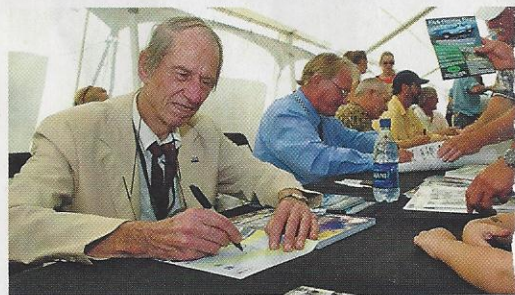
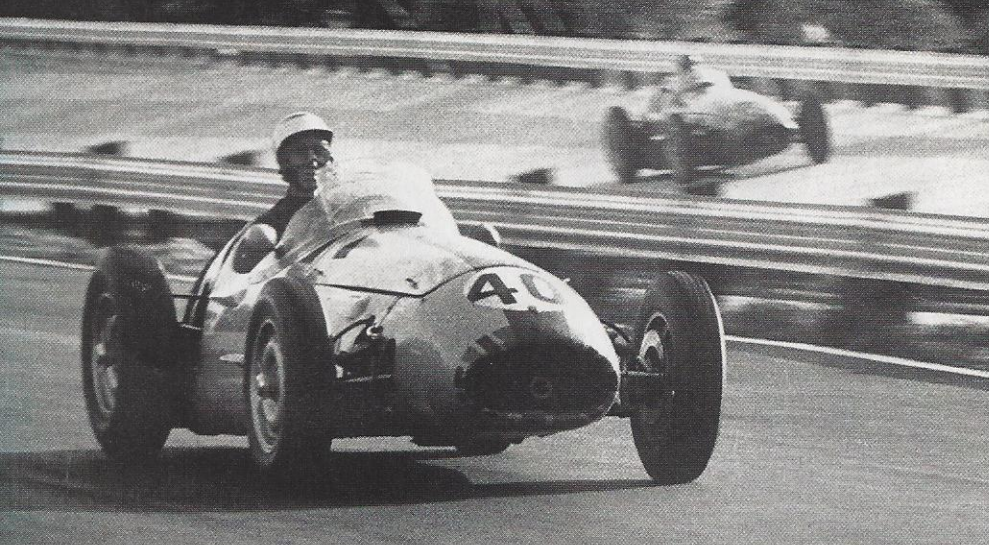


JOHN FITCH: 1917-2012



BY DON KLEIN

JOHN COOPER FITCH—THE first Sports Car Club of America national champ and a star in European sports-car racing in the 1950s and '60s—died at age 95 from skin cancer Oct. 31 at his home in Lime Rock, Conn.

Fitch was born in Indianapolis, but airplanes—not cars—were his first passion. In 1941, he volunteered for the Army Air Corps, flying bomber-escort missions. On one, he achieved elite status by shooting down a Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter.

After World War II, he became the first, and still only, American to race for the Mercedes-Benz factory team. He started out campaigning in an MG-TC, primarily at nearby Bridgehampton, N.Y. He caught the eye of Briggs Cunningham, who encouraged Fitch to enter the 1951 Grand Prix of Argentina. Fitch borrowed an Allard wrecked in a previous race and duly won the event—as well as the first SCCA national title in the process—and clinched Cunningham's support. Fitch-driven Cunninghams scored a number of wins at U.S. tracks in the early '50s.

In 1952, Fitch and Cunningham almost won the 24 Hours of Le Mans. After setting fastest lap in his C-4R roadster, Fitch retired late because of bad fuel provided by

the sanctioning body. Although others questioned this "coincidence," Fitch always accepted it at face value.

Mercedes-Benz's new 300SL roadsters impressed him during the race; similarly, Fitch impressed Mercedes team chief engineer Rudi Uhlenhaut. Uhlenhaut offered the chance to take a few laps in the innovative roadster. Fitch knew Cunningham would probably wind down his Le Mans efforts in the near term, so three laps at the Nürburgring became his audition to join the vaunted team, and Fitch drove quick enough to impress team manager Alfred Neubauer. Indeed, the American eventually joined the likes of Juan Manuel Fangio, Stirling Moss and Karl Kling to race for Mercedes-Benz in 1955.

Two significant events happened that year. The first was Fitch's impressive best-in-class, fifth-overall finish in the Mille Miglia at the wheel of a stock production 300SL coupe. The second was Le Mans. Fitch waited in the team trailer before taking over for teammate Pierre Levegh. But the now-infamous crash involving Levegh's 300 SLR, Mike Hawthorn's Jaguar D-type and Lance Maklin's Austin Healey produced the worst disaster in automobile-racing history, killing Levegh and more than 80 spectators and injuring more than 100 others. Fitch pledged to

John Fitch was a racer's racer, from sports cars to Grand Prix cars, such as his outing in the 1955 Italian Grand Prix in a Maserati (left). He won the 1955 Tourist Trophy in Northern Ireland with Stirling Moss (top). Signing autographs at Sebring (bottom).

improve racing and highway safety, a challenge he pursued the rest of his life, leading to innovations such as the sand-filled Fitch Inertia Crash Barriers—the yellow barrels seen on racetracks and highways—that have saved thousands of lives.

Fitch's career didn't end with Le Mans. Chevrolet's chief engineer, Ed Cole, suggested he help turn the Corvette into a world-class race car. In early 1956, Cole asked Fitch to develop and manage a team of Corvettes at Sebring, just six weeks hence. Corvette father Zora Arkus-Duntov had already turned down the offer, claiming it would be impossible to make the cars competitive. The team entered four cars, but different engines put them in separate classes: Corvettes won both.

Fitch received numerous awards, including induction into the Corvette, SCCA (inaugural class), Sebring, New England Racer and Motorsports of America halls of fame. In June 2012, he was inducted into the Bloomington Gold Great Hall. 🏆