



Cunningham Homecoming

ENTHUSIASTS AND OWNERS GATHER AT FLORIDA EVENT

BY TOM COTTER

■ WHICH WAS THE FIRST AMERICAN sports car to make white paint and blue racing stripes internationally famous?

Hint: The brand begins with a "C."

If you guessed Cobra, you'd be wrong, because Briggs Cunningham was building and racing his brand of racing cars in that livery a decade before Carroll Shelby even thought about hanging out his shingle.

Starting in 1950, Cunningham built and raced white-and-blue Cadillac-powered sports cars in Connecticut. After moving his outfit to Florida in 1951, he switched to 331-cubic-inch Chrysler Hemi engines.

For a self-funded operation, his accomplishments were huge, with overall wins at Sebring, Watkins Glen and Road America. His dream of victory in the 24 Hours of Le Mans, though, was elusive. His cars finished third, fourth and fifth in the French classic, but drum brakes didn't slow his heavy C2R, C4R and C5R machines enough to beat the Jaguars and Ferraris.

Le Mans homologation rules also required Cunningham to make road-going versions. Thus, the C3 sports car was conceived. Fabricated in West Palm Beach and bodied by Vignale in Italy, each \$10,000 coupe and convertible cost as much as three Cadillacs. Only 25 were built.

In January, a group of Cunningham



Top: Eight C3s sit outside the old Cunningham racing headquarters in West Palm. Above left: A white-and-blue-liveried Cunningham C4R; right: Cunningham fans gather at Mar-a-Lago resort.

owners and enthusiasts converged in West Palm for the first Cunningham Gathering since the cars rolled off the "assembly line." Organized by enthusiast Martin Gruss in conjunction with the annual Cavallino Classic Ferrari event, the gathering treated owners of Cunningham vehicles to a variety of activities.

"Gatherings are held for other cars, like Ferraris, so I figured, why not Cunninghams?" said Gruss, who owns the 18th C3 coupe made. "It took a year to plan."

He arranged for two Gulfstream G4 jets to fly owners from West Palm to Naples, Fla., to tour the Collier Collection. Miles Collier, whose father and uncle both raced for Cunningham in the 1950s, bought the contents of the Briggs Cunningham Museum in 1986 and moved it to Florida's Collier County. The private museum houses a number of race cars, as well as volumes of factory and racing archives.

The next day, owners met at the vacant industrial building in West Palm that once

served as Cunningham racing headquarters and the C3 manufacturing plant. Eight C3s sat in front of the building, mimicking a company photo of employees and race cars posed before the cars were shipped to Paris for the 1952 Le Mans race.

One C3 owner attending was Chuck Schoendorf, a 62-year-old insurance broker from Connecticut. "It became a three-and-a-half-year chore to restore this car," he said. "I sourced parts and suppliers in 19 states to finish in time for this gathering."

Schoendorf's was one of 11 C3s on the lawn of Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort for the Classic Sports Sunday Charity Concours, where Cunningham was the featured marque. Sharing the lawn were the C4R from the Fred Simeone Collection, the Cadillac sedan that finished 10th at Le Mans in 1950 and the Chevrolet Corvette that John Fitch and Bob Grossman drove to first in class and eighth overall at Le Mans in 1960. For more information, visit www.briggscunningham.com. 🏎️