

America's First Ferrari

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ESSEX, MASSACHUSETTS: All American Ferrari stories involving Luigi Chinetti, the brand's legendary importer from day one. The 166 Spyder Corsa 016-I was the first he imported.

At the start of the 1950 season, Cunningham won a race at Suffolk Airport - the first Ferrari win in USA

There are hundreds of "important" Ferraris with their unique place in history. This is definitely one of those who place themselves high on the list. The very first Ferrari, which was sold to the United States - the market that would later become Ferrari's most important - in 1949.

It was not new when it arrived in the continent. There was a 166 Spyder Corsa - a pure race car - which was built the prior year.

Ferrari's ambassador to the U.S.

166 was the first truly successful Ferrari model who won international races like the Targa Florio and Mille Miglia in spring 1948. In September, Italian racing driver Luigi Chinetti won the 12 Hours of Monthl ry outside Paris in this particular specimen, and a few months later he returned and set several speed records over an hour, 100 miles and 200 km for cars under 2.0 liters. All the new records were right around 200 km / h.

Chinetti was not just anyone. Already in the early 1930s, he had been selling - not to mention racing - for Alfa Romeo in Paris. The highlights had come close, with victories at Le Mans in both 1932 and 1934 as the largest. While in the United States to attend the Indy 500 in the U.S. in May 1940, World War II broke out in earnest in Europe. Chinetti did not get back to France, and he chose to remain in the U.S. through war.

In 1946 he became an American citizen, but often went back to Europe to run the race, eventually also in the new Ferrari racers. Chinetti knew Enzo Ferrari from his time with Alfa Romeo, where Enzo was racing manager for the factory team Scuderia Ferrari. Now Ferrari had realized their dream of own car brand.

In 1949 Chinetti added one - and Ferrari's first - Le Mans victory to his list of achievements. This time in a Ferrari 1949 166 MM Touring Barchetta he had sold to Lord Selsdon in England. Lord Selsdon was also involved in driving the 24 hours. He sat behind the wheel for half an hour, so Chinetti could get some rest to run the remaining 23.5 hours ...

Should be Jaguar

In addition to running multiple models, Chinetti used his sales talent to sell cars for Ferrari to wealthy private racers. One of these was Briggs Cunningham (think Proctor & Gamble, bank and railroad money) in the United States.

Actually Cunningham had planned to participate in racing with one of the new Jaguar XK120. But when Jaguar was unable to deliver a car to a race on Long Island outside New York in August, plan B was implemented - a Ferrari racer.

The vehicle arrived in the U.S. just days before the race at Bridgehampton. George Rand was the driver who had the honor of driving the first American Ferrari. He won the qualifier, started in pole position and led when an oil pipeline burst and the team had to retire.

In the next race at Watkins Glen in September Briggs Cunningham drove car itself onto two podiums. At the start of the 1950 season, he won a race at Suffolk Airport - the first Ferrari victory in the United States.

In the following 33 years the car was a part of the Briggs Cunningham collection

Fatal car loan

Later that summer his good friends, the very wealthy and racing enthusiast brothers Sam and Miles C. Collier, Florida, borrowed the car.

Together they had laid the foundations for what would become the Sports Car Club of America back in 1933. Collier brothers were the sons of Barron Collier who - among other things - was the largest owner of real estate in Florida. In short, obscenely rich, and it dripped probably a bit on his automobile enthusiast sons too.

Sam Collier was the one who drove Ferrari in racing, and he won the Bridgehampton in June. It would be his last victory in both the car and head.

In September he was again behind the wheel of the big race at Watkins Glen. Sam Collier was 3rd place when he came out in the gravel, ran off and got a fatal encounter with the fence. The accident led to Cunningham immediately proclaiming that he would never see the car again. The statement was probably a bit premature, because in 1951 the car was rebuilt and back in racing both in Buenos Aires and in Bridgehampton.

Museum Object

It would however be only a handful of races before Cunningham retired Ferrari racer in his private collection in 1953. Cunningham had, during the four years he had the Ferrari, driven both Cadillac and self-built racers at Le Mans, began production of sports car at home in the U.S., been on cover of Time magazine, and maintained an increasingly active sailing career.

In the following 33 years the car was a part of the Briggs Cunningham collection and eventually Museum in Los Angeles until New Year's Eve 1986. When it was sold to Miles C. Collier in Florida.

Do you think there was something familiar with Collier name? It was his uncle who drove himself to death in Ferrari in 1950 ...

PHOTO CAPTIONS

All photos: Paul Russell and Company

UNIQUE HISTORY: America's first Ferrari imported in 1948 and restored by Paul Russell and Co. 65 years later.

ACTIVE RACING DRIVER: Summer 1948 Luigi Chinetti drove this Ferrari 166 Spyder Corsa both at Spa in Belgium and Monthléry outside Paris, before he won Le Mans with a Ferrari 166 MM in 1949.

FATAL CRASH: Sam Collier's Ferrari after the fatal accident.

INTERIM MODEL: Chassis number 016-I is a pure race car with 2-liter V12 engine of 140 horsepower and cigar body.

CORSA SPYDER: Ferrari 166 is the first Ferrari model that was built both for track and road. This is

the racing version.

SPARTAN: The interior of the racer is functional without excess luxury.

OWN CAR BUILDING: Briggs Cunningham started with the production of their racing cars in the early 1950s. Here, a 1951 Cunningham C-2R next to Ferrari.

SIDEBAR PG 37

EXTENSIVE WORK: Paul Russell and his skillful craftsmen have taken the first Ferrari in the United States back to the configuration the car had before the start of the race at Watkins Glen in autumn 1950. Photo: Anders and Torgeir Toft Engerud

Careful Reversal

Paul Russell and Company have gained the confidence to restore this important piece of Ferrari history acquired by Miles Collier in Florida.

MOTOR got an exclusive tour of the workshop in Essex, just north of Boston by Paul Russell when the project was in its final phase before assembly and completion last summer.

- Cunningham thought enough he got a new car, Ferrari and Chinetti had not given the impression that it was Chinetti's old race car, smiling Paul Russell while we gaze upon the individual constituents of the chassis, engine, interior and bodywork made ready for painting and assembly in the famous workshop.

From here Paul Russell and Company has over the past 35 years rolled out an amazing variety of classics after extensive work of several thousand hours. No less than 36 times, he has been able to bring home "Best of Show" award at some of the world's most prestigious Concours. Not least thanks to a team of around 20 highly qualified employees who do most themselves, apart from chrome and nickel plating.

Restored 60 years ago

- It had already begun to have traces of a hard life when it came to the United States, and like most race cars got the lot of beating during racing career the five years it was used in the United States. Not least was the powerful crash when Sam Collier was killed, and bodywork was re-built with a slightly different look. When Briggs Cunningham took his Ferrari out of active service in 1953 it was the subject of a rapid restoration before it was put into the Cunningham Museum, explains Russell.

It was really just this Ferrari Miles Collier was looking to buy from the aging Cunningham in 1986, but he ended up taking over the whole Cunningham collection of 70 cars. Miles Collier leads car interest (and property empire) of his father, his uncles and grandfather as one of the leading and most knowledge-rich collectors in the world.

Third Collier job

- It is a privilege to work for Collier. This is the third car we do for him. A cautious return of Jean Behrens 1959 Porsche RSK 718-007 to the original configuration was the first ten years ago. And one of the famous Silver Arrow racers, a 1939 Mercedes-Benz W154, and now therefore this.

The car had different appearances in car shows and displays as it had crashed and been rebuilt, so there are pictures of it in different configurations.

- Miles Collier wanted to restore it back to how it looked before the start of the race at Watkins Glen when his uncle ran himself to death in the car. So we have studied the original images as of course we especially wanted the grill back to the configuration with start number 54, says Russell.

Two months after our visit the finished car debuted at Cunningham Reunion at Lime Rock, where it is named "Best of Show". It's definitely not the last recognition this work will get.

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