

John Fitch at Sebring in 1957 in the prototype Corvette SS sports racing car.

Corvettes and John Fitch

— story by Art Evans

— photos courtesy of Art Evans

General Motors brought forth the Corvette in 1953 with great fanfare, but they were nothing more than boulevard cruisers. When my dad bought a 1954 model, he let me drive it. At the time, I was racing my 1954 XK120 Jaguar and there was really no comparison. My Jag would do everything expected from a sports car; the Corvette wouldn't.

Improvements were made by Corvette Chief Engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov on the 1955 model, but GM was only able to sell 674 and

the company was considering discontinuation of the marque. But then, Ford came out with the Thunderbird and GM needed a sports car, so the Corvette was given a stay of execution. Zora did some further engineering and the 1956 emerged in the fall of 1955 much improved.

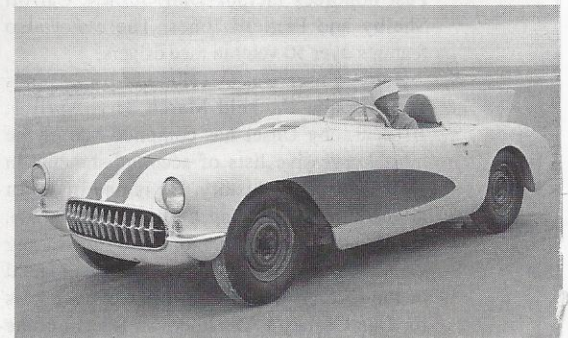
At the time John Fitch was one of America's top drivers. He wrote a letter to Chevrolet Chief Engineer Ed Cole expressing an interest in the Corvette's competitive future and offering his services as a consultant. Cole replied asking John to drive a stock Corvette on the beach at Daytona in the February 1956 trials. Fitch agreed and set a new production-car Flying Mile at 145mph.

Consequently, Cole decided a factory Corvette team would compete at the 12-Hours of Sebring that March. Arkus-Duntov told Cole it would be impossible to turn the car into a respectable racer in the time available, declining to be involved. So Cole turned to Fitch who accepted the assignment as team manager and lead driver.

It was apparent to John that Corvettes, as they were being delivered from the factory, were not equipped or prepared to attempt racing, much less a long-distance one like Sebring. But preparation

was his job and it had to be accomplished between February 18 and race day, March 24. Fitch rented a facility near Sebring that he called a shed.

Initially, only one car was delivered. After literally driving it's wheels off, John discovered a number of problems, large and small. At racing speeds, the wheels, still bolted to the hub and brake drums, rolled away free of the car. So racing wheels were at the top of the list. Next, handling was not anything the way it would have to be in order to be competitive, so a myriad of suspension changes were necessary. To top it off, in order for the car to run in the production



John Fitch set a production-car record of 145 mph at Daytona in 1956.

category, whatever was done had to be offered by the factory as an option, so John was in constant contact. As testing went on, oil leaks developed, engine mounts loosened, the fan belt was thrown off and the differential burned out until the right oil was found.

A month before the start, four cars were delivered from the factory. Three were strictly production models with 265 cid engines and



The 1957 prototype Corvette SS is still enjoyed by fans. It was a hit at the 2012 Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance.



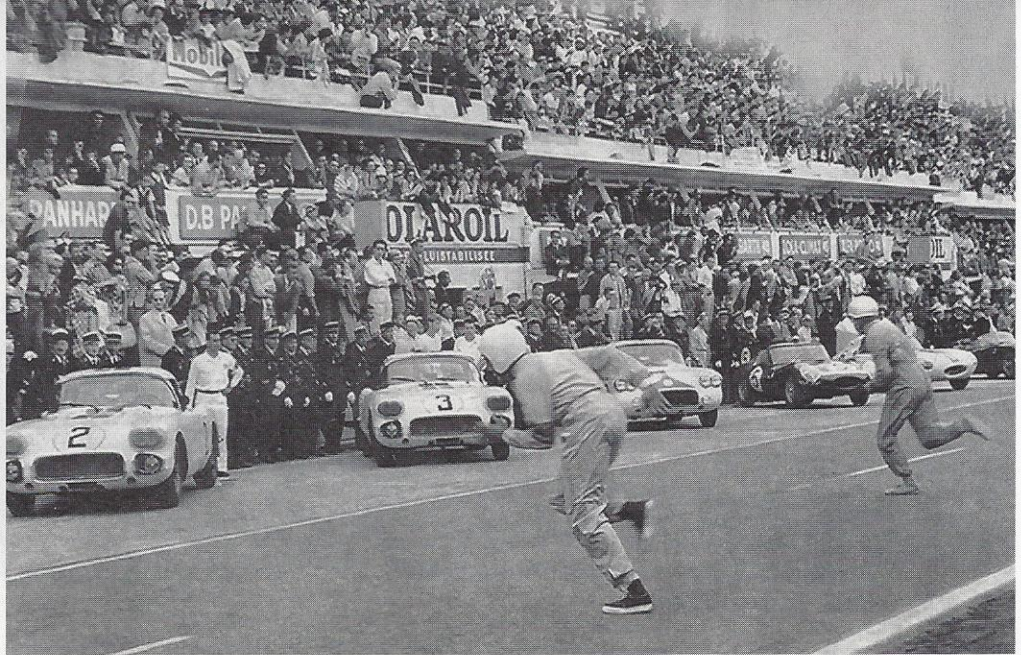
Corvette No. 3 in the pits at the 1960 LeMans.

the fourth with a 307 cid. The three were entered in Production Class C and the other in B for modified cars. Every day, more team members arrived as well as visiting brass from Detroit, all of whom required food, lodging and transportation, also John's responsibility.

John decided to drive the modified car (Number 1) himself and selected his old Cunningham team mate, Walt Hansgen, as co-driver. Other drivers were Dale Duncan with Allen Eager in No. 5, Ray Crawford with Max Goldman in No. 6 and Ernie Ericson with Chuck Hansen in No. 7. All had considerable road-racing experience.

When the flag dropped, the drivers ran across the ramp, jumped into their cars, started engines and were on the way. Fitch got away at the head of the pack and he could see Corvette No. 5 in his mirror with Nos. 6 and 7 not far behind. He knew they were off to a good start. As John, still leading the way, turned off the airport onto connecting roads, Mike Hawthorn in a D-Type Jaguar slipped by with John following closely behind. As Fitch approached the curve onto the airport again, Stirling Moss passed in his Aston Martin. Corvette No. 1 was third at the end of the first lap, surprising quite a number of onlookers.

As the race progressed, Corvette No. 5 suffered a broken axle and was out. Then No. 7 blew its engine, so they were down to two cars. The two



The running start at the 1960 Le Mans.

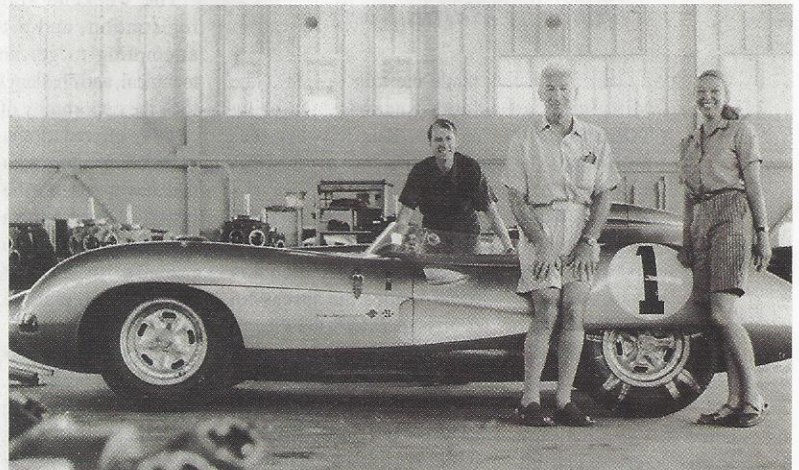
struggled on, No. 6 only able to use top gear and No. 1 with a slipping clutch. Nevertheless, both managed to finish. Fitch and Hansgen in No. 1 were ninth overall, winning Class B. Crawford and Goldman in No. 6 were 15th overall and won Production Class C. With two class victories, Corvette won the Team Prize. Only 24 of the 60 starters were running after 12 hours. Cole was delighted and Zora much chagrined.

Fitch was asked back to lead the team at Sebring in 1957, this time with Arkus-Duntov on board. GM entered a new Corvette Super Sports, designed and prepared by Zora and driven by Fitch and Piero Taruffi. My friends, Pete Lovely and Paul O'Shea drove Bill Mitchell's SR2. Jim Jeffords-John Kilborn-Dale Duncan plus Dick Thompson-Gaston Andrey drove production Corvettes. At the end, the SS failed to finish, the SR2 was seventh in class while the two production cars were first and second in class.

During practice before the race, both Juan Fangio and Stirling Moss took the SS around. Fangio broke the previous year's lap record by two seconds. He said, "Fantastico!" Moss did only a second slower than Fangio. The upshot was the GM,

Fitch and Arkus-Duntov had created a real honest-to-goodness sports car, able to hold its head up anywhere.

After my buddy Jim Jeffords won both the 1958 and 1959 SCCA National Championship in a



After the 1957 Sebring, John Fitch became good friends with Zora Arkus-Duntov and his wife.

Corvette, Briggs Cunningham entered a three-car team for the 1960 Le Mans. Cunningham himself with Bill Kimberley drove one, Dick Thompson and Fred Windridge another with John Fitch and Bob Grossman in the third. The 4.6-liter Corvettes were not seen as a serious threat being regarded as too heavy. At one time during the 24 hours, however, Fitch was able to climb as high as third overall during a heavy downpour. Fitch and Grossman finished a very respectable eighth overall and fifth in class. The others failed to finish. This was as good as a Corvette would do at Le Mans for quite a few years thereafter.

Fitch retired from racing after driving at Sebring with Cunningham in a Porsche in 1966. Fitch and I have been friends for many years. Now he's 94 years old. We talk on the phone every few weeks or so.



Corvette No. 9 at the 1957 Sebring.