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Talk of the Morning: Time can't catch up with 86-year-old hot rodder

By Tom Wharton
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Driving a vintage car 170 mph across the scorching, white Bonneville Salt Flats is a daunting prospect for anyone.

But racing legend John Fitch, who will be an 86-year-old rookie when he begins a quest this weekend to set a land speed record during the 55th annual Bonneville Nationals Speed Week, is no ordinary somebody.

Fitch was a World War II fighter pilot, a prisoner of war, the first Sports Car Club of America national champion and he is the inventor of those yellow plastic safety barrels on U.S. highways, which officially are called "Fitch Barriers."

Fitch was kissed by Eva Peron after winning the Grand Prix of Argentina and later joked in his biography that "she died soon afterward."

He survived an end-over-end crash at 140 mph and raced on 42 courses around the world, including Le Mans and Sebring.

It's no wonder the veteran racer considers western Utah's wide-open spaces no big deal.

During Speed Week, which begins Saturday on the salt flats just east of Wendover, Fitch fully expects to set a record in a 1955 300 SL Gull Wing Mercedes owned by Robert Sirna of Troy, Mich.

"I have no concerns," Fitch said this week from his Connecticut home. "It seems quite safe. I am used to driving faster than that in quite dangerous conditions with pitches, trees on both sides of the road and the road two feet wide. I went 190 miles per hour at Le Mans at night in the rain under those conditions. [At Bonneville] there is nothing to hit, plenty of open space and I am not going fast enough for the car to fly."

Fitch would be the oldest person to ever set a land speed record at Bonneville, a feat that would cap five decades of racing. After passing his rookie tests, he hopes to go for the record -- which stands at 168 mph -- as early as Tuesday.

He will make his attempt in a stock-car class on Bonneville's five-mile short-course.

"The car has been modified within Bonneville regulations," Sirna said in a prepared statement. "But outwardly, the car looks like any other 300SL. We wanted to make sure it is in the spirit as well as the letter of the law."

Fitch visited the salt flats last year, though he did not compete.

"It is weird and wonderful," he said. "It is like the face of the moon."

While famous for racing on teams with legends such as Stirling Moss and in legendary Mercedes, Cunninghams and Corvettes, Fitch might be better known for inventing highway safety devices including the sand-filled yellow barrels.

According to his official biography, Fitch's co-driver, Pierre Levegh, was involved in the worst accident in racing history, a 1955 Le Mans race that killed 85 spectators.

The tragic racing accident inspired Fitch to invent compression barriers, displaceable guardrails and safety cages (called capsules) for race cars.

"John Fitch's achievements in road safety throughout the world have spanned 4 1/2 decades," said John Carney III, a Transportation Research Board committee chairman who gave Fitch the Kenneth Stonex Award in 1998 for his contributions to the field of roadside safety.

"His lifetime contributions have covered the full spectrum of highway safety -- the roadside, the vehicle and the driver," Carney is quoted as saying in Fitch's biography. "All have resulted in significant reductions in injuries and fatalities on the motorways of the world."

Fitch said the violent Le Mans crash motivated him to devise a means of stopping an out of control car safely without injury



John Fitch, 86, plans to break the land speed record in the Bonneville Speed Week. A young Fitch in front of the Cunningham CR that he drove in the early 1950s. (Courtesy of Kane Rogers)

to drivers or spectators. That led to the development of what was called the Fitch Inertial System.

Some officials estimate those barrels have saved as many as 17,000 lives since they were first deployed in the late 1960s.

"I was a wartime bomber pilot and a fighter pilot and I was involved in some fatal events," Fitch said. "This is a payback in a way."

Utah's six-day Speed Week begins Saturday at noon and the sponsoring Southern California Timing Association is reporting that salt conditions appear to be good for this year's land speed record attempts.

The event draws drivers from all over the world who compete for nothing more than a trophy in dozens of classes including motorcycles, electric cars, tractor-trailers, hot rods and sedans. According to the Southern California Timing Association's Web site, the event concludes at dusk each night. Admission is \$5 for a day pass and \$20 for the entire week with children admitted free.

wharton@sltrib.com



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