

Doug's Stingray at Dodger Stadium. He won Saturday, but the next day, went off course and impaled the car on one of the concrete cones.

VARA Racer Profile:

DOUG HOOPER

by Lynn Mills

Doug Hooper has a lot of things to say about Corvettes—for instance, "they don't have brakes worth a damn," "they're too heavy... in the old days, the Corvette race was called the 'Elephant Parade," and as far as handling, "you have to do a whole lot to make them into even a half-assed race car." He raced a Mustang that he says handled better, a Cobra with better brakes and acceleration, several modified cars, a couple of Can Am racers, and a Surtees Formula 5000—but what does he keep coming back to? Believe it or not -- a Corvette.

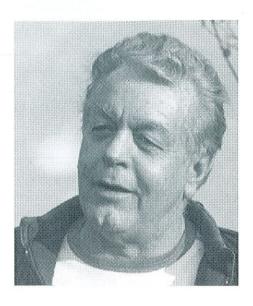
One reason is purely practical — "I think it's better to stick with one particular thing that you know," explains Doug. "I feel at home with them." The other reason is more sublime: he can't forget the first '57 Chevy that made him say that Chevy is the answer. "It just blew Ford away. It did 97 mph in the quarter mile right off the showroom floor, and my little hot rod Ford turned 97 with a roller cam and 4 carbs. When they came out with the Corvette, everybody said, 'Hey that's a good looking car.' The Corvette was the fastest thing out there on the street, acceleration-wise, and besides that, it could actually turn a corner without rolling over."

Doug sold his '32 Ford 3-window hot rod for an ex-Dan Gurney Corvette. A motorcycle and drag racer, Doug's first sports car race took place in June of 1960 at

Pomona. "The people were so different from the drag racers. You could leave your tools out over night and not worry that everything was going to get carted off. In drag racing, if you went out to run, you'd better have somebody back in the pits with all your stuff."

A gymnast in high school, he found a similarity between the two sports. "Gymnastics is a rhythm and that's what car racing is. Everything flows. The more rhythm, the easier it is." He doesn't know why he gravitated to cars and the hot rod scene in the first place, since his parents weren't into them at all. Neither did they like his racing—the first, and last, time they saw him race, he slid on someone else's oil and slammed into a tree. He does admit that he gets nervous watching his 31 year old son Mark go-kart race. "I have a certain amount of that parental thing, but if you're familiar with racing and you know the guy's good, you're not going to worry about it."

Of the highly competitive, slam-bang Corvette racing, Doug remembers, "You would have half the bodywork gone by the end of the race, even though you were best of friends as soon as the race was over. Guys that were into Corvette racing were from a lot of different walks of life, but the one common thing was going fast in some big car." He held his own against the great



names in Corvettes — Bob Bondurant (the instructor at his novice school), Andy Porterfield, Dick Guldstrand, and Dave MacDonald. Piloting Corvettes, Doug won the Pacific Coast Championship in B Production and C Modified, twice each.

While he liked the racing, tech inspection could be difficult and the Vette drivers were forced to create an association to protect themselves. "There was an attitude that if your car wasn't foreign, then it was a big piece of crap." Tired of the harrassment, the racers were going to resort to a strike at Santa Barbara (a race which attracted 40,000 spectators). As the flag dropped for the standing start, they planned to peel off and drive back to the pits in protest. "We got to be such a big drawing card, that we gave them an ultimatum." The threat worked.

In 1962, Doug was chosen to drive the brand new, independent suspension, streamlined Stingray for factory-sponsored Mickey Thompson. He remembers his employer as somewhat erratic, a millionaire one day, and broke the next. He'd drive on the freeway at 100 mph, talking with his hands, and he liked to do crazy stunts. During lunchtime at Daytona, Thompson took a little pit motorcycle out on the track. He couldn't get it going fast enough on the high banked oval, though, and slid all the way down.

"He was a very hard driving man. He would work your butt till you fell, but he'd be right there with you. He expected that anything he did, you could do." While Doug appreciated the job, he says there was tremendous pressure on him. "Mickey wanted to be known as the winner. He told me more than once, if you don't think you



Doug chases Tony Settember at Pomona, 1960. Doug passed Tony in the last turn of the last lap to win the race.

can win this race, I don't want to enter the car. Well, nothing's for sure. It took a lot of the fun out of racing because, hey, it was my job."

Doug was in elite company with his Stingray — it was one of the first four built. In testing, he had a direct line to Corvette godfather, Zora Duntov. Any part he needed would arrive the next day (marked "For Testing Purposes Only"), but it would be sent without the instructions to set it up. When the car had been delivered, right off the test track, it had wires going from the brakes into the dash. Doug figured out why when he took it out to a drag strip. The car streaked, but the brakes pulled so severely, he almost went into the guardrail. He concluded that the brakes must have been hooked up to monitoring instruments. "The factory was having its own problems with the brakes and never told us about them. Chevy was known for coming out with something new that was not all the way tested yet."

The Stingray's big debut was to be the three-hour race at the L.A. Times Grand Prix at Riverside in October. It was also the premier of Shelby's highly touted "Corvette-beater," the Cobra, driven by Billy Krause. The three other Stingrays were to be driven by Bondurant, MacDonald, and Jerry Grant. Expectations for both cars were high — but Doug had found that his engine was coil binding and wouldn't live unless he limited himself to 6500 rpm. Plus, he never knew which way the brakes were going to pull and had to brake in the middle of the track. In the course of the showdown, though, he steadily moved up as one by one, the Cobra and the other Stingrays DNF'd. Doug and his Stingray



Doug in a copy of the beautiful Grand Sport, 1965.



Doug and his Corvette became a fixture at Santa Barbara and other local tracks. (Photo by Bill Norcross)



The Mamas and the Papas' No. 5 McLaren shares the front row with Scooter Patrick's Alfa T33 at Riverside in 1970. (Photo by Trackside Photo Enterprises)

were victorious, but the Cobra had served notice—it held a mile and a half lead over the field before it broke.

"We knew we were doomed unless Chevy did something." Chevy answered with the higher horsepower 396 and 427 motors, but because of wheel size limits, the torque was unusable — Doug says he went faster in the 327. Doug helped the factory work out the kinks in the brakes

while testing at Sebring, where he had a chance to ride with Duntov in a Grand Sport. ("He drove pretty well for an old man... he was an old man even then. That was an impressive car.")

The Thompson effort brought four Corvettes to Daytona, two with "mystery" 427 engines for Junior Johnson and Rex White to run in the oval stock car races. Chevy had not provided them with spares (Doug remembers his customers waiting months just for valve cover gaskets for the new engines. "They didn't think about them. It was crazy.") If anything went wrong, they would just put in another motor. Unfortunately, it was Doug's transmission that broke in the race.

The team was looking forward to taking two Corvette Grand Sports to the ultimate sports car race, Le Mans, but were told after Daytona to take their time going home — they were out of a job. Politics had intruded into the racing world. Attorney General Robert Kennedy started to investigate General Motors for being a monopoly, so Chevrolet abruptly abandoned all their racing projects, including Indy. "They just flat panicked because they were spending a lot of money. They were selling more cars world wide than anybody — they did have a monopoly," says Doug.

He said that the factory would do "strange things," and remembers tire testing at Riverside. They had a Formula One Brabham and two experimental Corvair motors with fuel injection. The car broke the existing track record, but Doug says, the factory never did anything with it. "They took all the data off it, and as far as I know,

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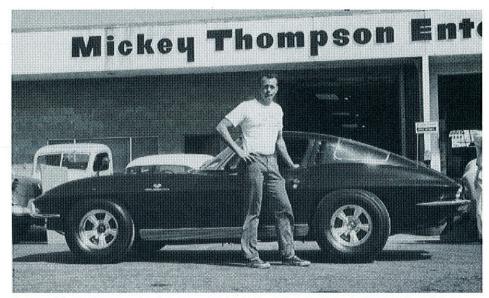
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it went into the crusher. There was a tremendous amount of waste, there always is in a big company." Doug likens it to his experience as a petty officer on an aircraft carrier. "We used to push airplanes off the flight deck into the water because they were shot up. They had planes coming in to land and take their place. We're talking about million dollar jets."

After losing his job with Thompson, Doug started his own Corvette shop in North Hollywood, aptly named, Doug's Corvette Service, but ran a Cobra for a couple of years — an ex-Lew Spencer car named, "The Trouser Snake." "They were always doing new stuff to them to make them work better. You might as well have parked it at the back of the pack, because you could run right through the whole field of Corvettes."

He next raced modifieds like the Kurtischassis "Alligator" and the "Genie," an oversteering mid-engine car, which he describes as "scary." Doug ran the Genie a year before deciding to get out of it, as he puts it, "before it killed me." From there, he won the Pacific Coast Championship in a McLaren.

He also ran that car, as well as a couple

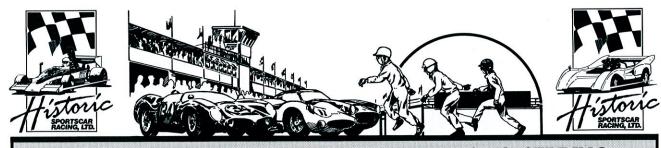


Doug with the Stingray he drove to victory in its debut race at the Times Grand Prix.

of Lolas, in the Can Am series. He raced against Jim Hall's Chaparral 2J, the "vaccum cleaner" car at Laguna Seca, but says, "If you're behind something like that, it's miserable because it picks up everything off the track and shoves it right at you." While there were guys out there with 18-wheeled transporters, like Lance Reventlow, Doug remembers Jim Hall bringing

his spares in a little pickup truck.

While he liked the fact that there were no rules in Can Am, and admired the innovators like Jim Hall, it was hard to keep up with the constant changes in technology. Doug usually ran mid-pack because he didn't have the latest car. "If it was a year old, you weren't competitive at all. It was changing so fast, there were new ideas



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Doug's 289 Mustang leads the pack at a Trans Am race at Riverside, 1966.



Doug's ex-Lew Spencer Cobra was called "The Trouser Snake."

coming out every couple of months." When the Porsche 917 blew away all the Lolas and McLarens, that upped the ante completely out of reach. "That was the death knell for Can Am because it brought up the expenditure double or triple. There were a lot of guys like me who only ran local races, maybe went back east for one or two of them, but didn't make the whole circuit because it was too expensive. That Porsche really killed it, even for the heavily sponsored guys."

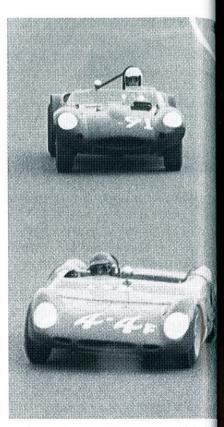
Doug found out early in the game that he couldn't do the kind of racing he wanted on his own money, and he always had sponsors, usually auto shops and dealerships. In the late 60's, though, he says it was fashionable among entertainment stars to sponsor race cars. "There were a lot of them doing that because their peers were. Everybody came out to the races. Later on, it was speed boat racing, offshore racing, or sailing."

Dan Blocker ("Hoss" on Chevroletsponsored *Bonanza*) sponsored Doug's Chevy-powered Genie. "He had a heart as big as a house. He was a hell of a sportsman, hell of a partygoer, and really enjoyed himself. But he wasn't prepared for all the limelight." To avoid photographers and fans at the races. Dan and his buddies used to hide out in the Riverside esses in a Greyhound bus. "They'd get all this food and everything and party all weekend."

Doug's McLaren was sponsored by The Mamas and the Papas. "They were crazy," he laughs. "They were stoned most of the time." While they never came out to a race, they did show up at a test session at Willow. "They came out in a stretch limo and told the driver, 'Get out, we want to try something.' They went out in the boonies and Dennis Dougherty was spinning doughnuts."

Doug used to work on Paul Newman's Corvette and remembers shooting the breeze with him at the studios. "It was all car talk because that's what he was into. James Garner was a car nut — he was another one who was down to earth. There is no better equalizer than racing. I haven't seen anything that brings people together like automobile racing."

Races at Santa Barbara and Pomona used to draw upwards of 40,000 spectators in those good old days, remembers Doug. "If you did anything good, you'd be on the front page of the sports section of the *LA Times*. Nowadays they don't mention anything unless you do an end-over and die or something like that, although ESPN has been very good in bringing interest to auto



Doug's Alligator chases Frank Monist Lotus 23 at Riverside, 1965.

(Photo by Han Stocke

racing." He's sorry to see the decline spectators over the years, citing reaso such as the glut of competing activities California, and higher insurance rates a spectator events. When the rates went up the 70's and organizers stopped promoti spectator events, Doug feels they made mistake. "I said, 'No, you guys have go wrong. What you want to do is get month interest, and more money from the spectors will pay your higher rates.""

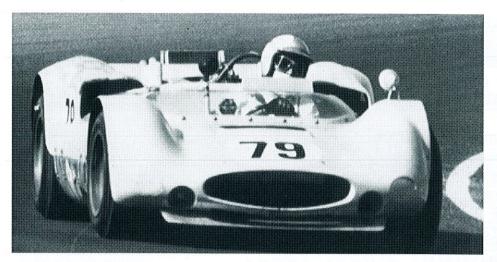
In 1971, racing just wasn't fun ar more, so Doug quit. Part of it was los several friends, although he says, "Y take that as granted, something that he pens once in awhile and it isn't going to you. But when you get older, you say, I not going to take that chance in the f place." (He adds that he'd rather driv race car than go out on the San Diego fr way.)

The competitive nature of profession racing also took its toll. "There was a lobackstabbing, people that would want you would would tell your sponsors that you would no good." The time away from the shwas a problem too. "I said, 'Hey, one or other is going to fail. If I don't tend to business, it's going to fall along the world side.' You can't race forever, so when you get out of it, you better have someth

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The Genie (one of the only left-hand drive Can Am cars) at Riverside, 1967.

(Photo by John A. Wilson)

somewhere." He was getting married again, so it was not a good time for the business to go belly up. He was so wrapped up in the sport he says, "You find that you get tunnel vision in racing — at one time, I couldn't tell you who the governor was. You get to a point where you say, 'I've got to slow down. There's got to be a little more."

Doug found a more sedate hobby when he quit racing — he's a part-time reserve

policeman. He currently works for the San Fernando police several days a week in the fugitive warrant detail. "I wouldn't do it full time because they couldn't pay me that many thousands of dollars to do it. It's a hard job... you're not in some neat little community like Mayberry; it's a difficult time in our history. It's like, I'm going out there with a shovel trying to stop the ocean. You're doing your little bit in your part of the world, but you say, 'At least I'm doing something." Po-



Doug ran this Surtees F5000 during the 1969 season, but never felt quite comfortable sitting on the gas tank.

lice work also feeds his sense of curiousity. "I get to see things that nobody else gets to see. I'm the first guy there and I love that, it's interesting."

His racing experience has come in handy in a number of chases, although he admits his black and white can't beat a motorcycle. ("You can't catch him. Just let him go... and hope the guy runs into something.") One car led him on a wild chase all the way through downtown L.A., where the crook



Doug in the Genie on pre-grid, with his sponsor, Dan "Hoss" Blocker, in the background.

crashed into another car, and then center punched a street light. "We were so mad, we were ready to kill him. We started to reach in there, and all of a sudden these lights came on!" A movie was being filmed across the street and now the cameras were turned on Doug and his cohorts. "You go, 'Oooop. Sir, would you get out of the car?' We could have looked really bad. They never show what leads up to it."

Doug trained nine months at the police



This Eagle-nosed Lola Mk II was bought from Dan Gurney.

academy, nights and weekends. He was not successful at keeping his racing history a secret during his pursuit training at the academy's track in San Pedro. "The instructor took me out and scared the hell out of me! I had no idea where the first turn even went, and from the word get-go he's on it." After a couple of laps, it was Doug's turn to take the wheel. Since he already knew about driving on a track, it was simple for him — until without warning, the in-

structor flipped the siren on. "All my concentration went right out the window. I'd never driven with a siren on. I came flying into the corner and just made it, I was all over the place. The guy was just having a good time with me."

Occasionally his job requires him to break up illegal racing, but he says he doesn't bust the participants. "I just say, 'Hey, somebody's going to get hurt, so while I'm around, cool it, take it someplace



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else." As a veteran of L.A. street racing when he was a kid, he can sympathize. Besides, he's mad that he can't take out his '65 fuelie Corvette and really get on it anymore. "I blame the mayor on down for making this a place where everybody's piled on top of each other, and you can't even get in your car and go anywhere because it's too busy. They have one by one rezoned places till there's nothing left anymore, no dragstrips left where these kids can go. These kids will never know what we had in our day because this town's got four times the amount of people... and no space left. But Ontario Motor Speedway is still sitting there vacant."

Eventually, Doug couldn't stay away from racing. He got back into SCCA in 1981, first driving a friend's '64 Corvette, and then an '82 Vette. Although he started mid-season with the '82 car, by the end of the year, he was second nationally. But just as in the Can Am days, technological advances made his car obsolete when the tube frame Camaros entered the field. "You couldn't give it away. That's why I finally aced myself out of SCCA. Unless you have one of these \$50,000 cars, you can't be competitive."

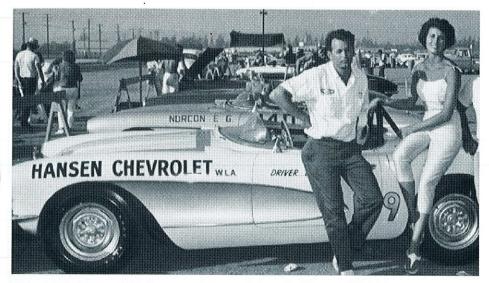
He discovered vintage racing a few years later, when Corvette racer Jim Smith in-

vited him to come watch the races in Palm Springs. Doug liked the easy-going atmosphere, reminiscent of his early days of racing, and started running the car with Jim in exchange for working on it. "Thank God for vintage, with all these cars that have been sitting around for years in garages. At one time, there wasn't anything worse than a two year old race car — you couldn't take it anywhere and race it. Probably a lot of guys scrapped them, that's why you don't see some of them out there. I remember some of the modifieds, they were so colorful."

In vintage racing, he's had the opportunity to run against some of his old cronies at Palm Springs like George Follmer and Dick Guldstrand. "It's a sport in which you have more longevity than others... because it isn't all physical." Doug would like to get more of the guys from the old days into vintage. "I heard Andy Porterfield (who runs Super Production in SCCA) say recently, 'That vintage looks like a good idea.' I'm going to tell him to get himself an old Vette and let's go out and have some fun."

"I know I'm not as fast as I was, because I'm not as stupid. When you're younger, you've got everything down the road in front of you. If you crash, so what? When





In the pits at Pomona, 1962, Doug poses with the race queen.

you get older, you've got a house, you've got more. You have less time left, so you're saying, 'I'm not going to go out there and do 99% in the corner. You think more." Nonetheless, Doug gives a good account of himself racing against sports racers and Corvettes with bigger displacement, and he's within a half second of the B Production lap record he set at Willow in the 60's.

He plans to take his Rolling Thunder race team to the big events in the east. "I've

done a lot of the tracks, but there's still a whole lot more that I haven't. I'm going to do some of this stuff before I'm too damned old to even get into the car." He likes the sport so much, when he quits driving, he says he'll probably stay involved as a worker.

Until then, he'll keep driving that overweight Corvette that doesn't brake or handle worth a damn. But just try to get by him.



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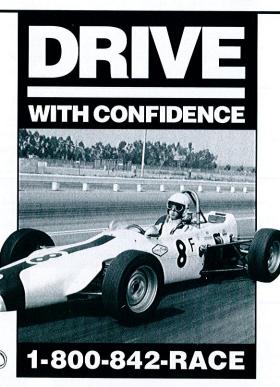
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