

Cunningham

Briggs Cunningham's goal was to produce American sports cars worthy of European racing. Did he succeed with the Cunningham, the American Ferrari?

BY DAVID CONWILL • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE REVS INSTITUTE FOR AUTOMOTIVE RESEARCH AND THE HEMMINGS ARCHIVES

Forget "Ford versus Ferrari." It's hardly a compelling story when the second-largest automaker in the world decides it wants to embarrass a boutique maker of race cars. Instead, it's far better when the hero is a scrappy, upstart David against the Goliath of international sports car racing. That's the story of Cunningham cars.

Briggs Cunningham was a gentleman sportsman of the type no longer fashionable in America. Raised in wealth and privilege, he spent his days pursuing strenuous adventure. He loved cars, thanks largely to an ex-Rough Rider uncle with a Dodge Brothers touring car re-powered by a World War I-surplus Hispano-Suiza aircraft engine. His mother and first wife preferred something less dangerous for him than auto racing, so for most of his youth, he contented himself with yachting—another lifelong passion where he made a lasting impact.

While he owned a sprint car in the 1930s that was driven by others, Cunningham's friendship with Barron Collier Jr.—and through him younger Collier brothers Sam and Miles—exposed him to road racing. The sport of road racing had been largely dormant in the United States since 1917, but the Colliers founded the Automobile Racing Club of America in 1933 to provide a sanctioning body for revived amateur races using imported cars (mostly Bugattis and MGs at first) and homebuilt specials (usually Willys or Ford V-8 based).

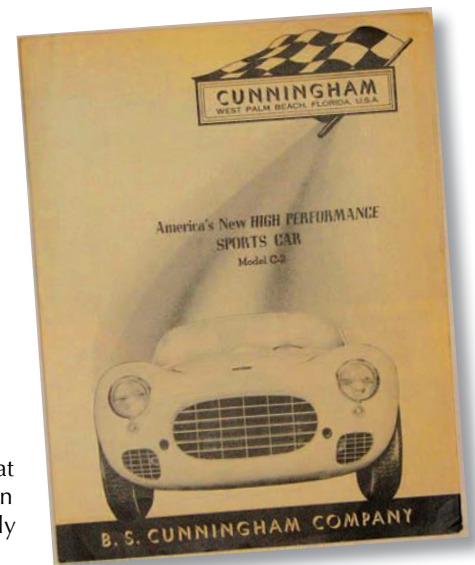
Road racing, as practiced by ARCA, was patterned on the European road races of the 1920s. It was a gentleman's pastime that had not yet attracted the massive sponsorship dollars of nationalist governments or gigantic corporations. In short, it was a hobby perfectly suited to a man like Cunningham.

Although he had promised his mother not to drive in any races, Cunningham supported his friends in ARCA at a distance. He undoubtedly listened eagerly to Miles Collier when Miles returned from taking his streamlined MG PA/PB, *Leonidas*, to France to participate in the 1939 24 Hours of Le Mans. Then in 1940,

Cunningham loaned his hybrid *Bu-Merc* roadster, a 1939 Buick Century chassis with a Mercedes body, to Miles for ARCA's 1940 World's Fair Grand Prix. It was ARCA's last official event. The combination of American power and European character would be prescient.

After World War II, Cunningham wanted to make an all-American run at Le Mans. Previous American cars in the race had typically been piloted by European drivers, and previous American drivers, like Miles, had often chosen European equipment for their attempts. In 1949, the most recent notable achievement of an American driver in an American car in Europe had been Jimmy Murphy driving the Duesenberg prototype to first place in the 1921 French Grand Prix.

Also, in 1949, the technological fruits of wartime engineering began to ripen in American automobiles. The new overhead-valve Cadillac V-8 was heralded as a technological marvel made possible in part by new refinery technology that produced high-octane gasoline. Cunningham turned to Bill Frick, a Long Island mechanic





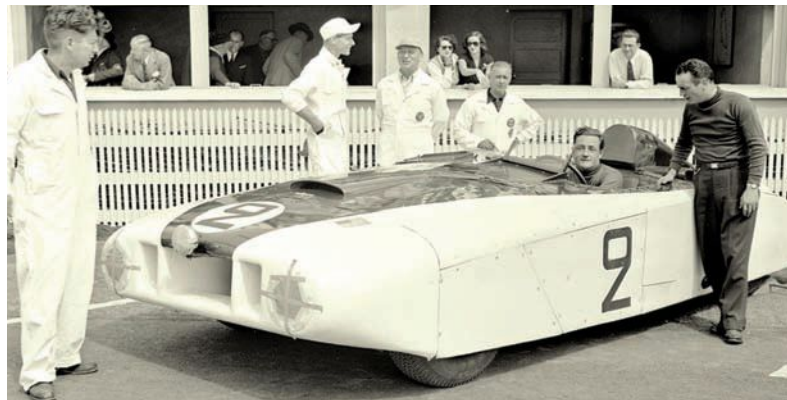
Because they were hand-built in tiny numbers, no Cunningham is identical to its fellows, but this 1952 C-3 coupe is about as typical as the homologation cars get. All C-3s utilized Chrysler engines, and all but the prototype had bodies made in Italy.



This Hemi utilizes the four-Weber intake manifold created for a later series of Cunningham "continuation" cars. Some '50s originals used a similar unit, mounting four Zenith one-barrel carburetors.



When French racing officials rejected his initial attempt to enter Bill Frick-built "Fordillacs," Briggs Cunningham instead quickly acquired two Cadillacs to race at Le Mans in 1950.



The second Cadillac, which French crowds called *Le Monstre* ("The Monster") was fitted with streamlined aluminum bodywork fashioned by moonlighting workers from Grumman Aircraft. It took 11th place.

well known for his talents at producing performance cars, for one of his Ford-Cadillac "Fordillac" hybrids and announced his intention to enter two in the 1950 24 Hours of Le Mans.

French officials were less than impressed and replied that the Fordillacs did not meet their homologation requirements. Moving quickly, Cunningham managed to acquire two 1950 Cadillac Series 61 Coupe de Ville hardtops—the smallest, lightest models produced by Cadillac.

Because the Cadillacs, at 3,829 pounds, were heavier than the Fords (2,965 pounds for an unmodified V-8 Business Coupe), Cunningham, Frick and crew stripped one car down to its chassis and enlisted employees from the nearby Grumman Aircraft facility to fabricate an aluminum body. French crowds at Le Mans dubbed this car *Le Monstre* for its monstrous appearance.

The other car remained stock in appearance but was fitted with speed parts and carefully tuned to optimize its power. Sam and Miles Collier drove the stock-bodied Cadillac to a 10th-place finish. *Le Monstre*, with Cunningham and Phil Walters sharing driving duties, finished 11th. Cunningham's appetite had only been whetted and he would come back to Le Mans with even better equipment.

To meet the homologation requirements, Cunningham incorporated the B.S. Cunningham Company in West Palm Beach, Florida. His goal was to produce good-handling, powerful cars made entirely from U.S. mechanical parts. Rather than making

massive investments in manufacturing capability, the new Cunningham company would produce its grand tourers and racers in the style of the old "assemblers," picking and choosing the best componentry from across the industry.

Cunningham had driven a Cadillac-powered Healey Silverstone to second place at the 1950 Watkins Glen Grand Prix, and he took that car as his model. Like the Silverstone's creator, Donald Healey, he received a lukewarm response from General Motors when he inquired about bulk buys of Cadillac engines. Healey subsequently met George Mason and they teamed up to create the Nash-Healey. Cunningham went to Chrysler Corporation and came away with an agreement to purchase the new Chrysler FirePower V-8.

The Hemi V-8s, actually industrial engines, were furnished to Cunningham at a discount and the company immediately abandoned its first, Cadillac-powered C-1 roadster design in favor of creating a new car. The Cunningham C-2 was based around the Chrysler V-8. Both cars featured a frame built from 3-inch steel tubing with a central X-member. The Cunningham Co. built its own de Dion tube suspension in the rear, reducing unsprung weight and allowing finer tuning. The C-1 and C-2 rode identical 105-inch wheelbases and shared a 58-inch track.

The C-2 spawned the C-2R race car. It was appropriately speedy (Phil Walters set the fastest official lap in practice for the 1951 24 Hours of Le Mans, at 5 minutes, 3 seconds), but

undesirably heavy. Three were entered in the 1951 24 Hours of Le Mans, but none finished. Two of the cars crashed out and the third, which maintained second place for some time, was taken down by engine problems. Fuel quality caused headaches for all teams, but perhaps more of an issue were the efforts of Jaguar with its C-type racing car, not to mention the new Aston-Martin DB2. A Nash-Healey, incidentally, managed to finish sixth overall.

For its attempt at a series-produced car, sold to the general public, the Cunningham Co. created the C-3 (see our profile of a 1953 model on page 40). The C-3 was based on the C-2, but featured a coupe body, though a small number of C3 convertibles were also built later on. The first two C-3s were produced entirely in Florida, but fit and finish weren't up to the company founder's standards. He selected coachbuilder Vignale of Turin, Italy, to hammer out the coachwork for the rest.

Appropriate to its time and market, the C-3 had similar proportions to the 1953-'55 Chevrolet Corvette. They were sized, in other words, somewhere between the diminutive sports cars of Europe and the increasingly gargantuan passenger cars of America. The power and performance of a Cunningham far outstripped the early Corvette's, but so did the price tag. A 1954 Corvette roadster had a factory price of \$3,523, whereas a C-3 was priced at \$15,000. They may have been worth every penny, but even in postwar America's most prosperous years, that was a stiff price for most buyers.

Losses continued to mount for the company, which never made it to profitability. More race cars came, numbered C-4 through C-6. A C-4R marked the high point of the company's racing fortunes, taking third overall at Le Mans in 1954. By 1955, the Internal Revenue Service had determined that the company wasn't actually a viable business, but rather a tax write-off for a rich man's hobby.

The tax issues, combined with the temperamental nature of the Offenhauser-powered C-6 and the 1955 Le Mans disaster (in which no Cunningham racer was involved), spelled the end of the Cunningham operation. Key people retired entirely from racing and thus from the company too.

Today, Cunninghams, sporting handsome Italian coachwork and powerful Chrysler Hemi V-8 engines, are highly sought. They are also extremely exclusive and valued appropriately thanks to their rarity. That panache has led to at least two attempts at revival: a continuation of C-3 production, and a C-7, designed to be a modern continuation of the legendary marque.

Americans would return to Le Mans, but the age of the gentleman driver ended after the 1950s, setting the stage for the big money professionalism of the 1960s and '70s. Owning a vintage Cunningham (or a revival car) covers the driver with some of the glory of the last sporting attempts to tackle Le Mans. They are also arguably the most exotic automobiles to be designed and constructed in the U.S. in the 1950s. They were America's Ferrari. 🏁



Plans to discontinue American V-8 power in favor of a Ferrari V-12 did not work out, and the 1955 Cunningham C-6R (above), the last Cunningham built by the original company, wound up at Le Mans using Offenhauser power. Briggs Cunningham returned to Le Mans with the Corvette team in 1960 (below left). Thanks to overheating brakes, the C5-R (below right) took third at Le Mans in 1953—the marque's best showing.

