

The Preservationist

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Remembering John Fitch

On Wednesday, October 31st the motorsports world lost a towering legend and HRC lost a true friend with the death of John Fitch. John passed away in his ancestral family home in Lakeville, Conn. at the age of 95 from a rare skin cancer and respiratory complications. We will long remember his legacy and will never forget his contributions to the history of open road racing in Elkhart Lake.

As most of you know, John drove here for the Cunningham team in both 1951 and 1952 winning in both years. In 1951 he drove a Cunningham C2R to victory in the main event for experienced drivers and in 1952 he drove the lighter and faster Cunningham C4R to victory in the Elkhart Lake Cup Race, the last open road race in Elkhart Lake.

Although John left an indelible footprint on the history of open road racing in Elkhart Lake, his victories here were mere footnotes to his many accomplishments in a life filled with adventure. His first love was flying and he flew both bombers and fighters in World War II becoming the first to shoot down a Messerschmitt ME 262 jet fighter in his P51 Mustang.

When Fitch returned from the war he found, like many returning Americans, an affinity for speed and danger and the quirky little British sports cars. He began his career campaigning an MG-

TC. Fitch was *fast*, so fast in fact that he came to the attention of Briggs Cunningham the wealthy racing enthusiast who encouraged Fitch to enter the 1951 Grand Prix of Argentina. Fitch couldn't afford a competitive car of his own, but he was able to borrow a Cadillac-Allard that had been wrecked in a previous race. John loved to tell the story of how he found that the frame was bent, so he secured it to an oak tree with a chain



John Fitch behind the wheel of the Cunningham C4R that he drove to victory in the Elkhart Cup Race on Sunday September 7, 1952 – “The Last Race”.

and kept backing up till it was reasonably straight. Fitch entered and won the race and as a result was named the first SCCA National Champion. It was the beginning of an active racing career that would span the next eighteen years during which he drove Cunningham, Jaguar, Ferrari Porsche, Maserati and Mercedes race cars to name just a

few. As one of the Cunningham team drivers he competed at Le Mans in 1952 and set a record for the fastest lap although contaminated fuel kept him from winning the race. In 1953 he won the twelve hour endurance race at Sebring co-driving with Phil Walters in a Cunningham C4R becoming the first American drivers to win the event in an American built car. Fitch modestly gave credit to Phil Walters who he said in 2006 was the most talented race car driver he had ever known. In 1955 he joined the Mercedes-Benz racing team along with Juan Manuel Fangio, Stirling Moss and Karl Kling, the company's greatest season in competition history. (Continued on page 2, column 1)

In early 1956, Ed Cole asked Fitch to develop and manage a team of Corvettes he planned to enter at Sebring, just six weeks hence. Corvette father Zora Arkus Duntov had already turned down Cole's request, claiming that it would be impossible to make the slow, overweight production two-seaters competitive in such a short amount of time, but Fitch loved the challenge. After working night and day four cars were ready, but different engines put them in two different classes: B and C Production. Against overwhelming odds, the team won both classes, giving them the team prize as well. Fitch had almost single-handedly achieved in six weeks what today would take an entire dedicated organization at least a year to accomplish and his reputation as a team manager became legend.

Fitch was also an inventor in his own right and a leader in racing safety. He went on to develop a unique crash barrier that today is the foundation of most highway safety barriers that have saved countless lives since their introduction.

In July of 2006 when HRC held the ceremony celebrating the recording of the historic race circuits on the National Register of Historic Places, Fitch along with Phil Hill were the Guests of Honor. No one who was there will ever forget John seated in Tom Mittler's restored C2R Cunningham wearing his vintage Cromwell helmet smiling and waving to an admiring throng as he toured the scene of his 1951 and 1952 triumphs. At the time John was 88 years old, his long and lean body was a bit bowed but his mind was clear and sharp and his comments at the ceremony brought both laughter and tears.

Asked about his clearest memory of the races in Elkhart Lake John thought for a moment and

they replied, "What I remember most is that it was very, very dangerous"...This from a man who had courted danger all his life. After the ceremony John sat for hours autographing the Cademartori limited edition prints of "The Last Race" in a bold and clear hand that seemed to entirely belie his age.

John journeyed to Elkhart Lake again in 2010 despite the recent loss of his wife Elizabeth, who died in 2009. He delighted the crowd with his comments at the Old Timers Dinner, presented the John Fitch award at the Concours de Provenance and autographed dozens of copies of the 60th Anniversary Edition of The History of the Elkhart Lake Road Races 1950 - 1952 and his book "Racing for Mercedes". Although noticeably weaker, John insisted on lending his support to every event. Speaking at the dinner John told how of his efforts to develop the Chevrolet Corvair into an American Porsche were brought to a screeching halt by Ralph Nader when he included the undeveloped car in his book "Unsafe At Any Speed" If Fitch

had been allowed to develop the car to its full potential the history of American motorsports may well have been changed forever.

John leaves behind him a career that was filled with adventure and a long legacy of motor sport accomplishment and lore that far exceeds that of any other member of his generation. John was fierce, stubborn and competitive but always fair. He was the preeminent American sports car driver of his era. No driver before or since had so much success under so many different marquees. He will be

greatly missed. Sadly, such giants seem to roam our land with decreasing frequency.



John Fitch at the 2006 Dedication Ceremony.

Autographed Limited Edition Prints Still Available



There are still a few of the Limited Edition Prints "The Last Race" featuring John Fitches #3 Cunningham in the lead available thru the HRC

Store. They are numbered and signed by the artist Hector Cademartori and autographed by John Fitch. Measuring 22" X 28" they are available at the member price of \$150 and to non-members at \$175. Contact Julie Morter, Store Manager, by phone at 920-627-5107.

A Tribute to Paul Brown

Paul Brown, beloved husband of Carol Hollfelder and son-in-law of HRC Chairman Tom and Bea Hollfelder passed away on October 13th after a valiant battle with melanoma cancer. He was 43 years old.

Paul was a man of many talents. He was a master mechanic, fabricator, race team owner, and the designer of Mustang performance parts, but his true labor of love was as a professional road racer. Paul was magic behind the wheel and an inspiration to watch. He had the ability to flow around a racetrack always on the limit ticking off identical laps with the precision of a metronome. His progress was fearless, precise, and relentless. He was respected and trusted by his fellow racers, never known to put anyone in danger and always willing to offer a helping hand in the paddock



Paul raced for many years in the World Challenge GT and had outstanding vintage racing results at Laguna Seca in 2001 driving a

1962 Meister Brau Chaparral 1 and in 2009 driving a 1971 Gurney Eagle. In 2011 Paul won the Pirelli World Challenge GTS Driver's Championship in a Ford Mustang Boss 302S matching Parnelli Jones' 1970 Trans Am record of 5 wins in a Boss 302. His last race was at the Road America CanAm in 2012 where he drove a 1971 Scuderia Filipinetti Ferrari 512M/F. Paul started last in a field of 30 marching to 6th overall and 1st in class adding one last podium finish to a stellar career. HRC sends its sympathy to the entire Hollfelder family. Paul will be greatly missed.

2013 Directors and Officers Elected

The following Directors and Officers have been elected for 2013. Directors (five year terms) - Mark Pfaller II and Clyde Morter. Officers (one year terms): Chairman, Tom Hollfelder; President, John Calhoun; Vice President, Clyde Morter; Secretary, Spencer Chapple and Treasurer, George Bruggenthies.

Corrections

Thanks to HRC member Nick Candee and friends for their corrections on the Siata article in Volume 17 of the Preservationist. The red 300BC shown in the photo was actually taken at Greenwich Conn, not Palm Springs and the #64 car of Ed Glowacke shown in the photo is a Daina Grand Sport, a Fiat 1400 based car produced in limited numbers by Siata from 1950 to 1955.

The records for the other Siatas entered in the Kimberly Cup Race does not specify the model of the cars and it is not clear what models were driven by Tony Pompeo, Max Goldmann, and Jack Horner. They also may well have been Diana's as the model had a larger and more powerful engine but would still have fit into the listed Class VII. If anybody knows for sure, please let us know.

