

The Americans at LeMans in 1950

Reprinted as published in *the Bulb Horn*, April-June 1987.

This story, written by Smith Hempstone Oliver in 1950 when he was the photographer/historian on the Briggs Cunningham team, has never been published anywhere else, nor has it been edited here to reflect changes that 37 years of subsequent history might otherwise dictate.

When Briggs Swift Cunningham of Greens Farms, Connecticut headed for France with his team of two Cadillacs in June 1950 to race in the famous 24-hour road race at Le Mans, it was an auspicious moment in the history of American automobile racing. Approximately 20 years had elapsed since an American team composed of American drivers with American cars had crossed the Atlantic Ocean to participate in this classic event. Consequently, all motor racing enthusiasts were doubly interested in the outcome of the event, one always dominated by European cars built for high speed on the fast highways of Europe.



June 24, 1950, thirty minutes before the 4pm start. Standing, left to right: John Oliveau, the author, Sam Collier, Miles Collier, Frank Burrell, Bill Spear and Paul Ceresole; kneeling: Alec Ulmann and Phil Walters. Briggs Cunningham took the picture with Hemp's camera.



June 20, 1950: prior to technical inspection. The crew readies the Cadillac "streamliner" while Alec Ulmann tapes the racing number.

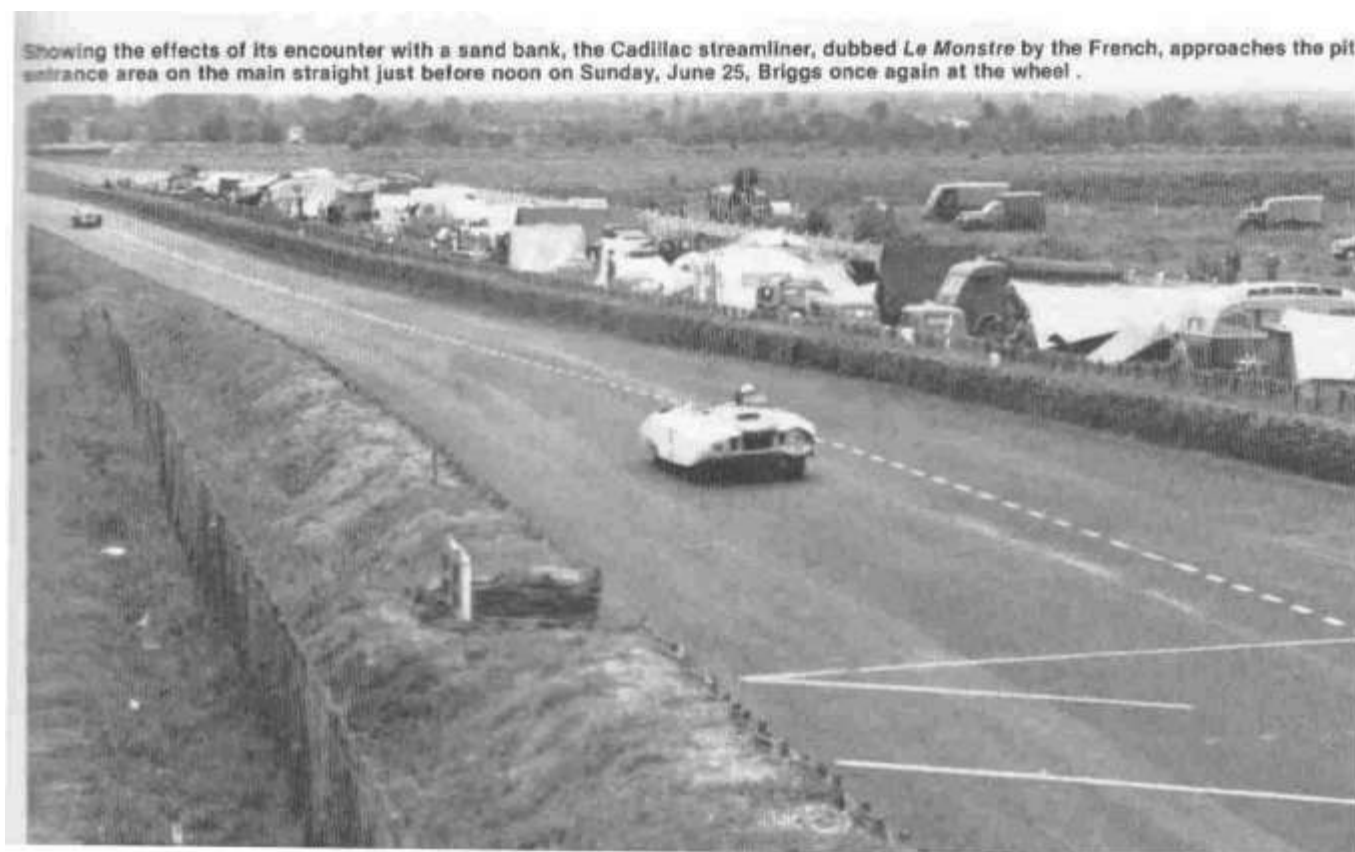


Sam and Miles Collier in the Cadillac coupe leaving Guillon's garage on the way to technical inspection on Tuesday, June 20, 1950.

Cunningham, internationally known yachtsman and amateur road racing driver of the Sports Car Club of America, wanted to compete with American cars and deliberately left home his many foreign machines quite capable of putting up a stiff fight at Le

Mans, a 2-liter, 12-cylinder Ferrari, the make which won at Le Mans in 1949, among them.

Instead, he chose to compete with a standard Model 61, 2-door, 1950 Cadillac coupe equipped with two carburetors, and a Model 61, 1950 Cadillac chassis fitted with a special streamlined body and equipped with five carburetors. Both cars were fitted with fuel systems holding over 50 gallons of gasoline, as the rules of the race required that at least 208 miles be covered between refueling stops. Each was also fitted with a standard manual shift transmission. The venture was an entirely private affair, the Cadillac Motor Car Co. completely washing its hands of any part of the attempt.



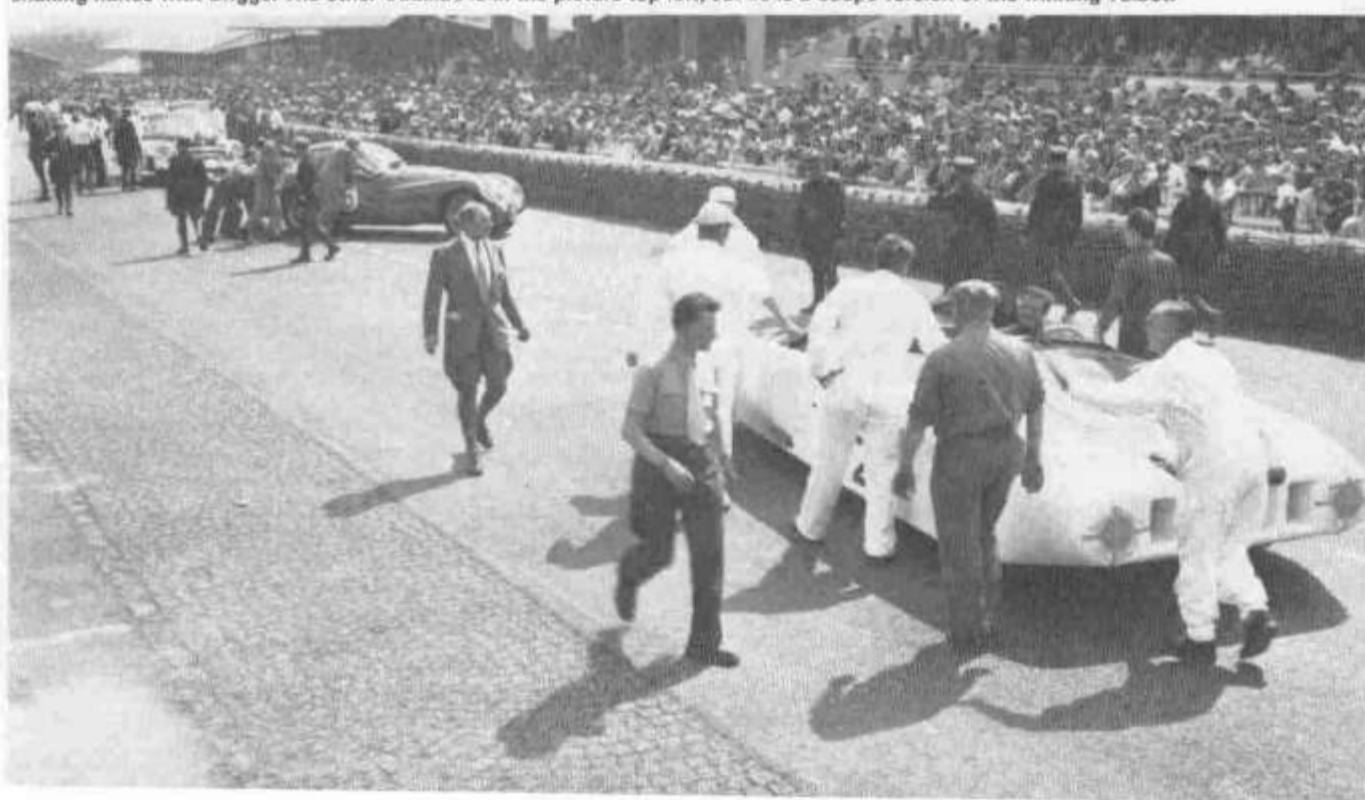
Le Mans, located about 100 miles southwest of Paris, is the location of the Automobile-Club del'Ouest, the organization which annually sponsors *Le Grand Prix d'Endurance des Vingt-Quatre Heures du Mans*. And Grand Prix of Endurance it is, indeed! Over a closed circuit 8.4 miles around and which is capable of being covered at speeds in excess of 100 miles an hour average for the lap, the competing cars must travel for 24 hours, stopping only to take on fuel, oil, and water as needed, to change tires, to make minor adjustments, and to change drivers.

Two drivers and one mechanic are allowed to each car, and at no time are more than two of these three men allowed on the track to attend to the needs of their car. All parts and tools needed for the repairs of a car must be carried in the car during the race, and many a luckless driver has been forced to abandon his mount because he did not have on board with him a needed nut, bolt, or gasket. The caps on the radiator, the oil filler pipe, and the gasoline tank are sealed and unsealed by an official *plombeur*, an unofficially broken seal meaning instant disqualification, as was discovered by the driver of a French Delahaye in the 1950 race. Only regular pump gasoline, as supplied to all the cars by the officials, is allowed to be used.

The race, which starts at 4 p.m. on a Saturday and continues until 4 p.m. the following day, is started in a unique manner. With the cars all lined parallel to each other and at 450 to the direction of the course, the drivers stand on the other side of the road, opposite their cars. At the drop of the starting flag each driver runs to his car, jumps into the seat, starts the motor, and works his way out into the traffic. Of the 60 cars lined up for the 1950 event, one Delahaye stubbornly refused to start at all and was finally pushed off the course where other cars occasionally joined it during the ensuing 24 hours. In fact, only 29 cars finished the grueling grind, the others falling victim to the punishment imposed by such a contest, some being abandoned along the course and others limping into their pits to find themselves unable to continue.

The two Cadillacs lived up to Cunningham's expectations. Both cars finished with ease and quietness, running consistently and smoothly throughout the race, the coupe finishing tenth and the streamliner eleventh. Cunningham had the misfortune in the second lap to misjudge a tricky right-angle turn and found himself embedded in a sand bank. Not carrying a shovel in his car, he was forced to dig himself out with his bare hands, thus losing precious time and laps. If it had not been for this unfortunate occurrence streamliner would have come in a few laps ahead of its stablemate.

The Cunningham/Walters Cadillac streamliner being pushed to its starting position by the crew, including Alec Ulmann (front). Bill Frick is shaking hands with Briggs. The other Cadillac is in the picture top left; car #6 is a coupe version of the winning Talbot.



15 minutes prior to the start: Briggs being calmed by Phil Walters as Bob Blake, Paul Ceresole and Alec Ulmann look on.



7 minutes into the race according to the clock on the Dunlop bridge, Sam Collier begins lap #2 in the Cadillac coupe.

The winning car was a 4.5-liter French Talbot driven for 22 hours by Louis Rosier, and for the other 2 hours by his son. The average speed set by this car, ideally suited for road racing by virtue of its quick steering, stiff suspension, very adequate transmission, and enormous brakes, was 89.7 miles an hour. The total distance covered by the winner was 2,153 miles. Hard on the heels of the Rosiers was another Talbot driven alternately by Meyrat and Mairesse.

A rather surprising and revealing bit of information is that the third- and fourth-place winners were equipped with American engines. Third went to a British Allard, driven by Sydney Allard and Tommy Cole and powered by a Cadillac engine identical to that of Cunningham's coupe driven by the brothers Sam and Miles Collier. The Allard is normally powered by a Ford V-8 engine and has an articulated front axle and a De Dion-type rear axle. A Ford transmission was used in conjunction with the Allard's 5.5-liter Cadillac engine. The Allard's brakes were far superior to those of the Cadillacs, and the car weighed only 2,100 pounds (compared with the streamlined Cadillac's approximate 4,000 pounds), so it was naturally expected that the Allard would beat out Cunningham's two cars. This thought was upheld by its excellent performance, despite transmission troubles in the small hours of the morning which left only top gear available for the remainder of the race. This same trouble was also experienced by the streamlined Cadillac, driven by Cunningham and his co-pilot, Phil Walters.



Talbot #7 prior to the race. Driven by Meyrat and Mairesse, it finished 2nd behind the Talbot-Lago of Louis Rosier and son.



Driven by Sydney Allard and Tom Cole, this Allard finished 3rd in the race. Car was powered by a 5434cc Cadillac engine.



MG special #39 was a private entry driven by Phillips and Winterbottom. Powered by a 1244cc engine, car finished 18th.



Car #14, a Nash-powered Healey, finished 4th driven by Tony Rolt and Duncan Hamilton, the pair who would win for Jaguar in 1953.

Fourth place went to another British sports car, a Healey, powered by a 3.8-liter Nash Ambassador engine instead of the usual 2.5-liter Riley engine. Both the Allard and Healey entries were prototypes, the Le Mans race being an excellent means of testing the two marriages of the two excellent British sports chassis with the equally excellent American engines. The Healey experienced no trouble at all, further proof of the stamina and durability of the mass-produced American powerplants. Between the Healey and the two Cadillacs were two beautifully handled British Aston Martins, a French Delage, a 17-year-old British Bentley, and a new British Frazer-Nash, a postwar British improvement over the prewar German B.M.W.

The trouble-free Cadillac coupe covered 1,956.7 miles at an average speed of 81.53 miles an hour, while the streamliner covered approximately half a lap less at a fractionally lower speed. Throughout the entire race not a drop of water was added to the cooling system of either of Cunningham's cars. In fact, the radiator caps were not once removed!

Much of the success of the two Cadillacs, and that of the Allard as well, was due to the great horsepower put out by their large engines at low speeds as well as at high. The Cadillac engines were the largest in the race, a decided advantage to offset the other inadequacies of Cunningham's two cars. Lap-time figures for the streamliner show that the best lap time for the car with all three speeds available in the transmission was only 2 seconds faster than the best lap time after the loss of first and second gears. If the car had been powered with a high-speed, small-displacement engine such as those in the majority of European automobiles, the slowing down in lap speed would have been much more marked once only high gear remained available.

It is probably safe to say that with proper chassis component design, with particular emphasis on adequate brakes and suspension, the modern American engine could hold its own in a race of this sort. This was quite evident with respect to the performance of the Allard-Cadillac and the HealeyNash, which were defeated only by the best French cars with years of design experience behind them.