say the least," says Charlie Johnson, service manager for Edwards Chevrolet. "You can do the best work in town and never make a mistake, and if you're not courteous and empathetic to people's situations, you're still not going to be as successful."

"The fact that we go the extra mile to make things right for the customer is our best asset."

best mechanics



Stan Zangler/Tom Williams BMW, Porsche, Audi, Land Rover

Edwards Chevrolet has been a part of Birmingham's consciousness for the better part of a century and is still owned and operated by a member of the Edwards family. Sales Manager Lee Edwards, the grandson of the dealership's founder, is in charge now, and is intent on keeping the family business in the family and keeping the business in downtown Birmingham, where it has remained through its entire existence.

"We were founded in 1916 by my grandfather, Sterling Edwards," Edwards says. "We've been through World War I, the Depression, World War II and several recessions since then," he points out. "We've found that over those times it's real important to keep our reputation strong, which is a reflection of how you take care of your customers."

Tom Williams BMW, Porsche, Audi, Land Rover

With automobiles that list for

more than \$100,000, customers of Tom Williams BMW, Porsche, Audi, Land Rover demand quality service from the downtown dealership.

"Our clientele is comparing us with service they receive when they stay in the finest hotels or fly first class," says Service Manager Stan Zangler, a native of South Africa who came to Tom Williams a year ago after 16 years with Century BMW in Huntsville.

So important is service to the dealership that the company is in the process of building its new auto mall, with three separate dealership facilities and as many as 40 service bays, near Grants Mill Road in the Irondale area. As many as 10 service bays will be dedicated to Land Rovers alone.

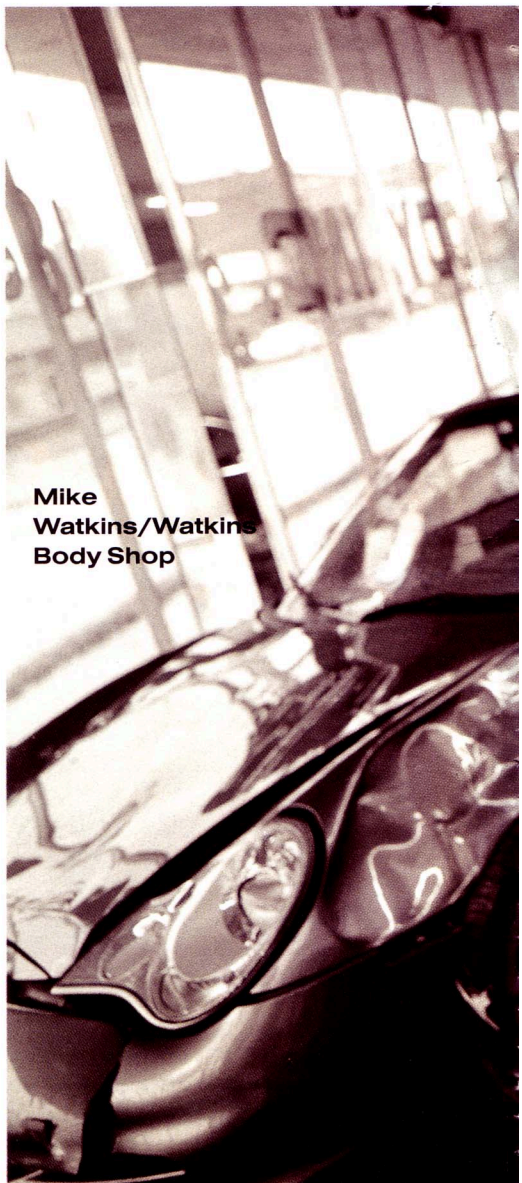
"One reason we're moving is we're landlocked here, and we can't do the type of service that our customers deserve," says Pete Turner, sales manager for the dealership. Turner says the company hopes to move into the new auto mall as early as September.

Zangler, who began as an auto-

service apprentice in 1968, says his goal is simple: To "take care of the customer and make sure the vehicle's fixed right the first time. And hiring the correct people—from the newest trainee to the guy that's been here the longest—whose main concern is going to be the customer and making sure when the vehicle leaves here, it's fixed right."

Collision/Body Work (tie): Watkins Body Shop

If you get a chance to walk through the service area of Watkins Body Shop, you might be reminded

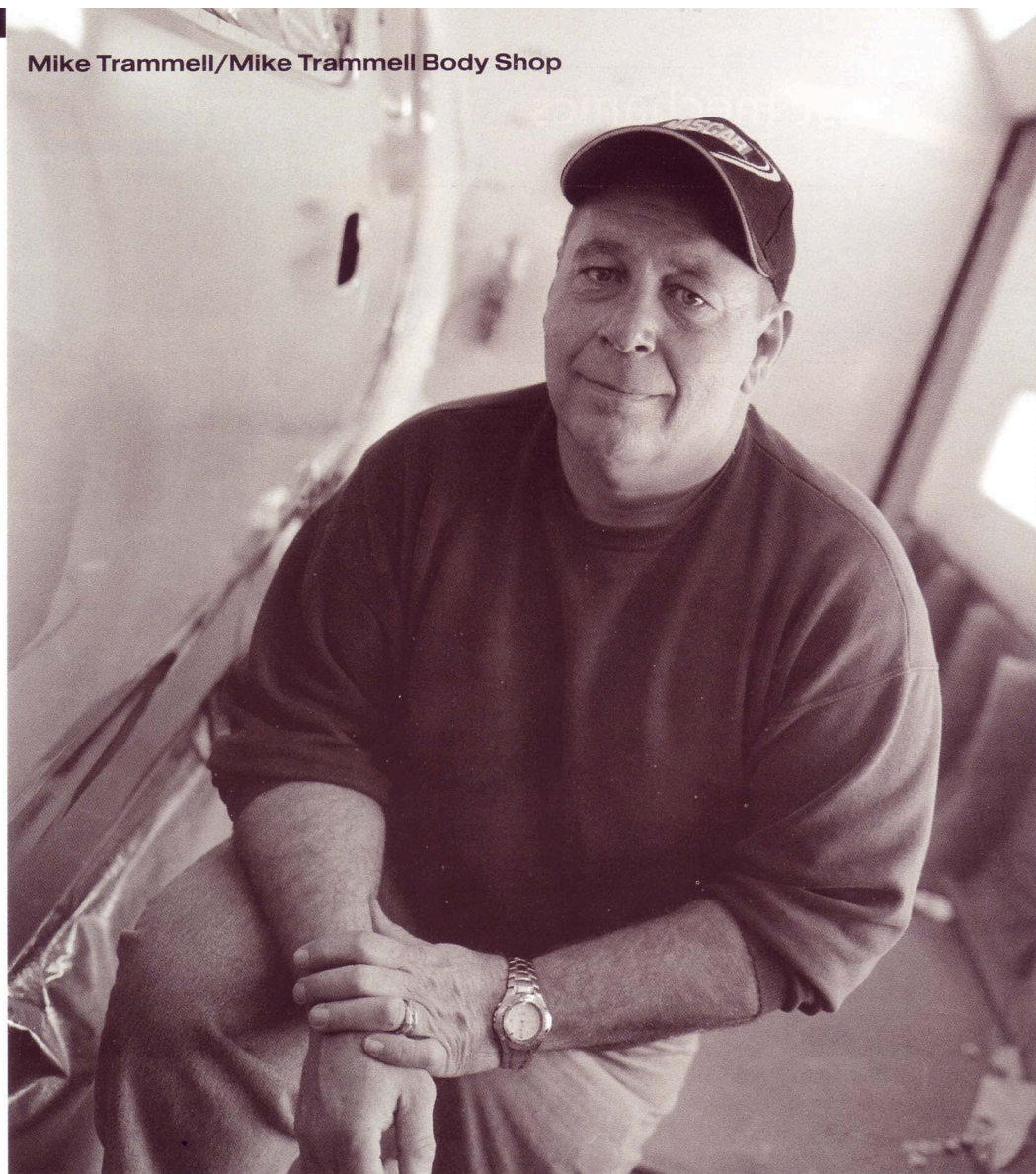


Mike Watkins/Watkins Body Shop

of a hospital operating room or a research laboratory. What Watkins Body Shop is, however, is a state-of-the-art, completely modernized service center where some of the most sought after and expensive cars in all states of disrepair are painstakingly put back together.

Mike Watkins opened his body shop about 15 years ago and, in that time, has developed the business into one of the most technologically advanced shops in town. It's also a quite large operation, as Jack Helvin, the service advisor for Watkins Body Shop, explains.

"We generally have, at any one time, anywhere from 60 to 80 cars in this shop...in various stages of



repair," Helvin says. "This building right here used to sell parts and cars and do service work," he adds. "Now, we've got the whole building. It was an AMC, Jeep, Renault dealership. There's a lot of history to this building."

Technology has had a major impact on the way the shop operates. Computerized systems now help body technicians realign a car's frame to within a millimeter, approximately the width of a dime. Also, the shop's paint technicians rely on a sophisticated system by which the shop's paint is matched exactly to the factory paint job.

Helvin says it's all about responding to the demands of a clientele that typically drive high-end automobiles and making sure the job is done right.

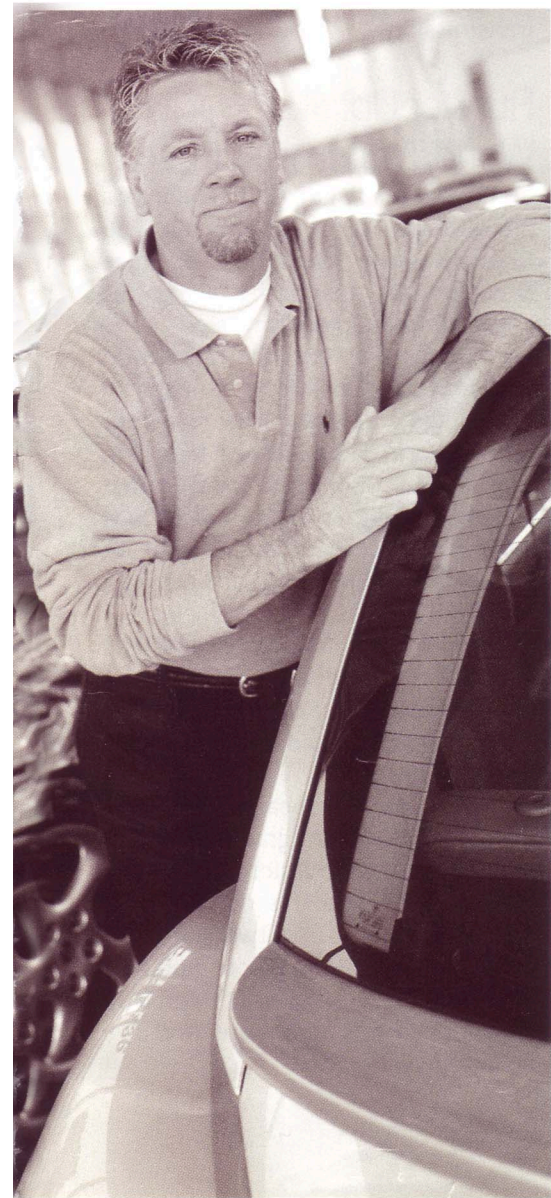
"We pay a whole lot of attention to detail, mainly due to the type clien-

tele and the type of vehicle that we work on," Helvin says.

Mike Trammell Body Shop

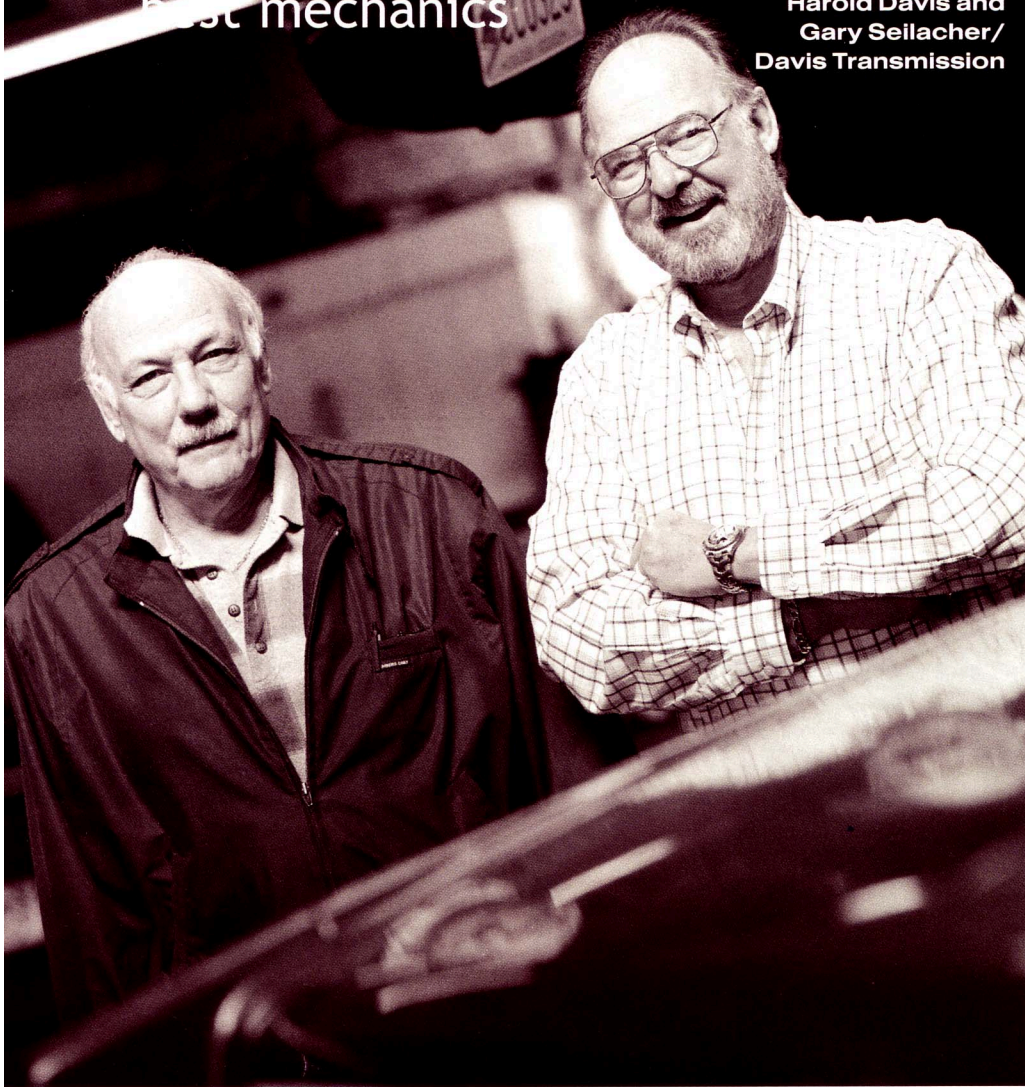
Of all the auto service shops in the Birmingham area, Mike Trammell Auto Body might be one of the most recognizable names of them all. In business for almost 15 years, 10 of those at the current location of 2121 2nd Avenue South, Mike Trammell Body Shop specializes in general body and collision repair.

The shop's owner and founder, Mike Trammell, is the kind of guy many people might feel at ease taking their cars to. Trammell's philosophy on the business and his work are simple and straight-forward. "I just try to give people a fair price for a fair job," Trammell says. "We do foreign car service and work on all makes



Best mechanics

Harold Davis and
Gary Seilacher/
Davis Transmission



and models.”

Located at 1700 4th Avenue South, its original location, for six years, the Mike Trammell Body Shop has experienced its fair share of changes in the industry. All of Trammell’s mechanics and technicians are specially trained in the latest technology and body repair practices.

Since 1987, the mechanics at Mike Trammell Body Shop, including Trammell, have serviced hundreds of cars. “We’ve seen some bad wrecks in here over the years,” Trammell relates. “It’s our job to put them back together and going again.”

Best Transmission Service:

Davis Transmission

Harold Davis and his father found-

ed Davis Transmission over 40 years ago with the belief that they could operate a successful business by working together using the skills and knowledge each had gained in separate areas of interest. Over the years, Davis Transmission has seen a lot of changes and several locations, but the shop has always maintained a loyal group of customers and employees.

“We decided to open a business close to where we were living, which was in Oak Grove, Alabama. This was in December of 1959,” Davis remembers. “My father (had been) a transmission mechanic all of his life and I was trained in insurance and finance. We figured the sales and mechanics combination would make us a living.”

“We started this business in Bessemer and expanded to Birmingham. We had two locations in Birmingham, one on 6th Avenue and

29th Street, and one on 5th and 21st South. We moved down here in 1982.”

Even though the business has moved around quite a bit since that first shop in Bessemer, Davis Transmission is typical of many family-owned businesses, retaining many of their mechanics and technicians for decades. Many of the employees began their careers with Davis Transmission and will most likely retire with him as well. However, that doesn’t mean that the mechanics at Davis Transmission haven’t kept up with the changes in the automotive industry.

“We have a continuing training program,” Davis says, “and we keep our people trained on all types of transmissions.”

Runner Up: World Transmission

If you ask what Chip Mullinax’s blood type is, he might tell you Chevron Type F. That’s because Mullinax has practically spent his entire life around transmissions.

His father opened the first World Transmission location almost 40 years ago on the West side of Birmingham. The oldest of four children, it was Chip Mullinax who first caught the bug for cars, and he has been nurturing that passion since he was old enough to hold a wrench in his hand.

“There were four boys and one girl, and I, being the oldest in the family, got the first opportunity to go get transmission fluid in my diapers,” Mullinax says.

“We built this location in 1979, which was the year I graduated. I had worked on transmissions all of my life, and Dad had this new location and was going to run two shops, so he said to me, ‘Here’s your opportunity,’” Mullinax explains. “I came in and opened this shop here, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Kelly Estes/
Estes Automotive



Mullinax and his father ran the two World Transmissions for nearly another decade, when they decided to sell the shop in West End and focus their attention on the new location on West Valley Avenue in Homewood. Over the years, practically the entire Mullinax family has been involved in the business, the only business this transmission mogul can ever see himself running.

"Over the years my brothers have worked for me, and one still works for me now. I was just raised up working on transmissions. It's the only job I've ever had," Mullinax says. "It's just a family operated business. It's what we know how to do and we enjoy it."

Best Independent Service, General: Estes Automotive

"I was in Jefferson State College working toward becoming an accountant," Vestavia native Kelly Estes says, recalling the moment when he decided to completely change courses and become

an automotive mechanic. "I decided to do a co-op program with General Motors and then went to work for Tom Williams." Little did he know that shortly over a decade later he would open his own service center and it would become known as one of the best in Birmingham.

Estes prides himself on running a clean operation and having talented and knowledgeable people working in his garage. Estes says he relies on the knowledge and experience of his staff to help keep his customers happy and loyal.

"This isn't your typical grease-monkey garage," Estes says. "When people come in here they want to talk to somebody (who is) competent about their car. We take it real personally."

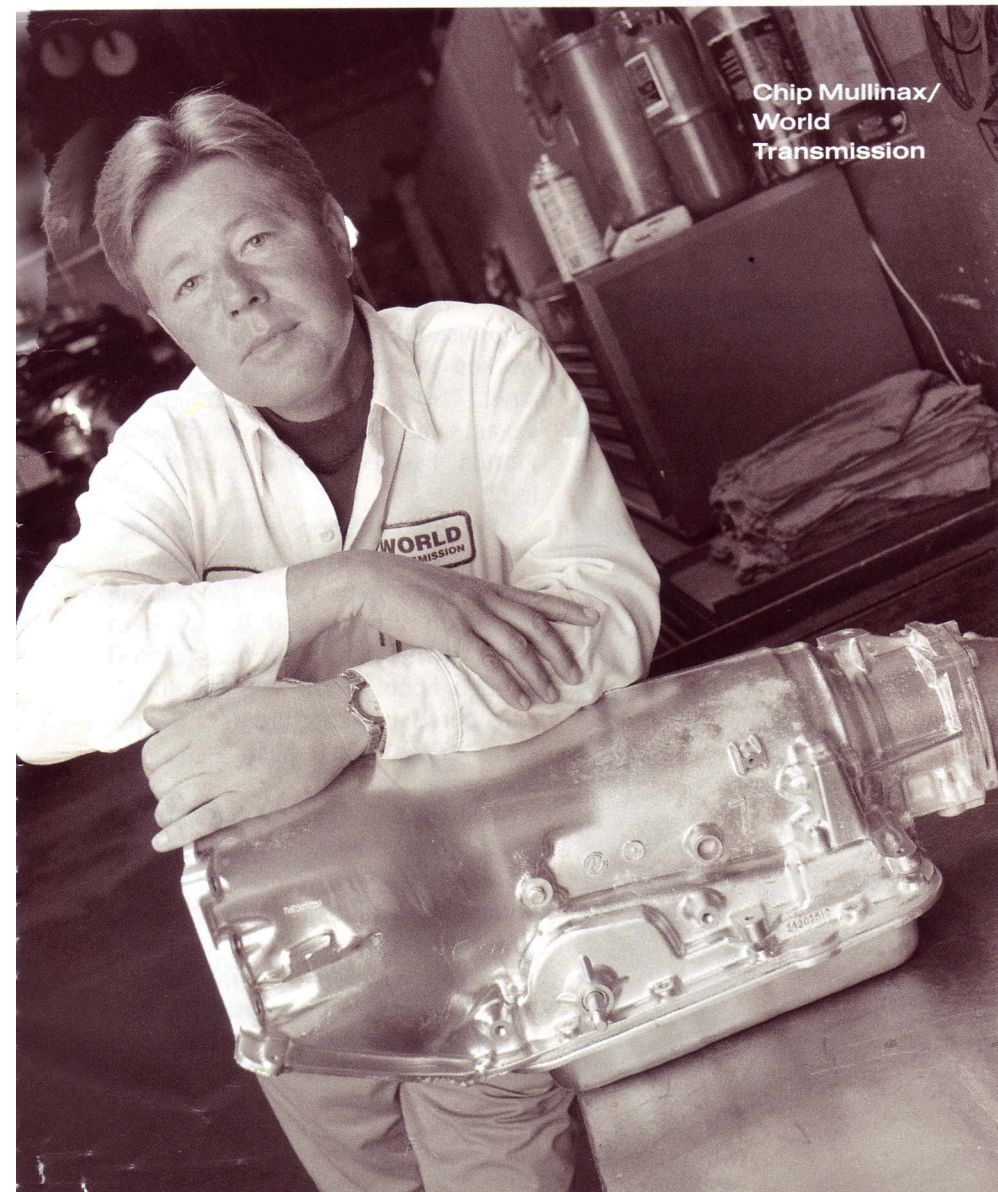
"I think I (have) the best (professionals) in the business," Estes adds. "Some of these guys are a lot better than I am. They're really good mechanics."

Like much of the auto service industry, Estes Automotive has had to change with the times, utilizing computer technology to analyze problems and aid in the repair process.

"We have computers that control everything," Estes says. "I have one guy who does nothing but diagnose cars. They then go to other people who fix the problem."

"When people come in...they expect their car back when it was

Chip Mullinax/
World
Transmission



best mechanics

promised, clean and fixed the first time.”

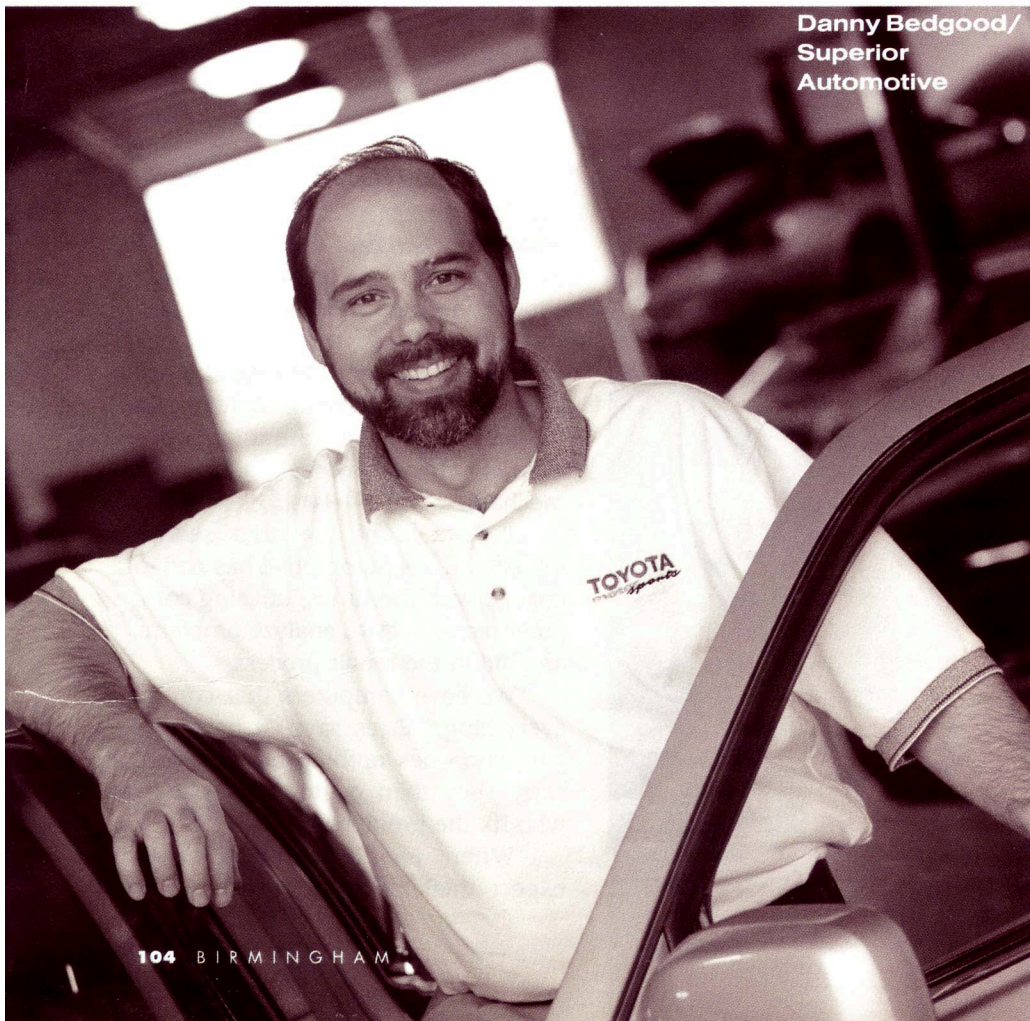
Best Independent Service, Import: Superior Automotive

Danny Bedgood has been repairing Toyota and Lexus vehicles for around 19 years. He opened his own service operation only three years ago, however, after leaving a successful career as a mechanic for local Toyota and Lexus dealerships. His shop, Superior Automotive, has built a solid name based on his reputation as a mechanic who knows his way around a Toyota, and having a dedicated group of loyal customers.

Bedgood says 80 to 85 percent of his business is by word-of-mouth, a good thing considering many of those customers have had a hard



Leonard Slick/Slick Finish



Danny Bedgood/
Superior
Automotive

time finding him since he left the dealership to open his own business in 1998.

“People are still finding me, even now. I still have people (as customers) who used to come to me when I worked for the dealers...,” Bedgood says. “Now, I have customers in Texas, Ohio, Tennessee, Georgia and Florida. I have a pretty good following.”

Bedgood’s shop only services Toyotas and Lexuses due mainly to his own fascination with Toyotas. He has been driving and fixing them most of his life, and has learned enough about these cars that he is considered one of the best Toyota and Lexus specialists in the Southeast.

“I had a ’73 Toyota Celica and that’s what I broke my teeth on,” Bedgood says. “I did all sorts of things to it until I bought a new Toyota in 1985.

“That’s what I was trained in,” Bedgood adds. “I’m basically self-taught in Toyotas.”

Best Detailing: Slick Finish

Leonard Slick is one serious car nut with a serious drive for cleanliness. That's why he and his business, Slick Finish, have the reputation as one of the best car detailing shops in the nation. Slick began working as an automotive detailer in 1976 after losing his job as a sales representative for an automotive services company. He worked out of a van for a while washing and detailing cars before moving to an empty bay at a car wash he managed for the facility's owner. Now, Slick is building a brand


new shop, which he plans to move Slick Finish into by mid-year.

Cars Slick has detailed have been on display in the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky and in the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in Talladega. After detailing cars for dozens of dealerships, Slick now works primarily for the general public.

He takes at least some of the credit for bringing the detail shop from the back of the dealership and onto the street corner. "Years ago, clean-up service was housed in a dealership and typically done in a back room," Slick recalls. "I might (have been) the

first person to bring this service to the general public."

Slick is another automotive specialist who doesn't need to do a whole lot of advertising. His reputation is enough to bring people into his shop. He has detailed cars made by Porsche and Lotus and has even cleaned an airplane in his shop before. Customers have flown him to exotic locations to work for them.

"Just about all of my business is by referral now," Slick says. "I'm a consumer advocate. I definitely want to see the customer get his money's worth. That's why my customers don't pay in advance." 

CAR CARE FOR DUMMIES

BY ASHLEY STARLING

Birmingham-area mechanics agree that the better care you take of your car, the longer it lasts and the less it costs to maintain in the long run.

The number-one service routine you should follow for your car is changing the oil, says Mark Mathis of Highway 31 Service Center in Pelham. He notes that problems from infrequent oil changes are the top reason cars are towed into the service center.

Most new car manufacturers say oil changes can be performed every 5000 to 7500 miles, but Ken Trotman, mechanic for Crestwood Chevron in Irondale, recommends changing it more often. "(Changing the oil less frequently) is okay if you plan to trade in the car every three years, but if you want to extend the life of the car, there is nothing better than changing the oil and filter at 3,000 miles," he says.

Not changing the fuel filter often enough can also cause car problems. "Fuel-injective cars tend to stop up more quickly," Mathis adds. He notes that most modern manufactured cars are fuel-injective, and recommends checking the owner's manual to see how often the filter should be replaced.

Another major mistake drivers make is allowing their cars to run hot. "Nothing will ruin your engine as quickly as overheating," Trotman says.

Mathis agrees. "Have the coolant system serviced as often as the owner's manual recommends."

Mathis also recommends having automatic transmissions serviced on or before schedule. Both coolant systems and automatic transmission services can be done while having

the oil changed.

If the car runs hot while you're driving, Trotman advises stopping and letting it cool for at least 20 minutes. Then, try to get to a safe place and call a towing service.

One other major, and extremely dangerous, problem is not having adequate air in all tires. Trotman

says the primary cause of premature tire failure, which can cause accidents, is underinflation. Tire air pressure should be checked at least once a month. The proper inflation can be found in the car's manual or posted inside the driver's door.

Above all, Trotman says, car owners should check problems as soon as they begin. He suggests having a mechanic discover the causes of any funny noises or strange behaviors.

"Problems don't get better, and they can get a lot worse," Trotman says. "A simple miss can ruin exhaust systems, a small brake noise can turn into tragedy and a leak or drip can leave you stranded or kill an engine."

