

# LeMans Stripes

## A Short History

– Rick Kopec

*We all know what LeMans stripes are...but do you know where they came from?*

In the 1950s, FIA rules stipulated that race teams use colors which represented their countries: Italian teams painted their cars red, British green, Belgians yellow, French blue, Germans silver. American entries were painted white (if frame rails were exposed they were painted blue). In some classes, especially Formula 1, the cars tended to all look alike – especially at speed. The different colors, keyed to each entrant's country, helped race fans tell them apart.

Millionaire American sportsman Briggs Cunningham had a dream of winning the most prestigious sports car race in the world, the 24 Hours of LeMans. In 1950 he entered a pair of Cadillacs. One was a stock two-door with the only modification being a dual-carburetor manifold. It was nicknamed "Clumsy Puppy." The other was an aerodynamic-bodied racer dubbed "Le Monstre" by the French. The cars finished 10th and 11th.

The following year Cunningham entered a pair of sports cars of his own design and manufacture (he had purchased a small auto manufacturing business). The cars, appropriately called Cunninghams, were powered by Chrysler's new Hemi engine. They were painted in the American racing colors of white and blue. They failed to finish at LeMans in 1951 but won major events at Elkhart Lake and Watkins Glen later that year.



Cunningham's 1950 LeMans Cadillac



1950 "Le Monstre"



1951 Cunningham C-2R



1953 Cunningham C-4R



Cunningham Maserati

Cunningham liked the white and blue color combination. American FIA entries had been painted white so Cunningham chose to paint his cars that color, with a pair of blue stripes running up the hood, over the top and extending down the rear deck. With this paint scheme Cunningham's cars became instantly recognizable. In fact, in subsequent years twin stripes were referred to as "Cunningham stripes."

Briggs Cunningham never did win LeMans, even though in 1952, when his co-driver became ill, he drove for 20 hours by himself. He raced his cars at Sebring and larger events in the U.S. and at LeMans through 1955. That was when the Internal Revenue Service declared his business a non-deductible hobby because it had not made a profit in the previous five years. At the end of the year Cunningham shut his company's doors.

Although he stopped building cars on his own, Cunningham was still consumed by racing. In 1957 he became a Jaguar importer and sponsored a trio of D Jaguars. The following year he



Cunningham D Jaguar

had a team of Jaguar-powered Listers. After that he fielded Maseratis, new E-Type Jaguars and Corvettes. They were all painted his signature white with blue stripes.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, a story about racing stripes was passed around among some sports car aficionados but it was more likely something of an urban legend. The claim was that the offset racing stripe or the edge on a pair of wider stripes that ran in line with the driver's line of sight down the hood was helpful if the car spun off the track and was enveloped in a cloud of dust. If the driver became disoriented he always knew which way the car was aimed by looking down the stripe edge. It never gained much credibility.

Peter Brock was in high school in the mid-1950s when Cunningham was racing. While most of his peers gravitated towards hot rods and drag racing he was attracted to sports cars and sports car racing. Brock's first car was an MG-TC but when he saw an unfinished, customized 1946 Ford convert-



Cunningham E Jaguar

ible sitting on a used car lot, the MG was history. The '46 had been chopped, channeled and semi-sectioned. It was powered by a Cadillac V8 backed by a LaSalle 3-speed transmission. By the time Brock finished the car its lower center of gravity made it a pretty formidable canyon racer. As a sports car racing fan in the 1950s, Brock had followed Briggs Cunningham and his cars. He painted his '46 white with a pair of blue, Cunningham-style racing stripes. The color scheme became his trademark and other vehicles he owned also acquired the white/blue center stripes theme.

Fast-forward to late 1964. Peter Brock was working at Shelby American as its designer. One of his assignments was to provide a unique exterior design for a special Shelby model based on Ford's new Mustang fastback. The cars were to be all be white and they would need something distinctive to give them a competition appearance but would not require a lot of unique badging or body pieces. Typical of Shelby American, there was no



Peter Brock's 1946 Ford canyon racer



1965 GT350 5S208

budget for anything elaborate. Brock's solution was simplicity in itself and would prove to be distinctive fifty years later.

The exterior was devoid of any Mustang or Ford emblems. GT40-inspired narrow/wide/narrow rocker panel stripes ran along the side, near the bottom of the door edge, with a "GT350" designation at the front. A pair of twin, ten-inch-wide LeMans stripes ran from the bottom of the front gravel pan, up the hood, over the roof, down the rear deck to the lower edge of the rear gravel pan. The blue stripes on white cars represented the American racing colors, reminiscent of Cunningham's teams.

Rather than call them "Cunningham stripes" they were referred to as "LeMans stripes" by those in the factory but that was really just an informal term. The only reference to stripes in 1965 Shelby literature was a letter to dealers calling them "Ralley Stripes." To help spur early sales, dealers were offered stripes on one car free of charge (FOC) if they ordered three or more cars at the same time. Although stripes appeared on GT350s in virtually every advertisement and magazine article—and on all of the competition models—they were never

formally listed as an option; they were just available. Many dealers were afraid that buyers would not want stripes because they would attract undue attention from law enforcement so they ordered cars without them. If a buyer wanted stripes they could be added by the dealership's paint shop.

A review of Shelby American factory sales and/or shipping invoices for 1965 and 1966 shows that roughly half of all cars received "Ralley stripes" (as they were called in factory documents) – 1965: 43% stripes, 56% no stripes, 1% not known; 1966 non-Hertz models: 56% stripes, 43% no stripes, 1% not known. There is no way to tell how many non-stripe cars received stripes at the dealer. As for the 1966 GT350 Hertz cars, most received stripes because they were part of the Hertz package. The few cars that didn't were not initially intended to be Hertz models but were needed at the beginning of the production run to fill the Hertz order, so a few regular cars were diverted to Hertz.

Another interesting side note is that LeMans stripes did not begin appearing on Cobra team cars until late in 1964. This timing coincides exactly with the beginning of GT350 production. The 1964 Cobra FIA cars were

painted Viking Blue with various colors across the nose and fenders. Daytona Coupes were also Viking Blue with a pair of very narrow white stripes running up the nose, hood and roof. King Cobras were Viking Blue with no stripes. When the team cars were prepared for the 1965 season, the Coupes and FIA roadsters were painted Guardsman Blue with white LeMans stripes. The King Cobras were also painted Guardsman Blue with white LeMans stripes for the 1964 West Coast Fall Series. The 427 Cobra team car was similarly painted Guardsman Blue with white LeMans stripes. And when the Shelby American team arrived at Daytona with two new Ford GTs in February of 1965 they, too, were painted Guardsman Blue with white LeMans stripes. That color combination had become Shelby American's signature livery.

For 1967, the name "Ralley stripes" (the term Ford used but it was sometimes spelled "Ralley") were not listed as a factory option. Instead, they could be supplied by the dealer based on a customer's request. No records are available for the number of 1967 Shelbys which had dealer-installed stripes but the figure is very low. Likewise with 1968 Shelbys.

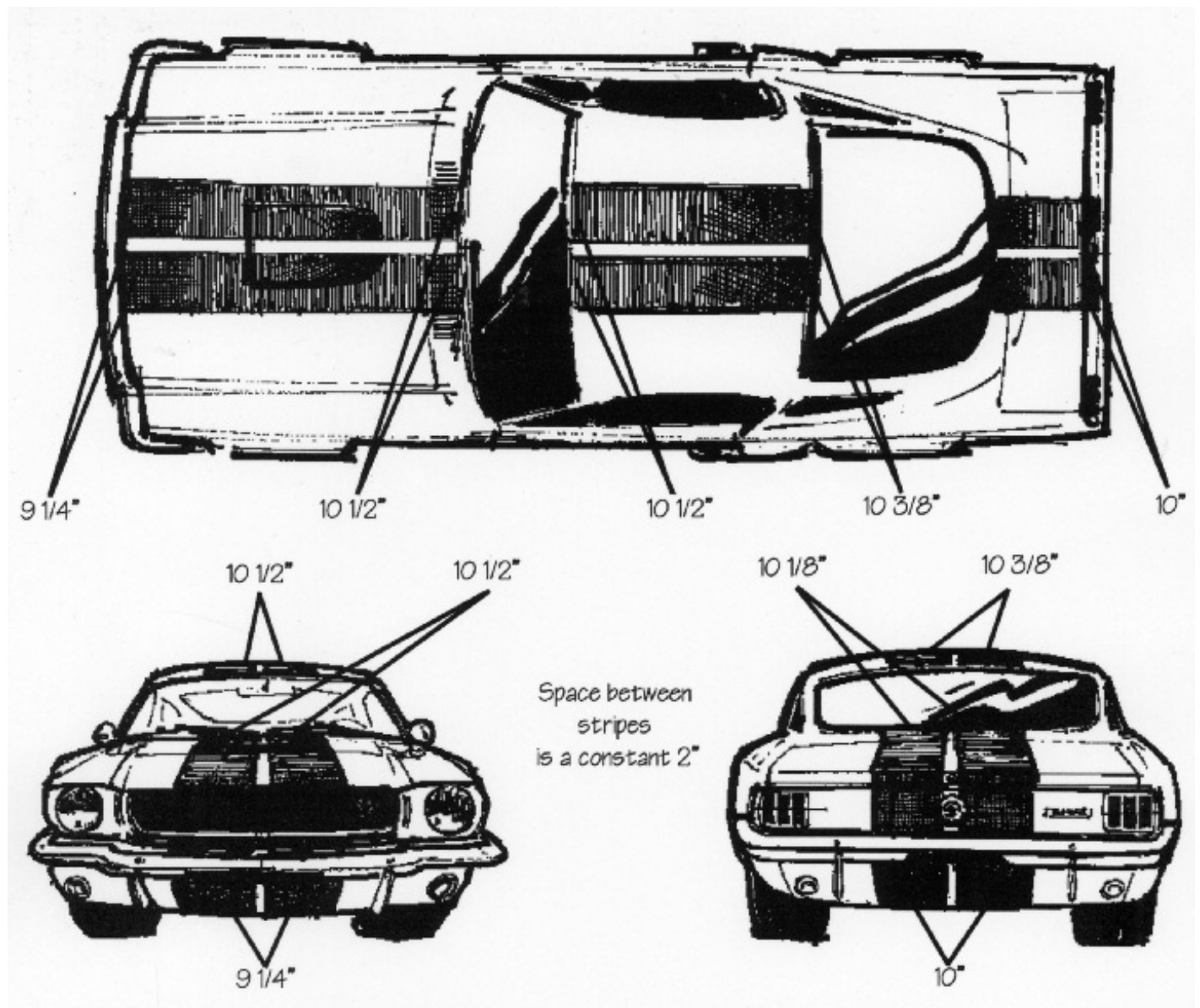


## *Twin 10-inch LeMans Stripes*

Actually, they're not. The ten-inch dimension is really shorthand for the stripe measurements because if you measure the width on a correctly striped car you find that they taper, from a 9 1/4" width on the lower front gravel pan to 10 1/2" at the lower and upper edges of the windshield, 10 3/8" at the upper edge of the rear window, 10 1/8" at the lower edge of the rear window, 10" at the deck lid and 10" at the lower edge of the rear gravel pan. Painting the stripes a constant ten-inches wide over the entire car produces an optical illusion of the stripes being narrower as they go over the roof of the car and widening out at the front and back.

These factory dimensions were used on all 1965 and 1966 cars striped at Shelby American and the same dimensions were provided to dealers. It was up to them whether they wanted to use them or not; most did. No cars were striped at the factory in 1967 or 1968, and if an owner requested "Ralley stripes," dealers likely used the dimensions they already had from Shelby American. If they didn't have dimensions and requested them, the factory sent the 1965-66 dimensions – which were the only ones available.

There were never any specific LeMans stripe dimensions used by Shelby American for Cobras. Competition cars which were given stripes had them laid out by whoever painted the car.



*Ed Gullett illustration*