

## The "Gentle" Man of Motorsport

In May of 2008, I was honored by the Saratoga Automobile Museum—ruthlessly roasted by a bevy of derelicts and fellow car junkies. My name was besmirched, my character impugned, my talent questioned, and it was all done under the guise of friendship and good will. It was a fantastic night! Between the wine and food, well wishes and reminiscence, one man stood out—a man I have admired and worked with throughout much of my career. John Fitch is a renaissance man in the sport of motor racing.

Sailor, fighter pilot, writer, inventor and race car driver, John Fitch did it all. He embraced life, fought for his country, created a family, and not only made a name for himself as a driver, but also added safety measures to an industry which often sacrificed life in the pursuit of speed.

I am not a biographer by trade, nor do I have the time or space available for a truly detailed accounting of John's life, but in researching his career, the most epochal moments shine through, highlighting the historic times in which he was raised, while defining the man he ultimately became.

Often thought to be one of the founding fathers of modern day sports car racing, John was born in Indianapolis in 1917, and raised by his stepfather who was an executive with the Stutz car company. Surrounded by cars from an early age, his love of motorsport seemed destined.

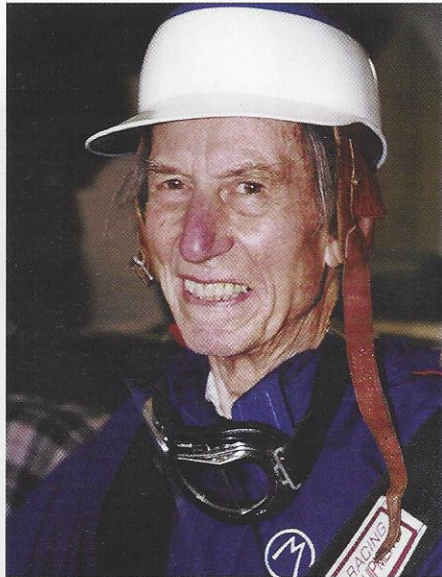
After high school, he entered the Kentucky Military Institute, then went on to Lehigh University to pursue a degree in civil engineering. After traveling through Europe and seeing a variety of races in the late '30s, John returned home to the States not long after Chamberlain's declaration of war.

In 1941, learning of the attack on Pearl Harbor while sailing the Gulf of Mexico, Fitch enlisted in the Army Air Corps as a P-51 pilot in the Fourth Fighter Group, becoming one of the first Americans to shoot down a German ME 262. Two months before the end of the war, John was shot down after a bombing run and became a POW. Honored as a hero, John arrived home after the war, facing a world in which speed and adrenaline were no longer part of his everyday routine.

As with many returning fighter pilots, peacetime brought boredom, and boredom brought change. His varied pursuits often

led to high speed, high adrenaline activities which ultimately turned this honored pilot into a world-respected race car driver.

John returned to Germany to drive a 300SL prototype for Mercedes-Benz, and he accrued wins in the Grand Prix of Argentina, the Mille Miglia and Sebring after winning the first ever SCCA National Championship. His need for speed, while unwavering, faced a turning point at Le Mans when his co-driver, Pierre Levegh, and 85 spectators were killed during the worst car crash in the history of auto racing. The psychological impact of this catastrophic event shocked the world, changing Fitch, who redirected much of his life to inventing safety measures that saved countless lives. One such invention, the Fitch barrier (sand-filled orange and yellow barrels placed at bridge abutments and off-ramps), is estimated to have saved thousands of lives.



Racing achievements, revolutionary inventions and countless awards later, John's life has taken an unexpected turn. This "gentle" man of motorsport is fighting a battle with the state and federal government which he may not win. Unbeknownst to many in the auto industry, Fitch is facing unimaginable fines and cleanup costs involving the property he and his wife have lived on for more than 50 years.

The issue involves two 1000-gallon underground heating oil tanks on Fitch's property. The state of Connecticut claims the tanks are leaking and putrefying surrounding soil and polluting the local

water table. Sadly, it was John himself who suspected the leakage and reported his findings to local government. The state demanded an excavation of thousands of tons of soil with estimated costs reaching \$350,000 for the initial work, and hundreds of thousands more in additional fees. In addition to his basic living costs, John also pays for a private nursing facility for his wife at a cost of nearly \$10,000 a month. It will not be long before this wonderful man is broken and bankrupted by his own state for a crime he did not commit.

For a man who, at the age of 86, attempted to break land speed records at Bonneville, slowing down is not an option. Well into his '90s now, John is still working hard, creating a more economical, low emission automobile for Third World countries using liquid coal as a fuel source. He is also using this experience with the hazardous material on his property to invent a system of convection and evaporation for cleaning soil which is cheaper and faster than current protocols.

In light of his accomplishments—war hero, POW, racing legend, inventor, writer, consultant, husband and father—the fact that his life may end tainted by the actions of a government unwilling to waiver, is unconscionable. John deserves better from a country he so valiantly fought for.

Having seen John less than a year ago, at that special night in Saratoga, I never knew he was facing such dire times. Never one to solicit help, John was warm and friendly, offering great memories and insight into the bygone days of legends. Like children sitting at the knee of an esteemed elder, we devoured his stories with laughter and awe, seeing the beginnings of racing through the eyes of a man who paved the way for all who came after.

Recently I learned of John's plight and have fixated on it ever since. I am fully aware that injustice is often pervasive, but it sticks in my craw none the less. John Fitch defines the American dream, excelling, creating and contributing to a country and an industry he so obviously loved. John's legacy should be upheld and I, for one, stand firm in the belief that the state of Connecticut and the EPA need to reevaluate this situation, amend their findings and allow John the peace and dignity he so richly deserves. 🏁