

An American legend's greatest year

Dan Gurney is rightly regarded as one of motorsport's all-round greats, with scores of wins to his name in a variety of machinery. No season demonstrated this better than his incredible 1967 campaign

By Kevin Turner, Editor

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Scoring victories in the Le Mans 24 Hours, Belgian Grand Prix, Indycar and a top-level touring-car series make for a pretty impressive career CV. But to achieve all that in one season is truly remarkable.

Fifty years ago, Dan Gurney had just started a campaign that would include all of the above successes, some of which he even took with his own team. It was surely the finest season for one of American racing's all-time greats.

"It could very well have been my best year," reflects the humble 85-year-old. "I've never looked at it with that question in mind."

Gurney was already an established top-liner when 1967 began, having taken the first Formula 1 world championship race victories for both Porsche ('62) and Brabham ('64). He'd also won the '59 Sebring 12 Hours with Ferrari and put in a starring performance at the '60 Nurburgring 1000Km alongside Stirling Moss.

His 1967 season started early – on January 2 with the South African Grand Prix – but not successfully. Suspension failure put his Anglo American Racers Eagle out, setting the tone for

the early weeks of the year. Engine failure ended his four-year domination of NASCAR's visit to Riverside, while a troubled run at the Daytona 24 Hours for Ford turned his pole position into a lowly seventh (despite driving two cars).

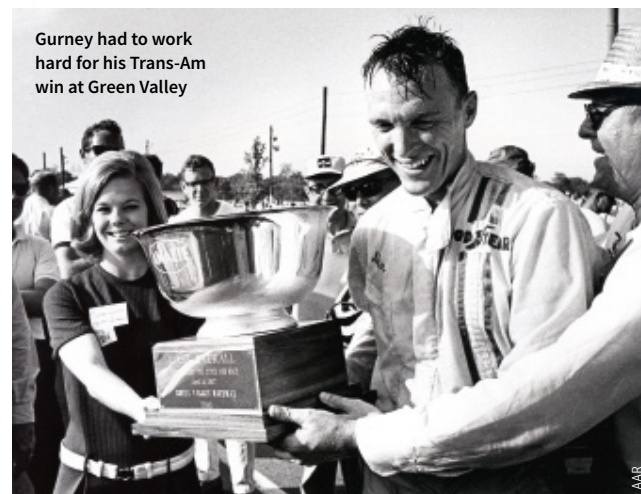
But the start of the European season was a turning point. The Eagle now had the Aubrey Woods-designed Weslake V12 engine installed once more instead of the Climax unit used in South Africa, and AAR entered two T1Gs for the Race of Champions at Brands Hatch. Although a non-championship F1 event, the contest attracted an impressive entry, including two Ferraris, reigning world champion Jack Brabham and the Honda of 1964 title winner John Surtees.

"Even in non-championship races, if you were up against fully fledged factory cars you still drove as hard as you could," says Gurney, who beat Surtees in heat one, with AAR teammate Richie Ginther third. Gurney then led a fine Eagle one-two in the second and, although Ginther hit late suspension trouble in the final, Gurney narrowly defeated Lorenzo Bandini's Ferrari to complete his domination of the weekend.

"Brands was a great track – I loved watching there and I loved racing there," says Gurney, who then took his first North American success of the year the following month... >>

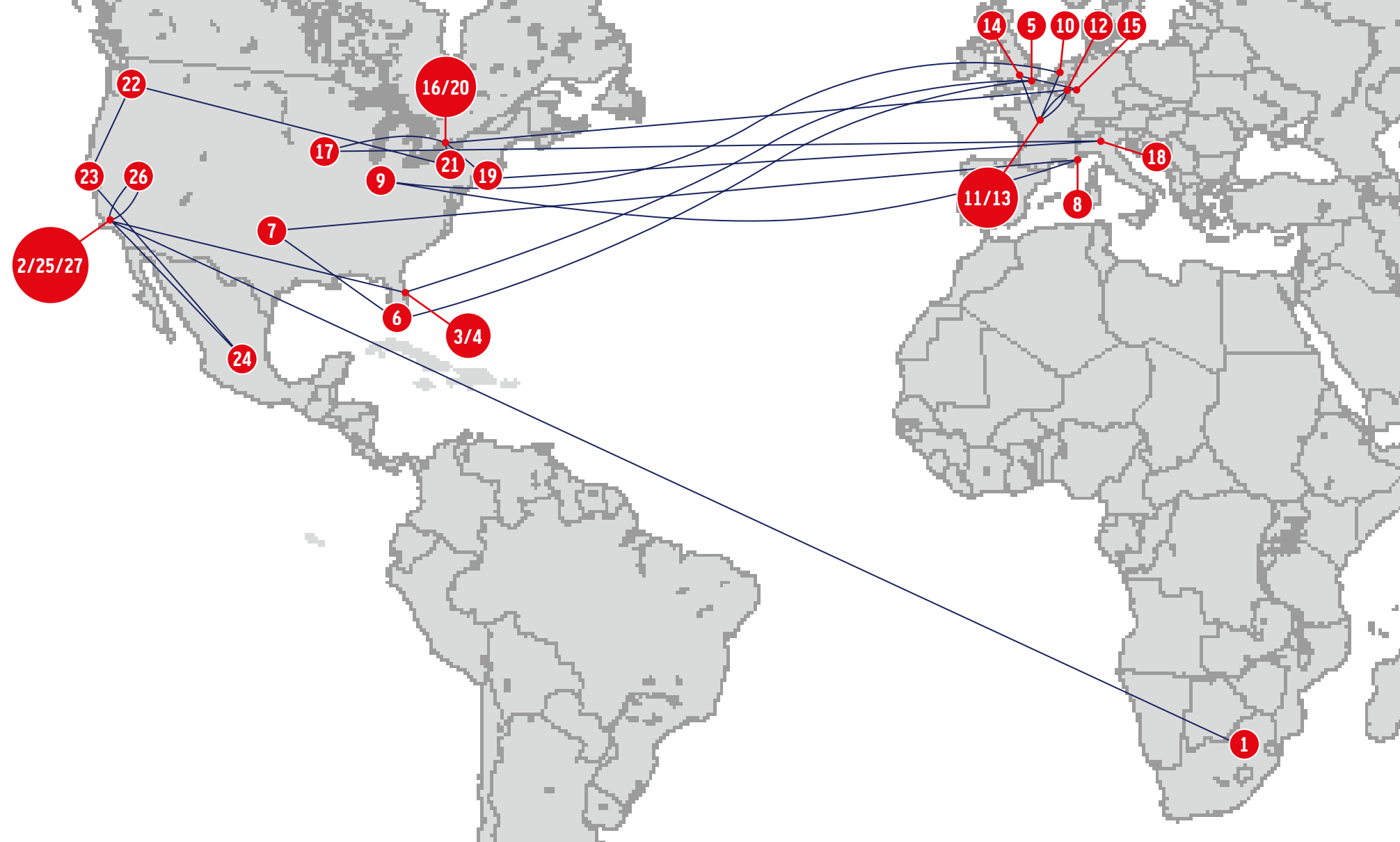


Race of Champions success ended unlucky run



Gurney had to work hard for his Trans-Am win at Green Valley





GURNEY'S 1967 SEASON				
	RACE	CAR	QUAL	RESULT (PROBLEM)
1	South African GP, F1	Eagle-Climax	11th	DNF (suspension)
2	Riverside 500, NASCAR	Mercury	3rd	DNF (engine)
3	Daytona Trans-Am	Mercury Cougar	2nd	11th
4	Daytona 24 Hours	Ford MkII	1st	DNF/7th*
5	Brands Hatch Race of Champions, F1	Eagle-Weslake	1st	1st
6	Sebring Trans-Am	Mercury Cougar	4th	DNF (clutch)
7	Green Valley Trans-Am	Mercury Cougar	2nd	1st
8	Monaco GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	7th	DNF (fuel pump)
9	Indianapolis 500	Eagle-Ford	2nd	DNF (burned piston)
10	Dutch GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	2nd	DNF (fuel injection)
11	Le Mans 24 Hours	Ford MkIV	9th	1st
12	Belgian GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	2nd	1st
13	French GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	3rd	DNF (fuel)
14	British GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	5th	DNF (clutch)
15	German GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	4th	DNF (driveshaft)
16	Canadian GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	5th	3rd
17	Road America Can-Am	Lola T70	3rd	DNF (gearbox)
18	Italian GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	5th	DNF (engine)
19	Bridgehampton Can-Am	Lola T70	3rd	DNF (fuel injection)
20	Mosport Park Can-Am	Lola T70	3rd	DNF (clutch)
21	United States GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	3rd	DNF (suspension)
22	Kent Trans-Am	Mercury Cougar	2nd	3rd
23	Laguna Seca Can-Am	Lola T70	2nd	DNF (overheating)
24	Mexican GP, F1	Eagle-Weslake	3rd	DNF (radiator)
25	Riverside Can-Am	Lola T70	1st	DNF (engine)
26	Stardust Can-Am	Lola T70	3rd	DNF (suspension)
27	Riverside Indycar	Eagle-Ford	1st	1st

*Gurney switched to another car after his first hit engine problems

Trans-Am had been gathering momentum, attracting manufacturers to the tin-top road-course series. Gurney drove alongside Parnelli Jones, among others, in the Mercury Cougar team and scored the car's first victory at Green Valley in April.

Soon, though, the gremlins struck again. At the Monaco GP Gurney qualified seventh, then shot up to third in four laps before his fuel-pump drive failed. At Zandvoort for the Dutch GP he qualified second to the new Cosworth DFV-powered Lotus 49 of Graham Hill – and half a second clear of the rest – with a revised car. “Extensive use of titanium and clever weight-saving produced a new Eagle some 100lb lighter than the car which won at Brands Hatch,” Autosport reported, but the result was the same as Monaco. This time fuel-injection problems downed the Eagle early on.

Between those two GPs, Gurney had again underlined his adaptability in the Indianapolis 500. Despite not focusing on Indycars, he qualified his Eagle-Ford second, beaten only by reigning double USAC champion Mario Andretti. In a race dominated by Jones's Granatelli STP Turbine, Gurney often headed the piston-engined brigade – which could have put him in contention for victory after the flying orange machine hit trouble late on – before a long pitstop dropped him down the order. Engine issues ultimately forced him out anyway.

Fortunately, the next two events would make Gurney's season. The Le Mans rivalry between Ford and Ferrari had stepped up a notch since the American firm's victory in the 24 Hours the year before. Ferrari had responded with the superb 330 P4 and dealt Ford a blow on home ground with a 1-2-3 at Daytona.

Ford's 1967 assault on the race was thus immense, with a septet of seven-litre V8s (three MkIIBs and four MkIVs) starting against three P4s. On paper the MkIV – one of which Gurney shared with Indy 500 winner and Le Mans rookie AJ Foyt – should have been the thing to have. It had more muscle than the four-litre Ferraris and a lighter, more sophisticated chassis than the older MkIIs, but Gurney isn't so sure.

“It was one-twentieth of one per cent better!” he says. “It was an enjoyable car to drive, but I think the 1966 car [the MkII, which had scored a 1-2-3] was capable of winning too.”

Gurney's theory is supported by the fact that Ronnie Bucknum led the early stages in one of the MkIIBs, but Gurney/Foyt still topped the order after two hours. Although up at the front throughout, Gurney insists he and Foyt had a gameplan.

Having been fast but unlucky before – he'd set pole and fastest lap in 1966 – Gurney took a more conservative approach. Even when Mike Parkes in the second-placed Ferrari tried to cajole him into a dice when the Ford was several laps clear, Gurney stood firm, at one stage pulling off the circuit to stay out of harm's way.

“The nature of the race has changed a great deal,” reckons Gurney. “Now it's like qualifying, but you couldn't do that with those cars. They had good brakes, but if you ran 10 laps as hard as you could they'd be total junk. It was still a big car.

“I had learned from [former Le Mans racer and team boss] Briggs Cunningham, who was always ahead of me at the end of the race! I mentioned that to AJ – I'm not sure he believed me at first – so we just never ran it that hard.” >>

About to start a trend by spraying the champagne after winning Le Mans



LAT IMAGES

That was just as well given Ford's various calamities, which included losing three cars in one accident in the early hours of Sunday morning. As dawn broke, only Gurney/Foyt stood between Ferrari and victory. But there were no late scares, aside from some rain, and Ford took its second Le Mans success at record speed. Gurney then started a now familiar tradition by spraying the victory champagne.

A week after winning endurance racing's greatest event, Gurney finally got some F1 luck at one of the all-time classic grand prix venues.

Nobody could live with Jim Clark's Lotus in practice at Spa, his pole time being an incredible 3.1s faster than the next man. But Gurney was that man, putting himself between the 49s of Clark and Hill, the Eagle itself three seconds clear of the next best non-Lotus after nudging 200mph.

Gurney got too much wheelspin at the start and was eighth out of Eau Rouge, but was challenging Jackie Stewart's BRM for second when runaway leader Clark pitted with a spark-plug problem. Although he had a brief stop of his own to complain about fluctuating fuel pressure, Gurney soon closed back in on Stewart, who was suffering gearbox issues. The Eagle broke the lap record before blowing past the BRM with a quarter of the race to go.

Gurney then pulled clear to win the Belgian GP by more than a minute. It was AAR's greatest success in F1 and, with a winning speed of nearly 146mph, it was also the fastest race then run on a European road circuit.

"Belgium was a much bigger deal than Brands," says Gurney. "It was notoriously fast and difficult.

"Our F1 effort was a small, close-knit group and everyone had a 'can-do' attitude."

Gurney's squad could, perhaps should, have added an F1 win on the greatest circuit in the world two months later at the Nurburgring. He hung on to German GP polesitter Clark (driving cautiously with a then-unidentified slow puncture) in the opening laps, then moved to the front when the Lotus slowed with damaged suspension. He was 45s clear of Denny Hulme's Brabham when the Eagle's driveshaft let him down.

Incredibly, apart from his Spa success, Gurney's only other world championship finish that season came with third in Canada. Not including the Climax-powered outing in South Africa, his average qualifying position was 3.9 (world

"The Eagle was quite capable of staying with a really good DFV, but it turned into a washing machine"

champion Hulme's was 5.5) and he was often the new Lotus 49's closest rival, but AAR could never get on top of reliability. Given the early fragility of Lotus boss Colin Chapman's revolutionary design, it was an opportunity missed.

"The car was quite capable of staying with a really good DFV, but it turned into a washing machine," says Gurney. "It was the oil [system] and meant we lost a certain percentage of power after just a couple of laps. In terms of plain power, when it wasn't being a washing machine, it was fantastic!

"The engine had quite a bit more potential than we allowed it to have. We just didn't quite have the expertise. The scavenger system wasn't right and it was a big thing to change."

"[Former Lotus designer] Len Terry did a terrific job on the car – it was an improved Lotus in many ways – and we built a lot of Indycars the same way."

There was still time for one more success that year.



Gurney entered his Eagle-Ford 67 for the Indycar finale at his beloved Riverside circuit in California – scene of the Eagle's first test – at the end of November. Against title contenders Foyt, Andretti and Gordon Johncock, and ex-F1 world champions Clark and Surtees, Gurney took pole.

Gurney and Clark, whose Vollstedt was running with a rudimentary raised rear 'wing' over the exhaust pipes, charged away from the field in the early stages as they battled for the lead. Eventually Gurney ran a little wide and Clark slipped through, only for his Ford engine to break a valve.

Gurney thus looked to be easing to a comfortable victory until a tyre needed changing at his fuel stop and extra time was lost, dropping him to third behind Andretti and Bobby Unser. "Gurney now produced a superb display of just how fast he can drive round Riverside," said Autosport's report. "He was catching Andretti at the rate of 1.5s a lap."

Above: final 1967 win came thanks to a sensational fightback in the Indycar decider at Riverside

Top and above right: Le Mans win was achieved at record speed after Foyt and Gurney came up with a plan

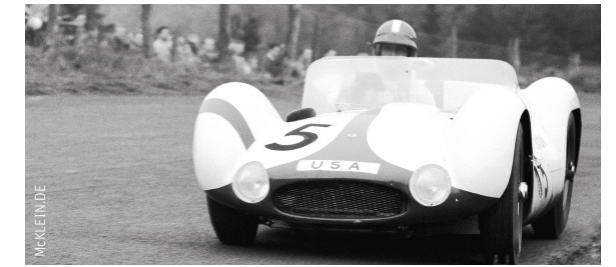
Andretti nevertheless seemed out of reach until he ran out of fuel, and Gurney snatched victory from Unser in an exciting climax to the 116-lapper.

Gurney's final 1967 tally stood at five wins from 27 starts and eighth in the F1 world championship, though tellingly he qualified in the top three on 19 occasions. Perhaps more remarkable is that his wins covered the two biggest single-seater series in the world and the Le Mans 24 Hours.

Sadly, he wouldn't get many more chances to impress in F1 in the dramatic and popular Eagles, as funding difficulties struck during 1968. "Then they pulled the plug," recalls Gurney of his support from Goodyear, which had made the project possible. "With Goodyear, certain people wanted the budget we had and they were better connected."

The cars had nevertheless made their mark, and played their part in one of motorsport's greatest seasons of versatility. ❄

OTHER GREAT GURNEY VICTORIES



1960 NURBURGRING 1000KM

The then 29-year-old played a key role alongside Stirling Moss as their American Camoradi-entered Maserati Type 61 defeated Porsche and Ferrari.



1962 FRENCH GP

Porsche's 804 model was a solid Formula 1 performer during 1962 and Gurney took the marque's first – and so far only – world championship success at Rouen.



1963 OULTON PARK BTCC

Gurney joined the British Saloon Car Championship (now BTCC) at Oulton Park and thrashed the field, which included Graham Hill, in an Alan Brown Ford Galaxie.



1964 FRENCH GP

Having come painfully close to winning the Belgian GP, Gurney scored Brabham's first world championship success at Rouen two weeks later in his BT7.



1968 RIVERSIDE NASCAR

Gurney recorded his fifth win in NASCAR's Riverside 500 in six years in a Ford Torino, defeating American legends Mario Andretti, Parnelli Jones and David Pearson.