

Stutz at Le Mans

by David Blumlein

"The car that made good in a day". The day was Tuesday 30th May 1911 and the car was a Stutz, built by Harry Clayton Stutz with a four-cylinder Wisconsin engine driving through his own design of transaxle. The location was the inaugural running of the Indianapolis 500 and the car, driven by Gil Anderson, finished eleventh carrying race number ten.

This story started in Ansonia, Ohio in 1876 where Harry Stutz was born and where he grew up, like Henry Ford, on a farm but showed a greater interest in machinery than agriculture. By 1898 Stutz had built his first car and formed the Stutz Manufacturing Company in Dayton, Ohio. This he then sold to Lindsay Automotive Parts Co. for whom he initially worked. He broadened his experience by moving on to the G and J Tire Co., the Schleber Car-burettor Company, the American Motor Company and the Marion Motor Company. In 1910 he left Marion to form the Stutz Auto Parts Company, while acting as consultant to the Empire Motor Company. But he always harboured a desire to build his own cars and, in an environment where there were so many small companies building cars - Indiana and especially Indianapolis became initially the centre of American automotive production before being superceded by Michigan's Detroit - Stutz had learnt that he needed to do something out of the ordinary if he were to establish his marque above others.

Hence the entry of his car for the Indy 500 and his successful debut encouraged Stutz to offer replicas for which he formed a new company, the Ideal Motor Car Co. of which he was the chief designer. He leased a three-story factory in Indianapolis and by August the first cars were being delivered. They had 6.4 litre T-head Wisconsin engines and of course Stutz's own design of rear-mounted gearbox/final drive transaxle, and one of the range offered was a two-seat roadster which in 1912 was named the Bearcat, this becoming the famous rival of the Mercer Type 35 Raceabout. Stutz became president of Ideal and in 1913 he merged the company with his Stutz Auto Parts firm to become the Stutz Motor Car Co. of Indiana.

The company raced special versions of their cars and had much success in America in 1915 especially, taking on the likes of the imported Peugeot, Mercedes and Delage cars, the outstanding products of the European-centred Grands Prix. By 1917 Stutz was making its own engines and was producing up-market six-cylinder cars. Harry Stutz himself left the company to form HCS, which made cars from 1919 to 1925 (the Series 6 was chosen as the Pace Car for the 1921 running of the Indianapolis 500) and the Stutz Fire Engine Company (1919-1928). In the meantime financial dealings resulted in the Stutz company being purchased by Charles M Schwab, chairman of the Bethlehem Steel Works. Schwab could see that in the competitive post-World War 1 market Stutz badly needed to add an eight-cylinder car to their range. For this pur-

pose he hired in 1925 one of America's outstanding engineers as president of Stutz, Frederick Ewan Moskovics.

Born in Budapest in 1880 and brought to America at the age of four, Moskovics had built up an enviable reputation: he was inspirational in the first board tracks used in America, he was responsible for some of the advanced features of the outstanding Marmon 34 car, he was involved in the development, with Charles Kettering, General Motors' Chief Engineer, of ethyl-gasoline, and was a personal friend of Ettore Bugatti. Moskovics quickly scrapped all of the previous Stutz designs and laid down a new, low, sleek car with a 4.7 litre single overhead camshaft straight-eight engine, known as the Stutz 'Vertical Eight', which developed 90 b.h.p. and was the work of the Swiss-born engineer Charles Greuter. This car was introduced at the 1926 New York Auto Show and quickly became a success with rising sales.

Stutz returned to racing and achieved many successes in the AAA Stock Car Championship, winning outright in 1927. In the April Stutz won the Stevens Challenge Trophy as the fastest standard production car through 24 hours, run on the Indianapolis track. However, two events changed the company's fortune in the spring of 1928. At the Olympia Motor Show in London in 1927, Charles Kettering had expressed the view that the General Motors Cadillac 341 was faster than a Rolls Royce between Detroit and Dayton. At a dinner the following evening Moskovics claimed that the Stutz was better than the Rolls, all of which prompted Charles Weymann, the French coach-builder credited with inventing the famous fabric-covered body construction, to bet to the tune of 25,000 Dollars that his newly acquired 8-litre Hispano-Suiza was faster than the Stutz!

The result was a 24 hour challenge between the French-built Hispano-Suiza and the Stutz Black Hawk, to take place on the Indianapolis Speedway in April 1928, with the winner taking all. Driving the Hispano-Suiza were Weymann himself and Robert Bloch, the 1926 Le Mans winner in a Lorraine-Dietrich, while Moskovics relied on two drivers who had brought Stutz much success in those earlier years, Tom Rooney and Gil Anderson. The contest was eventually resolved in Weymann's favour when the American car had to be withdrawn at the eighteenth hour with valve problems. To cap this failure, within a week Stutz tragically lost its top driver Frank Lockhart, who crashed fatally at Daytona Beach when a tyre failed on his Miller-engined Stutz Black Hawk record car as he was attempting to break the World's Land Speed Record. Stutz withdrew officially from racing, sales dropped and Moskovics eventually resigned in 1929.

However, from these misfortunes came one unexpected outcome. Charles Weymann had been sufficiently impressed with the performance of the Stutz at Indianapolis that he purchased a Black Hawk model and promptly entered it for the 1928



Stutz DV16 - 2nd Le Mans 1928
MCM057 (kit) - MCM057M (built)

Le Mans race! Stutz was not of course the first American car to venture to the Sarthe's famous event: Chrysler tried in 1925 to be followed a year later by Overland and Willys-Knight but these cars had no luck. By 1928 Bentley was well into its stride at Le Mans and represented a formidable opposition to the lone Stutz.

The American car, a black painted Black Hawk model with 4.9 litre eight-cylinder engine, was driven by Edouard Brisson, an Argentinian residing in Paris who had already driven Lorraines in the race, and the aforementioned Robert Bloch. Charging off at the flag fall in the best Moss tradition, car no.1 with Brisson at the wheel engaged in an exciting battle with the green Bentleys. The Stutz not only lowered the lap record at times but also took the lead no less than five times during the race, making the event one of the closest fought in its history. In fact it was only in the latter stages that the Stutz's 3-speed gearbox had to be held in top gear, giving Barnato's 4 1/2 litre Bentley sufficient advantage to win but only by 13 kilometres. And Chrysler backed up its countryman by taking third and fourth with its Type 72 model.

Brisson then took the Stutz to compete in that year's French Grand Prix, run as a sports car race at Comminges in the south of France, and finished in a fine third place.

It was not surprising therefore that a team of three Stutz cars lined up for the 1929 Le Mans race. These cars had slightly larger 5.3 litre engines, four-speed gearboxes and other modifications: double brake lines, fuel lines wrapped in asbestos and neat air scoops under the chassis to cool the rear shock absorbers. Their short-wheelbase, right hand drive chassis had been shipped from Indianapolis to France where their Weymann bodies were fitted. The cars came with Roots superchargers mounted between the front dumb irons but tests conducted at Monthéry before the race gave unsatisfactory results and it seems that probably two of the cars ran without their superchargers. Sources are unreliable on this matter. Drivers were Brisson/Louis Chiron (no.4), Guy Bouriat/"Georges Philippe" (Philippe de Rothschild, car no.5) and Britain's George Eyston partnered by Richard Watney who was sales manager of Warwick Wright, the London distributor for Stutz in New Bond Street, W1.

The cars were up against a strong team of Bentleys, including their new 6 1/2 litre Speed Six model and the big black cars were not destined to repeat the impressive performance of the previous year. Brisson brought his into the pits for refuelling and the car caught

fire. It was extinguished before too much damage was done to the rear of the car but poor Brisson suffered sufficient burns to stop him continuing. Chiron took over and envisaged a long, lone drive but he was spared because fire had weakened the fuel tank and the consequent leak put the car out of the race. A leaking tank also accounted for the retirement of the Eyston/Watney car, leaving Bouriat/de Rothschild in what was probably the sole supercharged car to come home fifth behind an impressive array of four Bentleys.

Two cars were entered for the 1930 race, possibly with the same engines as used for their 'stock' entry at Indy that year but again our sources are conflicting. Brisson was teamed with Louis Rigal and drama started when Rigal went off the road twice, initially damaging the exhaust but inflicting more comprehensive damage on his second excursion. This soon caused the car to catch fire and Rigal applied the hand brake and tried to jump clear while the car was still moving. He caught his heel on the top of the door and landed full on his face a merciful inch from the wheels of Barnato's winning Speed Six Bentley. The Stutz ran on a few yards before the recently replenished 45-gallon fuel tank exploded. Flames could be seen in the city of Le Mans five miles away and the passing cars had to cope with billowing flames and smoke until officials could haul the wreckage to the side with a rope: the Stutz burned for two and a half hours. Its team-mate, piloted by Raymond Boulier and Philippe de Rothschild, had an off-road excursion as well but later broke a half shaft, coming to a halt one hundred yards or so from its gutted sister car. The incidence of fire in the Stutz cars recalls that of another sporting car of the time with a propensity for self-immolation: the Bugatti Type 43.

There were two more appearances for Stutz at Le Mans: single car entries in 1931 and 1932. In the former Brisson/Cattaneo lost oil pressure and retired. The same car (certainly a twin-cam DV32) in Brisson's hands the following year was an innocent victim when the Alfa Romeo driver Minoia spun at the White House bends, already partially blocked by Jean Trevoux's overturned Bentley, and, having nowhere to go, Brisson collided with the Italian car and crashed into the bank. Brisson was hurled out and escaped unharmed.

So the effort of the single car in 1928 turned out to be the best result for an American car at Le Mans until Ford won in 1966!