



BRIGGS CUNNINGHAM

AND HIS PUSH TO WIN AT LE MANS

BY RICHARD HARMAN

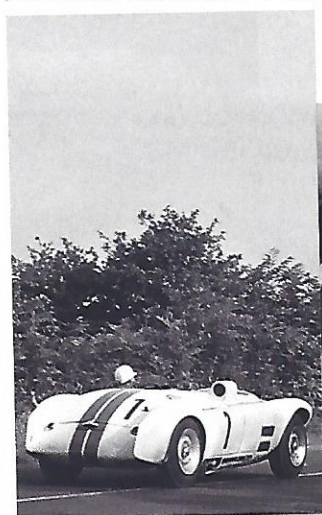
An American sportsman, Briggs Swift Cunningham II was a competitor, patron and pioneering champion of road racing in the United States. A self-effacing and modest man by nature, he had a determined and steely resolve that allowed him to pursue his ambitions in the most professional and sporting manner.

Briggs II was born in 1907 to a wealthy family in Cincinnati, Ohio. His father, Briggs Swift Cunningham, was heir to a meatpacking fortune, he founded Citizens National Bank (later the Center) and he served as a director of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Sadly, Briggs Senior died in 1912, leaving his capable wife Elizabeth with the responsibility of handling his considerable businesses and raising Briggs II and Elizabeth II. A secure inheritance assured that Briggs would live a privileged life and receive an unparalleled education.

While attending Yale, although not an academic achiever, Briggs excelled at many sports, including golf, tennis and sailing. He was particularly successful at yacht racing and captained the number one university boat. Automobiles and auto racing also held an early and ongoing fascination for him. He recalled being taught to drive the family Pierce-Arrow car by the chauffeur when aged nine.

Left: Every time the Cunningham team entered Le Mans, they were greeted with enthusiasm. Here is the Cunningham C-4RK driven by Phil Walters and Duane Carter flanked by the C-4R roadster of John Fitch and George Viola (a.k.a. George Rice) just after the start of the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1952. Both cars retired within the first 12 hours, but Briggs and Bill Spear finished 4th in the other Cunningham C-4R entered that year.

Right from top: Briggs Cunningham; Briggs driving the C-4R; John Fitch at the wheel of the C-5R.



In the summer of 1929, after leaving the university, Briggs married Lucie Bedford of Westport, Connecticut. The Bedfords were Standard Oil heirs known for their philanthropy. At the time Briggs and Lucie married, the American press proudly proclaimed they were the richest couple in history. Lucie shared Briggs's love of sailing, and was for many years the foremost female sailor in the country.

The couple famously embarked on an extended European honeymoon. They shipped their six-meter sailboat to France to compete in a series of races in the Mediterranean, at Villefranche, Nice, Menton and Monte Carlo. They also purchased a Mercedes-Benz SS, which was delivered to

their Paris hotel by factory racing great Rudolf Caracciola and came complete with a Mercedes-Benz mechanic to look after it for the duration of the couple's travels. With it, the young couple won the award for "Best Open Car" at the Cannes Concours.

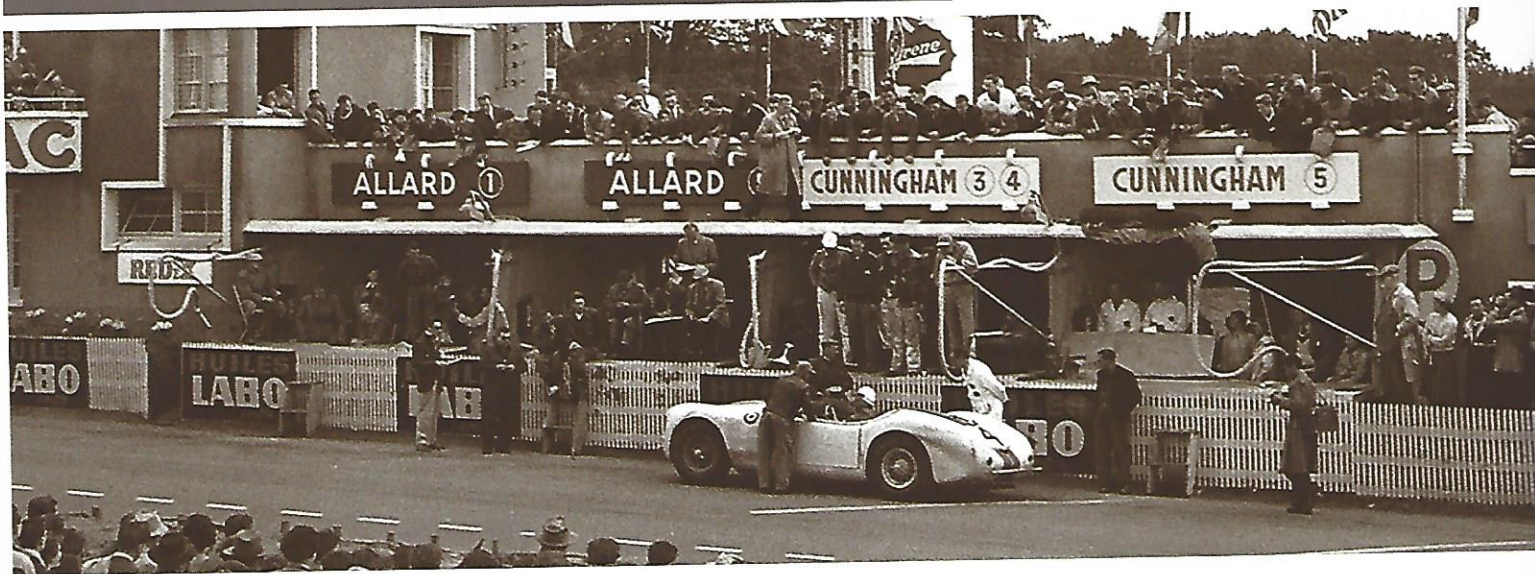
While in Europe, Briggs visited the 24 Hours of Le Mans, where the British Bentley team were victors, and the 1930 Monaco Grand Prix, where Bugatti Type 35 cars filled the first several places, with René Dreyfus winning. These events must have opened Briggs's eyes when compared to the rather ad hoc events he experienced in America.

Back in the States, Cunningham, along with a small group of like-minded amateurs, raced their cars around whatever courses they could find. The three Collier brothers, Barron, Sam and C. Miles, afforded access to their family estate in Pocantico Hills, New York, where a closed circuit was marked out in 1935 and christened the Sleepy Hollow Ring. British MG sports cars were their obvious choice for racing, as the Collier

brothers had become importers of the popular and potent small cars—so unlike the American cars of that time. Inevitably, the quest for more speed soon became a priority, so Briggs built a car to satisfy that need. He removed the lightweight bodywork from a damaged 1929 Mercedes SSK,

Below: The 1950 Cadillac Roadster nicknamed "Le Monstre" by the French was designed by Phil Walters (below, right) and Howard Weinman. In tandem with an almost standard road-going Cadillac 61 Coupe, which finished 10th, Le Monstre placed 11th at Le Mans in 1950.

Bottom: The C-2R of Phil Walters and John Fitch in the pits in 1951. The pair finished in 18th place that year.



and mated that to a 1939 Buick Century chassis and potent V8 engine acquired by friend Charles Chayne, Chief Engineer at Buick. The resultant special, named the “Bu-Merc,” was first raced in the 1940 New York World’s Fair Grand Prix by C. Miles Collier, and it reemerged after the Second World War to race again successfully until 1950.

Briggs purchased another special in 1950 from Frick-Tappett Motors in New York. Bill Frick and Phil Walters had established a fine reputation among the growing number of enthusiasts who demanded higher performance from their cars, and they decided to create a completely new car, comprising a 1950 Ford chassis, running gear and body—the lightest readily available—mated to a robust Cadillac V8 engine and gearbox. The resulting Fordillac was an instant success and was soon in high demand. Briggs was one of the early Fordillac customers and found the car to be a revelation.

Meanwhile, Briggs had developed a strong desire to compete at Le Mans and he eventually confided this wish to his close friends the Collier brothers and Alex Ulmann. They gained an entry for two cars for the 1950 event, thanks to the endorsement of Luigi Chinetti, who had won the race in 1949. The fledgling team proposed to enter the event with a pair of Fordillacs, but the cars were rejected by the Automobile Club de France (ACF) on the grounds that they were hot rods and were not true to the spirit of their rules. So two Cadillac 61s were hastily acquired and prepared by Frick and Walters. One of the cars received aluminum open roadster bodywork, constructed with the help of local Grumman personnel in

their spare time, while the other retained the standard coupe body. Mechanical preparations were limited by time; except for strengthening of the suspension, larger brake components, and increased capacity fuel tanks, the cars were close to standard, but their V8 engines received the Frick-Tappett performance treatment. At Le Mans, both cars bumbled their way to the finish, with Miles and Sam Collier bringing home the coupe in 10th, while Briggs and Walters in the roadster placed 11th after an early accident had dropped them to the back of the field.

This first foray at Le Mans convinced Briggs that, with better preparation and more suitable cars, he could win the greatest race in the world for America. “Le Mans was like the lead-up to Christmas for me,” he later said. “I looked forward to it more than any other race and enjoyed it the most. It was the one race we tried hardest to win, and all the other races we ran, often with more success, were small potatoes by comparison. We pointed all our efforts towards Le Mans each year.”

Briggs hired Frick and Walters to oversee the construction of an entirely new car, which would be the prototype for his second entry at Le Mans in 1951. The B. S. Cunningham Company was set up in Palm Beach, Florida, and there Briggs and his two colleagues quickly assembled a team of talented and highly efficient individuals to design and construct the first Cunningham race cars.

Briggs, in the driver’s seat of the C-2R, with his co-driver, George Huntoon, before the start of the 1951 Le Mans 24 Hours.



The C-1 prototype was a smooth, low-slung sports roadster, with a beautiful aluminum body by master craftsman Bob Blake. It was in some ways similar to the early Ferrari barchettas and the later Ghia-bodied Chrysler specials, and it bore a passing resemblance to the British AC roadster. Power was supplied by a Cadillac V8 engine of 5.4 liters, moderately reworked from the standard 180 bhp to produce 220 bhp, and this engine and a 3-speed Cadillac gearbox were mounted in a strong chrome molybdenum steel chassis with 3-inch main longitudinal tubes, front and rear cross members and a cruciform central brace. It utilized independent coil-spring front suspension, and rear suspension was by means of a live rear axle.

The car had a 105-inch wheelbase, and a relatively wide 58-inch front and rear track. The 12-inch front and 11-inch rear drum brakes, inboard at the rear, were sourced from Cadillac, but copper fins were brazed onto the drums to aid cooling. Hard competition brake linings were installed. The curved glass windscreen is believed to have been cut down from an unknown American production car. Borrani wire wheels were fitted. Only one C-1 was built, and it was equipped for road use to a lavish standard.

The C-1 was quickly followed by three C-2 cars, which were similar apart from their engines. Having lost the support of Cadillac, Chrysler Hemi V8s of 5.4 liters were installed thanks to a college friend of Briggs's, whose father was K. T. Keller, the president of Chrysler. With little pre-race testing and development, two of the C-2s failed to finish, while the remaining car, driven by Walters and John Fitch, struggled to complete the race in a lowly 18th place. Lessons were learned from this disappointing result and the all-new cars for the 1952 event were to be planned and built early, allowing time for more extensive reliability testing.

Three C-4R cars were built for the 1952 season, two roadsters and a closed coupe designated C-4RK. A totally new chassis was designed by G. Briggs Weaver, incorporating twin vertical ladder-frame members joined

Left, above: The C-4R of Briggs and Bill Spear in the pits for fuel in the early morning light of June 14, 1953, the second year that the pair co-piloted the C-4R at Le Mans.

Left, below: On the morning of June 13, 1953, with Briggs on the right in a flat cap, one of the C-4Rs is pushed out of Monsieur Guillon's garage near the circuit. The team returned to this garage every year.

Below: The Jaguar D-type (XKD507) driven by Phil Walters and Bill Spear at Le Mans in 1955.



together with cross members and diagonal braces at the center. This design proved to be much more rigid than the previous C-2R chassis and saved an appreciable amount of weight. The frame was clad in purposeful aluminum bodywork hand-crafted by Blake and John Serafin. The front suspension was by unequal-length wishbones, coil springs and tubular shock absorbers, while the rear was a Chrysler live axle with coil springs and tubular shock absorbers. The brakes were 13-inch drums, with radial cooling fins, on all four wheels, inboard at the rear. The wheels were 16-inch Halibrand magnesium alloy with aluminum discs and more radial finning. And the engines were a development of the same 5.4-liter Chrysler "Firepower" Hemi V8, fed by four single-barrel Zenith carburetors, and with an output of 300 bhp at 5,200 rpm.

The single C-4RK was structurally and mechanically identical to the C-4R cars, but was constructed with closed coupe bodywork. The curtailed rear section was apparently influenced by Wunibald Kamm, who visited the Cunningham facility during construction of the C-4RK. Briggs later recalled, "We persuaded Dr. Kamm to come to West Palm Beach, Florida, from his home in Canada, to design the C-4RK body that we raced in 1952. He had been in charge of the Mercedes-Benz wind tunnel in Stuttgart, Germany, before the war."

At Le Mans, the result was again disappointing, with one C-4R and the C-4RK failing to finish. The remaining C-4R, driven by Briggs and Bill Spear, finished in a fine 4th place. The C-4R cars were later raced regularly on home soil, with several important wins. The most notable victory was at Sebring in 1953, where Walters and Fitch drove a C-4R to a memorable win in the inaugural World Championship for Sports Cars 12-hour race.

For Le Mans in June 1953, two C-4R cars were entered alongside the single new C-5R. The engine of the C-5R was the familiar Chrysler 5.4-liter Hemi V8, but the gearbox was a Fiat-based 4-speed manual unit, sourced from the Siata truck range. The chassis was formed from two main tubular ladder frames, of similar construction to the C-4R. The attractive aluminum body design by Michelotti was much lower and smoother than the previous cars; it was designed specifically for the fast Le Mans circuit, so the bulges and air intakes were

Still bearing all of its illustrious racing scars and still wearing number 3 from the 1953 Le Mans race, the C-4RK is in remarkably original condition at The Collier Collection in Florida.



gone. The suspension was a further departure from the earlier cars: at the front was a live axle with torsion bars and the rear was a live axle with coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers. The move away from the heavier de Dion rear axle was thought to be better for the smooth surface of Le Mans. The brake drums were increased to 17-inch diameter and were inboard at both the front and rear. The C-5R weighed 1,150 kg (2,535.3 lbs.), which was slightly heavier than the C-4Rs. Top speed was calculated to be in excess of 160 mph.

All three cars finished in the top ten. The new C-5R finished in 3rd, driven by Walters and Fitch, the C-4R of Briggs and Spear in 7th, and the C-4RK of Charles Moran and John Gordon Benett in 10th.

In 1954, the now elderly C-4R roadsters raced again at Le Mans, with Bill Spear and Sherwood Johnston finishing 3rd and Briggs and Benett 5th. Fitch and Walters drove Briggs's Ferrari 375 MM, but the car retired by the halfway point.

During this period, more memorable victories took place at Sebring. In the second running of the 12-hour race, in 1954,



Above: The C-6R was the last car built by Cunningham specifically for Le Mans in 1955. Sadly, the Offenhauser engined car proved slow and hard to keep cool, but it kept going to the 19th hour of the grueling race. Later that year, the car was fitted with a Jaguar D-type engine, gearbox and nose for the 1957 Twelve Hours of Sebring, and it remains in that configuration in Florida.

Opposite, above: The Cunningham C-5R was built with intent to win the 1953 Le Mans, recording the fastest speed ever on the Mulsanne straight—154.81 mph and an average of 104.14 mph for the 24 hours, nearly 8 mph faster than the 1952 winning average. However, the C-type Jaguars were 9 mph faster due to their new Dunlop disc brakes, and the C-5R finished 3rd, one lap behind the Jaguars.

Opposite, below: In 1963, the Cunningham team entered Le Mans for the last time with a trio of Jaguar Lightweight E-types. Supported by Jaguar, Briggs and co-driver Bob Grossman finished in 9th place.

Stirling Moss and Bill Lloyd won, driving Briggs's OSCA MT4. Having been invited by Briggs to race in the event, Moss had expected to be driving a C-4R and was disappointed to be allocated the small-engined OSCA. But a brilliant drive by Moss and Lloyd took the laurels after their more powerful rivals failed to last the distance. And in the 1955 race, as a precursor to a pending arrangement for Briggs to become the Jaguar importer, Jaguar sent a single D-type Jaguar with 3.8-liter straight-six engine and disc brakes, along with their star driver Mike Hawthorn, to America for Briggs to enter in the 12-hour race. Co-driven by Phil Walters, the Jaguar won. The first three World Championship events at Sebring had seen Cunningham-entered victories.

One additional race car was built in 1955, the C-6R, which was originally equipped with a destroyed 3-liter Offenhauser engine. The car was only raced spasmodically, with poor

results, including a retirement at Le Mans. The car was later fitted with a Jaguar engine, but was not as dominant as the previous cars and raced only a few times.

In total, Cunningham entered 12 cars at Le Mans, garnering two 3rds, one 4th, one 5th, one 7th, one 10th and one 19th, along with five retirements.

Alongside the Cunningham race cars, Briggs built the road-going C-3 cars in order to qualify as a manufacturer; associated tax benefits were available to assist with the construction of his racing cars but required 50 cars to be sold each year. The C-3s utilized a chassis and mechanical components similar to the C-2 but were then shipped to Italy for attractive Vignale bodies—first coupés and later cabriolets. The costs for designing and fabricating suitably luxurious bodies in-house at the Cunningham factory would have been high, and the priority there was on building the race cars. It was Giovanni Michelotti, whom Briggs had met on his frequent visits to Italy, who suggested that Vignale body the cars. Inside and out, the C-3 bore more than a passing resemblance to other Vignale-bodied Michelotti designs of the period, particularly the Ferrari 212 and 225 series, and remains one of the coachbuilder's better efforts. A higher performance engine and chassis were available, but these were not widely publicized.

The process of shipping cars to Italy, handcrafting bodies for them, and shipping them back to America took longer than expected, and several orders for new C-3 cars were canceled due to delays in delivery. As a result, too few cars were completed for Cunningham to be classified as a constructor, so the tax benefits ceased. Reluctantly, before the end of 1955, Briggs closed down B. S. Cunningham Company.



From 1950 to 1955, the Cunningham Company constructed a total of 37 cars, comprising 9 race cars and 28 road cars. There were at least an additional 14 C-3 chassis, in various stages of completion but without Vignale bodywork, which were disposed of after the closure of the company, and at least six of these partially built cars still exist today, with various individually constructed bodies.

The Cunningham team continued to race and win with a variety of cars. Alongside the C-4R cars, which still achieved relative success in America for a few years, Ferrari, Jaguar and OSCA cars were also entered. Porsches, Maseratis and Lister-Jaguars were added later. Briggs and Alfred Momo, his longtime associate and trusted mechanical genius, had become importers of Jaguar cars for the northeastern states, and their racing successes helped secure a sales foothold for Jaguar in North America. Team drivers, notably Sherwood Johnston, John Fitch and Walt Hansgen, achieved many victories driving the British cars. And sales for Jaguar increased, despite a disastrous factory fire in England, which prompted the factory's withdrawal from racing and delayed the long-awaited replacement for the D-type race cars.

Without a serious contender for the Le Mans, Briggs temporarily halted his quest to win the big race. Then, in 1958, Briggs was called upon to captain the America's Cup yacht *Colombia* in defense of the coveted trophy. He had been an active member of the syndicate that built the new boat, and when the proposed captain, Cornelius Shields, was sidelined by a heart complaint, Briggs was the obvious choice as replacement. Although he was a seasoned sailor, and familiar with the water off Long Island and Rhode Island, Briggs was not familiar with the tactics of match racing, but he inherited an experienced crew, which included the designer of the boat, Olin Stephens. True to form, Briggs quickly downplayed his personal contribution and paid tribute to his crew after an unbeaten series of victories kept the America's Cup in the United States. In another typically magnanimous gesture, he had offered to exchange boats with the British crew of the *Sceptre* after the *Colombia* had taken wins in the first two races, but this was not allowed by the race stewards.



In 1960 the Cunningham name reappeared in France for the 24-hour race, with a team of three Chevrolet Corvettes and one Jaguar, and famed engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov joined the crew. One Corvette finished in 8th, after heroic efforts by the crew kept the car running when a serious water leak caused it to overheat late in the race. Repairs were impossible and refilling the water would have meant disqualification, but an ingenious solution was found by Momo, who filled the entire engine bay with ice.

The car continued at reduced pace to the end of the race. Meanwhile, the Jaguar, known as E2A, which was basically a prototype for the forthcoming E-type, was among the fastest qualifiers, with star drivers Walt Hansgen and Dan Gurney. Regrettably, the engine of this unique car expired after 9 hours.

This turned out to be the final appearance in the great race for the Cunningham team.

In his ten personal appearances at Le Mans as a driver, Briggs achieved two 4ths, one 5th, one 7th, one 8th, one 9th and one 11th, with three retirements. It's a record that stands up favorably in comparison to that of most other drivers at Le Mans.

Taken in total, his racing exploits included running some of the finest race cars in the world and employing the finest drivers, many of whom went on to greater success, including World Champions Mike Hawthorn, Phil Hill and Jack Brabham, together with Stirling Moss, Bruce McLaren, Dan Gurney, Roger Penske, Walt Hansgen, Ed Crawford, Dick Thompson and Augie Pabst—to name but a few.

Briggs kept many of the cars he raced, and he also purchased many more that he appreciated. In the early 1960s, the resulting group of cars were gathered together in Costa Mesa,



Briggs Cunningham stands proudly among his five race cars: the first Cadillac Roadster, the C-4R and C-4RK, the C-5R and his last car, the C-6R. The Cunningham team was the first to use the now legendary blue racing stripes, derived from the traditional prewar US Racing colors of a white body and exposed blue chassis. The two stripes along the body were suggested by Briggs's team manager, Stanley Sedgwick, to emulate the enclosed chassis rails of postwar sports cars.

By 1961, Briggs was also importing Maseratis, and his team ran three Maseratis at Le Mans, where Augie Pabst and Dick Thompson finished in a fine but unexpected 4th place, and Briggs and Bill Kimberly in 8th.

In the 1962 race, two Maserati 151s failed to finish, but Briggs and Roy Salvadori drove a Jaguar E-type to a most creditable 4th place. Momo had developed a Jaguar E-type road car for racing, utilizing lightweight body panels and modifying the engine. The car's success convinced Jaguar to produce a small series of similar lightweight E-types purely for customers to race. Needless to say, Briggs entered three such cars at Le Mans in 1963. Two of these cars retired, but Briggs and Bob Grossman brought the third team car home in 9th place.

California, to create one of the most outstanding car collections in the world. In later life, Briggs was happy to display his cars at many West Coast concours, including the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, where he also served several years as an Honorary Judge and where his memory is honored with the annual Briggs Cunningham Trophy for most exciting car.

The Cunningham museum remained open until 1986, when Briggs was unable to devote sufficient time to the maintenance of the cars due to ill health. He sold his collection to Miles C. Collier, son of C. Miles Collier and nephew of Barron and Sam Collier, and the majority of his outstanding cars became part of the already magnificent Collier Collection in Naples, Florida.

Briggs died in July 2003, but his legacy lives on in the cars he built, the cars he preserved, and the racing greats he nurtured. Every Cunningham-built race and road car is still in existence.

Richard Harman, a retired professional civil and structural engineer, devoted seven years of his life to researching and writing Cunningham: The Passion, The Cars, The Legacy (Dalton Watson, 2013).