



A CLASS REUNION

John Fitch and the Corvette he drove 50 years ago make a triumphant return to Le Mans **BY DON KLEIN**

Q EVEN WITHOUT THE BACK-story, reuniting the first Chevrolet Corvette to win at Le Mans with the man who drove it 50 years ago is newsworthy. In 1960, Briggs Cunningham entered three lightly modified Corvettes to do battle with race-proven marques such as Porsche, Ferrari and Aston Martin. Two of the three DNF'd. But one, the No. 3 driven by Americans John Fitch and Bob Grossman, not only completed the 24-hour endurance test but also took first in class and eighth overall.

Grossman died in 2002, but Fitch, still fit and sharp at almost 93, made the journey to La Sarthe this past June. He wise-cracked through press conferences before leading a parade of 50 Corvettes on a lap of the 8.5-mile circuit at the wheel of his old mount, fully restored to its original race specs.

Corvette had emblazoned the hoods of its screaming yellow C6.R GT2 cars with mammoth Le Mans 50th-anniversary

logos and blue racing stripes, reminiscent of the Fitch/Grossman car. Unfortunately, this year's Corvette story was not as successful as the one 50 years ago. But this story goes deeper than paint schemes and marketing hoopla.

In September 1973, Elliot "Chip" Miller, a young conveyor-belt salesman from central Pennsylvania, made his annual trek to the Hershey swap meet with his buddy Bill Miller. One of their reasons for attending was to sell Miller's 1954 Corvette roadster. But they were told to remove not only the For Sale sign but the car itself. At the time, only prewar cars and parts could be traded at Hershey.

So the Miller boys (who are not related) decided to hold a swap meet of their own, which would be open to all cars and parts. Dubbed "Post War '74," the event became known as "Carlisle," and what started as a part-time hobby evolved into an empire with 10 annual events, ranging from spring and fall collector-car swap meets to motorcycle and truck shows.

The jewel in the crown is "Corvettes at Carlisle," billed as the world's largest Corvette extravaganza. Unlike the Bloomington show in Illinois, which is known for its benchmark judging certifications, this is a social affair, complete with a huge downtown parade and old-fashioned burnout competitions. It's a love fest for America's sports car, and the faithful come by the thousands.

Corvettes at Carlisle was Chip Miller's favorite event. "My dad just had a thing for Vettes," says Lance Miller, who recently became a partner of Carlisle Events. "And there was this one car in particular, the No. 3 Cunningham Corvette, that he be-

came obsessed with. I mean, he just had to have that car."

Easier said than done. Miller knew that after Le Mans, all three Cunningham cars had been stripped of their racing modifications and sold as "regular" Corvettes. He thought No. 3 was out there. To aid in his search, he enlisted Kevin MacKay, owner of Corvette Repair in Valley Stream, N.Y.

"I knew the serial numbers of the three Cunningham cars," MacKay says, "but it still took a lot of detective work. The car changed hands seven times after Le Mans. In 1993, I was able to track down the owner, but he had no interest in selling. I called him year after year, but no dice. He

just loved that car, which was now painted red with a white cove. He had no idea it had been a race car."

In October 2000, MacKay got lucky. Although other prominent collectors had made lucrative offers, the owner had promised the car to Miller, and the deal was done. "My dad went nuts," Lance Miller recalls. "It was like he won the lottery."

A thorough examination by a team of Corvette experts confirmed the car's provenance (the key evidence was the lack of crash damage, which cars No. 1 and No. 2 suffered). After a no-holds-barred restoration, MacKay delivered the completed car to Carlisle in early 2002. But for Chip Miller, this was just the beginning. His son remembers, "Now that Dad had the car, he wanted to reunite it with John Fitch at Le Mans on the 50th anniversary of the victory. It was really, really important to him."

But two years later, at age 60, Chip Miller contracted amyloidosis, a rare blood-plasma disease. Six months later, he was dead.

"My world came crashing down," Lance Miller says. "I know it sounds corny, but my dad was my hero, my mentor and my best friend. It just felt right to make sure his dream came true. His obsession to take the car to Le Mans became my obsession, too."

Although his experience working at Carlisle Events gave Lance Miller some idea of what to expect, the task took Herculean effort. "You can't just pick up the phone and say, 'I'd like to have a parade of 50 Corvettes, led by the No. 3 Cunningham car, do a lap an hour before the race,' and expect them to say, 'Sure, no problem.'"

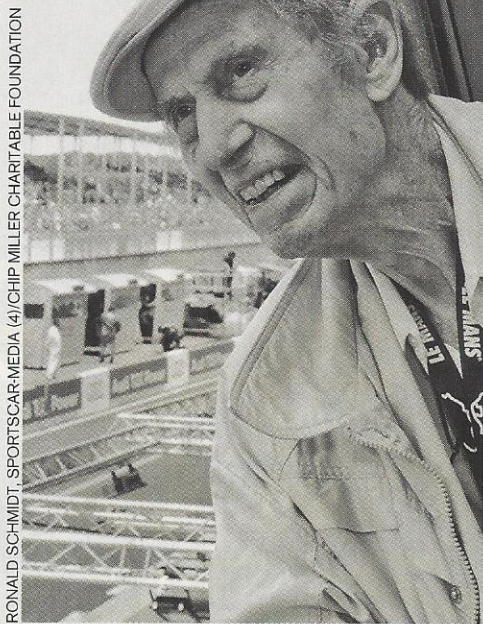
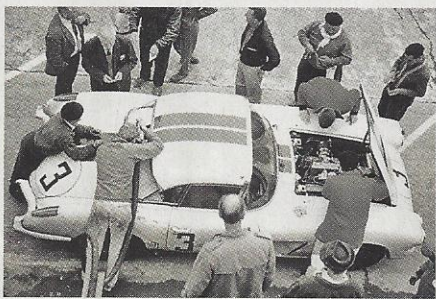
But he pulled it off. Corvette Racing chipped in with logistical help and hospitality, but Miller and his friends did most of the heavy lifting. Using contacts on both sides of the Atlantic, including European Corvette enthusiast clubs, he arranged a full schedule of events to celebrate the reunion, culminating in the prerace parade. At 1 p.m. on June 13, Fitch tightened his seatbelt on the No. 3 Cunningham Corvette, just as he had done 50 years ago. He took the green flag and led a field of 50 Corvettes for a spirited lap of the Circuit du Mans with a beaming Lance Miller at his side.

As the cars pulled back into the paddock, a light rain began to fall. Miller looked up, gave his trademark big smile and said, "That's just Dad crying tears of joy."

Corny? You bet. And pretty damned wonderful. 🍀



Opposite: Fitch at Le Mans in the restored No. 3 Cunningham Corvette. Clockwise from above: Fitch with Lance Miller riding along; the original No. 3 before it was stripped of racing mods; Miller with Fitch signing autographs; Fitch views the track.



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