

1954: THE FIRST FERRARI INVASION

By Arnie Baer

The 1954 SCCA Seafair Nationals held at Bremerton's Kitsap County Airport represented two important firsts. It was Ferrari's debut on a Northwest track at a time when the marque was just beginning its dominance of west coast sports car racing. More important from a personal standpoint, it was my initial in-person exposure to a National road race...and as the saying goes "you never forget your first time".

The Seafair Nationals road race was held on Sunday, and was run in conjunction with Saturday's Gold Cup Unlimited Hydroplane races. In this era before big-time racing and highly-marketed Seattle-area professional sports franchises, the Gold Cup was the area's premier and dominating sporting event. Sports car racing was fortunate to be able to leverage off of its visibility and similar target demographic. The commonality was stronger because star hydro pilots like Lou Fageol, "Wild Bill" Cantrell and later Bill Muncey all drove competition sports cars.

My memorable speed weekend started Saturday on a Lake Washington dock just south of the (only) floating bridge watching the Slow Mo's famous "under the bridge" flying start. It turned out to be the perfect vantage point for one of the most spectacular incidents in Seattle hydro racing history. While battling Fageol, "Wild Bill" Cantrell lost steering capabilities and veered off Lake Washington at over 100 MPH toward the house next door. His Gayle V Unlimited-Class hydroplane flew over the lakeside retaining wall, plowed through a primrose hedge and landed squarely on the middle of a lily pond. I ran to the scene as Bill was pulling off his helmet and murmuring "Oh sh-t". The primroses were still floating down onto the deck of the hydro. A Time/Life photographer took an iconic and widely-published photo of the flower covered hydro parked in this lakefront yard.

As Pacific Northwest residents awoke Sunday, Ferraris, OSCAs and other exotic racing cars were little more than pictures in a 35cent *Road & Track* or a 75 cent Fawcett paperback. This day, however, they became real...even to those not planning to attend the Nationals.

Most of the California-based racing cars had been trucked to Seattle and early race day morning the racers actually drove them out to the track. I vividly remember cruising down the Denny Street hill at the wheel of my mother's 1948 Buick Roadmaster when, to my surprise, I was passed by a gaggle of screaming hi-revving Italian cars. As the 8:00 ferry docked at Bremerton, the orchestra of two Ferraris, two OSCAs, a Siata, two or three Allards, two Kurtises, and other various production cars with open exhausts produced a symphony sweeter and louder than the last movement of Shostakovich's 5th.

By 1954 American sports car racing had already moved off public roads to mostly airport courses. Bremerton's Kitsap Airport was configured as a 3.9-mile course with a 3/4-mile long front straight and an unheard-of mile-long back straight.

Entering the airport gates I was able to hear more sweet snarls of racers, plus a pleasant waft of hot Castrol. I gained entrance to the pits thanks to a pass given to me by a 18 year old friend with forged ID and his mom's Jaguar to race. The friend, Bruce Kessler, later developed into a great international driver.

At the course we were all drawn to the two Ferraris. I watched mesmerized as mechanics worked on Ignacio Lozano's rather tired but beautiful 166 Coupe which was suffering from gearbox problems. Lozano asked me if I liked Ferraris, and when I confirmed that I did indeed, he handed me a handful of cluster gear teeth and commented: "Here, you now own some expensive parts of one."

Bill David and Alec Coppel drove beautiful OSCAs, which were lightening-quick as they finished first and second in the under 1500cc modified class. The OSCAs featured fascinating racing-oriented details, such as exposed electrical terminals faired into the body to allow quick connection of booster battery jumpers.

Other cars storming around the airstrip at the Seafair Nationals included the small, large, iconic, and esoteric. Witnessing the diminutive Giaur, with its purpose-built race body and hot-rodded Crosley engine, solidified its place on my list of favorite cars. (Even now I have fantasies of finding it in an Oregon barn, even if I wouldn't have the dimensions or flexibility to fit in the cockpit.)

If the small Giaur and the Oscas were sublime, their opposites were the two big Kurtis boomers, one of which was owned by John Fox. Earlier in the fifties John had brought his Cad-Allard to Whitman, which was in my home town of Walla Walla, and it was love at first sight. At my first view of his Kurtis I mentally compared the rough-hewn muscularity of the Allard with the more finished, yet massively-brutal Baby Hemi-powered Kurtis.

The day's real attraction was Sterling Edwards' Ferrari, which in its black and a grayish white looked to have jumped directly out of a magazine. While initial Ferraris were small displacement (the 166 name designated the swept cubic centimeter volume of each of the 12 cylinders- thus equating to 1992 ccs), Edwards' was a 340 (total of 4080cc).

The "Big Bore Modified" class race put the five-plus liter Cadillac and Chrysler engines on notice that their days of dominating West Coast racing were waning. Despite John Barneson taking an early lead in his Chrysler-powered Allard -- often driving in full "reverse lock", Edwards chipped-away at the displacement disadvantage with superior handling and the high-end power from the overhead-cam "4.1".

After six laps the Allard's Baby Hemi engine blew. Edwards Ferrari kept pushing ahead, finishing a full lap in front of the second place car.

This 1954 day in Bremerton proved the sports car experience was new and exciting. Ferrari's domination along with the great showings of other Italian marques set the stage for a regional infatuation with sports car racing and a national move from brute-force domestic pushrod power to more balanced, professionally-engineered overhead cam-powered beauties.

And like the cars themselves, Ferrari's ascendancy to the top was quick. It was fully accomplished by the time Seafair Nationals returned to Bremerton in 1955, for that was the year of the monumental duel of Ferraris driven by Carroll Shelby, Ken Miles and Phil Hill. Of course, that event evokes entirely different, yet still very special memories.

Look in the 1954 Historic photo archives for photos from the race day Arnie describes so well.