BY NORM DEWITT

CORVETTES AT LE

CELEBRATING THE CARS AND THE STARS

IN RECENT YEARS, THE PRATT & MILLER CORVETTES HAVE BECOME A PERENNIAL FAVORITE AT THE 24 HOURS OF LE MANS, AND THEIR SUCCESS HAS PROVED THE AMERICAN BRAND IS A MATCH FOR ANY OF THE SUPERCARS EUROPE HAD TO OFFER IN THIS, THE MOST GRUELING OF ENDURANCE CONTESTS. THAT WAS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE, AND THE 2010 LE MANS DEBUT WITH THE NEW GT2 CAR IS ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST ATTEMPT BY CORVETTE TO WIN AT LE MANS. THIS IS THE STORY OF THE MEN AND THE MACHINES THAT LED CORVETTE TO THAT FIRST ASSAULT ON THE GREATEST ENDURANCE RACE IN THE WORLD.

Briggs Cunningham was a legend in endurance racing for his attempts to win Le Mans with a variety of cars. When not attempting to win Le Mans, Briggs was best known for his successful 1958 defense of the America's Cup in yacht racing. If you need to remove sag from insufficient halyard tension on the mainsail of a boat, you tighten "the Cunningham," an innovation named for its inventor. Briggs could be best described as the premier American sportsman of the 1950s, if not of the entire 20th Century. His Cadillac racers in 1950 included the famous "Le Monstre," not the most aesthetic creation ever to grace the event. An aptly named metal box, it likely drew its inspiration from the hideous Bugatti "tanks" that raced there in the 1920s. His next efforts included fielding graceful sports racing cars of his own manufacture starting in 1951.

John Fitch looks back upon those first years racing for Cunningham, "It started in 1951. General Peron invited 10 drivers and cars to come to Argentina for a big race. I won the race in an Allard, and as a result of that, Briggs Cunningham invited me to come to Le Mans with his team for the first time, driving the Cunningham C2." John Fitch/Phil

MANS

WHO MADE CORVETTE HISTORY.

Walters finished 18th, after running second for much of the race. Returning the following year, Briggs achieved fourth at Le Mans, while teammate Phil Walters led the first lap. Fitch was entered in another Cunningham C-4R, which retired. John Fitch recalls, "We should have won it, but the automobile club that puts on the race gave us the wrong octane rating for the engine. We burned the valves, and the engine failed."

The first major win came the following year with a victory in the 12 Hours of Sebring, followed by a third overall and first in class at Le Mans for the Cunningham C5-R of Fitch and co-driver Phil Walters. Briggs was to finish eighth with the older C4-R. Fitch explained, "We calculated that 5 mph faster than the previous year would be enough to win the race, but we were wrong. They improved the race average by 7 mph, which was not predictable." The new disc brakes on the Jaguar C type had been a game changer and put the Cunningham team race strategy in disarray.

The following two years brought additional success at Sebring for Cunningham, as the team continued to gain experience and results. In 1954, Stirling Moss won overall with Briggs' OSCA, and the following year the Cunningham team again won, this time with a D-type Jaguar. Briggs' legacy from those three consecutive victories lives on through "Cunningham Corner" at Sebring.

Meanwhile, Fitch had accepted an offer from the Mercedes factory to be a teammate to Juan Fangio and Stirling Moss. In the 1955 Mille Miglia, Moss won overall with his 300SLR, while Fitch drove the production 300SL to fifth overall, first in class. Fitch noted, "Nobody, including me, knows how that could have

THE CLASS-WINNING number 3 Corvette takes on fuel during a pit stop. After a mishap with the radiator, the crew began stoking the engine with ice during subsequent pit stops to help prevent it from overheating.

IMAGE: CHIP MILLER CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

happened … a production car against 700 cars, many of them racing cars. I asked Alfred Neubauer (legendary Mercedes team manager from the 1930s thru the '50s) where he thought we might come in, and he just laughed. He didn't think we'd be anywhere near fifth overall. It was an ego thing for me; I really pushed and had a battle with a brilliant driver, Gendebien." Olivier Gendebien in his privateer 300SL led the GT class at Rome, but was to finish seventh overall, six minutes behind Fitch after 1,000 miles of battling with him over the rugged Italian roads. Olivier was to win the 24 Hours of Le Mans overall three times, teamed with Phil Hill.

Despite such stellar results, Fitch remained unimpressed. "The 300SL was not a good race car at all. It was heavy for its power, with an engine that was designed for a limousine. It was only three liters and was never intended to go over 90 mph. We had to strap up the rear axle because it had a swingarm rear axle – terrible, very primitive. If the wheels dropped down into positive camber, it simply slid off the road. We had a suspension in the car that could only use half the travel, so it didn't have the rebound travel." The only way to control the camber was with straps which kept the rear suspension in a neutral or negative camber range, making the best of a bad situation. Considering that the 300SL was the class of the GT field, one can only imagine what racing the competition must have been like.

At Le Mans, Fitch was entrusted with a 300SLR prototype, same as Moss and Fangio, but it all went horribly wrong. John's co-driver, Pierre Levegh, had the Mercedes disintegrate in a shattering crash that killed 84 spectators in the grandstand opposite the pits, the darkest day in the history of the sport. With the resultant withdrawal of the Mercedes factory from racing at the end of the season, Fitch returned to the U.S.A. His previous five seasons of racing for Cunningham and Mercedes-Benz had made him the most experienced and successful American endurance racer of the day. With the start of the 1956 season, Fitch was hired to develop the Corvette into a competitive machine for road racing. It was far from a fairy tale beginning.

John Fitch remembers, "Ed Cole ordered Zora Duntov to prepare a team of production cars for the World Championship event at Sebring in five weeks, and he refused … Zora said it was impos-

ON THE GRID before the start of the race, the cars drew attention wherever they went.

PHOTO CREDIT OF THE CHIP MILLER CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

ENGINEERS AND DRIVERS prepare the cars before the race at Le Mans.

IMAGE: CHIP MILLER CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

DOCTOR DICK THOMPSON, circa 1963. Dick Thompson is one of the most successful Corvette racers of all time. Beginning in 1956, he raced Corvettes all over America and in various other nations, including France, where in 1960 he and Fred Windridge co-drove the #2 Cunningham Team Corvette at Le Mans. Five of Thompson's nine total SCCA national championships were earned driving Corvettes. He also enjoyed many important race victories in a Corvette, including the GT title in the 1957 12 Hours of Sebring and the first win in the legendary Corvette Grand Sport.

sible. Cole said, 'If you won't do it, then I'll get John Fitch to do it.' I did, but it was a piece of junk … it was terrible. The wheels actually broke and rolled down the runway ahead of us when we were testing at Sebring two weeks before the race. The whole brake system was hopeless; it was incredible that we could have done what we did. The brake return springs lost their temper, so the brakes would stay on … just incredible things one after the other, all through the car. We only had five weeks to make a race car out of it, in a rented hangar at Sebring. Chevrolet sent a lot of people down, but all of their specialists were not specialists in racing. Things that work for passenger cars simply don't work for racing. I made the Corvette a racing car."

Walt Hansgen was scheduled to drive the race-prepared Corvette at Pebble Beach but had gotten ill, so John Fitch selected Thompson as the substitute driver. Fitch stated, "I recommended Dick Thompson to Ed Cole in part because he was a dentist and could schedule his occupation around the race events."

Thompson recalls, "I first raced a Corvette in 1956. I flew out; I'd never seen the car before. It had great big carburetors, before fuel injection. Come race day, I had a pretty good starting position, right up front. They dropped the flag, I put my foot down and the car went "uhhhhh" … those great big carburetors just drowned it out. I didn't know any better, that you had to use them very gradually from a stop. I was almost last getting off the line, but the 300SLs really had trouble, as it was winding through a forest and that's not where they are at their best … by the time the lap was over, I was in first place. It handled so well compared to the 300SLs and Jaguars, but a lap before the end, the brakes went completely out. One Mercedes caught up to me, and I finished second overall in the race … first in class. When it was over, I pulled into the pits and couldn't stop it without putting it in gear and turning off the key. When they took the wheel off, everything fell out onto the ground … springs, shoes, everything just melted."

Why didn't Corvette just take a lesson from Jaguar and convert their racers to the new Dunlop disc brakes? "A lot of ideas were kicked around and cancelled for one reason or another. If we put those wonderful disc brakes on those race cars, they would have to be made available for every Corvette; it had to be an option for all Corvettes. That was something they just couldn't afford to do," replied Fitch.

Finishing second overall to Tony Settember's gullwing 300SL, Thompson had made the best possible impression. Dick Thompson "The Flying Dentist," had been racing a variety of Corvettes during this same time frame, establishing himself as one of the best in America's sports car racing. Thompson won the 1956 and 1957 SCCA National Championships driving a Corvette, cementing his position as one of the top Corvette drivers in the country. Later, he was to become part of their history at Le Mans.

At Sebring in 1957, John Fitch raced one of the most famous Corvette race cars of all time, the sports prototype Corvette SS in its only race. Fitch recalls the effort, "We had a car called "the mule," a very rough car built for exhibition. The factory gave me that car, and what the factory gave me … suspension and everything. We did our testing with that car, the fiberglass one, and then transferred those parts we had refined onto the magnesium-bodied race car … that was the 'proper' SS. It was a last minute

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push … we had just a day to do it, and I knew the car was going to fail. That's why I got Piero Taruffi as my co-driver, because he was not only a great driver, but he was a recognized engineer of the highest quality. I needed him because I knew I was going to have to come into the pits and say, 'this car is hopeless.' I needed him (Taruffi) to back me up. We obviously couldn't finish. I knew that before we started, so I did something nobody else ever did – I let the competition drive the car. Fangio and Moss both broke the lap record, which was great news. That ended up being all the good news that GM got out of it."

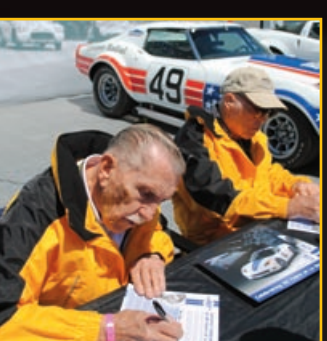
The race was relatively short for the debut of the Corvette SS. "After a couple of hours, I told them that the car had to be withdrawn," explained Fitch. "Ed Cole was there, the future president of GM, a wonderful guy and a great engineer. He wanted to win the World Championship with a Corvette. That's why he ordered the SS built. He said, 'John, we've come so far, we can't quit now … let's finish this race.'" Fitch continued, "Piero drove a full lap, came in and said "impossible." What had happened was that Zora had used the wrong material for the bushes in the DeDion axle, a very complex axle. When they go, the axle moves at random. It got to the point where you didn't know which way it was going to jump, so passing another car was very dangerous. Part of the circuit is not big wide runways; it was little two-lane service roads for the airport, so there was no room to make any mistakes." The car was getting rear wheel steering as it lurched back and forth down the track, the rear suspension was no longer under precise control.

Cunningham's racing efforts were soon to involve America's production sports car, the Corvette. For 1960, Cunningham again assembled his team for another assault on Le Mans, this time a three-car effort using Corvettes, while one car was entered by Camoradi USA. Briggs again hired John Fitch and also brought Dick Thompson onto the team. "I remember going to the GM executives in Detroit with Briggs Cunningham, and they asked Briggs to run a team," commented Fitch. "Looking back, I only raced the Corvette three times: in 1956 to try and make it a credible car, in 1957 with the SS, and in 1960 … I have to say, it was successful."

Dick Thompson, who was teamed with Fred Windridge, recalls that first Corvette effort. "Just being there was great fun. I really enjoyed it because I had never been there before … so it was quite an experience. You knew you just had to drive fairly fast and could enjoy it. It was my first experience racing with him (Briggs), and of course he was a wonderful guy. Cunningham said, 'You are here to have fun, don't worry about the race.' We looked

DICK GULDSTRAND AND DICK THOMPSON sign autographs at Laguna Seca. **DRIVERS** Corvette Racing, American Le Mans Series, Laguna Seca, May 21, 2010, Corvette celebrates 50 years at Le Mans: 1960 #2 Cunningham Team Le Mans competitor with driver Dick Thompson, 1967 #9 Dana Chevrolet Le Mans competitor with driver Dick Guldstrand, and 2010 #3 C6.R GT2 with driver Ron Fellows.

IMAGE: RICHARD PRINCE/GM RACING PHOTO.



THE CLASS-WINNING #3 Cunningham Corvette was already on its way to the festivities planned for the 2010 running at Le Mans, but the #2 car (owned by Bruce Meyers) was on hand to commemorate the past 50 years of racing at Le Mans. The engine in the #2 car expired around the 20-hour mark, admittedly by the drivers due to excessive engine-braking. **ENGINE** The Cunningham cars featured 283ci fuel-injected V-8s, beefed-up suspensions, driving lights, oil coolers, knock-off wheels and a 37-gallon fuel tank with a quick-fill gas cap coming up through the rear glass. **INTERIOR** Imagine this being your office for 24 hours, rain or shine. Contemporary Corvette Racing driver Ron Fellows had an opportunity to drive the #2 Cunningham Corvette and compared the difference between these historical machines and those tearing up the track today by saying, "The only thing familiar was the sound of the V-8 at startup."

at each other like he was crazy (laughs). I enjoyed being with him and was to drive for him another half-dozen times. Everything was arranged perfectly. You didn't have to worry about a thing. It took us a while to learn the track, of course, and you never really learn it because it changes so. At night, for instance, your braking points are different … I'm not sure why, I guess because it was cooler or something. It takes a lot to learn it."

In those days, the Mulsanne Straight was three miles long with a high-speed kink near the end, before dropping down to the 90-degree right corner with a sand trap on the exit that served up an assortment of beached cars in most years. What was the Mulsanne kink like in the dark with a 1960-era production-based Corvette? As Thompson describes it, "That was tough, and in the rain in the dark … with a production car at the kink, you had to slow down quite a bit. And with the brakes we had, we were lucky to get it slowed down enough to go through the kink."

Racing for Cunningham, the accommodations were first-rate, with their hotel outside Le Mans having an owner who doubled as a first-rate chef. Thompson paid little attention, as he was intensely focused upon getting the braking points right in the constantly varying conditions, a task far easier said than done. He confided, "After practice, you get so concentrated on the task that you can't live a life outside too well. Concentrating upon remembering where the turns were in the rain, knowing how far they are apart. We had a system of counting … on the long straight-away, when you took the turn onto it, you would start counting. We would put the brakes on without even seeing the corner at the end. You had to. If you waited until you saw it, it was too late. In the rain, it was like you had half your headlights; the rain was distorting it. In 1960, we had a fair amount of rain, more than I wanted (laughs)."

How was the balance of the car? "The handling was fine," noted Thompson. "We could out-handle just about everything except the race cars (prototypes). They were better. We could get it sideways, to again try to save the brakes a little bit by going in (to the corners) a little fast and sideways – that would slow it down. We'd have to change the tires on every other pit stop."

This was an era when vehicle conservation was the primary concern. Today, Le Mans is more akin to a 24-hour sprint race, as durability and consistency have improved massively across the decades. In 1960, it was anything but that, rewarding master tacticians such as John Wyer (Aston Martin, Mirage, Gulf-Ford, and Gulf-Porsche) for whom the race strategy was a balance of speed and car conservation. Thompson later drove for John Wyer at Mirage. Thompson stated, "He was a mastermind. He would get us together and say, 'Look, you are just touring around the course. It will be a race in the last two hours. Until then, you just tour around and don't get competitive with anybody else.'"

So the trick is getting to that point? Thompson continued, "With an intact car."

The disc front brakes and drum rear brakes were not even close to being up to the task required to slow a Corvette repeatedly from such enormous speeds. Thompson pointed out, "We had to be very careful with the brake system on the 1960 cars. We had so much brake trouble; even with fresh linings it would take a lap or so to seat them in. Even then, we had to baby it. It was passenger car brakes, and they put the best pads on them they could – these little teeny brake pads. They were completely worn out somewhere around the third stint. Fortunately, they could change them. That was all they could do. Of course, both of us had been downshifting to save the brakes. And we downshifted sometimes a little too soon, running

CORVETTE RACING, American Le Mans Series, Laguna Seca, May 20, 2010, Corvette celebrates 50 years at Le Mans: 2010 #4 C6.R GT2, 2011 VIN 001 GM Design Special Anniversary Z06, 1960 #2 Le Mans competitor, 1969 #49 Le Mans competitor (raced at Le Mans in 1973), and 1967 #9 Le Mans competitor.

IMAGE: RICHARD PRINCE/GM RACING PHOTO.

DRIVERS Corvette Racing, American Le Mans Series, Laguna Seca, May 21, 2010: C6.R #4 drivers Olivier Beretta and Oliver Gavin, Corvette racing legends Dick Guldstrand and Dick Thompson, and C6.R #3 drivers Johnny O'Connell and Jan Magnussen.

IMAGE: RICHARD PRINCE/GM RACING PHOTO.

the rpm up higher than it should be. I think that's why the engine failed – over revved from downshifting. By the time Fred got it, the brakes were just about gone completely. If we could have used the engine normally with normal brakes, I'm sure it would have lasted."

Fitch had much better results, stating, "I had a wonderful time early in the race. For a long time, it was a very heavy rain, and a production car has a great advantage with its narrow tires. The race cars (prototypes) have very wide tires, and they aquaplane; running on a film of water, they can't corner worth a damn. I had been lapped by the leader and unlapped myself, getting up to second overall in the race. Then, of course, the rain stopped … it couldn't go on forever, but that was the high point of the race."

The car ended up being the world's fastest ice chest. Fitch describes the dilemma, "Reportedly one of the mechanics lifted the radiator cap, and we lost water. From then on, it was touch and go as the car was overheating badly. Le Mans rules are such that you can't add water except at certain periods. It was terrible, we couldn't run fast anymore. But we had run so well, we were laps ahead. We could run slow laps and still not be overtaken. Willie was a very clever fellow, and he thought of getting loose ice out of the cooler in the pits and putting it around the cylinder heads to cool the engine with the ice. That allowed us to finish the race and maintain our place. There was a very prominent rule the next year about not being able to use ice!" One can imagine the initial reaction to the corner workers when reporting ice coming out from under one of the cars.

John Fitch was to get the Corvette to the finish line, finishing eighth overall, first in the 5-liter GT class. Corvette had won its class at Le Mans. Later in the year, Dick Thompson was to drive the "Stingray" at Laguna Seca, the car that eventually became the next-generation production Corvette. Dick Thompson truly appreciated the years he raced for Cunningham, "Working for him was really great. He'd always give you a car that was as good as he could make it, whatever car it was. Briggs had a philosophy that we were supposed to be having fun."

How was the pay? "No pay … Briggs said that 'you're out here having fun, why should I pay you?' They had no transporters. You had to drive the cars. I drove one of the Corvettes for the first time from the port to the race track at Le Mans … three or four hours. The Frenchmen went wild over that. I had a hard time getting there; they'd all come up in front of me and walk around looking at it. They knew it was one of the race cars. Briggs didn't pay you anything. And neither did Grady Davis with the Gulf cars (Mirage), but they made life wonderful for you."

One often hears of the camaraderie between the drivers and their great off-track adventures during that era. The racers quickly learned to substitute running up the expense account vs. having a salary. Dick Thompson's wife Eve explains, "They would come to pick you up saying 'Which airport do you want?'"

Dick Thompson added, "Yes, it wasn't a bad deal at all … it was fun."

At the Laguna Seca round of the American Le Mans series, Corvette paid tribute to this team that had achieved a class win in their first attempt. Also included in the anniversary festivities were the Dana Chevrolet 427 Corvette driven at Le Mans in 1967 by Bob Bondurant and Dick Guildstrand, along with a 1973 Corvette entry. A tribute Corvette was present, made in the colors of the 1960 Cunningham entries in celebration of the 50th anniversary.

Briggs Cunningham later established one of the world's premier automobile collections in Costa Mesa, California. Leading a long and full life, he passed away at the age of 96 in 2003. Zora Duntov passed away in 1996, forever to be known as the father of the Corvette. John Fitch is still active in the vintage racing scene and attended the 24 Hours of Le Mans 2010, one of the true legends of that earlier era. Dick Thompson is retired and lives in Florida with his wife Eve. ■