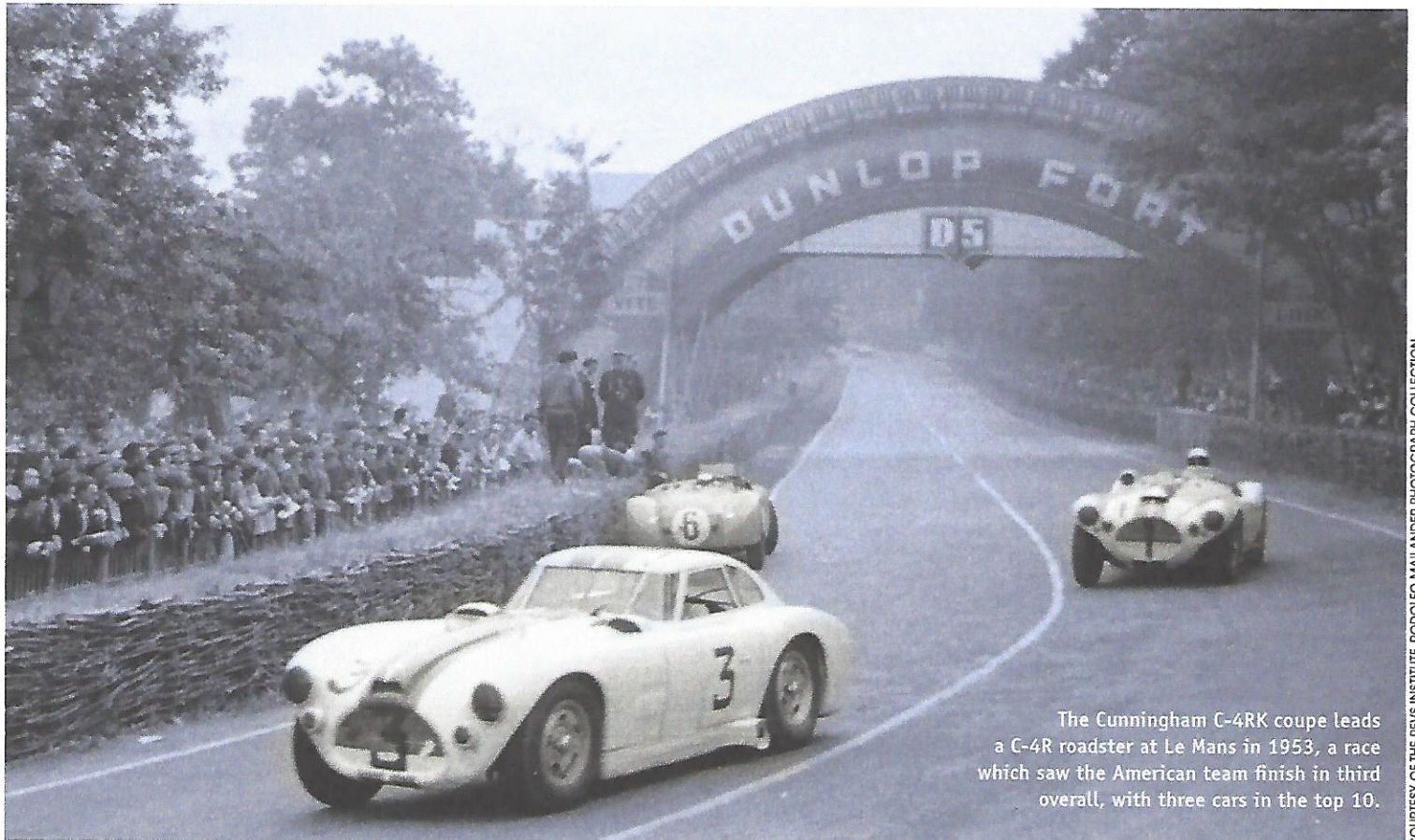


Briggs Swift Cunningham II

The ultimate American sportsman brought the best this country had to offer and competed on the world's biggest racing stage



The Cunningham C-4RK coupe leads a C-4R roadster at Le Mans in 1953, a race which saw the American team finish in third overall, with three cars in the top 10.

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BY TERRY SHEA • IMAGES AS CREDITED

In April of 1954, Briggs Swift Cunningham II graced the cover of *Time* magazine, a position normally reserved for the likes of a Roosevelt or a Rockefeller. Cunningham's impact on the racing scene in postwar America, and Europe, too, cannot be overstated. His team's professionalism, preparation, and thoroughness ushered in a new era in motorsport.

Born in 1907 to a very wealthy Cincinnati industrialist, Cunningham chose many competitive pursuits, gaining fame racing cars and boats, in addition to having been a skilled golfer and tennis player as a younger man while attending Yale. By his 1954 *Time* cover appearance, he had also established himself in the automobile business, producing Italian-

bodied, Hemi-powered grand tourers and dedicated sports racers in Florida.

Cunningham married his first wife, Lucie Bedford, the daughter of a Standard Oil executive, in 1929. The couple had quite the extended honeymoon in Europe, from 1929 into 1930, time which included attending the Monaco Grand Prix and winning an award at a concours d'élegance in Cannes with a Mercedes-Benz SS that was personally delivered to Cunningham by Rudolf Caracciola, then the top factory driver for the storied German automaker. Rejected by the Navy during World War II due to asthma, Cunningham instead bought and piloted his own plane with the Civil Air Patrol, monitoring the Florida coastline near his Palm Beach home.

When the Sports Car Club of America, founded by Cunningham friends Miles and Sam Collier, sanctioned

its first race in 1948 on the streets of Watkins Glen, New York, Cunningham was there, racing his 1939 Buick with a Mercedes-Benz SSK body to a second-place trophy. By 1962, Cunningham could claim one title as a driver and eight as a team owner at the premier sports car race at Watkins Glen.

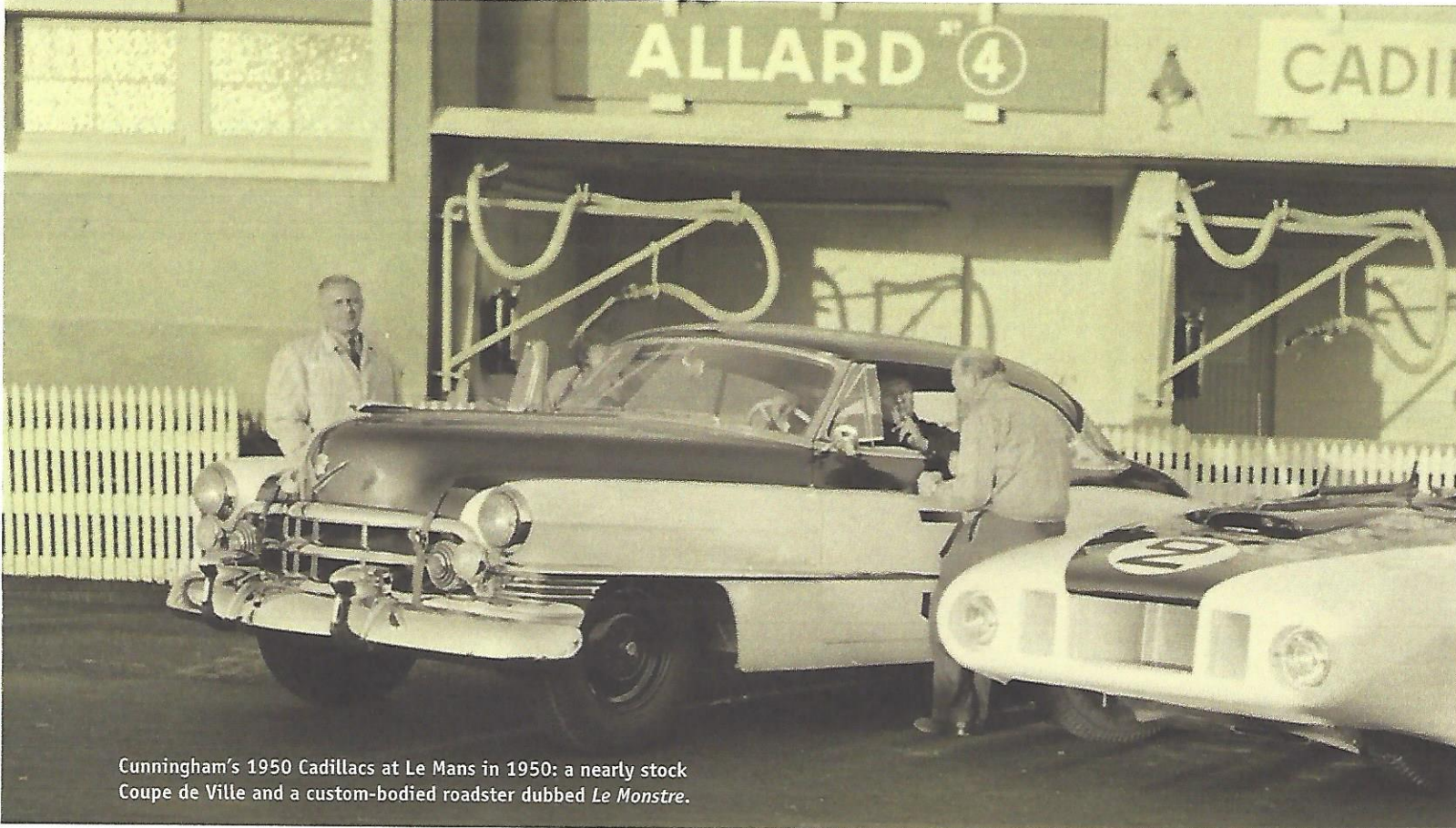
Cunningham set his sights on winning the most prestigious sports car race in the world, the 24 Hours of Le Mans, in 1950, the goal to do it with an American car. Frick-Tappet Motors of Rockville Centre, Long Island, created the "Fordillac," a 1949 Ford powered by the then-new



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Cunningham's 1950 Cadillacs at Le Mans in 1950: a nearly stock Coupe de Ville and a custom-bodied roadster dubbed *Le Monstre*.

Cadillac OHV V-8 engine, but the French put the brakes on that effort because the Fordillac was not a car from a recognized automobile maker. Not to be rebuffed, Cunningham entered two 1950 Cadillacs, the first a race-prepped, but largely stock Coupe de Ville (nicknamed *Le Petit Pataud* after a puppy in French children's literature) and the other an aerodynamic custom-bodied roadster (*Le Monstre*) built with design and fabrication input from engineers at Grumman on Long Island working on their own time. Both were white, clad in twin stripes that would become the signature Cunningham livery.

While the custom roadster was demonstrably faster than the coupe, a second-lap mishap left *Le Monstre* stuck in a sandbank. Cunningham spent four laps digging it out by hand (the rules prohibiting any driver from receiving any assistance while on the course) and he rejoined in 35th position. The two

Cadillacs ultimately finished 10th and 11th, rather respectable considering the rapid preparation of the cars and the off-track excursion.

After Le Mans, Cunningham took matters into his own hands, buying Frick-Tappet Motors outright and moving its operations from Long Island, New York, to West Palm Beach, Florida. The B.S. Cunningham Co. was established in the car-making business.

Between 1951 and 1955, the company made several different race cars and two road-going models, fewer than 50 cars in total, almost all powered by Chrysler's innovative FirePower Hemi engines. The company completed its first prototype, the C-1, a two-seat roadster, which predated the similar-looking AC Ace by a couple of years. Noticeably larger than the European sports cars it was designed to compete against, the C-1 featured a Cadillac OHV V-8 engine

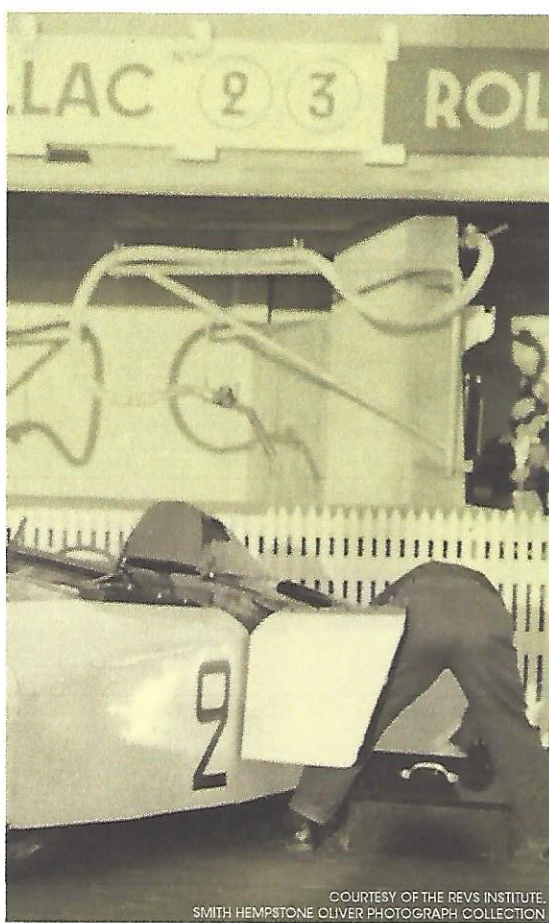
tweaked to produce 220 hp, clad in a handmade aluminum body over a steel frame. Suspension and braking components were sourced from Cadillac, Ford, Mercury, and other American makes.

The C-1 provided the basis for the C-2R racer, but before production began, Cadillac backed out as engine supplier. Fortunately for the Cunningham Co., Briggs Cunningham had befriended the son of Chrysler President K.T. Keller while at Yale, and Chrysler's then all-new Hemi proved just what the team needed. The Chrysler engine, tuned by Cunningham mechanics with four Zenith carburetors on a custom, log-type manifold, along with other modifications, was producing an impressive 270 hp by the end of the 1951 season. The C-2R set the pace at Le Mans that year with the fastest official practice lap, but only one of the three cars built finished, down in 18th place. Later in the season, the C-2R scored victories for the Cunningham team at the Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, and Watkins Glen road races.

With rules changes at Le Mans, the B.S. Cunningham Co. would need to produce 50 road cars to be considered a legitimate make and, in late 1951, production began on the C-3 road



The last Cunningham built, the C-6R, competing at Sebring in 1955, featured an Offenhauser engine, and not a Chrysler Hemi.



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In 1960, John Fitch and Bob Grossman piloted this Cunningham-entered Corvette to an eighth overall finish and first in the 5-liter GT class at Le Mans. (Bottom) The Vignale-bodied, Chrysler Hemi-powered Cunningham C-3 road car.

car. Though the first two bodies were completed in Florida, the company brought costs down significantly by outsourcing body production to Carrozzeria Vignale of Italy. The C-3 surely had European flair, but under the hood was the same basic engine as used in the C-2R racers: an all-American Hemi V-8. Cunningham would ultimately produce 20 C-3 coupes and five C-3 convertibles.

Returning to Le Mans in 1952, Cunningham entered three cars: two C-4R roadsters and one C-4RK coupe, designed with the direct input of the famous German aerodynamicist Wunibald Kamm. Briggs Cunningham and his co-driver, Bill Spear, finished in fourth place overall, Cunningham himself having driven all but four hours of the race, an incredible feat.

Cunningham returned in 1953 with the lone C-5R built for the race, along with a C-4R roadster and the C-4RK coupe. The sleeker C-5R was clocked via radar as the fastest car down the famed Mulsanne Straight at 154.8 mph, three miles an hour faster than the speediest Jaguar. Despite the advantage, the Jaguar team, running more fade-resistant disc brakes was able to consistently out brake the other teams, resulting in a one-two finish for the cats from Coventry. Cunningham's C-5R with John Fitch and Phil Walters sharing driving duty, came in a very respectable third place. Overall, Cunningham had three cars in the top 10.

Cunningham returned to Le Mans with a car of his own make for the last time in 1955, the C-6R, an even sleeker, lower roadster powered by an Offenhauser four-cylinder engine. The team DNFed during that ill-fated race with a failed piston in the 19th hour, though it was never truly in contention.

Despite Cunningham's failure to win Le Mans, Cunningham race cars and the Cunningham team achieved far better results in other races, including three straight 12 Hours of Sebring wins from 1953 through 1955, with a C-4R, an OSCA, and a Jaguar D-Type. In fact, Cunningham continued racing, with Ferraris, Lister-Jaguars, Maseratis and Corvettes, the latter of which earned the team a class win at Le Mans in 1960. His and the team's final race entry was at Sebring in 1966 with a Porsche 904 GTS.

Cunningham was all but forced to shut down the B.S. Cunningham Co. in 1955 as he was up against IRS rules which considered his business a hobby after not turning a profit for its first five years. He later opened a museum in Costa Mesa, California, which included many of his own cars, along with other vintage racing and collectible cars. The majority of that

museum survives today as part of The Revs Institute in Naples, Florida.

Beyond racing automobiles on land, Cunningham proved quite adept at sailing as well. His exploits on the water began before World War II with world championships won in the 6-meter class. Even as his sports car teams were dominating road racing in America, Cunningham helped finance the syndicate that built *Columbia*, the 12-meter yacht he helmed to a dominant victory in the 1958 America's Cup off Newport, Rhode Island, not once trailing in a four-race sweep of the U.K. challenger *Sceptre*.

Briggs Cunningham II, who passed away in 2003, went to extraordinary lengths to compete on the biggest auto racing stage in the world with a car that bore his own name. By all accounts, despite the expense and the intense competition, he remained a gentleman and a sportsman, and was respected by his employees as much as his competitors. Though his dream of winning Le Mans in his own car never quite came true, his legacy today burns as bright as ever, his achievements lauded and his cars desired, giving evidence that he truly lived the American dream. 🏁