

Making Racing History — American Style

When Briggs Cunningham set his sights on Le Mans, he knew his team would have to create everything from cars to strategy

by Miles Collier



Cunningham C-4RK coupe

The cars of Briggs Swift Cunningham deserve a very important place in the history of post-war American motoring, both on the road and on the track.

The Cunningham legacy will stand the test of time because he was the first American at Le Mans to develop the proven method: the use of large-displacement American engines to power lightweight chassis, carefully organized logistics and a roster of all-star drivers.

In today's world, with an almost infinite supply of specialty parts and components — and, more importantly, abundant and proven knowledge about the ins and outs of race preparation — one can only marvel at the accomplishments of a small group of hot-rodders in West Palm Beach in the early 1950s. Most of what came out of those shops in Florida had to be learned from experience and made from scratch.

Particular to the man, Cunningham's uniquely Corinthian approach to motor sport, with his emphasis on fair play, honest conduct and national pride, displayed character that has never been surpassed. Very quickly, "les concurrents Americains" became admired competitors at Le Mans. It was not lost on the French that the Cunningham effort, for all its apparent resources, was the effort of but one man without a major industrial enterprise behind him. In addition, uniquely among the other entrants, the American team was operating 5,000 miles from home.

Builder, team boss and driver

As "le Patron," Cunningham was more than just a boss pacing the pit lane while his cars fought it out on the track. He was a racing team boss who took his licks

in the arena. Cunningham's famous 20-hour stint at the wheel in 1952, which resulted in his bringing his car home in an impressive 4th place, compared well with other Le Mans "iron man" driving exploits: Chinetti's victorious 23½ hours in 1949; Eddie Hall's 24-hours 8th place in 1950; and Pierre Levegh's heartbreaking 23-hour failure to finish while leading in 1952.

To road race with exclusively American-originated equipment in the early 1950s was to take on a problem of unending difficulty, as no suitable equipment or special parts existed.

When Briggs Cunningham set his sights on Le Mans, he knew his team would have to create everything from cars to strategy.

Experienced with road-racing hot rods in the form of his Bu-Merc — a heavily tweaked 1939 Buick Century fitted with a Mercedes SSK body from before the war — Cunningham came to his Le Mans efforts via the assistance of East Coast specials builder Bill Frick and sprint-car driver Phil Walters.

Having to build a competitive entry from Detroit parts bins was entirely expected. In the best hot rod tradition, focus on the best engine drove the process. At first, it was Cadillac's new-for-1949 OHV 331 V8, and subsequently, Chrysler's brand-new Hemi. In the finest home-builder tradition, the racing C-2Rs, C-4Rs, C-5Rs and the lone C-6R emerged with relatively unsophisticated, non-triangulated ladder chassis, and Ford- and Mercury-based front suspensions, rear ends and drum brakes.

Initial efforts tried to use an American transmission, but ultimately reality dictated that the manual 3-speed boxes available be replaced with a European Siata truck

MONTEREY / Cunninghams at Pebble Beach

Mathieu Heurtault, courtesy of Gooding & Company



1952 Cunningham C-3

4-speed.

Coachwork was hand-formed aluminum, in accordance with the universal practice of the time. Coachwork design appeared to always be rather hopefully based on that of the previous year's most apparently sophisticated competitor.

Thus, we see the Cunningham team emulating Ferrari in 1951 and 1952 (C-2R and C-4R). We see traces of Jaguar's 1952 streamlined C-type in 1953 (C-5R), and the 1954 D-type Jaguar in 1955 (C-6R).

Despite his cars' reliance on imitation — and the longstanding bugaboo of inadequate brakes — Cunningham overcame his hardware deficit with immaculate preparation and superb driving.

The relatively unstressed Chrysler V8s did much to aid the team's best results: a 4th in 1952 with a C-4R, courtesy of Briggs' 20-hour marathon. The team improved with 3rd in 1953 with the optimized-for-Le Mans, beam-axle C-5R. Cunningham scored another 3rd in 1954, with the by now seriously obsolescent C-4R.

Cunningham had nevertheless set the standard for all subsequent American Le Mans efforts, although none insisted, as he did, that the effort be 100% red, white and blue.

Above all, Cunningham inspired a generation of drivers who recognized in his efforts the highest order of sportsmanship and national pride.

Cunninghams for the road

Simultaneous with his racing effort, Cunningham also elected to become a road car manufacturer. Clearly, there was hope that the passenger car profits would help offset the costs of the racing team.

In 1952, the Le Mans rule makers replaced the 10-car minimum production run requirement with one for 50 cars. Manufacturer's status would allow the team to enter specialized racing prototypes. Such design freedom presented a major advantage for the tiny organization.

Cunningham was able to build what he needed us-

ing any mix of self-created and vendor-supplied components without the compromises in the prospective C-3 production road car.

Initially, the new C-3 road car was to be wholly built in Florida. However, when the first two C-3s cost a prohibitive \$14,000 each, designer Giovanni Michelotti and Italian coachbuilder Vignale were engaged to body and finish the cars in Italy for \$4,000 per unit — thereby allowing a viable retail sales price of \$8,000.

Italian design and American power

By creating an Italo-American GT car, Cunningham was the first of many to recognize the power of sophisticated Italian design in the increasingly design-sensitive post-war American market.

Many automobile manufacturers — both Italian and American — benefited from this trans-Atlantic design flow. Consider Chrysler's Ghia Specials; the Nash-Healey; Dual-Ghia; Intermeccanica's Buick-based Apollo and subsequent variants; the one-off, Corvair-based Fitch Phoenix; and, more recently, the Cadillac Allante. While many automobile manufacturers ultimately recognized the virtues of combining Italian chic with American V8 practicality, Cunningham was the first on the scene.

K.T. Keller, then chairman of Chrysler — and father to Cunningham's Yale roommate, who helped Briggs get the Chrysler engine deal — may well have been inspired by the C-3 when he ordered Chrysler to build a series of dream cars in cooperation with Carrozzeria Ghia. Alas, as is often the fate of pioneers, Cunningham found that despite the rosy projections, he was losing \$4,000 per C-3 sold. Plans for the second run of 25 cars were abandoned.

In all, Cunningham demonstrated the potential and excitement of international road racing to a receptive America and set standards of sportsmanship. What's more, he produced the C-3, which was named one of the most beautiful cars in the world in the Museum of Modern Art's "Ten Automobiles" exhibition of 1953.

Not bad for an amateur. ■