

B. S. Cunningham Co.

Good Morning, everyone

I want to thank your fine organization for honoring Briggs Cunningham today. It is a great pleasure for me to say a few words about Briggs Swift Cunningham the second, a man who has been a hero of mine since I was about seven years old. My father had a close friend who ran the wind tunnel at Grumman aircraft and he gave me one of the two wind tunnel models of Mr. Cunningham's "Le Monstre" 1950 Le Mans race car for my birthday in 1955. The other wind tunnel model was kept by Phil Walters, another NEAR Hall of Fame honoree. I treasured that wooden car and it caused me to follow every Cunningham exploit from then on. Mr. Cunningham was great role model to have as a kid; he was why I wanted to be a racer.

Many years later, still in thrall over Mr. Cunningham's accomplishments, I partnered with his son, Briggs the third, an American racing icon himself, in an effort to bring a legitimate American Grand Touring car to the world marketplace. Mr. "C"'s influence was felt deeply during those efforts.

Your honoree Briggs Cunningham was, and to some extent still is, a very famous man. Unfortunately, fame itself is not so unusual anymore. There are many famous now. Some become famous overnight for no discernable reason at all, so fame has become almost common and reduced in value. As a result, Briggs' fame may not seem all that important to some anymore. That is a true loss to our culture. Today's famous people are all too often very poor role models. Not Briggs. One very prominent person once said that Briggs was a man "about whom no one has ever had a bad word to say". The author of that obviously went to great lengths to avoid dangling a participle. They also went to great lengths to tell the truth about Mr. "C".

Unlike the fleetingly famous, Briggs Cunningham was a true role model. He is celebrated for his accomplishments, his sterling character and his deep commitment to sportsmanship. He embodied the very spirit of sportsmanship, a handshake was a binding contract for him and his word was good enough for anyone.

B. S. Cunningham Co.

As to the scale of his fame, in the 1950s it was a powerful signal to us all when someone appeared on the front cover of Time Magazine (indicate poster). There's a funny story that comes from the Time Magazine feature article. The writer was impressed with the scale of Mr. "C"'s race team operation. It looked like motorsports had earned Briggs a small fortune and the writer asked how he had done that, how he accumulated this small fortune. Briggs simple and deeply funny answer was: "start with a large one". Others have used that line since.

His legacy is enduring and it has endured because the Cunningham team absolutely dominated road racing in America from its beginnings into the 1960s. The legacy has also endured because there are substantial institutions that benefitted from his guidance and support at their foundation and in their formative years. In the automotive world, Briggs was largely responsible for the founding and success of the Sports Car Club of America (the SCCA), the Pebble Beach Concours, Watkins Glen, Lime Rock and Sebring, and in a broader sense, the entire sport of road racing. He was the father of road racing in America and he was a good father. He never sought credit; in fact he preferred being an unseen force for good.

Many of Briggs' accomplishments are so deeply ingrained in America's motorsports culture that we fail to realize they belong to him. One example is his creating the first American sports car and with it establishing the enduring definition of the American sportscar. Some will be surprised by that.

The American sports car, most of us could agree, is a large displacement V-8 high output front engine roadster. This template was not pioneered by the Corvette and certainly not by Shelby's Cobra. The Cunningham C2-R and C4-Rs are the template and inspiration that every American sports car has followed since Briggs first built his in 1950-51. In later life, Shelby did admit this to some insiders, but Zora Duntov was willing to credit him for the inspiration far earlier than "Ole Shel" was. As to how good those early 1950s Cunninghams were, bear in mind that it wasn't until the 427 Cobra was introduced in 1965 that a Shelby car could outperform the Cunningham C4-R. That was more than fourteen years later. The Cunningham C4-R was only 2400 pounds and had a 400 horsepower Weber carbureted Chrysler Hemi, so you do the math.

B. S. Cunningham Co.

But there's more. Here's a partial, and I stress "partial", list of other, smaller Cunningham innovations and accomplishments:

- The first racing team from any country with in-car radio communication to their drivers, Cunningham
- The first American team with a portable machine shop at the track, Cunningham
- The first Ferrari imported to the US
- The Jaguar and Maserati distributor for the US
- The racing stripe

There's a story about that last one. I guess that most people think we've always had racing stripes but that's not remotely true. It used to be that race cars competing internationally were required to be painted in colors assigned by national origin. French cars were blue, English cars were green, Germans were silver and what few American cars racing in Europe were painted white with blue frame rails. Remember that frame rails used to be visible on open wheel cars. The first envelope body American cars to compete in Europe were Cunninghams and their envelope bodywork hid the frame rails. Briggs solution was to paint two broad blue stripes the length of the white bodies, hence: racing stripes. Pretty soon, everyone adopted Briggs' innovation and the color scheme became America's official racing colors. Years later, Shelby reversed Briggs' colors and painted his team cars blue with white "racing" stripes.

As to Mr. Cunningham's character, which he was also famous for, one anecdote expresses it perfectly. You may know that Briggs was the world's most accomplished sailor and won the America's Cup in 1958. Long before Dale Earnhardt, it was said that Briggs could "see air". You may also wonder where he found the time to do that while dominating automobile road racing, but I digress. The story goes that Briggs' boat (The Columbia) so outclassed the British finalist that Briggs offered to swap boats with the Brits. Perhaps it's hard to believe that offer was altruistic, but it was. All he wanted was for the competition to be fair. That's Briggs Cunningham. That sort of sportsmanship has long been missing in our world. We miss Mr. Cunningham and I am so glad you honor him here today.