



## John Fitch, American Hero, Corvette's Reluctant Savior and his contributions

1917 – 2012



### Fitch into the Breach

By 1955, the Corvette was on the verge of extinction. Ford offered its two seat Thunderbird “sports car” that was outselling the Corvette by a landslide. Not one to admit failure, Ed Cole, president of Chevrolet was determined to keep the Corvette alive. Even with new styling, the Corvette needed to prove itself in racing competition argued Zora Arkus Duntov. But in the words of speed guru Smokey Yunick, “the Corvette was overweight, under powered and handled like a manure spreader”. The FIA Sebring 12 Hours of endurance was just 6 weeks away. It would be a scramble. Due to a shortage, only one of the four team Corvettes had a 1956 chassis. The other three were built on 1955 holdovers. Duntov opted out fearing his fledgling career was at a risk if the Corvettes failed. The odds were too tough. So Cole hired **John Fitch** to lead the effort. Fitch was approaching 40, had an engineering background and had little to lose. His career peaked as the only American on the renowned 1955 Mercedes Benz racing team. With perseverance and luck, Fitch and Walt Hansgen won a class victory by merely finishing the race in a specially prepared Corvette fitted with a bigger engine and a 4 speed transmission. While pleased, Fitch thought the outcome was not truly deserved. GM managers thought otherwise. They commissioned Duntov to build the Corvette SS prototype. They believed it could win it all the following March with visions of the 24 Hours of Le Mans that June.



### Fitch and Duntov

In 1957, Chevrolet introduced a more powerful 283 cu in engine. Engineering genius John Dolza designed the novel Ramjet Fuel Injection system. Duntov came up with a special camshaft. **John Fitch** would lead the team. Nonetheless, at GM it was styling that sold cars. The SS had a shapely lightweight magnesium body that wrapped around a space frame chassis. According to Fitch, the chassis was a copy of the 1955 Mercedes 300 SLR. Styling was controlled by the powerful Harley Earl, (the same Harley Earl who conceived the Corvette in 1953). Racing was a new concept. Engineering and race prep were second priority. How the Corvette SS failed is the story of legend. GM supplied Fitch with a test vehicle called “the mule”. While he soldiered on at Sebring developing and testing parts, the stylists, far away in Detroit, labored to make the SS beautiful. The mule proved surprisingly fast in testing laps, piloted by Fitch’s former Mercedes teammates and racing greats Stirling Moss and Juan Miguel Fangio. Each turned down a ride because the race was approaching and there would be little time to shake out the car when the SS finally arrived. As “those in know” expected, the SS retired early. A bushing failed, causing the rear suspension to collapse on the 23rd lap. A week later GM officially withdrew from racing and led other US car manufacturers to follow suit. Corvette racing would now be in the hands of privateers.



### Fitch and Cunningham

As it turned out, Corvettes ruled the roost in the period that followed, notably on the west coast driven by Bob Bondurant, Dick Guldstrand, Doug Hooper, Dave MacDonald and Andy Porterfield. Briggs

Cunningham was a wealthy American sportsman who raced cars of his own design and manufacture at the time. **John Fitch** frequently drove for Cunningham. After trying several years for the overall win at Le Mans, in 1960 Cunningham decided to enter America's leading sports car in the production car class. Recently, Larry Berman, Cunningham Motorsport Historian, had a conversation with Joel Finn, who owns all of the Alfred Momo materials which were rescued prior to being dumped. Joel clearly stated that the cars were owned by GM and shipped to Momo with specially prepared race engines installed. The stock engines were shipped in crates with the cars from Detroit to Momo's shop, along with trained race mechanics. Further work was done on the cars at Momo's behind curtains/screens, to shield them from the public. That March, two Corvettes were readied for Sebring but they failed to finish. After further testing in April at Bridgehampton, Cunningham put the three Corvettes on a boat to France. At Le Mans, Fitch and Bob Grossman were assigned the # 3 car. It was the only Corvette to be scored at the finish, coming in 8th overall and winning the class. Fitch and Grossman had piloted the first Corvette to win at Le Mans. After the LeMans race, the cars came back to Momo's to be decommissioned and repainted their original factory-designated colors. The race parts and modifications were removed, including the fast fill fuel neck in the top center of the rear deck behind the window. The race engines were removed and shipped back to GM at Detroit for review and testing. Joel has a shipping document signed by Alfred's wife, Mary, confirming this shipment in August 1960. [Video clip](#). It would be 42 years before another Corvette achieved that distinction. The Registry of Corvette Race Cars logo is inspired by the Cunningham Corvettes graphic blue stripes and "meatball."



### **Fitch and 50th Anniversary re-enactment of Corvette's first win at Le Mans**

Chip Miller, Corvette collector and co-founder of the pre-eminent Carlisle swap meets and car shows was fascinated with Corvette race cars. The Le Mans winning Briggs Cunningham # 3 Corvette was always in his sights. With help, by 2000 he located and bought the very car from an unsuspecting owner. Following that, the car was verified and restored exactly as it was raced in 1960. Chip planned to take it back to Le Mans on the 50th anniversary of its epic victory. Even more, he wanted its drivers to make a celebratory lap around the 8.5 mile circuit in front of 200,000 fans. But cruel fate intervened. In 2004, Chip Miller tragically died from a rare blood disease. It would be up to others to fulfill his wishes. Chip's dream was accomplished by the love and unrelenting determination of his son Lance Miller. In June, 2010 at Le Mans, **John Fitch**, 93, was behind the wheel on the occasion. The story is told in the [Quest Documentary](#), a professionally produced 90-minute film.

## **John Fitch remembered**

**John Fitch** lived an incredible life. Comprehensive accounts have appeared in the New York Times, Autoweek and other publications. He was a giant among his peers. He was America's pre-eminent post war sports car driver winning races across the US and overseas. He was inducted into the Corvette Hall of Fame at the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, KY. Fitch took up adventuring and sailing a year after studying engineering at Lehigh University. Restless at the time, he enlisted early in WWII, piloted a P51 Mustang and survived as a POW late in the war. In 1957 Fitch helped design and managed the 1.54 mile Lime Rock race circuit in northwestern CT that still operates today. He invented the Fitch crash barrier system which has saved countless highway lives. He designed and until recently drove the Fitch Phoenix, a car of his creation based on a Corvair chassis. John Fitch was the consummate gentleman throughout. [Here is a masterful video](#) that puts the great man's life in perspective.