



**CUNNINGHAM'S  
INVASION  
OF LE MANS**

In the early Fifties, Briggs Cunningham dreamed of winning the 24 Hours of Le Mans in an American car. In his attempt to realize that dream, he had to build his own.

**B**riggs Swift Cunningham was good at every sport he tried—yacht racing, shooting, flying, golfing,...and driving. In 1939, Cunningham and Charles Chayne, Buick's chief engineer, developed the "Bumerc"—a Buick engine and chassis combined with a Mercedes-Benz SSK-type body. The car was driven in the New York World's Fair Race on December 24, 1940. After World War II, Cunningham was still acutely interested in driving and joined the fledgling Sports Car Club of America. The wealthy Cincinnati took his hybrid car onto SCCA's tracks in 1948, where he was amazingly successful in competition. When Cunningham took the Bumerc to Watkins Glen that year, he finished second.

More pivotal for Cunningham than his performance at the Glen was his meeting with Phil Walters and Bill Frick, who interested him in their "Fordillac,"



Left: A racing Cunningham C-4 roadster stands before its progenitor, the C-1 prototype. Above: Briggs Swift Cunningham, 1966.



(Porsche 262 speed 240 mph + )

a hybrid uniting a Ford body and chassis with a Cadillac V-8 engine. Briggs was impressed, so much so that he bought the Walters-Frick company.

To Briggs Cunningham racing meant one thing—driving in the Le Mans 24-Hour Race, the world's premier endurance race...and winning it. His goal was to build a sports car that would win at Le Mans. Unfortunately, the Fordillac didn't qualify because it was not a "real" car. It was considered a hot rod, an amalgam of two different makes. Cunningham loved the new lightweight Cadillac overhead-valve V-8, so he decided instead to enter all-Cadillac machines in the 1950 endurance classic.

Two Cadillacs were entered in the 1950 Le Mans race and the results were impressive. Cunningham entered the

two cars, a stock Coupe de Ville and an "aerodynamic" racer that was nicknamed "Le Monstre" by the French for its size and aggressive appearance. Le Monstre hit 134 mph on the Mulsanne Straight; the de Ville reached 115 mph. Of the two, the stock Cadillac finished better, in 10th place overall, with Le Monstre behind it in 11th. Briggs Cunningham had dumped Le Monstre into a sandbank and lost a half hour digging it out. Also, he had driven the last few hours of the race in high gear only, having lost both first and second gears earlier.

Briggs Cunningham was as convinced as the French authorities that Cadillacs were too big and unwieldy for the Le Mans course, which had a good number of twists for the cars to maneuver. So late in 1950, Briggs con-

centrated his efforts on preparing his own sports car to race at Le Mans—the first Cunningham. From 1950 through 1955, he paved the way for America's successful onslaught of international racing in the 1960s. The Ford GTs that would dominate a decade later would be backed by a multibillion-dollar corporation; Cunningham had only his private fortune with which to finance his car.

The first Cunningham was designed chiefly by body engineer Bob Blake, assisted by Bud Unger, although everyone from Briggs Cunningham on down

### 'Le Monstre'

Opposite page: Cunningham's "aerodynamic" Cadillac finished Le Mans 11th in 1950, behind his stock Coupe de Ville entry. Below: The inspiration of the '50 race, the C-1 prototype prefigured the Cunningham entries of '51.

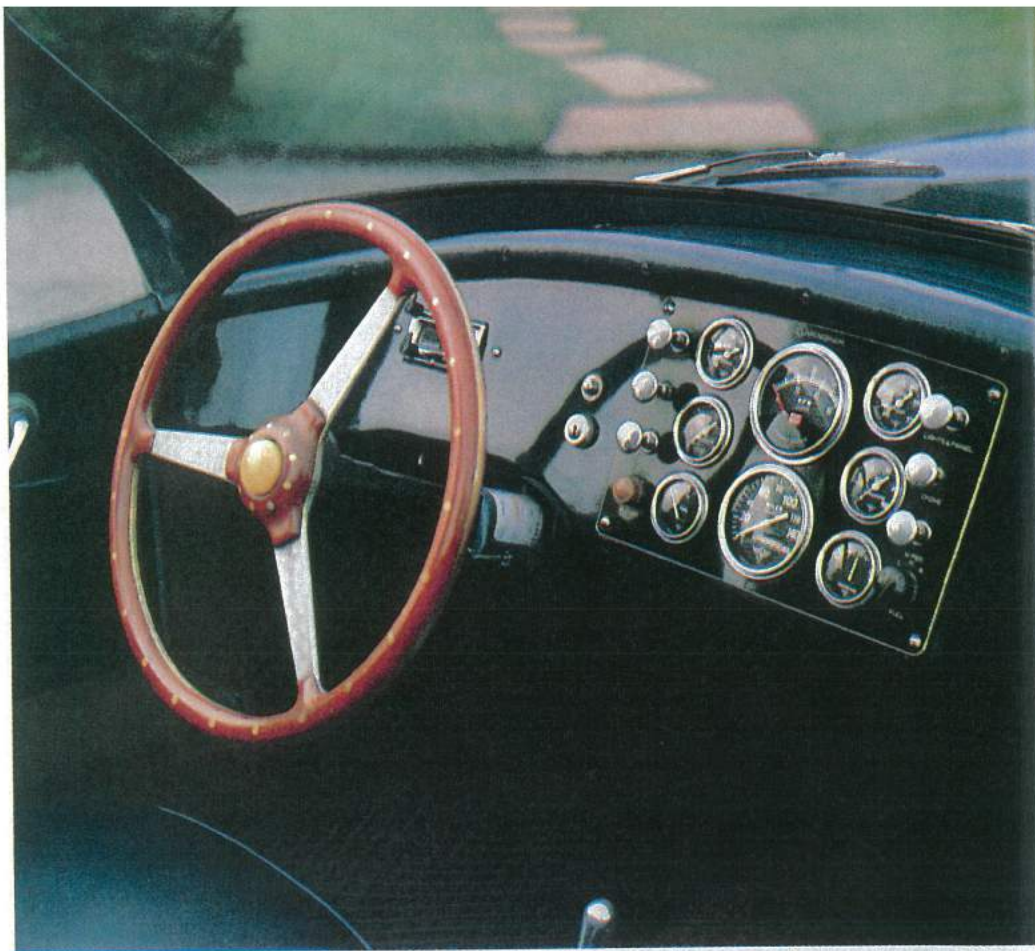


had a hand in the project. Briggs expressed his design goal as "a matter of what we liked," but *Mechanix Illustrated* magazine's Tom McCahill called it "a polyglot selection of the world's finest, ... from any angle, you can find the best of several other great cars." The grille, for example, looked like that of the Ferrari Barchetta Type 166 or one of the later Chrysler-Ghia sports cars. The overall lines were clean and purposeful, as well they should have been, considering the ultimate use of the car.

The C-1 used an extremely strong tubular steel chassis with coil-spring independent front suspension and a de Dion rear axle. Its wheelbase was 105 inches; its width was 70 inches; and its track was 58 inches. The cockpit contained a full set of instruments, including an oil temperature gauge, and a pair of \$300 leather bucket seats. The C-1 was lavishly trimmed compared with European counterparts, but Briggs Cunningham's attitude toward its luxury was casual: "They were more road cars in a way, because we used to drive them everywhere.... That was what we wanted them to do—drive to the race, then run on the track."

Cunningham was asking nothing more of his automobiles than sports-car builders had asked for decades. The one-off C-1 is now on display with other Cunninghams at the Briggs Cunningham Automotive Museum in Costa Mesa, California. → Ft. Myers/Collier

The C-1 accurately prefigured the shape of the following C-2R. The C-2 was to have been available in road trim; but only three were built in all, and the three of them carried the "R" (racing) designation. The C-2 used the C-1's 105-inch wheelbase and sophisticated suspension. Its worm-and-roller steering was quick—only 2¾ turns lock-to-lock. The brakes were drums, featuring Raybestos linings; they were heavily ventilated, in anticipation of the pounding they would be taking at Le Mans. The C-2R was powered by the Chrysler FirePower 331-cid hemi-head V-8. Briggs preferred the hemi to the Cadillac V-8, although he did use the



Top: The C-1's dashboard was utilitarian. Middle: Considered "lavishly appointed," the cockpit had \$300 leather bucket seats. Bottom: Though the C-1 was powered by a 331-cubic-inch Cadillac engine, later models were to rely primarily on Chrysler power. Opposite page: The lines of the C-1 were the result of what its builders liked.



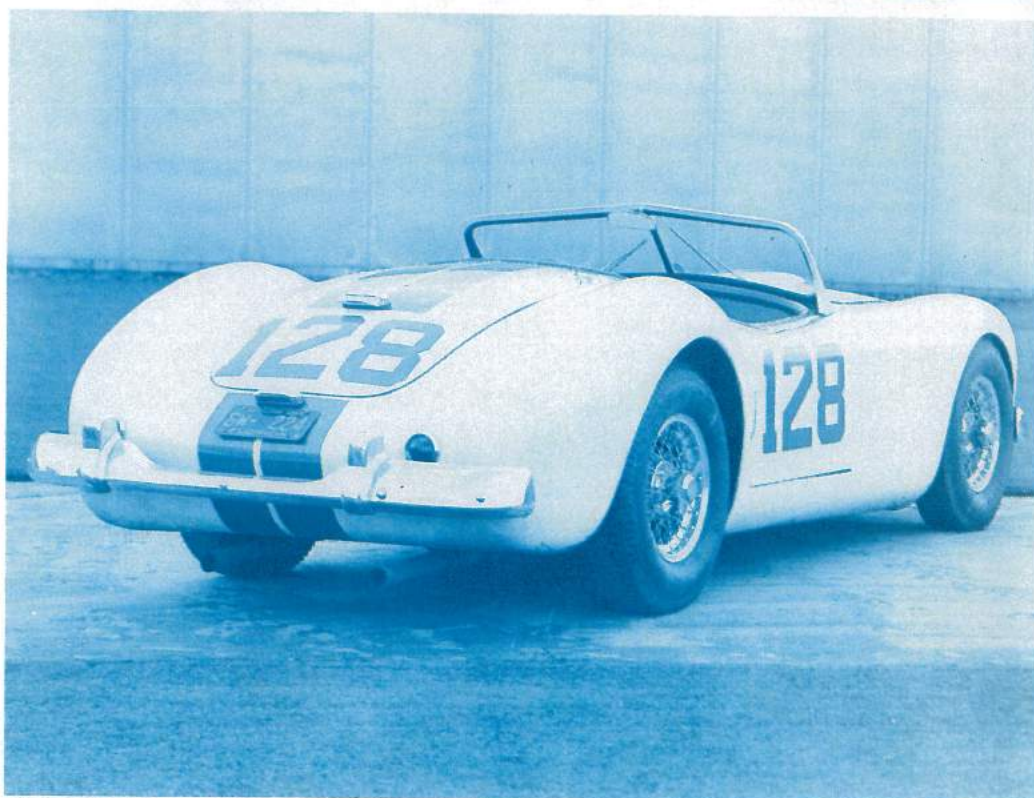
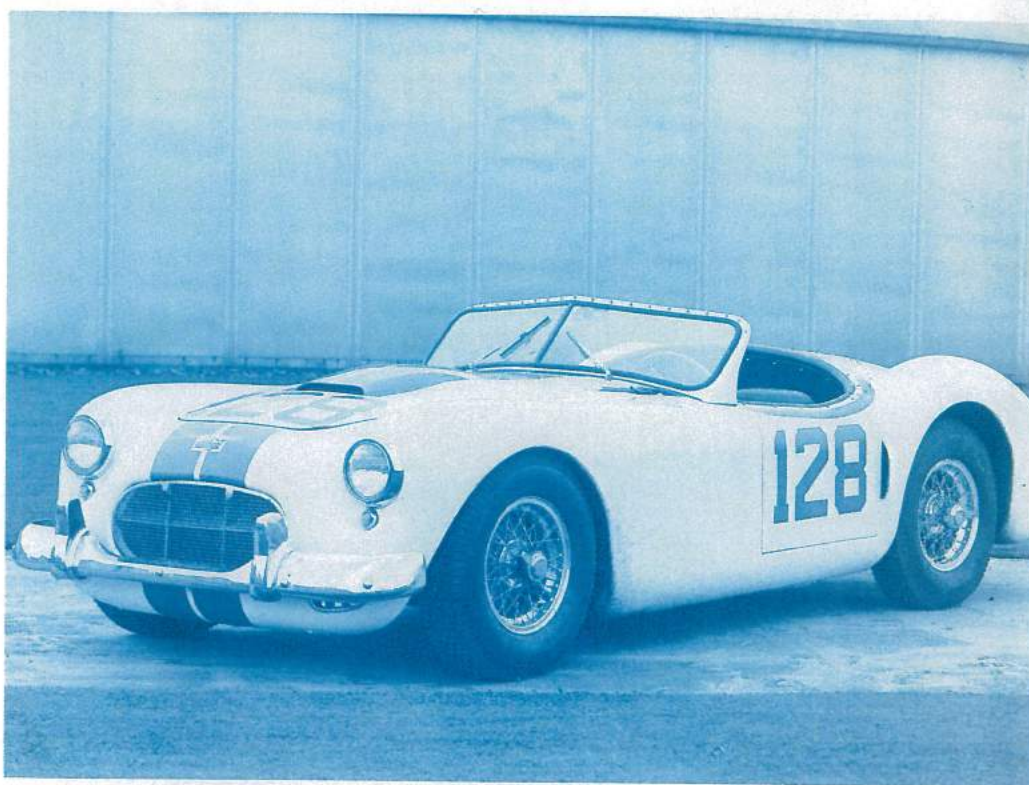


**The C-2R used the C-1's wheelbase and suspension. Briggs Cunningham had great hopes for the C-2R in the 1951 Le Mans race.**

lighter Cadillac pistons that raised the hemi's compression from 7.5:1 to 8.3:1. It was a tremendously powerful car, able to reach 100 mph in second gear and 124 mph in high in "street tune." One of the C-2Rs was clocked at 154 mph. The stock engine was capable of 180 bhp; Cunningham was able to get much more out of it—as much as 300 bhp.

Briggs Cunningham had great hopes for the C-2R in the 1951 Le Mans race. And for a while it did not disappoint him. Early in the race, which started in a downpour of rain, two of the three C-2Rs spun out and were eliminated. But the third, driven by Phil Walters and John Fitch, took off like a bullet and ran strongly through the night. By dawn it was in second place, behind a C-type racing Jaguar. But the position didn't stand; the C-2R was heavy, about 4000 pounds race-ready, and its high compression caused detonation on low-octane French gasoline. The "ping" eventually began to endanger the bearings and Walters and Fitch had to hold back—they finished 18th.

Cunningham took his racers back to the drawing board for the 1952 Le Mans 24-Hours; he also built the first of his models that could be bought in a showroom—the C-3s. They were for sale at about \$10,000, with four-place coupe bodies designed by Giovanni Michelotti of Vignale, the Turin coachworks. A cabriolet model was added later. Vignale's construction technique may have been of the body-putty variety typical of Italian design houses of that period but, also typically Italian, the styling was magnificent. Arthur Drexler, curator of New York's Museum of Modern Art, named the coupe in his list of the world's 10 best cars in 1953. It shared the distinction of being on the list with such *tours de force* as the 1947 Cisitalia coupe by Pininfarina. Along with the marvelous 1953



Above: The C-2R's construction was based on the C-1 prototype. Of the three C-2Rs entered in the 1951 Le Mans, one finished, having run in second place for part of the 24-hour race. Opposite page: The C-3s were built to satisfy regulations that a minimum number of production automobiles be manufactured to qualify for Le Mans. Only 27 units were produced.

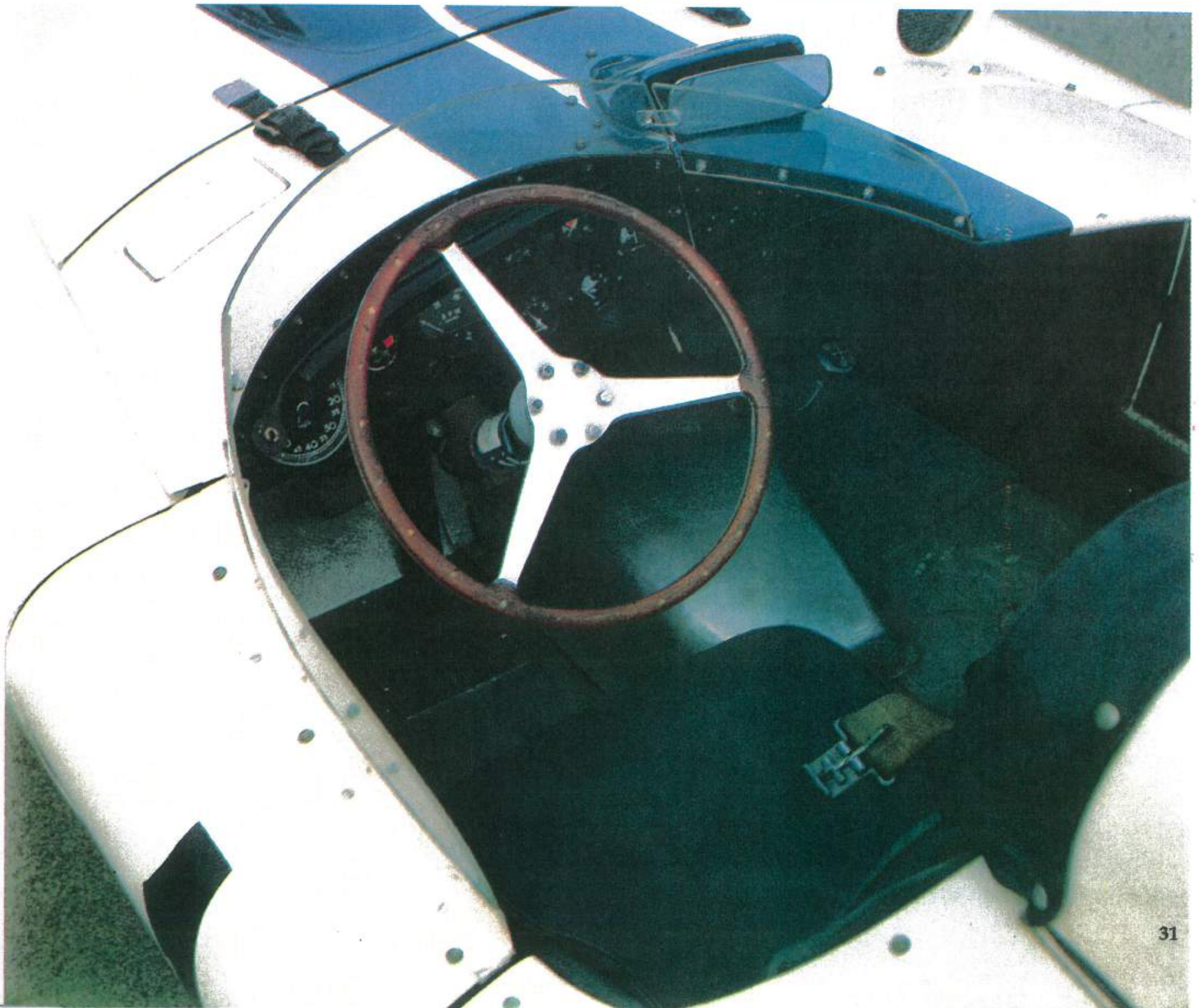
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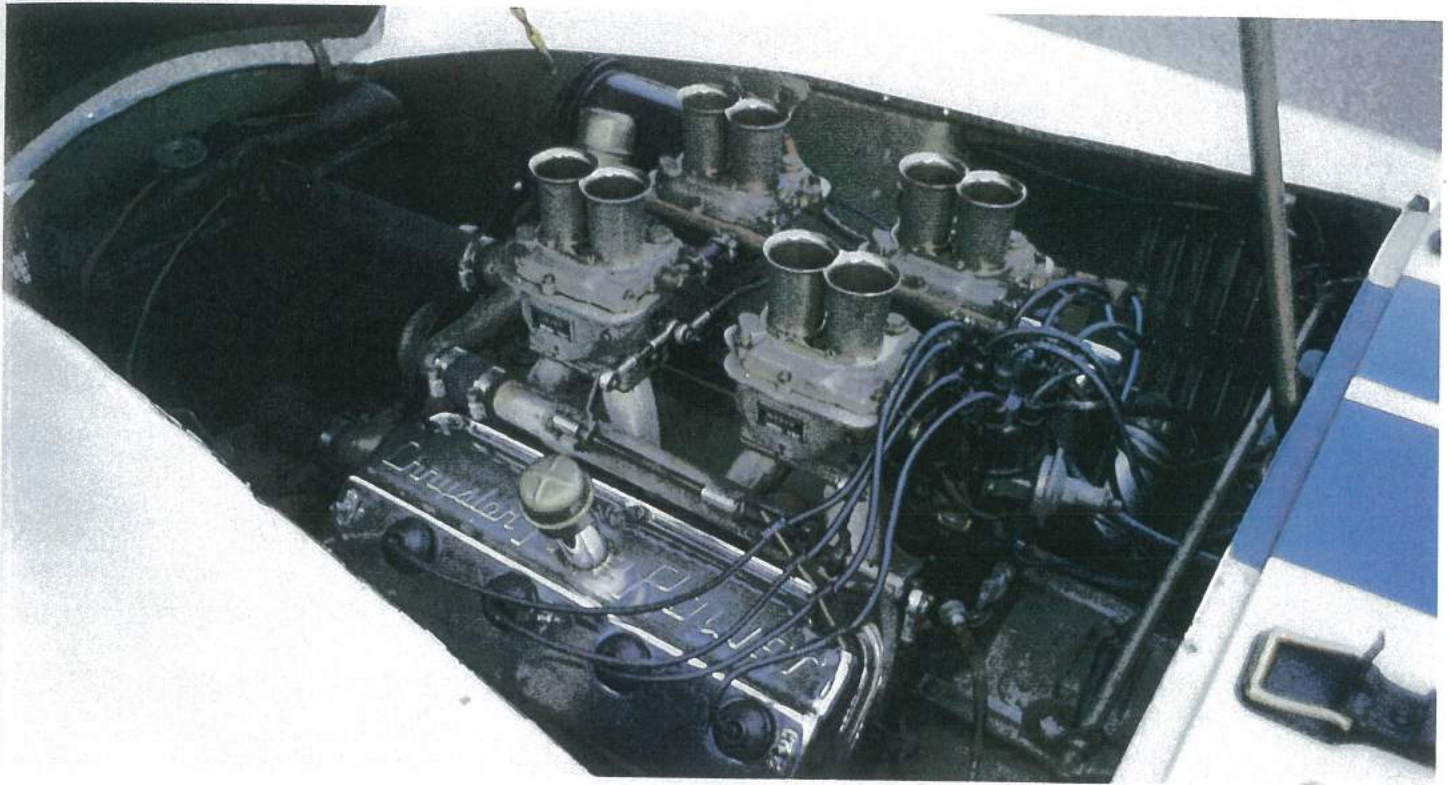


The C-4Rs were the most persistent Cunninghams, entered in Le Mans races from 1952-54. Two C-4R roadsters and a C-4RK kammback were built, with the roadsters being the more successful, finishing as high as third in 1954. Lighter in weight than the C-2R, the C-4R was better designed for racing, with a small windscreen, a teardrop headrest, side pipes, an aerodynamic molding around the rearview mirror, and a rear deck and fenders shaped for smoother airflow.





Above: The C-4Rs reflected greater attention to purposeful detail than had the earlier models. Left: The Cunningham badge indicated the intent behind building the cars—to win races, specifically at Le Mans. Opposite page, top: The C-4R was powered by a 331-cid Chrysler hemi V-8 that developed 325 horsepower. Opposite page, bottom: The kammback coupe featured a truncated rear deck.



Studebaker Starliner hardtop, the C-3 represented America on a list that was otherwise completely European.

A total of 27 C-3s were built in 1953-55—18 coupes and nine roadsters. The main purpose of producing the Cunningham coupes was to qualify for competition in certain races. But they were great buys for the money, and for three years they sold as fast as Cun-

ningham could put them together.

The 1952 Le Mans effort of the Cunningham group consisted of his most successful racing car yet, the C-4R. With a Chrysler engine churning out 325 bhp, a 100-inch wheelbase, and a low, aggressive snout, the C-4R demonstrated that Cunningham had learned well from his Le Mans experience in 1951. The C-4R weighed

only 3000 pounds, and its drum brakes were finned as well as ventilated.

Cunningham entered three copies of the new car—two roadsters and a kammback coupe (that is, one with an abruptly truncated rear deck). Two of the cars eventually dropped out, but Cunningham himself drove the other car 20 of the 24 hours to place fourth overall, behind two Mercedes-Benz

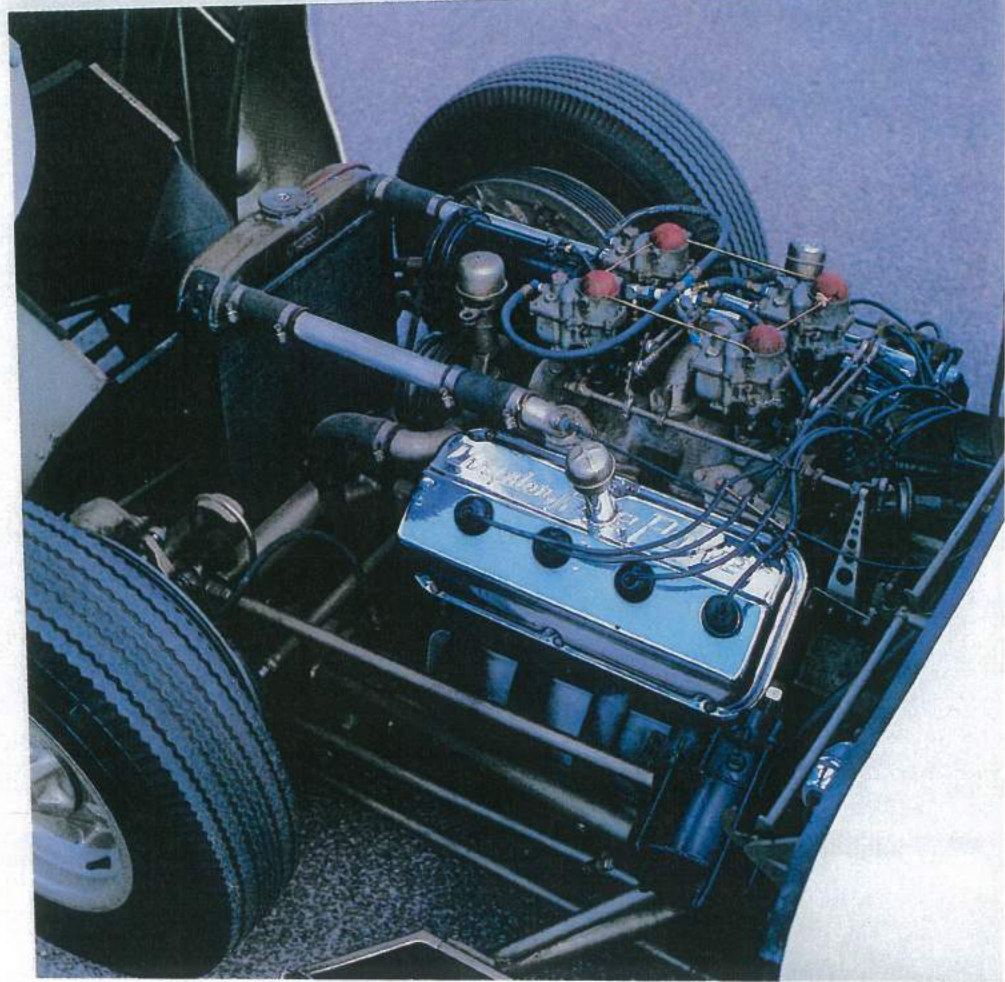


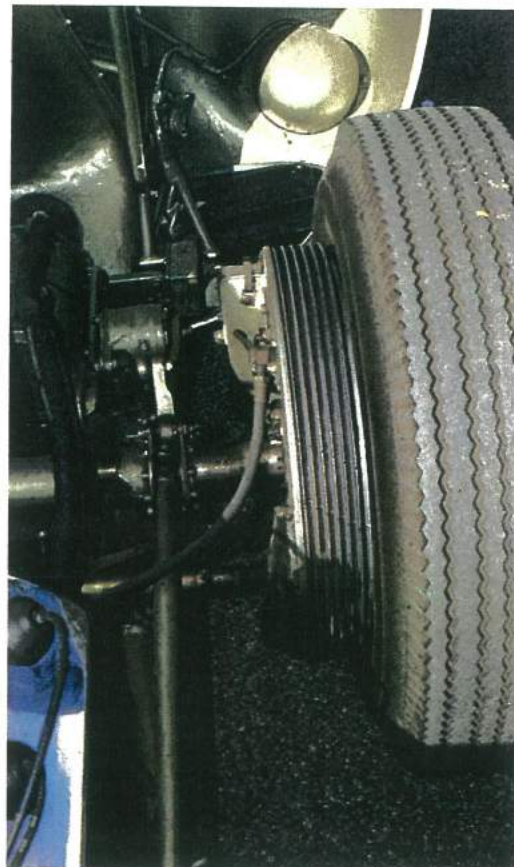
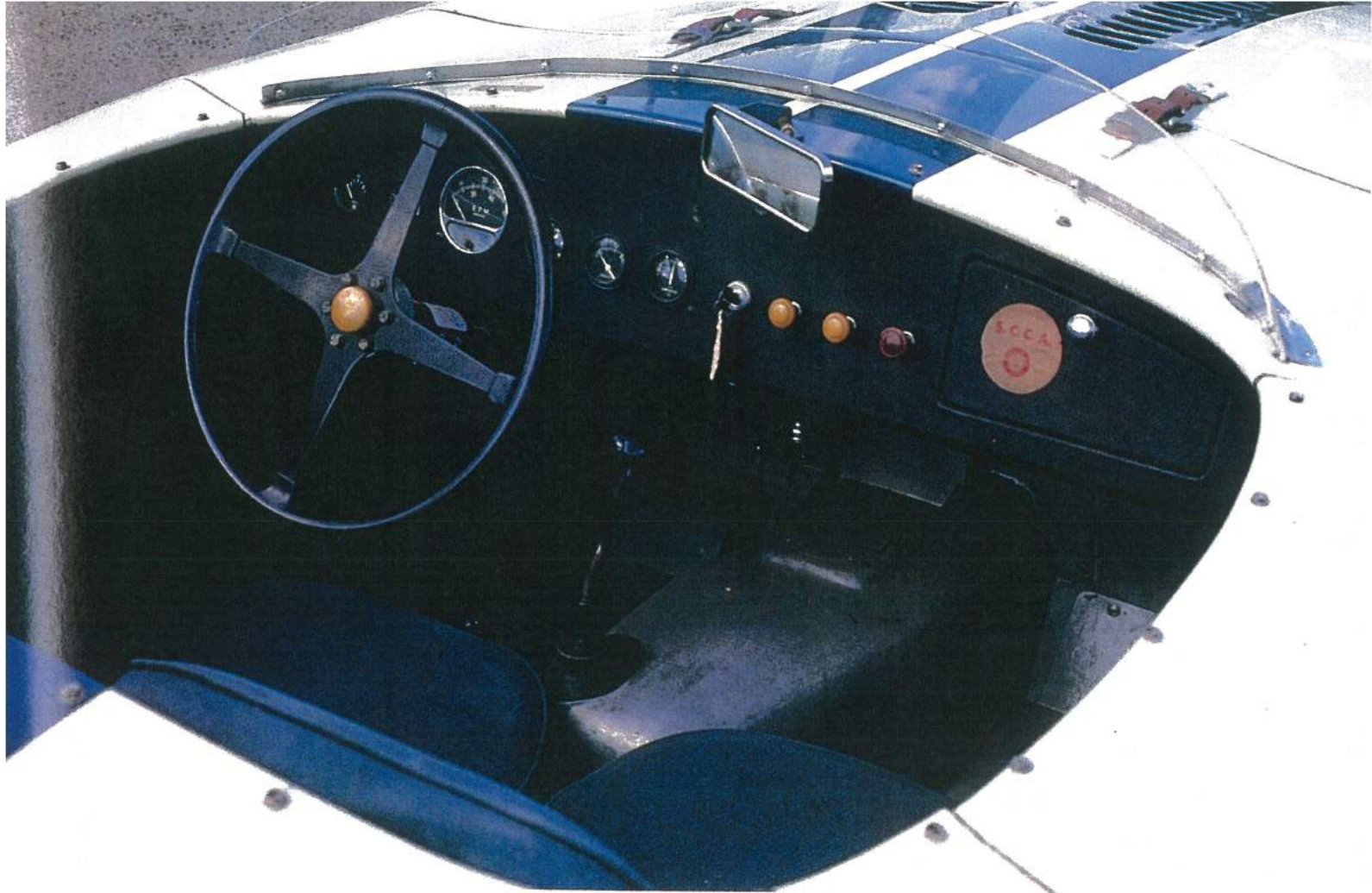


racers and a Nash-Healey. He broke the distance record that had been established in 1950 by a Cadillac-powered Allard for the five-to-eight-liter class.

The year had been gratifying, but Cunningham still hungered for victory at Le Mans. He returned in 1953 with two of the C-4Rs and the new, even stronger C-5R. The C-5R had been designed by Cunningham—a long, low coupe that was sleeker than the C-4R. In addition to the usual Chrysler engine, it had torsion-bar suspension, a straight front axle, Halibrand knock-off wheels, and 11-inch Al-Fin brakes. Cunningham had done some work on the valve problems that had plagued and retired two of the C-4Rs the year before. The C-5R looked unbeatable.

Fitch and Walters drove the C-5R, following a carefully planned lap average that was calculated to put them in the winner's circle at the end of 24 hours. The C-5R performed flawlessly, hitting 156 mph down the long Mul-sanne Straight. But the Jaguar D-types were quicker, not so much because they had higher speed but because they were fitted with new disc brakes.





**The C-5R looked unbeatable. Fitch and Walters followed a carefully planned lap average that was calculated to put them in the winner's circle at the end of the 24 hours.**

The C-5R was the car that should have given Briggs Cunningham everything he wanted at Le Mans. The car was light, smooth, long, low, and sleek. It finished third, beaten by better brakes. Opposite page, bottom: The C-5R's engine was the trusted Chrysler hemi V-8, with 331 cubic inches developing about 310 horsepower. Above: The interior was just as stark as ever, a tribute once again to its purpose. Left: One of the features of the C-5R was its 11-inch front brakes. Another was its torsion bar suspension.



The C-5R averaged over 104 mph and finished third, completely surrounded by the Jaguars that took first, second, and fourth. The two C-4Rs placed seventh and 10th.

Briggs had ordered Dunlop-Girling disc brakes for all of his Le Mans cars for 1953, but the British company didn't deliver them in time. Cunningham had been told just before the race that the

discs would not be available until later that year. Some observers have suggested that Dunlop might have been acting in Jaguar's interests, but nobody is sure.

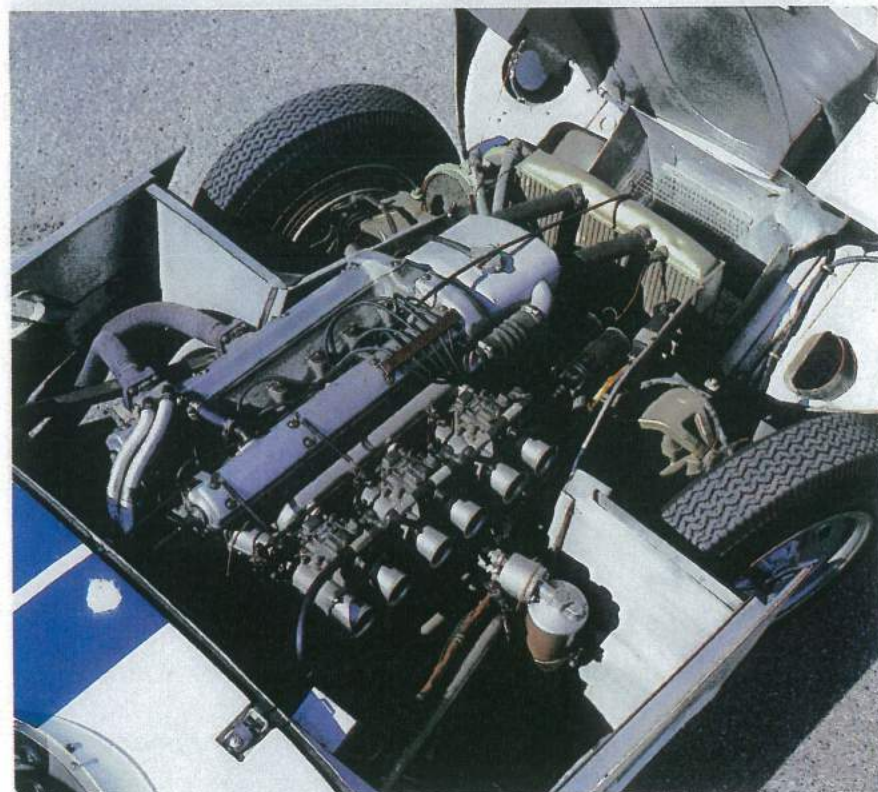
The Cunningham team assaulted Le Mans in 1954 with three cars—two old C-4Rs and a 4.5-liter Ferrari. The latest Cunningham design—the C-6R—wasn't ready in time. The Ferrari broke down

Above: The design of the C-5R was as smooth as a race car could have, and it lacked nothing in performance. But for the difference in braking capabilities between it and its competition, the design was a winner. Opposite page: The C-6R was Cunningham's hope for 1955—his last hope. It was his final assault on Le Mans; it initially featured an Offenhauser four-cylinder engine, later to be replaced by a Jaguar powerplant.

“The cars, basically, were just too big and too heavy. Everybody else was getting lighter and smaller. We didn’t have an engine—the Corvette wasn’t built yet. We didn’t have a gearbox—we had to have that built in Germany. We were just getting outclassed....The race cars...gave us publicity for the production cars, and what we’d have done without it I don’t know.”







The C-6R—Upper left: Racing demanded heavy-duty cooling. Upper right: Some instruments were difficult to see. Lower left: A Jaguar engine replaced the Offenhauser used at Le Mans. Lower right: Note the scoop and headrest fin. Opposite page: Although raced after Le Mans, the C-6R was never very successful.

with rear axle troubles. The two-year-old C-4Rs performed well again, finishing third and fifth.

The 1955 Le Mans entry was the C-6R, the last of the Cunninghams. Fitted with a 2942cc Offenhauser Indianapolis-type engine to keep it under the new three-liter displacement limit, it lacked the durability of the Chrysler-powered cars and failed to finish. The race was darkly over-

shadowed by the frightening accident of Pierre Levegh, whose Mercedes-Benz broke loose due to a collision with another car, launched into the air, and disintegrated upon impact. Flying fragments and burning fuel killed over 80 spectators. Walters came into the pits shaken and told Cunningham that he didn't feel like driving anymore. Many of his fellow drivers felt the same, and it took a lot of time for most of them to

climb back into racing cockpits after the most tragic accident in Le Mans history.

Although the C-6R was later tried unsuccessfully with a Jaguar engine, Cunningham closed his company shortly after Le Mans. The closing wasn't the result of the Levegh crash or (as is so often reported) that the street cars were losing money. Cunningham stated, "We just broke even on the production cars, but that didn't mean

## MAJOR SPECIFICATIONS

*The Cunninghams*

Model	C-1	C-2R	C-3	C-4R(K)	C-5	C-6
<b>Body type</b>	Roadster	Roadster	Coupe/ Convertible	Roadster/ Kammback	Roadster	Roadster
<b>Seating</b>	2	2	4	1	2	1
<b>Year(s) manuf.</b>	1951	1951	1952-53	1952	1953	1955
<b># of units</b>	1	3	27— 18 coupes 9 convert. (\$10,000 base)	2/1	1	1
<b>Wheelbase (inches)</b>	105	105	105, 107	100	100	100
<b>Engine</b>	Cadillac V-8 331 cid	Chrysler V-8 hemi 331 cid	Chrysler V-8 hemi 331 cid	Chrysler V-8 hemi 331 cid	Chrysler V-8 hemi 331 cid	Offenhauser Inline 4 179.5 cid
<b>BHP</b>	160	220-est. 300	220, 235	325	310	272

**Miscellaneous:**

All Cunningham automobiles were front-engine, rear-drive.

C-1—Front suspension: coil-spring, independent. Rear suspension: de Dion rear axle.

C-2R—Front suspension: Ford parallel wishbone. Rear suspension: de Dion rear axle. Steering: worm-and-roller. Turns lock-to-lock: 2.75. Brake system: drums, Raybestos lining, ventilated.

C-3—Front suspension: Ford/Mercury. Rear suspension: Chrysler live axle. Brake system: hydraulic, 11-in. drums. Steering turns lock-to-lock: 4.5.

C-4R(K)—Suspension: Ford front, torsion bars. Wheels: Halibrand. Brake system: 11-in. Al-Fin.

C-5R—Front/rear suspension: solid axles. Brake system: inboard 17-in. Al-Fin drums. Wheels: 6-in. wide-base Halibrand Indy-type.

C-6R—Front suspension: unequal length wishbone. Rear suspension: de Dion, parallel trailing arms and vertical channel, coil springs. Brake system: inboard 13-in. drums.





The Cunninghams paved the way for future American assaults on the Le Mans 24 Hours.

that the whole factory did. The race cars were money down the drain. Still, they gave us publicity for the production cars, and what we'd have done without it I don't know. But in those days, if you lost \$50,000 or more for five consecutive seasons, you were classified as a 'hobby' by the tax people—and you can't deduct money spent for a hobby.

"The cars, basically, were just too big and too heavy. Everybody else was getting lighter and smaller. We didn't have an engine—the Corvette wasn't built yet. We didn't have a gearbox—we had to have that built in Germany.

We were just getting outclassed.... Meyer-Drake was asking \$100,000 apiece for redesigned engines. The cost is all in the tool work, and if the engine isn't successful, you have to develop it, get the bugs out. There just isn't time."

Briggs Swift Cunningham continued to race other people's cars—Jaguars, Oscas, Formula Juniors, and Corvettes—until 1963. Then he retired from the circuits to spend his time on his museum. But he had written a great story at Le Mans. Nobody else has come anywhere near such success on a shoestring budget.

The only Cunningham that collectors

are likely to come across is the C-3. Most of the 27 C-3s built are still around. But pedigree costs money, and rarity adds to the price. The Cunningham buyer will not be disappointed with his purchase...but it will be expensive.

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