

Fitch obit for Vintage Motorsport: 1600 words assigned by Editor Randy Riggs.

JOHN FITCH REMEMBERED

By Art Evans

If someone were to write a novel about the life of John Fitch, it would seem so far-fetched as to be almost unbelievable. John sailed the Gulf of Mexico patrolling for German subs on the eve of WWII. Next he was a WWII hero, the boyfriend of Kathleen Kennedy and buddy of JFK, won the first GP of Argentina, was the first SCCA National Champion, a member of the 1955 World Championship Mercedes Benz team, part of the all-conquering Cunningham team, won the Team Prize for Corvette at the 1956 Sebring, credited with transforming the Corvette into a genuine sports car, designed safe and challenging Lime Rock Park, created the Corvair Sprint, invented and developed the Fitch Inertial Barriers.

I summarized John's extraordinary experiences during WWII in a five-page article in the Mar/Apr edition of *Vintage Motorsport* titled: "John Fitch, the War Years"

The article concludes towards the end of the forties when John, after buying an MGTC, established an MG dealership at White Plains, N.Y. His first race was in the TC at Bridgehampton in June 1949. He finished fifth and proposed to his girlfriend, Elizabeth Huntley, that evening. The marriage lasted for her lifetime. The first Sebring event was held on December 31, 1950; Fitch won his class in a Jaguar XK120.

Then he created the Fitch Model B, a Ford V8-60 engine in a Fiat 1100 chassis with a modified Crosley body. He took seconds with the Model B at both the Bridge and Watkins Glen in 1951. That same year, he became the first SCCA National Champion and, in a borrowed Cadillac Allard, won the first Argentine Grand Prix after which he was given a kiss by the race queen, who was also the un-crowned queen of the country, Evita Peron.

Back home, he built another sports-car special, the famous Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar in which he won many SCCA races. The car is so viable that it has been raced almost continually since its construction, now in vintage events.

On and off during the decade, John drove for Briggs Cunningham. John's and Brigg's first try at Le Mans was in 1951. John remembered that, "Here was this huge homebuilt American car against a field of experienced factory teams. At the 18th hour we were running second overall. Only a Jaguar was ahead of us, one of the three factory cars and identical to the other two that had blown their engines. We were waiting for the third one to fail. It didn't, but we did."

Due to John's drive at Le Mans, in 1952, Mercedes Benz Chief Engineer ask John to try out in a 300SL at the Nürburgring. While there, Ferry Porsche offered John a seat in a 356 Coupe in an all-Porsche event where he finished third. Also while at the Nürburgring, John suggested to Mercedes Benz team-leader Alfred Neubauer that the company might want to consider entering the Carrera Panamericana. Some months later, John got a telegram asking him to drive in the famed Mexican Road Race. He did and it was a triumph for Mercedes. Their prototype 300SLs finished first and second with John in fourth.

In 1953, he and Phil Walters won Sebring and placed third at Le Mans in a Cunningham C5R. While in Europe, John drove a Cooper-Bristol at Aix-les-Bains, a Frazer-Nash in the Tourist Trophy, a HWM-Alta at Monza and a Nash-Healy at the Mille Miglia.

I first became aware of John in 1953 when he came to California and won the first March Field race in a Cunningham C-4R. I was there taking pictures with my trusty Rolleiflex.

His greatest year was 1955 when he was a member of the Mercedes-Benz team, which, led by Fangio and Moss, won everything. John told me that he thought his greatest drive was the Mille Miglia where he won the GT class in a production 300SL.

Originally, the factory had teamed Fitch with Denis Jenkinson as navigator. During practice, John invented a device made out of wood that held a continuous roll of paper containing a map of the course. Stirling Moss, entered in an SLR, insisted on an all-British crew. So at the last minute Jenks was teamed with Moss. Jenks took the Fitch invention with him and the German mechanics constructed one out of metal. The rest is history. Moss and Jenks won overall.

That same year in Northern Ireland, Fitch and co-driver, Stirling Moss, won the Tourist Trophy. Fitch was the co-driver of the 300SLR involved in the famous Le Mans disaster that occurred while Pierre Leveigh was at the wheel. Mercedes withdrew from racing at the end of 1955.

Many years later, John and I wrote a book about his experiences with Mercedes Benz. The first edition of *Racing With Mercedes* was published in 2006. After all copies had been sold, the Saratoga Automobile Museum came out with a second edition. Copies are available online at www.saratogaautomuseum.org.

In December 1955, Fitch wrote to Chevrolet Chief Engineer Ed Cole expressing John's interest regarding Corvette's competitive possibilities. He added that he would like to work with Cole as a consultant. As a result, Cole had John drive a stock Corvette on the Beach at Daytona in February 1956. He covered the Flying Mile at 145 mph, setting a new production-car record.

Following that, Cole named Fitch the team manager for the Chevrolet effort at Sebring in 1956. Until then, Corvettes were boulevard cruisers and not selling well. GM was even considering dropping the marque altogether. The cars were delivered to John at Sebring in mid February. Race day was March 24. In those few short weeks, John was able to do what Corvette Chief Engineer Zora Argus-Duntov considered impossible. He turned them into serious competitors winning the production class and the Team Prize. John not only led the team, but also and drove at Sebring that year as well as the following year. In 1957, Corvettes placed first, second and fourth in class, taking the Team Prize again for General Motors. In 1960 Fitch drove a Corvette at Le Mans as a member of the Cunningham team. He and co-driver Bob Grossman finished eighth. It was the best a Corvette do at Le Mans until 2001 when they finished first and second.

John's 18-year racing career is the stuff of much legend, but his most significant contributions are in automotive safety. He designed the course at Lime Rock, among the safest in the world for drivers as well as spectators. Fitch's concern with safety began at Le Mans in 1955 after the horrendous racing accident.

John took great satisfaction in his invention and development of Fitch Inertial Barriers. These ubiquitous barrels that line danger points on our thruways have saved countless lives.

Most people assume they are just sand-filled barrels, but they are much more than that. Without going into the technology, suffice it to say that John was granted a patent, which, unfortunately, eventually expired so the royalties stopped.

John and I became acquainted when we worked together during the sixties on advertising projects, he as driver and me as cinematographer. For many years, whenever he was in California, we sailed together on my 30-foot boat. Since then, we have always kept in touch, mostly by telephone since we lived on opposite sides of the continent.

In 1960, Fitch made his home near the race course at Lime Rock, Connecticut. The previous year, General Motors had come out with the rear-engined Corvair. John took the car, which was somewhat lacking in performance, and designed the Fitch Sprint as well as a more advanced version, the Fitch Phoenix. Unlike a normal Corvair, Sprints could, and did, hold their heads up on road-racing circuits. Sprints were sold in kit form to dealers. The Phoenix is a prototype. No more were ever produced due to Ralph Nadar the Corvette. In 1968, he performed similar surgery on the Pontiac Firebird.

During the early sixties, Lime Rock fell on hard times. Local law doesn't allow racing on Sundays. Fitch and Jim Haynes took over the company and put it back on its feet.

Racing with his friend and patron, Briggs Cunningham, John drove D-Type and Lister Jaguars at Lime Rock, Road America and Thompson among other venues. His last race, appropriately enough, was at the 1966 Sebring, teamed with Briggs and Davey Jordan. Cunningham's Porsche 904 broke a valve and they retired for good.

Always interested in safety, in addition to the Fitch Inertial Barriers, John created Compression Barriers and Displaceable Guardrails for use on race tracks. Research he conducted has made racing measurably safer for drivers, officials, spectators and everyone who traverses our roads and highways.

On August 6, 2007, it was my great honor to host his 90th birthday party at my home in Redondo Beach, California. My family was almost in revolt due to the numbers that came, among them Phil Hill and Carroll Shelby. Davey Jordan's wife, Norma, brought the cake. Bob Bondurant flew over from Phoenix to give John a copy of his just-published biography, *Bob Bondurant*, by Phil Henny.

John was in Los Angeles to present a paper to a Society of Automotive Engineers conference held in Hollywood on August 7, 2007. The paper was titled, "Are We Flat-Out for Survivable Deceleration? The 1955 Crash at Le Mans—Its Impact on Racing." It may have been the first time the society had heard from a speaker who hadn't graduated from college.

On October 24, 2008, the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles held a celebration to honor Corvettes as race cars. A large number of Corvette drivers were there, but John was the star. To help celebrate, I put together a book, *Racing With Corvettes, The Early Years*. We had a box of books hot off the press that John and I autographed for his fans.

John C. Fitch died peacefully on October 31, 2012 at his home in Lakeville, Connecticut.

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