

1950 Le Mans: Series 61 DeVille and „Le Monstre“

The 24 Hours of LeMans holds the reputation as one of the world's most prestigious road races. It is also an extreme endurance run that tests the mettle of both men and machines. In 1950, Cadillac, the GM division recognized as The Standard of the World for luxury motoring, sent two of its 1950 cars to France for competition.

The team was lead by well-known race car builder and driver, Briggs Cunningham. Two Cadillac's were prepped for the race. One remained basically stock receiving simple modifications such as the addition of a two carburetor intake system, welded-on air ducts for the drum brakes, an extra 35-gallon gas tank in the trunk and simple race equipment such as hood straps and safety restraints.

The other car was stripped to its bare chassis and rebodied by Bill Frick of Fordillac fame at his Long Island, NY shop. He received assistance from aerodynamicists and metal workers from Grumman Aircraft in developing a streamlined roadster envelope. When unveiled at LeMans, this striking body was nicknamed, 'LeMonstre' by the French motoring press.

Surprisingly, the stock Series 61, driven by brothers Sam and Miles Collier finished in 10th place. LeMonstre, manned by Cunningham and Phil Walters was one spot back in 11th. The order would likely have been reversed had Cunningham not placed his car in a sand pit and lost 30 minutes digging it out by hand. Ironically, Cunningham had decided against the recommendation to carry shovels in the cars and had to borrow one from a spectator. This was the first time since the 1920s an American production vehicle had raced at LeMans and the Cadillac had beaten 'proven' race cars from manufacturers such as Jaguar, Bentley, Talbot Lago, Panhard, Ferrari and Delage. T

Source - AACA Museum

Luigi Chinnetti, an acquaintance of Cunningham and the 1949 LeMans victor, invited Cunningham to compete in the grueling 24-Hour LeMans race. Luigi promised that he could arrange for two vehicles to be entered; if Cunningham could finish, he could return again in 1951.

Cunningham immediately began his pursuit of two competitive vehicles and a knowledgeable mechanic. He was introduced to a mechanic named Bill Frick who recommended transplanting the mighty OHV V8 Cadillac engine into Ford bodies. The resulting vehicle, which Cunningham dubbed the 'Fordillacs', were both agile and powerful. When shown to racing officials, the vehicles were declined because of their deviation from LeMans regulations and because they resembled hot rods. Cunningham decided to purchase two 1950 Series 61 Coupe deVilles with manual transmissions. The rules for LeMans stated that no internal engine modifications could be performed. The chassis was to be stock but the bodies and the external parts of the engine could be modified.

Cunningham decided to enter one of the Coupe deVilles with very minor alterations while the second vehicle would be heavily modified. Howard Weinman, an aeronautical engineer, was tasked with morphing the Cadillac. Weinman began by testing designs in wind tunnels. The resulting design was wide, had a low center of gravity, aerodynamic, and lightweight due to an aluminum body. The body panels could be easily removed to access the necessary mechanical components. Many people agreed that the appearance was not favorable and it received the name 'Le Manstre' by the French press.

The only suspension modification performed on each car was the addition of French springs. A thermostat was added to the drum brakes, differential housing, and the transmission case so that over-heating could be monitored. Two-way radios were installed in both cars. A tachometer and oil pressure gauges were added to the internal instrumentation. Unessential items, such as the rear seats, hubcaps, and fender skirts, were all removed.

Both vehicles received mild updates to their engines. The 'Le Manstre' was given five carburetors while the stock Coupe received dual 2-barrel carburetors, replacing the single 2-barrel unit. The muffler was removed and the pipes ended in front of the rear wheels. Alfin drum brakes were added to the LeManstre and both vehicles received modifications to allow better air flow the brakes. In addition to the stock 20 gallon fuel tank, a 35 gallon tank was added. The two vehicles were painted in a dark blue and white color prior to being shipped to France.

There had been little time to perform proper testing on either vehicle prior to being shipped to France. When the vehicles arrived at LeMans they were put through intensive practice runs. Both cars proved to have their flaws such as poor night vision. When proceeding through corners at a high rate of speed, the engine received inadequate amounts of fuel. The first practice run for the LeManstre was devastating; co-driver Walters lost control and tore a hole in the nose. Repairs were able to be made before the tech inspection and the other short-comings were addressed before race-day.

Cunningham and Phil Walters were the drivers of the LeManstre, the more serious entry. The coupe was driven by Miles and Sam Collier. The traditional sprint start, where the drivers sprinted to their vehicles, revealed the doors were locked. The problem was able to be solved by reaching in through the window and unlocking the door. Still, not a good way to start a race.

On the second lap, the LeManstre lost control and ended up in a sandbank where it sat for twenty minutes before being freed. The LeManstre was now four laps behind. The Coupe had a bit of misfortune as well. Part way through the race, it had to come to a complete stop while a stray dog made its way across the track. Later on in the race, it barely made it back to the pits due to low fuel.

When the checkered flag fell, both cars were in impressive standing. The LeManstre had battled its way back from 35th place to finish in 11th. The coupe was in 10th after averaging 81.5 mph per lap. To finish the race is a major accomplishment, a testament to both driver and car. Their accomplishment was even more significant since the Coupe had lost its first and second gear during the race.

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The first Cadillac was race-prepared by Frick-Tappett Motors; the second was stripped to its bare chassis and, at the hands of a dozen aerodynamicists and metalworkers from nearby Grumman Aircraft, given a streamlined roadster envelope whose mass and imposing appearance earned its French nickname, "Le Monstre".

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The 1950 Cadillacs had independant front suspension with A-arms and coil springs, Delco shocks, Saginaw steering, Bendix dual-servo brakes and a standard 3.77:1 axle ratio. Cadillac also provided five-carburator manifolds and a 2.9:1 gearset for the Special.

Once at Le Mans, where the team could test its pair of Cadillacs on the circuit, it was found that the roadster would reach about 130, but had slower lap times than the stock-bodied coupe because it couldn't accelerate out of the corners as quickly as the coupe.

The original gearset was reinstalled and then it was discovered that the hydraulic lifters would pump up and hold the valves open if the rpm exceeded 4,400, so the team set a mandatory limit of 4,400 rpm for the race.

In preparing for the race, Miles Collier had suggested that each car carry a folding shovel. Briggs rejected the idea as being unnecessary but soon regretted his decision. On the second lap, Cunningham ran Le Monstre into the sandbank at Mulsanne and spent a half-hour digging the car out with a shovel supplied by a spectator.

Considering that the Collier brothers were the only ones on the Cunningham team who had raced at Le Mans, and the short preparation time before the event, the two Cadillacs (the Coupe de Ville driven by Sam and Miles Collier finished 10th and the roadster, driven by Cunningham and Phil Walters, was 11th overall) acquitted themselves in grand fashion, the team and cars winning the affection and cheers of the spectators.

Although Le Monstre was built for, and ran, only one event and was not a prototype, it was significant in bringing fame and attention to American entries at this historic 24-hour race. It was big, it was noisy, and in the traditional American white with blue trim racing colors, it portrayed the brash American spirit that Europeans expected. They weren't disappointed.

Source: John Gardner and Kane Rogers, briggscunningham.com