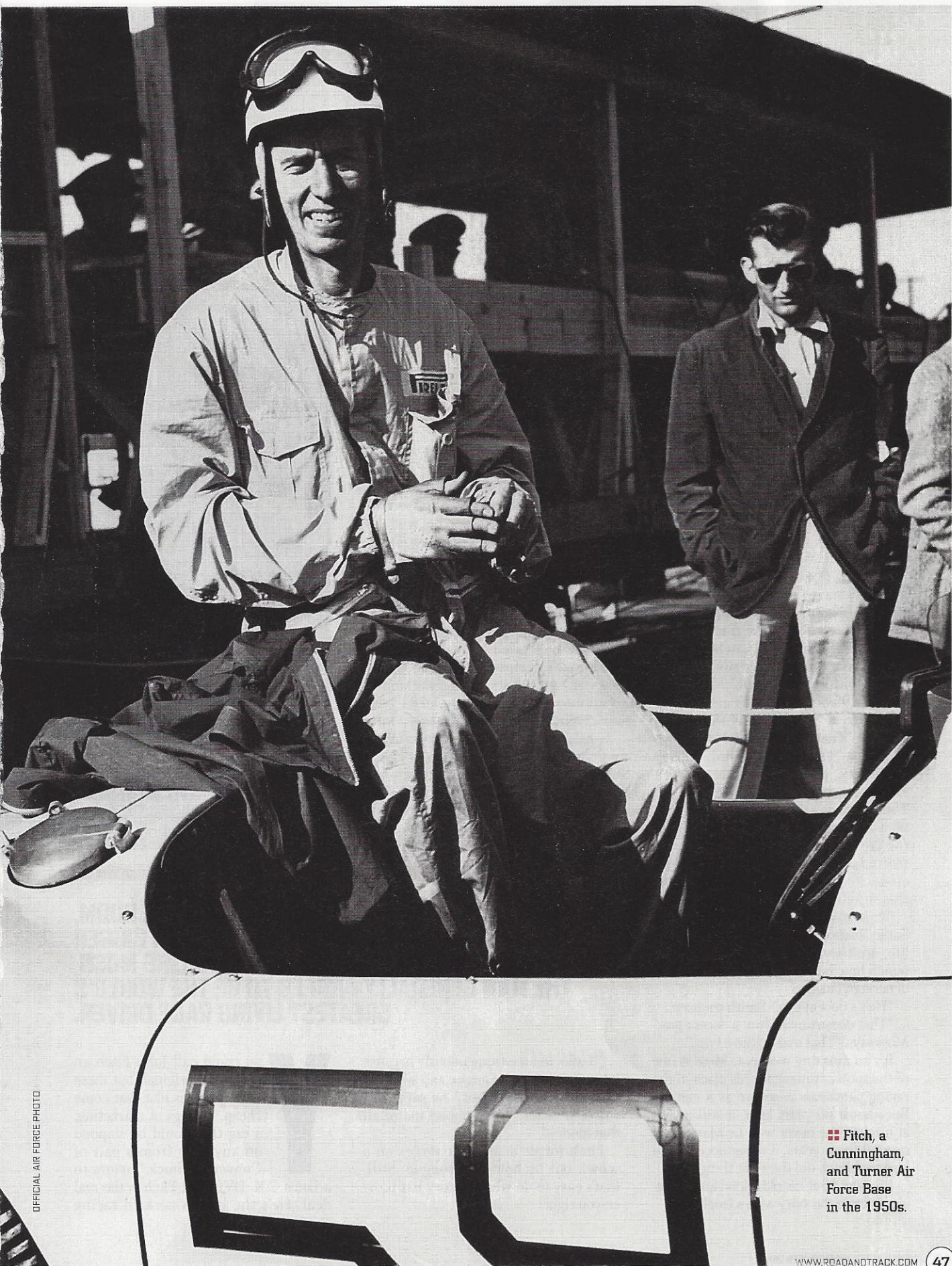


ALMOST FAMOUS

**JOHN FITCH BUILT THE
CORVETTE RACING PROGRAM,
PALLED AROUND WITH JFK,
RACED GULLWINGS FOR MERCEDES,
AND NEARLY DIED AT LE MANS.
ONE DAY, HE MIGHT EVEN
SAVE YOUR LIFE.
SO WHY HAVE YOU NEVER HEARD OF HIM?**

BY ALLEN ST. JOHN





OFFICIAL AIR FORCE PHOTO

■ Fitch, a
Cunningham,
and Turner Air
Force Base
in the 1950s.

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Sir Stirling Moss knows how to work a room. The man many believe to be the world's greatest living racing driver has spent the last half-century regaling his fans with stories of a golden decade of speed and survival. And what it's like to be, well, Sir Stirling. ■ "In my first races, I would go around at the end, waving at everybody. And of course they'd wave back. And the organizers would think, Christ, he's got a lot of fans here, we've got to bring him back next year. And I'd get, like, five hundred bucks." ■ The crowd roars. Mic in hand, the perpetually tanned Moss is holding court in a tent full of racing geeks in the infield of Lime Rock Park, the honored guest at the track's annual Labor Day vintage-race weekend. ■ Moss glances stage left and catches the eye of an elderly gentleman, gaunt but still dapper in a tan summer suit and white cap. He smiles impishly. ■ "I see my old friend John Fitch is here," Moss says. ■ When he entered the room fashionably late, the 95-year-old Fitch got an even bigger round of applause than the 83-year-old Moss. ■ "You drove with John at LeMans, right?" moderator Murray Smith asks. ■ "That was 1955," Moss counters. "Everyone knows about that ghastly thing." ■ "That ghastly thing" was nothing less than the worst racing accident in history, when a Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR driven by Moss's teammate—and Fitch's co-driver—Pierre Levegh plunged into the stands, burning as it went. The accident killed Levegh and more than 80 spectators. ■ "I'm glad to see him, because he owes me some money," Moss says, drawing a big belly laugh from the crowd. "John had the audacity to go to that lovely [Mercedes] team manager [Alfred] Neubauer and say, out of deference to the people who got killed in this shunt, we should withdraw."

"This was a ridiculous idea," Moss says flatly. "Nobody's going to come back to life, are they?" Moss delivers this as a punch line, but there's only a smattering of nervous laughter.

"He's a decent guy," Smith counters.

"That doesn't make him a decent guy," Moss says. "That makes him a twit."

It's an amazing moment. Moss is one of the sport's immortals, his place in the racing pantheon as secure as it can be. But almost 60 years later, it still gnaws at him that he never won Le Mans. And over all those years, it never occurred to him that Fitch did the right thing.

Moss looks at his old friend and struggles to close the story with a laugh line.

"It affected me tremendously because I was driving with Fangio, and we were in the lead by four laps," he says with strained cheer. "You robbed me of all that money."

Fitch forces a smile. It verges on a scowl, but he holds his tongue. Still, that's easy to do when history has proven you right.



WHEN HE ENTERED THE ROOM, THE 95-YEAR-OLD JOHN FITCH GOT AN EVEN BIGGER ROUND OF APPLAUSE THAN STIRLING MOSS, THE MAN GENERALLY AGREED TO BE THE WORLD'S GREATEST LIVING RACE DRIVER.

You could call John Fitch an American original, but these days, phrases like that come cheap. It rings of marketing, a tag that could be slapped on anything from a pair of Converse Chuck Taylors to a Louis C.K. DVD. But Fitch is the real deal. He's the best American racing

TOP PHOTO BY BERNARD CAHIER

🇨🇭 Clockwise, from top: Fitch and a 300 SLR in 1955. In a Gullwing on the Mille Miglia. Fitch (left), Pierre Levegh (middle), and Mercedes racing manager Alfred Neubauer (right) at Le Mans.



driver you've never heard of; a legendary car designer; and a witness to history, automotive and otherwise. It's also quite possible that he saved your life.

If Tom Wolfe had written *The Right Stuff* about European sports-car racing, Moss would be Gordo Cooper, the swaggering star who, for all his talent and accomplishment, is obsessed with his place in the pecking order. Fitch, on the other hand, would be Chuck Yeager, the maverick who pursued lofty goals quietly, out of the limelight.

Former Formula 1 and Trans-Am driver Sam Posey has known Fitch since he was 14.

"When I think of John Fitch," he says, "I think, here is one guy on the planet who has never needed, and will never need, a psychiatrist."

but it's more than enough.

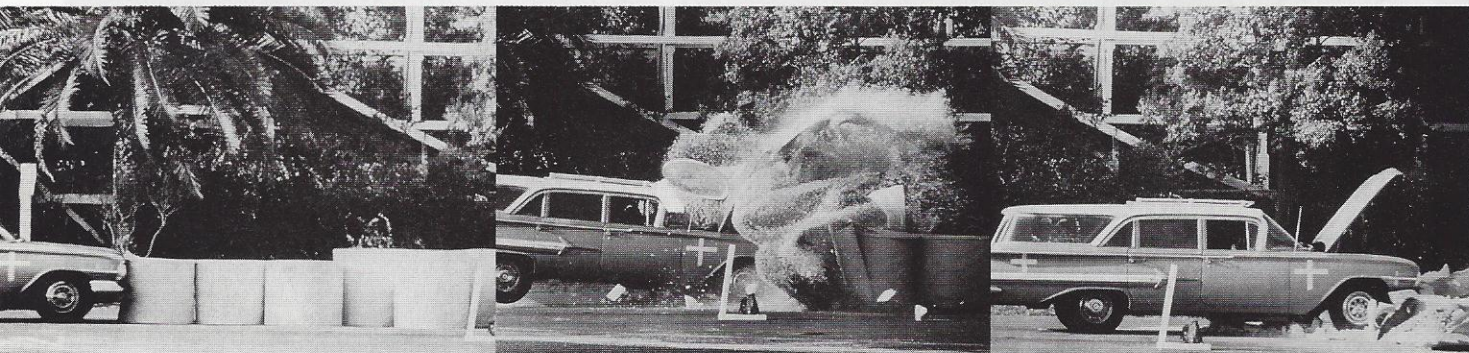
"I was captivated by the Fitch Sprint," Robbins explains as Fitch drives off. More than 40 years after he purchased the car—essentially a much-modified Chevrolet Corvair—he recalls every detail, from its slick roofline to the sonorous note of its glass-pack mufflers. "It was so balanced. It would stay right with the Porsches."

In addition to being a world-class driver, Fitch is an inveterate tinkerer, a natural-born engineer, always itching to make something a little bit better. So why not build cars? In the late 1950s, Fitch took over the Corvette racing program. In a matter of months, he had transformed Chevy's cushy boulevard cruiser into a capable racer. A decade later, he built a roadgoing sports car—

▣ **Right:** The Targa Florio, Sicily, Mercedes-Benz SLR, 1955. Fitch and his co-driver, Desmond Titterington, finished in fourth place. **Below:** The Fitch Inertial Barrier in an early crash test. The device is still used on American highways.

And it was cheap."

Fitch seems to find old age full of frustrations, but there are some benefits. At this point in his life, untied to a manufacturer or sponsor, he's free to speak his mind on subjects from Michael Schumacher ("He's driving bumper cars!") to JFK ("He wasn't very bright. I was a good friend of his. But I didn't vote for him"). When I mention the Shelby Cobra, he launches into a rant, clearly enjoying himself.



As Moss winds down his Q & A session, Fitch exits the tent slowly, walking toward a waiting car. Ross Robbins, a fifty-something race fan, tags along, happily forsaking Moss's final nuggets for a moment with Fitch.

"I just wanted to tell you that I owned a Fitch Sprint," he says. "We corresponded when I was putting the car together."

Fitch lights up. "Thank you for buying my car," he says, earnestly.

"John's a real schmoozer," Posey has said. "To see him in action at cocktail party is...pretty impressive." Indeed, all his life, Fitch has rubbed elbows with the rich (he drove for millionaire racer and America's Cup competitor Briggs Cunningham), the famous (he shook hands with Orville Wright and kissed Eva Perón), and the powerful (he was a close friend of the Kennedy clan, palling around with fellow veteran JFK, casually pondering a future in politics).

You can see that self-possession at work. Fitch makes Robbins feel like he's the center of the universe. The connection lasts only a second,

THE EASY ANSWER IS TO CALL FITCH CHEVROLET'S ANSWER TO CARROLL SHELBY. BUT WHILE SHELBY ALWAYS SEEMED TO BE IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME, FITCH ENJOYED NO SUCH LUCK.

the dashing Fitch Phoenix—around a Chevrolet production engine, and with the Sprint he turned the lowly Corvair into a capable performance machine.

If any of this sounds familiar, it should. The easy analogy is to call Fitch Chevy's answer to Carroll Shelby. But while Shelby always seemed to be in the right place at the right time, Fitch enjoyed no such luck. General Motors pulled out of sports-car racing soon after it dipped in, and Ralph Nader effectively killed the Corvair, taking the Sprint with it.

But Fitch is still proud of the cars that bear his name. "The Sprint was a wonderful, practical, reasonable car that every driving enthusiast could enjoy," he once told me. "A daily driver, a family car, and a sports car all in one.

"A Cobra is a stupid car," he says. "It's overpowered. It's unpleasant to drive. It's got a big engine and that's all. I never built a car for dragstrip speed. That's dumb. Who the hell wants to race an old lady at a stoplight?"

Who indeed?

Come Sunday morning, Lime Rock is silent. Thanks to the local blue laws, the track is shut down, a concours taking place on the grounds. Fitch and Moss are sharing a table at a small tent in the infield, signing autographs. They're seated beside each other, but the line is long, so there's little time for banter.

"You look great for your age, Sir Stirling," gushes one fan.



"It's the tan," Moss says, jauntily. "You can be on death's door, but if you keep up the tan, that's half the battle."

Having waited an hour for his brush with greatness, Kevin Doyle moves toward the table with his 8-year-old son, David.

"Thank you, Sir Stirling," the boy says, shyly. They slide toward Fitch.

"Hi...hi," he says, attention focused on the boy. He looks at the book he's given to sign, opened to a picture of the Mercedes SLR. "I was part of that. Yes, yes, I was."

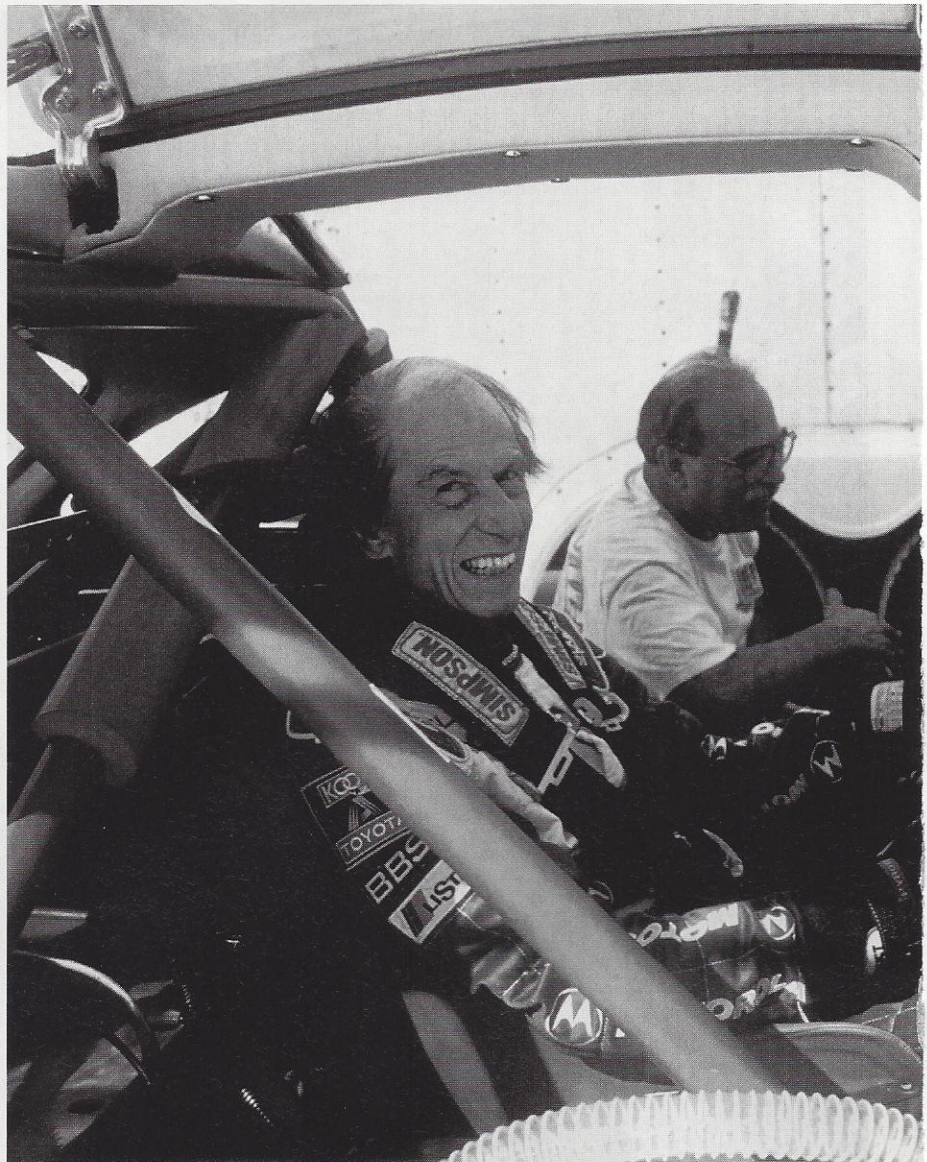
"Thank you, sir. God bless you," Doyle says, herding his kids outside the tent.

"What can you tell me about Stirling Moss?" I quiz the younger Doyle. He looks at me in panicked silence, as though I had asked him to do long division.

"What can you tell me about John Fitch?" I ask.

"He was a fighter pilot in World War II and he set a land speed record when he was 85 years old!" David says. No hesitation.

Did Fitch shoot down a Messerschmitt 262, his overmatched P-51 knocking the legendary jet-powered German fighter out of the sky as it landed? And is it true, too, that Fitch headed to Bonneville in 2003, in Bob Sirna's Mercedes Gullwing, one of the most unlikely hot rods ever to hit the salt? You can, as Yogi Berra would say, look it up. At the most obvious level, Fitch is a product of a world gone by, one of the last surviving members of that so-called Greatest Generation. Less



AT THE MOST OBVIOUS LEVEL, FITCH IS ONE OF THE LAST OF A GENERATION, A PRODUCT OF A WORLD GONE BY. LESS OBVIOUS IS THE FACT THAT HE MIGHT JUST BE THE PROTOTYPE OF THE MODERN RACING DRIVER.

obvious is the fact that Fitch might just be the prototype of the modern racing driver. He was among the first to sense that racing could be more than just a pastime for overgrown boys with too much money and too little sense. Fitch understood business and he understood safety, and by nudging the sport in those directions—the two pillars currently supporting everything from NASCAR to Formula 1—he laid the groundwork for every successful racer who followed.

Consider his actions at Le Mans.

Even though Fitch had been a POW—he spent time in a German prison camp after being shot down and was liberated by George Patton himself—he understood how good the Mercedes team was. And how important the fertile American market was to the company.

Fitch convinced Mercedes to compete in the exotic Mexican cross-country race, the Carrera Panamericana, and to sign him on as the company's lone American driver. He competed in the Mille Miglia in 1955, and while Moss

and navigator Dennis Jenkinson won the race in a 300 SLR, Fitch's performance in the GT class was almost more impressive. He finished fifth overall in a bone-stock Gullwing, improbably topping the time of Alberto Ascari's race-winning Lancia from the previous year.

"You did a bloody good job," Moss once told him. "You were bloody fast."

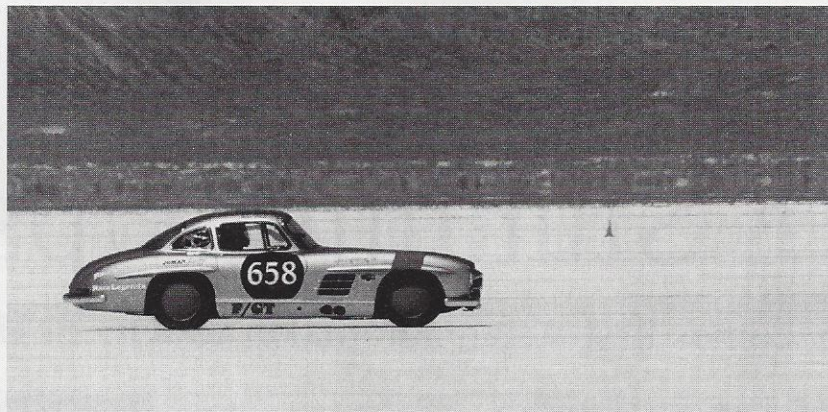
And he was. Fast enough to win races. Fast enough, given the right car and the right circumstances, to win a championship.

Then came Le Mans.

Fitch was sitting with Pierre Levegh's wife when it happened, and he knows it was mere luck that put her husband in the burning silver car instead of him.

"I often think of that one," Fitch says. "It could have been me." Indeed, Armed Forces Radio reported that Fitch had been driving, and his mother initially thought he was dead.

PHOTOS BY TIM CONSIDINE



■ Left and above: The then-86-year-old Fitch at Bonneville in 2003, driving Bob Sirna's 1955 Mercedes Gullwing. The drive failed to set a record but spawned the award-winning 2010 documentary *A Gullwing at Twilight*.

the most spirited drive at Spa or Sebring. "I struggled with this," he once said. "There was no way of stopping an out-of-control car without injuring the occupants."

Automotive safety was in its infancy in the 1950s, with the idea of safety through extreme mass running counter to even the most basic laws of physics. Fitch's ideas were embraced so wholly in the ensuing decades that it's difficult now to see how revolutionary they were.

"I understand inertia, the transfer of momentum from one element to another," he says. "That's the way my brain works."

"The safety thing is perfect for John because it speaks to his general altruism," Posey says. "And it speaks to his fiddling with gadgets. He loves to tinker. He loves to invent."

So John Fitch, Inventor built prototype crash barriers out of liquor crates filled with sand. And, unsurprisingly, he served as his own crash-test dummy. Donning a helmet, he ran a car into his home-built barriers at speeds of up to 70 mph, occasionally in his own driveway.

"He had these barrels arranged," Posey recalls. "It's freezing cold, and John gets the car warmed up and charges toward these barrels. At the last second he throws himself down on the floor of the car. He crashes into the barrels. Sand everywhere. Just a huge mess. And John emerges, grinning like a son of a bitch."

Cheap and effective, the Fitch Inertial Barrier was an elegant piece of engineering. After a few more crash tests, mass-produced versions found their way onto virtually every highway in America.

"How many lives did they save?" Fitch asks, then answers: "It's incalculable."

The late-afternoon air at Fitch's house, just a few miles away from Lime Rock, is thick and sultry. A sleek black Jaguar sedan rolls up that same shady gravel driveway where Fitch tested his barriers, and Stirling Moss and his wife, Suzy, climb out. They enter through the screen door, past the small plaque explaining that this house, built in 1767, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Hello, Stirling, old boy," says Fitch. "How are you, my man?"

The two men settle down. The conversation turns to Dennis Jenkinson, the crusty journalist who lived in his Porsche, didn't own a pair of socks, and served as Moss's navigator for that legendary Mille Miglia win.

"Of course, Jenks was going to go with me," Fitch reminds Moss.

"I know," the legend replies. "That's very kind of you."

"I'm very pleased and honored you're here," Fitch says. But Le Mans is on his mind. He needs to clear the air.

"When Mercedes withdrew, you lost a major victory for your career," Fitch says. It's an acknowledgement, not an apology.


"He never liked Le Mans," Suzy pipes up. "He *hated* Le Mans."

"I didn't like the 24 hours," Moss says. "It's too long." No apology from Moss either, both men seemingly admitting that old friendships trump old grudges.

There's a pause in the conversation.

"When you get old, you think about history, how you might have done things differently," Fitch says. "I try to picture all the things I did well. I have a mental picture of a big green, like a golf green, with lots of room for lots of things to list. And I couldn't think of a damn thing."

Punch line delivered, Fitch and Moss laugh heartily. But Fitch stops after a moment, serious again.

"Except," he says, "for that highway barrier." 

Still, Fitch could step back from the tragedy and see the situation more clearly than anyone at Mercedes. Yes, it made sense to continue the race, because the bottleneck caused by a mass exodus of fans onto the area's narrow roads would only add chaos to the disaster. But did Mercedes need to press on? Faced with that, he previewed the headlines of the next morning's Paris papers: "They'll say 'Ruthless Germans Race On To Victory Over Dead Bodies of French.' And that would help no one."

Fitch connected not with Neubauer, who was obsessed with the minutiae of the race, but with Rudolph Uhlenhaut, the company's gifted engineer who was programmed to see the bigger picture. As Mercedes pulled out of Le Mans, and later racing altogether, Fitch, too, pulled back from the sport. He understood that by preventing another massive accident, he could do more for the sport than even