

AN IRREPRESSIBLE 20TH CENTURY HERO BY ART EVANS

If someone were to write a novel about the life of John Fitch, it would seem so far-fetched as to be almost unbelievable. Fitch sailed the Gulf of Mexico patrolling for German subs on the eve of WWII. Next he was a WWII hero flying against the Luftwaffe in a P-51 and shooting down an Me262 jet, later landing in a Nazi prison camp; he was the boyfriend of Kathleen Kennedy and buddy of JFK, won the first GP of Argentina, was the first SCCA National Champion, a member of the 1955 World Championship Mercedes-Benz team, part of the all-conquering Cunningham team, won the Team Prize for Corvette at the 1956 Sebring, is credited with helping transform the Corvette into a genuine sports car, designed the safe and challenging Lime Rock Park circuit, created the Corvair Sprint and invented and developed the Fitch Inertial Barriers that have saved thousands of lives.

Fitch's extraordinary experiences during WWII were summarized in a five-page article in the Mar/Apr 2012 edition of *Vintage Motorsport*, "John Fitch, the War Years."

A Race and a Proposal

The article concludes toward the end of the 1940s when Fitch, after buying an MG TC, established an MG dealership at White Plains, N.Y. His first race was in the TC at Bridgehampton in June 1949. He finished 5th and proposed to his girlfriend, Elizabeth Huntley, that evening. The marriage lasted for her lifetime. The first Sebring event was held on December 31, 1950; Fitch won his class in a Jaguar XK120.

Then he created the Fitch Model B, a Ford V8-60 engine in a Fiat 1100 chassis with a modified Crosley body. He took 2nds with the Model B at both the "Bridge" and Watkins Glen in 1951. That same year, he became the first SCCA National Champion and, in a borrowed Cadillac Allard, won the first Argentine Grand Prix after which he was given a kiss by the race queen, who was also the un-crowned queen of the country, Evita Perón.

Back home, he built another sports-car special, the famous Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar in which he won many SCCA races. The car

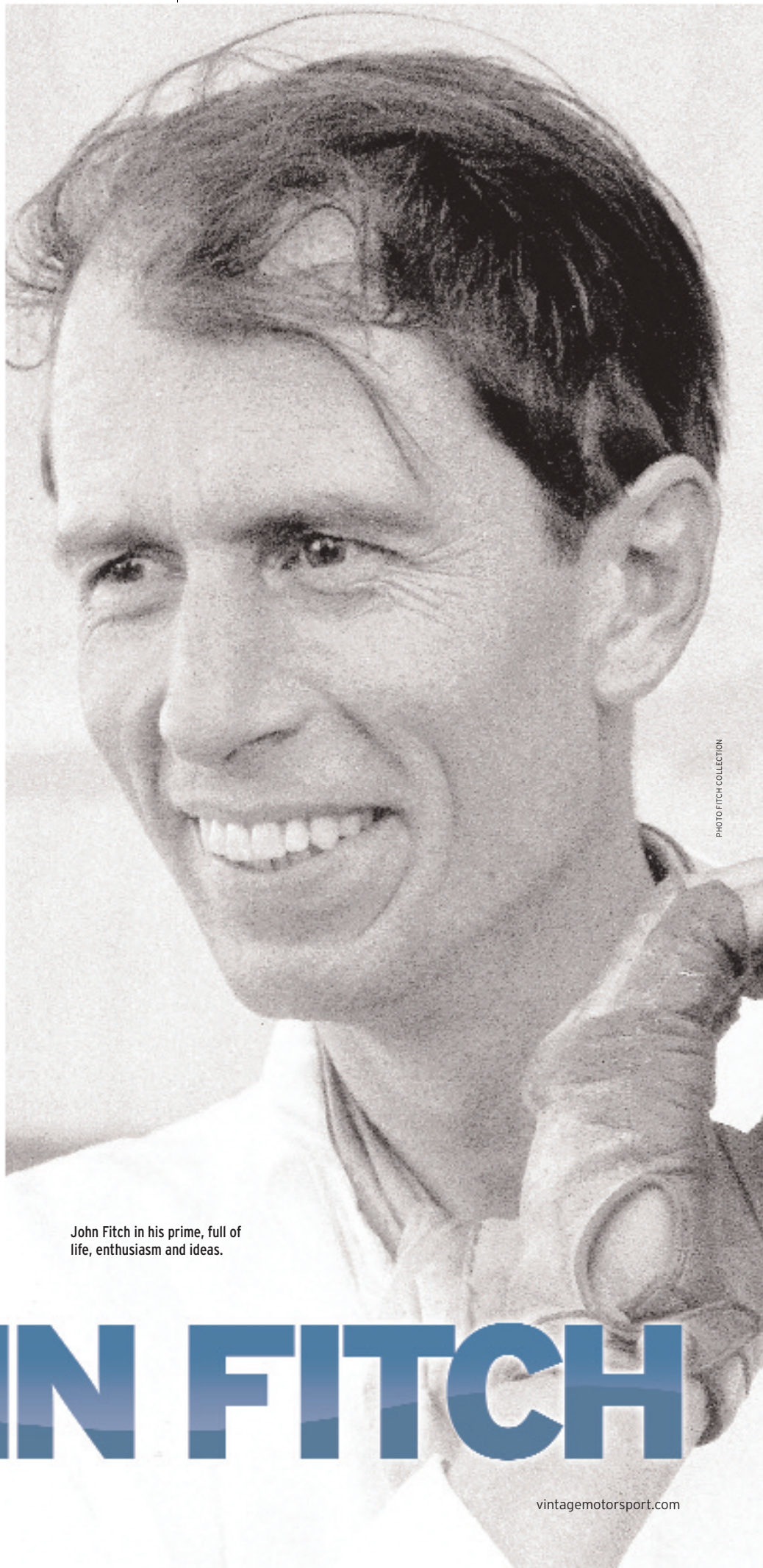


PHOTO: FITCH COLLECTION

John Fitch in his prime, full of life, enthusiasm and ideas.

JOHN FITCH

is so viable that it has been raced almost continually since its construction, now, of course, in vintage events.

On and off during the decade, Fitch drove for Briggs Cunningham. Their first try at Le Mans was in 1951. Fitch remembered it like this: "Here was this huge homebuilt American car against a field of experienced factory teams. At the 18th hour we were running 2nd overall. Only a Jaguar was ahead of us, one of the three factory cars and identical to the other two that had blown their engines. We were waiting for the third one to fail. It didn't, but we did."

Due to Fitch's drive at Le Mans, in 1952 Mercedes-Benz's chief engineer asked him to try out in a 300SL at the Nürburgring. While there, Ferry Porsche offered Fitch a seat in a 356 Coupe in an all-Porsche event where he finished 3rd. Also while at the Nürburgring, Fitch suggested to Mercedes-Benz team leader Alfred Neubauer that the company might want to consider entering the Carrera Panamericana. Some months later, Fitch got a telegram asking him to drive in the famed Mexican Road Race. He did and it was a triumph for Mercedes. Their prototype 300SLs finished 1st and 2nd with John in 4th, although he was disqualified after getting permission from race officials to get mechanical help—his finish disallowed.

In 1953, he and Phil Walters won the 12 Hours of Sebring and placed 3rd at Le Mans in a Cunningham C5R. While in Europe, John drove a Cooper-Bristol at Aix-les-Bains, a Frazer-Nash in the Tourist Trophy, a HWM-Alta at Monza and a Nash-Healey at the Mille Miglia.

A Year to Remember

His greatest year was 1955 when he was a member of the Mercedes-Benz team, which, led by Fangio and Moss, won everything. Fitch told me that he thought his greatest drive was the Mille Miglia where he won the GT class in a production 300SL, a car that was not expected to finish in the top 10 competing against the best cars from Ferrari, Maserati and Porsche, not to mention the 300 SLRs

Originally, the factory had teamed Fitch with Denis Jenkinson as navigator. During practice, Fitch invented a device made out of wood that held a continuous roll of paper containing a map of the course. Stirling Moss, entered in an SLR, insisted on an all-British crew. So at the last minute Jenks was teamed with Moss. Jenks took the Fitch invention with him and the German mechanics constructed one out of metal. The rest is history. Moss and Jenks won overall.

That same year in Northern Ireland, Fitch and co-driver Stirling Moss won the Tourist



In 2008 Fitch attended a Corvette tribute at the Petersen Museum.

PHOTO WILLIAM EDGAR



At Indy in '53, Fitch tried but could not qualify the Brown Motor Co. Offy.

PHOTO IMS



Fitch drove his first race in an MG TC at Bridgehampton in June 1949.

PHOTO FITCH COLLECTION



Fitch (middle) tested in 1952 with Mercedes at the Nürburgring.

PHOTO DAMLER-BENZ ARCHIVES



In 1956 with this finned Corvette, Fitch reached 145mph on Daytona's beach.

PHOTO JACK GANSLER

Trophy. In June, Fitch was the co-driver of the 300SLR involved in the infamous Le Mans disaster that occurred while Pierre Levegh was at the wheel. Mercedes withdrew from racing at the end of 1955.

Decades later Fitch and I wrote a book about his experiences with Mercedes-Benz. "Racing With Mercedes" was published in 2006.

In December 1955, Fitch wrote to Chevrolet chief engineer Ed Cole expressing his interest regarding Corvette's competitive possibilities. He added that he would like to work with Cole as a consultant. As a result, Cole had Fitch drive a stock Corvette on the Beach at Daytona in February 1956. He covered the Flying Mile at 145mph, setting a new production-car record.

Following that, Cole, now general

manager of Chevrolet, named Fitch the team manager for the Corvette effort at Sebring in 1956. Until then, Corvettes had little racing success and had not sold well. GM was even considering dropping the brand altogether.

The cars were delivered to Fitch at Sebring in mid-February. Race day was March 24. In those few short weeks, Fitch was able to do what Corvette engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov considered impossible. He turned them into serious competitors, winning the production class and the Team Prize. Fitch not only led the team, but also drove at Sebring that year as well as the following year.

In 1957, Corvettes placed 1st, 2nd and 4th in class, taking the Team Prize again for General Motors. Fitch was entered with driver Piero Taruffi in the one-off Corvette

SS, which lasted just 23 laps, the fast but not fully developed SS suffering several problems. However, Fitch fared much better in 1960 where he drove a Corvette at Le Mans as a member of the three-car Cunningham team. He and co-driver Bob Grossman wound up a surprising 8th overall and 1st in GT. It was the best finish for a Corvette at Le Mans until 2001 when a C5-R finished 1st in the GTS class and 8th overall.

Fitch's 18-year racing career is the stuff of much legend, but his most significant contributions are in automotive safety. He designed the course at Lime Rock, among the safest in the world for drivers as well as spectators. Fitch's concern with safety began at Le Mans in 1955 after the horrendous racing accident that killed 85 spectators.

He took great satisfaction in his invention and development of Fitch Inertial Barriers. These ubiquitous barrels that line danger points on our thruways have saved countless lives. Most people assume they are just sand-filled barrels, but they are much more than that. Without going into the technology, suffice it to say that Fitch was granted a patent, which, unfortunately, eventually expired so the royalties stopped.

Fitch and I became acquainted when we worked together during the '60s on advertising projects, he as driver and me as cinematographer. For many years, whenever he was in California, we sailed together on my 30-foot boat. Since then, we had always kept in touch, mostly by telephone since we lived on opposite sides of the continent.

In 1960, Fitch made his home near the race course at Lime Rock, Connecticut. The previous year, General Motors had come out with the rear-engined Corvair. Fitch took the economy car, which was somewhat lacking in performance, and designed the Fitch Sprint as well as a more advanced version, the one-off Fitch Phoenix. Unlike a normal Corvair, Sprints could, and did, hold their heads up on road-racing circuits. Sprints



The one-off Fitch Phoenix was innovative and unique.

PHOTO © RANDY RIGGS

broke a valve on lap 148 and they retired for good.

Always interested in safety, in addition to the Fitch Inertial Barriers, Fitch also created Compression Barriers and Displaceable Guardrails for use on race tracks. Research he conducted has made racing

measurably safer for drivers, officials, spectators and everyone who traverses our roads and highways.

On August 6, 2007, it was my great honor to host his 90th birthday party at my home in Redondo Beach, California. My family was almost in revolt due to the numbers who came, among them Phil Hill and Carroll Shelby. Davey Jordan's wife, Norma, brought the cake. Bob Bondurant flew over from Phoenix to give Fitch a copy of his just-published biography, "Bob Bondurant," by Phil Henny.

Fitch was in Los Angeles to present a paper to a Society of Automotive Engineers conference held in Hollywood on August 7, 2007. The paper was titled, "Are We Flat-Out for Survivable Deceleration? The 1955 Crash at Le Mans—Its Impact on Racing." It may have been the first time the society had heard from a speaker who hadn't graduated from college.

On October 24, 2008, the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles held a celebration to honor Corvettes as race cars. A large number of Corvette drivers were there, but Fitch was the star. To help celebrate, I put together a book, "Racing With Corvettes, The Early Years." We had a box of books hot off the press that Fitch and I autographed for his fans.

At various times Fitch was inducted into the Corvette, Sebring, SCCA (inaugural class), New England Racer and Motorsports of America halls of fame, and in June 2012, into the Bloomington Gold Great Hall.

John C. Fitch died on October 31 at his home in Lakeview, Connecticut, with his three sons at his side. 🏁

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Fitch after winning the main at the Sowega National Sports Car Races in Albany, Ga., in Oct. '52 driving the Cunningham C-4 R.