

SUPER DOOPER COOPER



Tuners embraced Buick's new 3.5-liter aluminum V8 when it came out in 1961. No surprise that this lightweight V8 found a home shortly thereafter in mid-engine British sports racers.

By David Colman | Photos By Richard Small

NINETEEN SIXTY-TWO was the year American road racing irrevocably discovered the magic of V8 power. Four-cylinder, mid-engine sports racers like the Lotus Monte Carlo, Cooper Monaco and Telar/Zerex Special were about to receive heart transplants that would make them precursors of the Can-Am era.

ONE OF THE FIRST V8 engines American tuners embraced was the 215cid (3.5 liter) Buick V8 which GM introduced in 1961 for its Buick Special. This motor weighed just 324 pounds dry, thanks to its aluminum block and heads. At 1.5 pounds per cubic inch, it was the lightest V8 in America.

The hot rod potential of the over-square Buick did not escape the notice of 1959 Indy 500 champion Rodger Ward, who also contested USAC's Road Racing Championship after the Indy season ended. To compete in the 1961 West Coast road races at Riverside and Laguna Seca, Ward hired Bob McKee to install a 5.0-liter aluminum Buick in his Del Webb Kern City Cooper Monaco (chassis CM/4/59). The combination proved potent enough to run 5th at Laguna Seca, but overheating ended his day.

Ward's performance was not wasted on Alfred Momo, official entrant of Briggs Cunningham's multi-car Maserati team at both West Coast events. In fact, Ward had out-qualified and outrun all four Momo entries at Laguna with his best practice lap time of 1:18.90. By October, 1961, Cunningham's front-engine Maserati team was clearly outclassed by the newer mid-engine designs from Cooper and Lotus. Jack Brabham had won the Times Mirror Grand Prix at Riverside in his Cooper Monaco Climax, while Stirling Moss swept Laguna's Pacific Grand Prix in his Lotus 19 Monte Carlo Climax. In both of those contests, Cooper works driver Bruce McLaren drove the Peter Berry Racing Cooper Monaco (Chassis CM/3/61) to high finishes: 2nd at Riverside and 4th at Laguna.

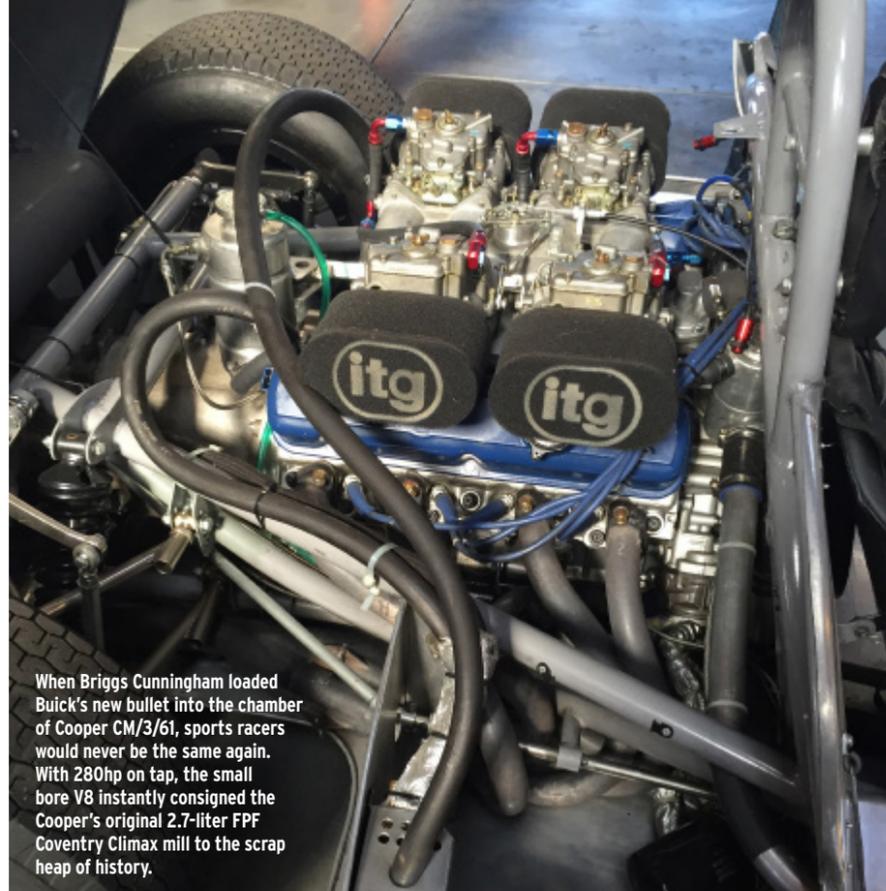
After the '61 season, McLaren left Cooper to start his own race team. Briggs Cunningham then acquired the fin-tail, aluminum-bodied Monaco from Peter Berry and shipped it to Reventlow Automobiles, Inc. in Los Angeles. There, McLaren removed the 2.7-liter Climax engine (which powered Jack Brabham's Cooper at the 1961 Indy 500) for his own use in formula races Down Under. Cunningham instructed RAI to install the aluminum Buick V8 in the empty engine bay. In the February 1962 issue of *Sports*

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Car Graphic, Jerry Titus did a cover story on this engine swap: "Obviously, the results of this transplant may decide what team cars the Momo Corporation will be campaigning next season, since Briggs has privately expressed the thought that Birdcage frames are more functional as surrealistic mobiles than they are as race cars."

At RAI, the Cooper Climax weighed in at 1,480lbs. Substitution of the Buick for the Climax added only 20lbs. to the curb weight. RAI was simultaneously working on their own mid-engine, Buick-powered two-seater. This last gasp Scarab was sporadically raced by Lance Reventlow without either enthusiasm or success. However, Reventlow's engine program for Cunningham proved more successful. RAI evaluated



When Briggs Cunningham loaded Buick's new bullet into the chamber of Cooper CM/3/61, sports racers would never be the same again. With 280hp on tap, the small bore V8 instantly consigned the Cooper's original 2.7-liter FPF Coventry Climax mill to the scrap heap of history.

displacements ranging from 3.0 liters to 4.2 liters, before settling on 3.8 liters—a 300cc increase of the stock Buick. According to Titus, "Dyno tests have shown an easily attained output of 280hp at

6200rpm from the 3.8 engine, with a healthy 250 lbs. ft. of torque available from 5000rpm upward." The Buick utilized a low profile, crossflow intake manifold mounting four

Cooper specialist Ken Nichols returned the Monaco to original condition. For safety concerns, within the passenger sidepod lies a 16-gal. fuel cell, upgraded roll bar braces to both the bulkhead and rear cross member, as well as a collapsible steering column.

side-draft Weber 45 DCOE carburetors. Its 8-into-2 exhaust consisted of small diameter headers leading into 4-inch collector pipes located below the half shafts.

HIRED GUNS

Throughout the '50s and '60s, Cunningham employed a long list of well-known sports car drivers to pilot his many entries both in the U.S. and at Le Mans. In 1956, Jaguar boss Sir William Lyons appointed Cunningham the Jaguar distributor for the Northeast U.S. Lyons sent over a trio of D-Type Jags for Cunningham drivers John Fitch, Gordon Benett and Sherwood Johnson to race in SCCA's C Modified class. At the Steel Cities Cumberland Spring Nationals, Cunningham's three Jags were soundly trounced by the Walt Hansgen-driven D-Type belonging to Hanson McAfee. From that day on, Walt

Hansgen became the number one pilot for Briggs Cunningham.

It was pre-ordained, then, that Hansgen would handle the controls of the potent new Cooper-Buick project



car. With help from entrant/mechanic Alfred Momo, Hansgen successfully campaigned the Cunningham Cooper Monaco to two C Modified SCCA National wins in 1962 (Bridgehampton and Watkins Glen) plus another at Bridgehampton in 1963. But the biggest triumph for the Cooper Buick came at the FIA International 500km race at Bridgehampton on September 15, 1963, when Hansgen took 1st place over a storied field of entries. The team subsequently finished off the '63 season with a 1st place in the qualifying race for the

LA Times Grand Prix at Riverside Raceway.

At Bridgehampton, Hansgen bested the NART Ferrari 250P of Pedro Rodríguez, the NART Ferrari 330LMB of Dan Gurney, the Corvette Grand Sport of Dick Thompson, and a trio of FIA Cobras driven by Ken Miles, Bob Holbert and Bobby Brown. But the win did not come easily. Leading by more than a lap, Hansgen pitted for fuel on lap 47. The Buick refused to re-fire, sending the team scrambling for another battery and jumper cables. By the time the flooded V8 kicked over, Hansgen not only lost his lead, but fell a full lap behind Rodríguez. The Ferrari then faltered when its wire wheel spokes cracked, promoting Hansgen back into the lead. But with 11 laps to go, the

Cooper-Buick dropped a cylinder. Joel Finn described the finish: "As the Cooper neared the pits it made

This is the view the C Modified crowd got of Walt Hansgen's Cunningham Cooper in 1962 and '63: a pair of fat blue racing stripes disappearing into the distance at Riverside, Laguna Seca, and Bridgehampton. This storied ride marked the end of the line for the fabled Cunningham equipe.



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This disheartening journey saw the Buick replaced by a Chevrolet. The final indignity was an attempt to convert the Monaco into a Marauder kit car.

a big bang as a half shaft broke, but Hansgen was able to coast over the finish line to win just as Rodríguez appeared in the distance. Had the race

been one lap longer, Rodríguez would have won." Hansgen's epoch triumph marked the end of Briggs Cunningham's 14-year campaign to dominate domestic and international road racing. After the 1963 season, the team retired the Cooper and disbanded altogether. Thus, the Cooper's 1963 wins marked the last triumphs for the fabled Cunningham equipe. In 1964, Cunningham sold CM/3/61 to Ernie Gravelle. A long downhill slide through the hands of many subsequent owners ensued. This disheartening

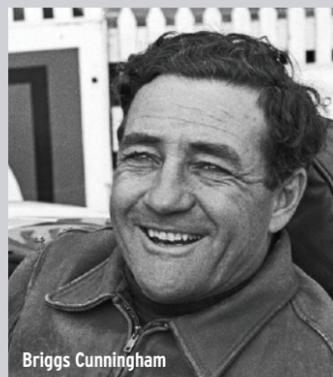
journey saw the Buick replaced by a Chevrolet. The final indignity was an attempt to convert the Monaco into a Marauder kit car. Mercifully, the once-proud Cooper found its way back to the UK for a complete rebuild. Engineer Steve Slyfield oversaw the restoration of CM/3/61 to its former glory. Cooper specialist Ken Nichols handled the chassis work, Sid Hoole cast a new Cooper C5S transaxle, and a fresh Buick was constructed in line with the period modifications made by RAI.

LISE CUNNINGHAM HELLER - Remembering Briggs

Lise Heller says her husband Jeffrey made "once a month visits to Fantasy Junction" to ogle what she calls "the eye candy." After one such trip, Jeffrey exclaimed, "You'll never guess what I saw for sale! It's one of your grandfather's old race cars!" Her immediate reaction? "Don't you even think about getting involved! Do you know the cost of running a car like that?" Case closed, right? "Of course, he went right ahead and bought it."

Now that the famous Cooper Monaco-Buick has again become part of the Cunningham equipe, Lise keeps a wary distance from it: "I sat in it once, but the mechanic yelled at me and told me not to touch it."

That hardly seems fair to the woman who is the eldest of Briggs Cunningham's many living grandchildren. Although Lise was too young to have attended the team's races, she clearly recalls him describing those days to her. "When they went to Le Mans, they would drive the race cars from the port to the track because they had no transporters. At mealtime, they would all stop together and picnic by the side of the road!"



Briggs Cunningham

Before Briggs moved from Greens Farms, Connecticut, to Costa Mesa, California, Lise recalls him keeping his vast car collection "in a big stone barn. Everybody stopped by to drive the cars and hang out with the gang. He always insisted that all his cars had to operate."

So, what was it like having Briggs Cunningham as your granddad? "Whenever we saw him, the first thing he would say was 'What can I do you for?' He was very generous, kind and loving. He always wanted to help and make others happy."

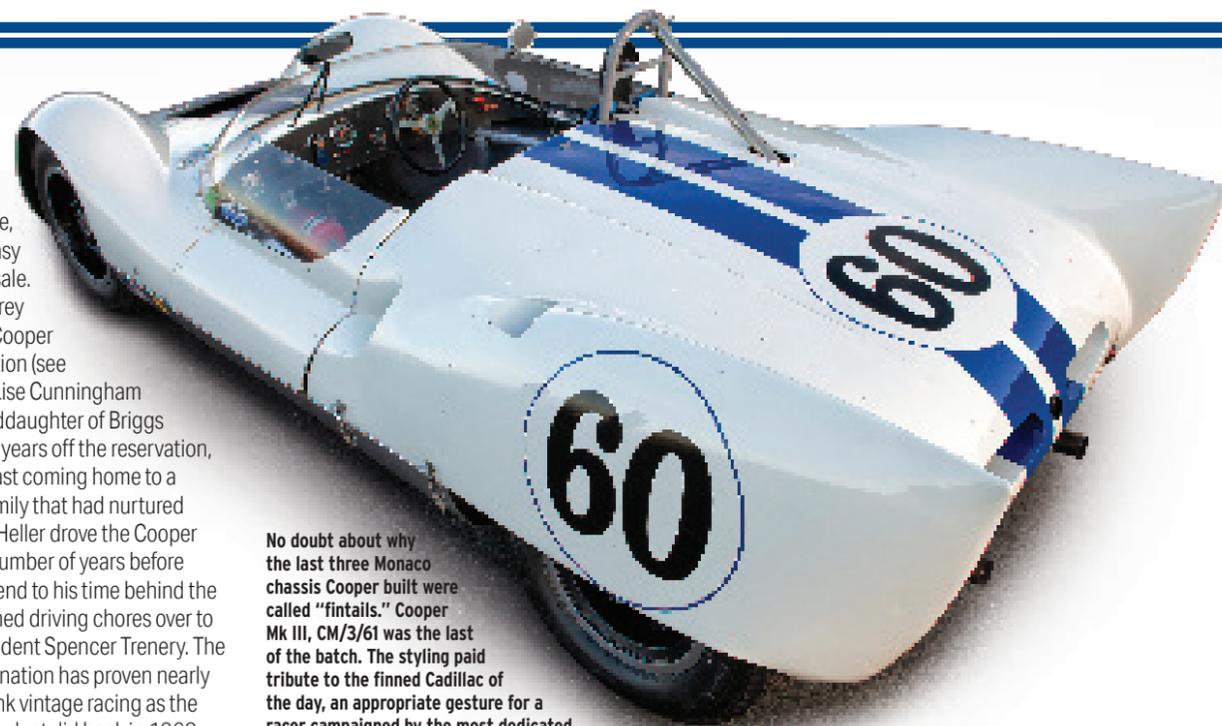
"When he discovered that the French customs officers loved basketball, he built them a court. Of course, that helped them look the other way from time to time."

MOTORSPORT IMAGES

A NEW CARETAKER

In 2015, the freshly rebuilt Cooper emigrated to Emeryville, California, where Fantasy Junction posted it for sale. Berkeley architect Jeffrey Heller purchased the Cooper after spirited consultation (see sidebar) with his wife, Lise Cunningham Heller, the oldest granddaughter of Briggs Cunningham. After 50 years off the reservation, CM/3/61 was at long last coming home to a member of the very family that had nurtured its birth and success. Heller drove the Cooper in vintage races for a number of years before medical issues put an end to his time behind the wheel. In 2019, he turned driving chores over to Fantasy Junction president Spencer Trener. The Cooper-Trener combination has proven nearly as successful in top rank vintage racing as the Hansgen-Cunningham duet did back in 1963.

Trener marvels at how much the Cooper's 1.5-in. diameter tube frame structure moves under duress: "It's very delicately built. As a driver you can run right past its durability window. I can feel the chassis wind up and unwind. It has a lot of torsional movement." He admires the talent Hansgen demonstrated in winning major events with this Cooper: "I have a lot of respect for what he accomplished with this car. Back in 1961, you could only use 70% of a car's potential, whereas today it's 99.8%. Walt had a lot of foresight to be able to nurse this package home for big wins."



No doubt about why the last three Monaco chassis Cooper built were called "fintails." Cooper Mk III, CM/3/61 was the last of the batch. The styling paid tribute to the finned Cadillac of the day, an appropriate gesture for a racer campaigned by the most dedicated American patron of them all, Briggs Cunningham.

Trener took the Cooper to a class win in March of 2021, then peddled it to a convincing pole position and Race 1 win at the Velocity Invitational Group 3 (1957-'61 Sports Racing Cars) contest in October 2021 at Laguna Seca. But the Monaco was a DNS for Race 2 on Sunday because the Buick had "tightened up" toward the end of Race 1. The Cooper's dominance in Group 3 does not surprise Trener. "This car is the first line of design evolution for sports racing cars. It should be the ultimate car for the group it races in."

The brilliant gambit of slipping a lightweight V8 into a state-of-the-art, tube frame sports car chassis forever altered the trajectory of American road racing. Just 22 months after Jerry Titus laid bare the secrets of Cunningham's Cooper-Buick, he had this to say about the revised state of road racing in December, 1963: "Another important era had ended—that in which a top-flight 3.0-liter car was the most potent combination for a sports/racing or Modified race. The Fall series of pro races on the West Coast brought out a bumper crop of entries powered by domestic V8s that went like rockets plus stopped and handled like Formula cars."

Once the Cooper-Buick opened the gate to that V8 future, there would be no end to the phenomenon it helped create. The success of Cunningham's fin-tail fantasy led Carroll Shelby to order six Cooper Monaco rolling chassis in 1963. Shelby then installed his own transaxles and 289 Ford engines. The racing press dubbed them King Cobras. They dominated pro racing on the West Coast in 1963. In 1964, Parnelli Jones won the prestigious *LA Times* GP in Cooper Monaco CM/6/64. It was a victory that paid tribute to the foresight of Briggs Cunningham. His legacy would live on in the Lolas, McLarens and Chaparrals that waged battle in the Can-Am Series. 🏁

JIM ROSE

After owner Jeff Heller stepped away from racing, Spencer Trener has given the Cooper a number of notable wins in Group 3 vintage contests for 1957-'61 Sports Racing Cars. At Laguna in 2021, he took the win over a '61 Chaparral Mk I and a '53 Cooper Porsche Pooper.

