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### **Sports Car Paradise: Racing in Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>**

On the weekend of September 21-22, 1957, the California Sports Car Club held the first running of the International Road Races at Riverside International Motor Raceway. Almost 200 drivers, predominantly from towns and cities across Southern California, competed against each other over the course of thirteen races in European and American sports cars in front of 27,000 spectators. Sports columnist Bob Hunter of the *Los Angeles Examiner* lauded Riverside as the "newest spoke" in the region's "major league wheel" that included football, boxing, golf, and tennis. Southern California sports car racers finally had a "home" that was "worthy of their skills" so they would not have to venture out to "foreign" tracks to win trophies and thrill crowds.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Grand Prix for Sports Cars at Riverside the following year in October 1958 drew in 72,000 fans, an impressive number for a sport that was barely ten years old. That same year witnessed 100,000 in attendance at the Los Angeles Rams-Chicago Bears football game, a major league baseball record crowd of 78,000 at the Dodger's opening day, and 61,000 horse racing fans at Santa Anita on Derby Day. The popularity of sports car racing supported the *Los Angeles Times*' claim that Southern California was the "sports capital of the world."<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the late 1940s, a community of motoring enthusiasts centered in Los Angeles embraced the amateur racing of two-seat European and American performance cars. They drove the sport to the forefront of activity and popularity over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the process, they tested the strengths of the organizations that emerged to control it. One was a staunchly independent regional club and the other part of a far-reaching national group, as they clashed over differing ideas of the nature of their chosen motorsport. The period

1947-1963 witnessed the emergence, chaotic growth, and stabilization of racing in the sports car paradise of Southern California, which had ramifications for the larger motorsports community in the United States.

*The Automobile and Motorsports in Southern California*

A study of sports car racing in Southern California from the late 1940s to the early 1960s illustrates how deeply motorsports and leisure were interwoven with the automobile and American culture. Southern California, specifically Los Angeles, was predisposed toward the automobile. The widespread rejection of railways, trolleys, and busses as the primary means of transportation before World War II ensured that Los Angeles was well on its way to becoming a decentralized metropolis of suburban, business, and industrial districts by the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> The city and the automobile were inseparable, which resulted in Los Angeles becoming a center of American car culture.

Along with making the car a part of everyday life, the people of Los Angeles fostered a vibrant motorsports community. The subtropical Mediterranean climate allowed for virtually year-round racing and driving. The first competition, called the Fiesta Bicycle, Motorcycle, and Automobile Meet, occurred at what is now Exposition Park in May 1903. Road races in Santa Monica and Corona witnessed upwards of 100,000 spectators lining the streets beginning in 1909 before spectator fatalities ended them. The Los Angeles Motordrome at Playa del Rey was the world's first wooden board track built for automobile and motorcycle racing in 1910. Dedicated long and short oval tracks, including Beverly Hills Speedway, Legion Ascot, and Gilmore Stadium, hosted thousands of fans through the 1930s. Famous American drivers, including Barney Oldfield, Ralph De Palma, and Eddie Rickenbacker, raced, won, and broke speed records at those events.

Besides racing on city streets and oval tracks, race car builders and drivers from Los Angeles were dominant players in America's premiere race, the Indianapolis 500, from the early 1920s to the early 1980s. Cars and engines built by Harry Miller, Fred Offenhauser, Louis Meyer and Dale Drake, and Dan Gurney's All American Racers set the standard for racing technology. Numerous Southern Californian drivers, including Louie Meyer, Rodger Ward, and Rick Mears won at Indianapolis.

Area motorsports enthusiasts pioneered other forms of competition. The Southern California Timing Association, the oldest racing organization in the United States, sponsored land speed racing events on California's dry lakes and the salt flats of Bonneville, Utah, beginning in November 1937. After World War II, hot rod enthusiasts invented drag racing in Los Angeles in 1950 and created a nationwide sensation governed by Wally Parks' National Hot Rod Association. Legendary drag racing strips included Santa Ana and Lions near Long Beach.<sup>5</sup>

Historians have addressed some of the Southern California motorsport communities that emerged after World War II. Robert Post's important study of drag racing revealed the cultural value of analyzing a dramatic "theater of machines" that had "no practical purpose" other than going very fast in a straight line over a one-quarter mile track.<sup>6</sup> The "participatory phenomenon" of hot-rodding, according to David Lucsko, was a significant example of how end user agency opened up the black box of the automobile to millions of Americans as they sought more speed, power, and individuality.<sup>7</sup> These expressions of enthusiasm for automotive technology reveal much about the American infatuation with cars as the people of Los Angeles and Southern California built communities based on the ownership, use, and strong identification with specific types of automobiles.<sup>8</sup>

Intertwined with these enthusiastic automotive communities was the growth of leisure in post-World War II America. The style of “conspicuous” leisure and consumption that emanated from the wealthy classes of the late nineteenth century took hold on a larger scale for a growing and more affluent segment of the population.<sup>9</sup> Historian Lawrence Fuller placed Southern California at the forefront of this “democratization of American leisure” where the middle and lower classes aspired to experience the same forms of play as the wealthier classes.<sup>10</sup> With communal enthusiasm and the growth of leisure came the creation of automotive lifestyle sports where active participants worked to cultivate their respective movements through their social organization of clubs and activities on regional and national scales.<sup>11</sup>

The story of sports cars in the greater Los Angeles area reflects those themes as individuals bought and used them in spectacular, competitive, and communal ways to exercise their enthusiasm for the automobile. Historian John Heitmann recognized the influence of European sports cars and racing in 1950s America at the recreational level.<sup>12</sup> Witnesses, participants, and their descendants have written about Los Angeles and Southern California within the context of its centrality to the history of sports car racing in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Origins of Sports Car Racing in the United States*

The modern sports car movement emerged before World War II. Affluent Easterners, like Briggs Cunningham, embraced the first generation of sports cars from Great Britain, Italy, Germany, and France and strove to emulate the spectacles they saw on European racing circuits such as Brooklands, Monza, Nürburgring, and Le Mans in the 1930s. A group of motoring enthusiasts in Boston formed the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) on February 26, 1944.<sup>14</sup> The SCCA defined a “sports car” to be “any quality car which was built primarily for sports motoring as opposed to mere transportation.”<sup>15</sup>

In response to the availability of sports cars from Europe in the immediate postwar period, sports car clubs “sprang up like daffodils in March” according to automotive writer Ken Purdy.<sup>16</sup> The most popular and prolific activity for clubs was racing on courses laid out on public roads just as they were in Europe. The SCCA sanctioned the first postwar road race in October 1948 with the inauguration of the first International Sports Car Grand Prix at Watkins Glen, New York.<sup>17</sup> The club grew exponentially as its members established regional chapters, or “regions,” across the country and numbered approximately 5,000 members by 1952. Above all else, the SCCA wanted to frame racing as a genteel activity that should be strictly amateur in nature.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Sports Car Racing in Southern California*

The first sports cars, fifty red MG TCs from England, arrived in Los Angeles in 1947.<sup>19</sup> By the early 1950s, other British car makers introduced their own designs while European, and American manufacturers produced new sports car designs that gained a market share in the United States. Jaguar, Austin-Healey, and Triumph in Great Britain, Mercedes and Porsche in Germany, Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, and Osca in Italy, and Chevrolet, Cunningham, Glasspar, and Kurtis in the United States ensured there were a variety of cars available to a willing consumer base that ranged from the lower middle class to millionaires and Hollywood stars.<sup>20</sup>

Southern Californians embraced the competitive nature of sports cars and welcomed them into the myriad layers of automotive enthusiasm in the area. Three enthusiasts in Los Angeles, Roger Barlow, John von Neumann, and Taylor Lucas, formed the California Sports Car Club, or Cal Club, in 1947. Barlow was a documentary filmmaker-turned-import car dealer. His International Motors was one of the first foreign car dealerships on the West Coast and was responsible for that first delivery of MG TCs to Los Angeles. An Austrian émigré, von Neumann worked for Barlow as a salesman before building his own foreign car empire. Lucas was a

mechanic with an interest in sports cars.<sup>21</sup> Barlow remembered that he and his compatriots were dissatisfied with the lack of activity in the only existing club at the time and decided to create their own with a focus on driving and competition.<sup>22</sup>

The Cal Club quickly set about organizing sporting events on public roads for its members whether they had the blessing of local authorities or not. The first event was a legal hill climb at Palos Verdes in August and December 1947. Von Neumann followed up with a 100-mile road race through canyon and mountain roads of Santa Clarita called the Cento Miglio. The club ran the illegal event several times during the 1947 to 1948 period under the cover of night to avoid the California Highway Patrol. There were only six to eight participants in each race, but their presence could be felt as the MGs and other sports cars zoomed by unsuspecting motorists.<sup>23</sup>

After that brief period of lawless racing, the Cal Club incorporated in March 1950 and established its offices on Hollywood Boulevard.<sup>24</sup> The club quickly rose to prominence as the only major independent amateur sports car racing group in the United States with approximately 1,500 members by 1958.<sup>25</sup> One thing was certain; the Cal Club leadership wanted it to be the primary racing organization in Southern California.

Despite the prominence of the Cal Club in Southern California, some of its members wanted to affiliate with the SCCA to benefit from belonging to a national organization. They broke away and formed the Los Angeles (LA) Region in July 1949. John R. Bond, a writer and editor at *Road & Track* magazine, was the first regional executive, or president. They held their first event, a hill climb at Sandberg northwest of Los Angeles, on April 2, 1950. Like the Cento Miglio, these initial events were held on public roads, which were under the threat of cancellation with the unwelcome appearance of local law enforcement.<sup>26</sup>

The Cal Club, LA Region, and other clubs needed places to race. They first competed at Carrell Speedway in Gardena, a one-half mile banked oval that hosted stock car, hot rod, and motorcycle races. The track's promoters sponsored "Foreign Car Races" beginning in July 1949. The Cal Club took over responsibility for the races two years later and attracted 6,000 spectators at their first event. Carrell Speedway was not ideal because the oval track did not permit drivers to handle their cars in a way consistent with European-style road racing. Nevertheless, it was a legal venue that attracted both drivers and spectators.<sup>27</sup>

Public roads were the traditional venue for sports car racing. They provided the twists, turns, and changes in elevation that required the skillful and efficient operation of the cars, which made driving a sports car fun. They were also in the proximity of buildings, streetlights, road signs, trees, and spectators that served as hazards for the racers. Only hay bales, sand-filled containers, and snow fencing stood between the cars and the public. An alternative was to use the runways and connecting taxiways of local municipal airports or military airfields, which were closed to air traffic for the day or no longer in use, as a course. The long, wide, flat, and smooth circuits facilitated high speeds approaching 150 mph, challenged the drivers with hairpin turns, and reduced the probability of crashing. The open spaces of airport courses facilitated purpose-built grandstands and well-protected viewings areas that made crowd control easier and safer.<sup>28</sup> Both types persisted over the course of the 1950s and 1960s in regard to the specific locale that a race took place.

Cal Club members organized the first legally sanctioned sports car road race in Southern California at Palm Springs on April 16, 1950. The 2.6 mile course consisted of the roads found at a local airfield and an unfinished housing development. The 6,000 foot straight enabled speeds of up to two miles a minute.<sup>29</sup> The short-lived Sports Car Racing Association held what is

considered the second race in the region at the decommissioned Naval Lighter-Than-Air Station Santa Ana on June 25, 1950.<sup>30</sup>

The Cal Club, LA Region, and a small number of other racing-oriented clubs sponsored races at a myriad of venues throughout the 1950s. Southern California races began at Torrey Pines in December 1951, Santa Barbara in September 1953, Bakersfield in March 1954, Willow Springs and March Air Force Base in November 1953, Hansen Dam in June 1955, Pomona in June 1956, Paramount Ranch in August 1956, and Hourglass Field in May 1957.<sup>31</sup> Each course had its strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies. With the exception of Willow Springs, these courses were temporary, which involved a lot of work on the part of the clubs regarding designing a course on pre-existing roads, liaison with the communities that owned them, and planning and coordinating the actual execution of the races.

#### *Drivers, Sports Cars, and Spectators*

Hundreds of sports car racers emerged to compete at the Southern California tracks. They and the motorsports press referred to themselves as “pilots” in an aviation analogy that echoed the glamour, skill, and danger of operating sophisticated machinery in a high-pressure environment. A few worked in motorsports as a result of their skill as drivers, mechanics, and managers. Others found the challenge of racing a distraction from more ordinary jobs in business and industry. On the track, they were all technically amateurs under the auspices of their membership in either the Cal Club or the LA Region.

Emulating the earlier success found in other forms of racing, Southern California produced a new class of celebrity drivers that fueled the popularity of sports car racing and European-style motorsports in general. Their meteoric paths also served as stepping-stones into professional racing careers. Phil Hill of Santa Monica was the best known of all. He started



racing a variety of cars ranging from MGs to Ferraris in 1949. He quickly catapulted to national and international fame, which included multiple wins in the Sebring and Le Mans endurance races. Hill's greatness culminated when he became the world's first and only American-born Formula 1 champion in 1961 as a member of the Ferrari factory team.<sup>32</sup>

Another outstanding Southern California sports car racer was Ken Miles. He started racing in England at Silverstone and Prescott before immigrating to Los Angeles in 1952. Miles made his racing debut that year and quickly made a name for himself as both a driver and builder of cars, including his famous MG and Porsche specials.<sup>33</sup> During his three terms as president of the Cal Club from 1954 to 1957, the membership grew from 350 to 1,500.<sup>34</sup>

Other Southern Californians realized sports car racing fame and fortune as well. Richie Ginther, Dan Gurney, Jack McAfee, Chuck Daigh, Lance Reventlow, and Max Balchowsky followed Hill and Miles into national and international racing notoriety in various forms. Mainstays of the Cal Club racing scene included founders John von Neumann and Roger Barlow and leading members like Bill Pollack.<sup>35</sup> While these racers were either born in California or made their home in the state, another racer, Texan Carroll Shelby, became a fixture on the local scene after a spectacular win at Torrey Pines in a Ferrari in July 1955. His quick rise to international prominence included an SCCA national championship and designation as "Sports Car Driver of the Year" by both *Sports Illustrated* and the *New York Times*.<sup>36</sup>

Southern California women were also enthusiastic for sports car racing. The Cal Club was quick to include them, but in a controlled way. It incorporated a "Ladies Handicap Race" into the schedule at the December 1951 Torrey Pines event. John von Neumann's nineteen-year old stepdaughter, Josie, won the race in her MG.<sup>37</sup> Shortly thereafter, fourteen female enthusiasts in Los Angeles created the Women's Sports Car Club (WSCC) in 1952 to bring together like-

mindful women who did not want to watch from the sidelines or serve on their husband or boyfriend's pit crew. They pushed for increased participation for women in sports car racing when there was no presence at all. Their efforts resulted in the "Ladies Race" becoming a standard part of race schedules.<sup>38</sup> Besides von Neumann, leading women drivers included Mary Davis, Maxine Elmer, Ruth Levy, Marion Lowe, and Pat Sawyer.

The majority of WSCC members served in a non-racing capacity behind-the-scenes at events in support of the Cal Club and LA Region. They conducted lap scoring, registration and check-in, technical inspections, ran mimeograph copies, prepared lunches for volunteer race workers, and organized glamorous award banquets to conclude each race. These "Gal Fridays," as one of their own called them, did the work that was required for the races to take place.<sup>39</sup>

There were two general classifications of cars in which drivers competed. Modified "sports racing cars" were purpose-built race cars designed for competition at the highest levels in terms of speed and endurance. They were the most popular with racing fans and spectators due to their unique nature and higher performance. The category included Aston Martin, Ferrari, Maserati, and Porsche racers straight from the factory that cost upwards of \$10,000. There was also a variety of "specials" that featured original workmanship and clever combinations of American and European engines, chassis, and bodies. Multi-millionaire Lance Reventlow invested \$75,000 in the development of three Scarab racers that dominated the 1958 racing season. In contrast, builders like Max and Ina Balchowsky had as little as \$1,000 in their garage-built and junkyard-sourced racer *Old Yeller II* that had its share of racing success.<sup>40</sup>

The exorbitant cost of modified sports racing cars created a new owner/driver relationship. A review of entry lists in race programs reveal that drivers did not have to be the owners of the cars they raced. Multi-millionaire sportsmen and successful entrepreneurs like

John Edgar, Tony Parravano, John and Eleanor von Neumann, and Frank Arciero provided Ferrari, Maserati, and Porsche cars for successful drivers like Phil Hill, Bill Pollack, Richie Ginther, Ken Miles, Dan Gurney, Jack McAfee, Chuck Daigh, and Carroll Shelby to drive at high profile races in Southern California and across the nation.<sup>41</sup> These team owners were the only individuals capable of affording the factory-trained mechanics for expert maintenance, the specialized transports that carried the tools, parts, and cars to races, the repairs needed if the drivers crashed them on the track, and providing expenses and a salary for the drivers so they could race in amateur events.

Production, or stock, sports cars required cars to be as they left the factory without any major changes to their design. One of the key appeals of sports car racing was the fact that enthusiasts could drive the same car for daily transportation during the week. On the weekend, they donned helmets, used tape to cover their headlights and add numbers to their cars, and enlisted friends to support them in the pits. An enthusiast had a wide range of cars and prices from which to choose for competition in the production category. A used MG TC could be bought for as little as \$850. A brand new MG, Triumph, or Austin-Healey cost under \$3,000. For more performance and money, a prospective racer could buy a Jaguar or Corvette for around \$4,000.<sup>42</sup>

To determine the winner of a race weekend, the Cal Club and the SCCA adopted similar methods of organization. They developed a two-day weekend race schedule that divided the entrants' cars into the production and modified categories and, in turn, broke each down into distinct classes based on engine displacement and overall performance and represented by a letter of the alphabet.<sup>43</sup> The cars with the largest displacement engines were in Class A while those with the smallest were in Class H or J. On Saturday, class groupings raced at the same time

so there would be several “races within a race” to maximize time on the track for all entrants. On Sunday, the Saturday winners competed against each other in two “main events” where both production and modified cars faced each other in “over” and “under” events based again on engine displacement.<sup>44</sup> The main event and class winners received trophies to reflect their amateur status.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, the trend in the greater American sports car community was to establish permanent closed road tracks. They offered increased revenue for local communities, spectator safety, a “home” course for local racers, and a consistent driving experience that, when combined with other permanent tracks, provided a regional and national circuit for racers to compete. Tracks opened at Lime Rock in Connecticut and Road America in Wisconsin in 1955, Watkins Glen in 1956, Laguna Seca in northern California, Bridgehampton on Long Island, and the Virginia International Raceway in Danville in 1957. Willow Springs had opened earlier in 1953, but its largely undeveloped state hindered its widespread use. Southern California’s answer for a permanent road racing track was the Riverside International Raceway, which opened officially on September 21, 1957. Located near March Air Force Base west of Los Angeles, the original 3.3 mile, thirteen-turn course included a 1.1 mile back straight that would permit lap averages above 100 mph. Sportswriter Art Luring of the *Los Angeles Times* asserted that the racing would be “fast and furious.”<sup>45</sup>

Since Riverside was a commercial enterprise, the Cal Club and the LA Region alternated sponsorship of follow-on races in November 1957 and June 1958 respectively. The next event, the U.S. Grand Prix for Sports Cars held on October 11-12, 1958, was a turning point in the history of Southern California sports car racing. The marquee event was a 200-mile race with a purse of \$14,500 for an international roster of professional competitors. The Times-Mirror

Company, operator of the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Mirror*, sponsored the race to raise proceeds for its chosen charities. The organizing body was the Cal Club, which granted permission to its members to participate in the race. The sanctioning bodies were the Federation Internationale de L'Automobile, the world governing body for sports car racing, and the United States Auto Club (USAC), the largest American professional racing organization and organizer of the Indianapolis 500. With top European professionals like Jean Behra, Joakim Bonnier, and Roy Salvadori competing, the *Los Angeles Times* heralded the race as the “biggest of its kind in U.S. history.”<sup>46</sup> To Bill Pollack, president of the Cal Club, the running of the Grand Prix marked the “real coming of age of sports car racing” in the United States where years of hard work and amateur sportsmanship provided the foundation for mainstream success.<sup>47</sup> An unprecedented crowd of 72,000 spectators watched Chuck Daigh win the feature race.<sup>48</sup> Fellow Southern Californians and Cal Club members, Phil Hill and Bill Krause, won the next two years in a row.

Attending a Southern California sports car race was a major event for spectators. Fans congregated to see the rare and exotic modified racers or the production cars they drove themselves being raced by well-known and relatively anonymous drivers. They came from all walks of life in terms of education and employment with the core being professionals in their late twenties and thirties, but many of them were college students.<sup>49</sup> The number one goal of a true sports car spectator was to analyze the driver’s skill in maneuvering the car, especially how they “set up” for a turn.<sup>50</sup> There was not one crowd as there was at a baseball or football game. There were several crowds as spectators positioned themselves at the various turns and straightaways.<sup>51</sup> For those who could not make the journey, they could watch races on their television at home via local stations like KTTV Channel 11.<sup>52</sup>

*Trouble in Paradise: The Cal Club v. The SCCA*

By the mid-1950s, sports car racing was a major activity in Southern California. For drivers and fans, there were a variety of events to attend almost every weekend of the year. Unfortunately, there was trouble in sports car paradise. The Cal Club and the LA Region were two different groups. The Cal Club formed specifically to provide the organizational structure for racing. The LA Region incorporated racing into a broader-based program of activities that, according to Cal Club members, was predominately social in nature at the expense of serious competition.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of their motivations, tensions emerged between the two clubs centered on which group would secure the precious few calendar dates and venues for racing. Southern California also became a battleground in the national debate over whether sports car racers should be strictly amateurs or could they take money for racing. The two clubs became bitter foes or friendly rivals depending on the opinion of individual members, but a Cal Club-LA Region feud was in full bloom by 1957.

The scheduling of concurrent races was the first major issue. The primary responsibility of the Southern California Council of Sports Car Clubs was to rationalize the regional events calendar for its member clubs, which included the Cal Club and the LA Region. Nevertheless, there were so many conflicts over dates and venues that it was difficult to alleviate the situation and the calls for order went unheeded.<sup>54</sup> There were over twenty races planned on the West Coast with many on the same date in 1958 alone.<sup>55</sup> It was obvious that the scheduling problem would dilute driver and spectator attendance.

The Cal Club and the LA Region also competed against each other in securing venues in local communities. The Cal Club, by far, utilized the largest number of venues and exclusively used Paramount Ranch, Santa Barbara, and Torrey Pines. Both the Cal Club and the LA Region alternated and even shared use of the commercial Riverside raceway for high profile events like

the Grand Prix for Sports Cars. The Cal Club lost Palm Springs to the LA Region after a dispute with the local promoter. In reaction, the Cal Club coordinated with the Pomona Elks Lodge to use the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds in June 1956.<sup>56</sup>

The two clubs were also “bickering” over whether the two organizations should recognize each other’s competition licenses and car preparation rules at their respective sanctioned races.<sup>57</sup> The SCCA national leadership advocated that its members retain a purely amateur status and established strict license and car requirements. By the late 1950s, the Cal Club welcomed both amateurs and professionals and was critical of the SCCA’s position.<sup>58</sup> The two groups continued to coexist in a tense environment where members like the outspoken president of the Cal Club, Ken Miles, were absent from high profile races like the November 1956 Palm Springs event due to their criticism of the SCCA.<sup>59</sup>

The SCCA had over 10,000 members nationwide in 1958 with the overwhelming majority of regions and membership located east of the Mississippi River.<sup>60</sup> There was an east-west divide in the club centered on the amateur versus professional debate, which John Bond of *Road & Track* equated to a “a civil war,” and the independent nature of the western regions. The SCCA leadership in Connecticut, known as the “Westport Pharaohs” due to their direct rule of the national club, demanded staunch adherence to amateurism and accountability on the part of its regions.<sup>61</sup> The independent nature of the 554 members of the LA Region was not unnoticed by the SCCA leadership in the early 1960s. They charged the region with allowing members to participate in professional racing at Riverside, non-adherence to SCCA car classifications, failing to submit proper documentation of a fatal accident at Pomona in July 1961, and maintaining improper liaison with the SCCA national office overall. For the region’s continuous disregard of

the national club's rules and regulations and overall non-cooperation, the SCCA summarily revoked the charter of the LA Region on November 25, 1961.<sup>62</sup>

In a surprising turn of events, the SCCA immediately awarded the Cal Club a regional charter making it the club's representative in Southern California. D.D. Michelmore, president of the Cal Club welcomed the opportunity to merge with the SCCA.<sup>63</sup> The advantage for the club was that it gained the resources of the SCCA national organization in regard to securing the requisite insurance for its racing program.<sup>64</sup> At a meeting of the Cal Club Board of Governors in Hollywood on November 25, the members decided by a vote of 88 to 7 to become the California Sports Car Club Region of the SCCA, or the Cal Club Region, effective December 6.<sup>65</sup> The club's first event was the Pacific Coast Championship races at Riverside on March 3-4, 1962. Josh Hogue, sports car columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, remarked, "The change in Smogville is a good one. If we may use an old expression, 'it should clean the air.'"<sup>66</sup>

It did not clean the air. James E. Peterson, president of the LA Region wrote to the SCCA executive director threatening legal action in the absence of a hearing that could effectively stop sports car racing in Southern California if not resolved.<sup>67</sup> Disaffected LA Region members formed an alliance with the USAC, which earlier in May 1958 had announced the creation of a professional sports car road racing category, or "go-for-dough" racing as sports columnist Art Luring called it, under the aegis of the United States Sports Car Club (USSCC) division.<sup>68</sup> In an immediate act of defiance, the newly created LA Chapter of the USSCC announced that its first race would be at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds at Pomona in March 1962.<sup>69</sup> The LA Chapter had beaten out the Cal Club Region to get the exclusive contract with the Elks Lodge for the Pomona event, which up to that point had been a Cal Club race.



The Cal Club Region went on the offensive. It ordered its members to avoid the Pomona race or face banishment from club events for the rest of the year.<sup>70</sup> In the end, the LA Chapter cancelled the Pomona race. The reasons given were due to the lack of entries and the inability to acquire insurance for the event. Either way, a lawsuit resulted blaming the SCCA.<sup>71</sup> The Cal Club Region continued to ban drivers that acted counter to SCCA rulings. Rising star Bob Bondurant was “uninvited” from the May 1962 Santa Barbara races due to his participation at an USSCC-affiliated race in Las Vegas.<sup>72</sup>

The LA Chapter initiated its own campaign to win the hearts and minds of Southern California sports car racers. Its “Open Letter to Sports Car Drivers” that appeared in *Motoracing* in April 1962 emphasized democratic elections, rules reflecting the California experience and not “eastern customs,” scheduling of both amateur and professional events, and the freedom to secure advertising and sponsors for cars and racers. Most importantly, the LA Chapter urged participation in “other events” while guaranteeing to all drivers that “we don’t ban you; we’ll support you.”<sup>73</sup>

In the interest of the sport, the Cal Club Region and the LA Chapter agreed to a merger in June 1962.<sup>74</sup> The merger stalled for the remainder of the year due to a disagreement on how to actually go about the process among the leadership of the two clubs. In hopes of finding a solution, a general meeting for members in good standing of the Cal Club Region and LA Chapter was held in Hollywood in December 1962. The members agreed to a merger of the two clubs after a vote of 172 to 95. It took two rounds to settle on retaining the Cal Club name. The group elected an eleven-member board, which included a new executive, Otto Zipper, a Ferrari and Porsche dealer and race team owner. The Cal Club Region announced a full slate of races for 1963, which included events at Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine and Riverside.<sup>75</sup>

The Cal Club Region went on to be one of the most successful and active SCCA regions in the United States through the early twenty-first century. It hosted numerous amateur events that primarily catered to drivers that did not require spectator participation. The Region also benefitted from the SCCA's incorporation of professional racing as it hosted the Southern California circuits for the highly popular United States Road Racing Championship (1963-1968) and the Can-Am (1966-1987) and Trans-Am (1966-present) series.

Sports car racing, however, faced a dilemma. An expanding population, rising property values, and the need for more housing and commercial infrastructure ensured that urban development in the paradise of Southern California forced the closure of many racing venues serving motorsports. Riverside and Willow Springs remained as the only two viable road race courses by the 1980s. A developer bought Riverside, which had risen in prominence as a venue for West Coast NASCAR competition, in 1983 with the intention of turning it into a shopping mall and housing subdivision. During the first weekend of July 1988, the Cal Club Region organized the last amateur races to be held at Riverside with more than 700 cars entered. Part of the festivities included one last lap around the course by the now legendary drivers from the early years, including Phil Hill, Carroll Shelby, and Dan Gurney.<sup>76</sup> The Cal Club Region opened its own motorsports complex, Buttonwillow Raceway Park, located two hours north of Los Angeles in Kern County in 1995.<sup>77</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The importance of Los Angeles and Southern California to sports car racing can be viewed at two levels. The struggle for control of racing between the Cal Club and the SCCA reveals that not all sports car enthusiasts agreed on what was the correct path for their sport. The democratization of this particular automotive lifestyle sport in the 1950s was not a singularly

objective process, but subjective as Southern Californians agreed and disagreed with each other, and with other parts of the country, over their perceptions of how sports car racing fit within their motorsports culture. Tensions emanating from differences in club operations, rules, and style, competition for dates and venues, and the explosive amateur v. professional debate illustrated that Southern California was not big enough for both an independent Cal Club and the SCCA.

Overall, Los Angeles was at the epicenter of American motorsports and car culture in the decades following World War II. The success and style of Southern California sports car racing introduced a new pastime to more Americans who looked to the region for motorsports inspiration. As the popularity of drivers and their cars grew, European manufacturers and American importers found a growing market for their products as new enthusiasts joined the larger community to go racing themselves. This new strain of automotive technological enthusiasm rooted in Europe had arrived in the United States, which in a large way was only possible by entering through the sports car paradise of Southern California.



Figure 1. British, German, and Italian sports cars at the start of the 215-mile Invitational 3-Hour Enduro Race held as part of the *Times-Mirror* Grand Prix at Riverside International Raceway on October 14, 1961. From the collections of the Henry Ford.

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