



Dan Gurney

WHEN DAN GURNEY passed, Jan. 14, just three months shy of his 87th birthday, those of us who had grown up captivated by the tales of his racing exploits were shocked and saddened to lose one of the most admired American racers of the last century. Dan wasn't famous simply because he was so successful as a driver in amazingly variety of venues: sports cars, F1, Indy cars, Trans-Am, Can-Am, stock cars, endurance racing and more; he was a legendary builder and innovator as well.

Dan's company, All American Racers, constructed achingly beautiful cars that claimed victories in 78 major races, from the Indy 500 to the IMSA GTP series. But, even more important to his fans, Dan embodied the best qualities of an American champion: a self-made man, who by sheer skill, guts and determination managed to upend the established order while comporting himself like a real gentleman.

What many people don't know is that Dan was as dedicated to motorcycling as he was to racing cars. He'd been a rider since he was teenager and kept a favorite photo of himself aboard a TR6C Triumph dirt bike in his office, taken at the 1959 Big Bear Off-road Grand Prix in California, where he finished a worthy 21st out of 872 entrants. In the 1970s he partnered with Kim Kimball to become a Montesa dealer, because he wanted Americans to know that he wasn't "just a car guy."

Bravery isn't even an adequate word to describe his fearlessness. In an era when Formula One cars were fire-prone and fragile—and fatalities all too frequent—he raced his own creation, the Eagle Gurney-Weslake V12, to victory in 1967 over the insanely fast Spa-Francorchamp circuit through the Ardennes forest in Belgium at speeds up to 196 mph—a still unmatched achievement for an American driver and constructor.



Dan shows off the S&S powered V-Gator outside the AAR shops, which are now run by his sons Justin and Alex. The machine makes 150 hp and goes like a rocket, yet is a mellow ride in traffic. On Dan's left is Chuck Palmgren, and Rhys Griffiths is on his right. The bike now resides in the Barber Motorsports Museum in Birmingham, Alabama.

This F1 victory came only a week after he also won the world's foremost endurance contest, the 24 Hours of LeMans, together with the irascible A.J. Foyt, in a Ford Mk-IV. The first and only American team in an American-built car with American drivers to win overall at Sarthe. Atop the podium, Dan surprised everyone by spraying his magnum of Champagne over the crowd, starting a tradition that endures to this day.

While many racing drivers seem willing to win by any means necessary, Dan never stooped to dirty driving, earning him the deep respect and real friendship of fabled talents like Jim Clark, John Surtees, Stirling Moss, A.J. Foyt, Mario Andretti and many others.

Growing up in Riverside, California, where his parents moved in 1948, Dan learned the art of making speed from hot rodding—starting with souped-up flathead Fords in fifty-dollar cars stripped for minimum weight.

His heroes back then were the fastest and most innovative builders, the same group that would form the backbone of his team at AAR—men whose gifted hands and resourcefulness could outperform the cubic money of better funded teams.

DAN TOWERED AT almost six-foot-four and felt the dramatic fore-aft chassis pitching of a conventional motorcycle suggested its center of gravity was too

high. Car racing had taught him the value of light weight and a low center of gravity to achieve maximum acceleration, braking and cornering performance, as well as a small frontal area for best speed.

The first Alligator was based on a 350cc Honda enduro, reconfigured back in 1976 to have as low a seat as possible. Although not perfect, he judged the experiment promising enough to continue development. By 2002, the concept was sufficiently refined to a point that 36 A-6 Alligators (sixth generation) were produced for sale. Based on Honda RFV 650 single-cylinder engines, enlarged to 706cc and fuel-injected, they also featured super-efficient downdraft cylinder heads created in his own shop.

MCN tested the Alligator in December 2003, loaned to us by Dan's good friend, actor Perry King. Aside from its barely muffled sound, it was a functional revelation: dramatic acceleration without fear of wheelies, remarkable poise when braking without concern for stoppies, and a wind-cheating shape wrapped in flawless carbon fiber bodywork. With an 18.5-inch seat height and a very torquey 70 horsepower in a tidy 320-pound package (dry), we loved it, but couldn't muster its \$35,000 asking price.

Never satisfied with what he had built (surely another lesson learned from racing), Dan tried a variety of engine variations. I had the chance to ride a Gator powered by a YZF 450cc Yamaha motocross engine—again fuel-injected with a trick downdraft head—which equaled the performance of the larger Honda-powered model in an even lighter machine.

Later still, I had the chance to ride the S&S-powered V-Gator, which sported not only special Gurney heads, but a unique engine mounting to isolate vibration. It made 150 horsepower, and delivered breathtaking performance, but was otherwise a model of civility, smooth and tractable in traffic.

The crowning achievement of his passion for high-performance motor-



Taking time off from his busy car racing schedule (he was USAC Sports Car Champion in 1958), Gurney entered the 1959 Big Bear Grand Prix aboard a TR6C Triumph, finishing 21st out of 872 entries.

cycles was to be his patented Moment Cancelling Four Stroke. Featuring just two cylinders in a front-to-back layout for a narrow profile, with twin crankshafts geared together to eliminate vibration, it would be a compact water-cooled, DOHC 1800cc engine that Dan suggested could make over 260 horsepower!

Those of us who got glimpses of it as a work in progress, under the capable direction of Chuck Palmgren, knew how close it was to being finished before Dan passed. He never got to hear it run.

FOR MANY YEARS, Dan and his crew would make regular Sunday morning rides up nearby Ortega Highway in Southern California, also a favorite MCN test route. Nearly 20 years ago, five of us chanced to meet up with his big group while doing our own test of 600cc sportbikes. Gassing up at the last station before the rural part of the Ortega beckoned, we were struck by the sight of a very unusual motorcycle amongst his group, ridden by a tall guy in black leather who wore tan work boots and an all-black full-face helmet.

Unable to see who he was, I photographed the fascinating machine,

an image that graced the last page of Aerostich catalogs for a time. We all took off, following his group quickly down the road. The weather turned to rain, light at first, then very heavy, yet none of them slowed down! I tried to keep up, but as Dan's crew rocked well past 100 mph on the wet straightaways, I backed off.

At the end of the road, huddled inside the Lookout Roadhouse as a virtual hurricane lashed the wooden structure, Dan finally removed his helmet and I knew instantly why these guys were so fast. Although he was approaching 70, he'd lost none of his love for speed, and had led his group on a merry chase.

Seeing the recognition on my face, Dan flashed me his famous smile, and I knew I'd remember that day forever. That we would actually become friends years later was beyond my wildest dreams.

I retired from MCN a couple of months after a very fun visit with Gurney and Palmgren at AAR for my article on his Moment Cancelling Four-Stroke engine (MCN 12/15). Before vacating the office, I sent a hurried email to all my friends and colleagues urging them to keep in touch.

To my surprise, the very first person to respond was Dan, on New Year's Eve, no less, wishing me well and inviting me to his Thursday lunch get-togethers.

Although I honestly didn't feel worthy of his attention, these lunches became the highlight of my week. The chance to sit with Dan, hear his amazing stories, be privy to some of his secret projects and to ask questions I'd pondered for many years was an incredible treat.

Nothing less than a comprehensive biography could possibly do justice to Dan's incredible life. Thankfully, his lovely wife Evi has been working on that book. I can't wait to read it. Hopefully this brief sketch encourages others to learn more about Dan Gurney. ***allamericanracers.com/dan-gurney-biography*** MCN

Dave Searle (MCN editor '00-'16) started freelancing for Road Rider in 1988 and became the technical editor of MCN in 1996.