

This racing pioneer was well ahead of Carroll Shelby

Shelby wasn't the first person to think of stuffing a big engine in a lightweight sports car. That honor goes to his fellow American Briggs Cunningham.

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In 1962, Carroll Shelby envisioned building a lightweight roadster fitted with an American V-8 engine. That vision became the Cobra sports car.

But the idea for such a machine was originally developed more than a decade earlier by Briggs Swift Cunningham II: sporting enthusiast, gentleman racer and fearless competitor. As heir to a family meat-packing fortune, Cunningham had the means to pursue practically any activity he desired. Sports was his passion, and auto racing, in particular, consumed him.

But it wasn't until 1948 that the then-41-year-old Cunningham took his first few laps on a racecourse.

In those days, as it is today, one of the most prestigious and gruelling races in the world was France's 24 Hours of Le Mans. It was also an event utterly dominated by Italian, German and British race cars.

An American interloper, Cunningham decided to rise to the challenge. In 1950, he fielded a two-car team for the big endurance test. One was a nearly stock Series 61 Cadillac coupe equipped with a 160-horsepower V-8 engine. The other was similarly powered but was wrapped in one of the strangest bodies ever displayed on a race car.

Its appearance was like that of a bar of soap, having both front and rear wheel skirts and a boat-tail rear end. It looked almost homemade, despite being designed and built by several Grumman aircraft engineers during their off hours.

Dubbed Le Monstre (the monster) by the French press, this Cadillac-powered oddity managed a respectable 11th-place finish, despite an off-track excursion where Cunningham spent more than a half-hour vigorously digging the car out of the sand with his bare hands. The stock-bodied Series 61 coupe ended up in tenth place overall.

The same year as his first Le Mans effort, Cunningham built his own sports car called the C-1 roadster, followed in 1951 by the C-2R. The latter was the first to use Chrysler's 331-cubic-inch Hemi V-8 engine, replacing Cadillac as Cunningham's powerplant of choice. Both models were reasonably quick, but ultimately too heavy for competitive endurance racing.

Cunningham's most successful race car by far was his 1951 C-4R — an aluminum-bodied roadster fitted with a modified 325-horsepower Chrysler Hemi. It could sprint from zero to 60 miles per hour in about six seconds.

His company in West Palm Beach, Fla. was supplied with engines and technical advice from Chrysler, whose key executives had taken a keen interest in his activities. This type of support was necessary to win, as each engine was worth about \$60,000.

Cunningham's C-4Rs were painted white with two broad, blue racing stripes running the length of the car. This scheme was later copied by Cobra-maker Carroll Shelby for his Mustang-based GT350 racers. Weighing considerably

less than earlier efforts, the C-4R proved competitive and virtually bulletproof.

Cunningham and his team entered the C-4R in the 1952 Le Mans race. Out of a possible 24 hours behind the wheel, Cunningham drove 19 and a half hours straight, letting his co-pilot drive only near the end. By the time the race was over, the C-4R had finished first in class and fourth overall. This was an amazing result for a small team with a single-car entry that lacked the kind of resources available to the factory-backed European teams.

Over the next two years, the three C-4Rs that were built collected a total of 15 first-place finishes along with five seconds and five thirds at race venues including Sebring, Fla., Watkins Glen, N.Y., Elkhart Lake, Wis. and Riverside, Calif. During this period, the cars never broke down or crashed. Team Cunningham was so successful and popular that it was featured in a 1954 issue of Time magazine.

Aside from the C-4R, Cunningham also built the road-going C-3 coupe and convertible. These Italian-designed beauties, which also featured Chrysler Hemi power, cost a small fortune, resulting in fewer than 30 being produced between 1951 and 1955.

Cunningham made further attempts at winning Le Mans outright with newer models, but with little success. After the 1955 season, he ended his car-manufacturing business. But he and his team members continued to race other brands, such as Jaguar, Ferrari, Maserati and Porsche, for the next 10 years.

Fast forward to 2001 and the Cunningham Motor Company was revived with the hopes of reigniting the Cunningham fire. That effort eventually floundered, but the revival would have been a fitting testament to the man who showed the world that smaller is better, except when it comes to what was under the hood.

Cunningham proved that American V-8 muscle could successfully compete against Europe's race cars, setting the stage for Shelby's success with his Cobra a decade later.