

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

STOPPED RACING

The warning came in the nick of time. Chuck “Charlie” Daigh, a hired gun working at Southern Engineering and Development, Chevrolet’s secret racing base in Georgia, on the edge of Atlanta, answered the telephone and heard the voice on the other end telling him “Charlie, be careful. Something is gonna to pop.” Then silence.

It was the killjoy AMA – the Automobile Manufacturers Association, ordering Detroit’s and Dearborn’s Big Three automobile corporations -- General Motors, Ford Motor Co, and Chrysler -- to roll up their complicated network



of covert factory teams, and leave racing forever. And, sure enough, within hours, Chevrolet’s big base had closed down and Charlie was out of work; there was insufficient payroll even to even buy him airfare home to Los Angeles.

Not to worry, though. Chevrolet employed him as a mercenary racing mechanic, but Charlie’s true trade was danger junkie, a calling he’d

picked up while he and his brother Harold were attached to a high-risk troupe of paratroopers fighting Germans in the Second World War.

Then, in 1951, 1952, 1953, and 1954, Charlie had been in the Mexican Road Race -- acting as navigator, ballast and problem-solver -- on a clandestine squad of Lincoln-Mercury leviathan luxo-cars . Surviving politics and intrigues at the corporate level was, to Charlie, nothing but another dose of high-risk duty; and, precipitous as it was, the phone call gave him just enough time to act.

Helping himself to a share of the corporation’s rolling stock, Charlie commandeered a Nomad station wagon; quickly replaced its engine with a hotted-up one he lifted from a Corvette; next hooked a late-model to the bumper of the Nomad; and sped north to Tennessee where a NASCAR Grand National was in progress. Here, after trading the late-model for cash, he drove the Nomad out to L.A., idly wondering which one of the Big Three would be employing him next.

The majority already had: In addition to his stint in Mexico with Lincoln, Charlie previously had been fired and then rehired by Chevrolet’s shadow outfit and also had served time at Peter DePaolo Engineering, Ford’s backdoor squadron.

Charlie Daigh, then, was resilient as racing was: Hard as the AMA fought to eliminate racing, nothing worked. Whenever the Big Three shut down its factory-backed outfits, something always got them going again.. Paralyzing, then, was the initial panic after Charlie and the rest of racing's corporate mechanic mercenaries discovered that this time the AMA hit squad was in deadly earnest and was putting its mandate in WRITING -- and what writing! The strangled wording of what posterity afterward recalled as "the AMA Ban," said that GM, Ford, and Chrysler "promise never to race or" to participate in any public contest, competitive contest, or test of passenger cars involving or suggesting racing... the advertising or publicizing of any race or racing...the advertising of any race or speed contest to evaluate the actual or comparative capabilities of passenger cars for speed, or the specific engine torque, horsepower, ability to perform in any context that suggests speed..." It was quite a day, June 6, 1957. The Big Three were promising to abstain from racing, something all of them had claimed never to have done in the first place.

Take Chevrolet. Although back in the 1920's its founding brothers had raced, the only racing that GM had ever condoned officially was Chevrolet's annual splash of Americana called the Soap Box Derby.

FoMoCo's story was just as sad. The company had a speed heritage dating back to Henry Ford's No. 999, one of the first racing cars, but Dearborn had actively disavowed racing ever since 1935, the year the old man financed the Miller-Ford fiasco in the Indy 500, and lost his shirt. But in 1957, just before the AMA ban took hold, Ford was racing with what it claimed was "... the greatest collection of talent ever assembled around one marque"; the ban rendered all of them dead meat.

Meanwhile, some years earlier, on a muggy afternoon in late 1951, on the savage jungle frontier separating Mexico and Guatamala, Lincoln-Mercury had gotten into the act.. A dreadnought squadron of heavyweight Lincoln Capri-model town cars --having raced and battled each other across the dry-gulch deserts and towering volcano ranges of Mexico for five days and 2,178 miles--had swept to victory in the La Carrera Panamericana, the great Mexican Road Race.

Lincoln-Mercury wasn't the first to go racing in Mexico; tiny Hudson went below the border first, and never stood a chance because its flathead Hornets were antiques five model years old. Lincoln-Mercury, by comparison, had the advantage of possessing big overhead-valve V8's plus the services of U.S racing's two hottest outside contractors, a couple of oilfield roughnecks and obsessed racers, Clay Smith and Bill Stroppe. Smith and Stroppe had implored Lincoln to bring to Mexico a factory team of Lincoln Capris.

What Smith and Stroppe said counted, because the pair already were famed for creating the tricked-out L-M sedans which had been repeat winners of the Mobilgas Economy Run, the infamous mileage swindle. Nobody else but Smith and Stroppe could have convinced Lincoln that Mexico, with its dipping, diving, constantly switchbacking, two-lane blacktop was designed expressly for Lincoln's high-tonnage luxury monsters.

So, exactly as they'd done in the fraudulent Mobilgas Run, Smith and Stroppe tricked-out a team of Capris;



hired Charlie Daigh and other brilliant problem-solvers; then put hell-bent Indy 500 racing chauffeurs behind the wheels, and Lincoln won four – 1951, 1952 1953, 1954 -- Mexicos in a row. Afterward Smith-Stroppe duo had to break up when, first Smith got killed on a dirt track, and then almost all of L-M's Indy drivers did the same; and then the government of Mexico banned further Carreras because it was too expensive to keep mobilizing the army for conducting crowd control.

June 6, 1957 was a black day for those few pro-racing proponents within the AMA, but for big Bill France, founder and tyrant of late-model stock car racing, it meant

the end of all his plans for himself and his new, rigged, National Association for Stock Car Automobile Racing, NASCAR. Big Bill was a good 'ole boy – a fast and opportunistic thinker who had divined that stock car racing's heart was the deep south: he already had his drivers – lots of hooch-hauling moonshiners like Curtis Turner, But NASCAR still was nothing but a Dixie phenomenon, and France lusted for the approval and participation of the Big Three.

The date he first did so is unclear, but soon Big Bill was hitting on the Big Three with the tantalizing slogan, "Race on Sunday. Sell on Monday!" He started at the top with Chevrolet, the Big Three's best-seller, as well as its most anti-racing marque. Yet, as was known to Big Bill, Chevy's chief engineer, Edward N. Cole, was a pro-racing anomaly, who, upon first hearing it, believed wholeheartedly in France's "Race on Sunday. Sell on Monday!"

In fact, just as France approached him, Ed Cole was in the middle of preening for market his Turbofire V8 – the first mass-produced automobile engine which was deemed capable on extracting more than one horsepower for every cubic inch of displacement. And once he ascended to the powerful position of general manager of



Chevrolet, Cole horrified the division's anti-racing elements by marketing his seminal V8 as "The Hot One!"; and, the following year, he upped the hype to "The Hot One Is Even Hotter!"

Ed Cole had been a controversial and small legend within GM ever since his career began in 1933. Being a lab technician in Cadillac's luxury division during the worst year of the Great Depression wasn't a promising beginning; but his uncanny engineering skills propelled Cole to the top of the corporate ladder, despite his very un-GM-like

maneuvering of re-inventing sluggish passenger monoliths into weapons of high-performance.

Not only had Cole created Chevrolet's "Hot One" -- his small-block V8 – but he'd been in on the re-birth of the Corvette "sports car," initially a turkey made of plastic unable to out-run to 60 mpg a lumbering Oldsmobile.

Under Cole's stewardship, the Corvette experienced a bizarre metamorphosis and became a two-seat banshee

with all the goodies: four-on-the-four, limited-slip differential, Cerametallic brakes and hot camshaft. And so, that spring, Ed Cole sent a team of big 'Vettes to Sebring, where they became the talk of the 12 Hours.

FoMoCo quickly spotted Cole's and Chevrolet's brazen violation of the AM Ban, yet was powerless to do anything to stop it, because the weakness of the AMA was that it wasn't a policing organization and had no provisions for inflicting penalties on any member caught suborning the Ban. Cole and Chevy went right on suborning. That same 1957 fall, after the AMA Ban had been in effect for several months, Cole took over custodianship of Corvette's high-finned, SR2 and sent it to Nassau, down in the Bahamas, for the spectacular sports car carnival and week-long cocktail party called "Speed Weeks."

A long-held Nassau custom was that it was impolite to ignore the attentions of the uniformed waiters who were serving cocktails right in the pits; and, as usual, a lot of drivers were drunk, none more than the SR2's assigned chauffeur Curtis Turner, whom Cole had drafted out of the deep south's moon-shining and NASCAR fakery. Came the start of the feature race, all might have been lost, had not Turner been accompanied by a drinking pal, who, to tell Curtis when it was time to turn, joined him in the wheelhouse of the SR2. For two out-of-control laps the pair did a pretty good job of holding the SR2 in or near the lead. But finally Chevrolet's irreplaceable sports car skidded off the back straightaway and went careening into the middle of one of Nassau's swamps.

Just three months afterward, in Florida, at Daytona Beach, in NASCAR's waterfront 200-miler, Ford nailed yet another outrageous General Motors violation, this time concerning Pontiac. Not only had Pontiac just swept the 200, but conspicuously whooping it up in the winner's circle with Big Bill France and all the rest of stock-car-racing's colorful personalities, was the division's ambitious general manager Semon "Bunkie" Knudsen, who was flim-flaming the AMA Ban by spending his own money to turn Pontiac into a marque of cubic inches; horsepower; sales success; and profits.

Bunkie's father was William S. Knudsen, a flamboyant Ford-to-GM turncoat from Detroit's and Dearborn's early years who'd left Bunkie a sizable fortune to dispose of as he wished, and Bunkie chose racing. Not long afterward, William C. Mitchell, GM's newly-appointed Chief of Styling, duplicated Knudsen with a flim-flam of his own. Using a cast-off mule chassis borrowed from the Corvette sports car's abandoned SS program, and a shell of fiberglass shaped on the sly by Mitchell's best stylists, Mitchell, like Knudsen, engaged in a multi-season of personally-financed racing with the hot set of wheels which became the Sting Ray.



Meanwhile, all the men of FoMoCo knew was that multi-divisions of GM were racing and winning races and they were not. So Ford's marketing, sales, and engineering departments made a pitch to their new division manager Robert Strange McNamara, a whiz-kid hired by "Hank the Deuce", Henry Ford II who was the lackluster

grandson of Henry I, to restore shrinking profits, such as the crackling great \$380-million bath Ford had just suffered with its notorious Edsel.

The pitch McNamara's underling made their boss was simple: Why not crash GM's party by funding Ford's own sub rosa racing program? Of course those underlings knew that they were pitching the wrong man. Compared to Ed Cole, McNamara's opposite number at Chevrolet, who had authorized Chevy's PR coup "the Hot One," McNamara was a wet blanket whose only interest in automobiles was building them cheaply and making them invisible.

The VW, McNamara was quoted, made an ideal piece of transportation. While Chevrolet had added steroids to its Corvette, all that Ford's so called sports car, the Thunderbird, received was a stretching-out and a wider

backseat. The one sales success McNamara is remembered for, the frugal and uninspired Ford Falcon, was a mongrel which McNamara's frustrated underlings barely argued him out of reducing from six-cylinders to four.

Difficult as it was to prosecute a serious racing program when your own general manager is meddling in its operation, it wasn't impossible: Guru Dan Sullivan, one of Ford's old-line, most valuable engineers, simply began running his own covert operations. Sullivan was old, old Ford, originally hired by Henry 1 himself, and Sullivan's appetite for racing came from Henry. Within Ford, Sullivan was famous. For one thing, way back in 1932, he'd been part of the select team which invented Ford's fast V8 flathead, the ground-breaking powerplant selected by Public Enemy No. 1 Dillinger as his bank-robbing vehicle of choice.



As his road-map for negotiating the corporate Ford labyrinth and circumventing McNamara, Sullivan aped the philosophy of his personal god Henry -- "Never complain, never explain." A network of friends and admirers throughout Ford permitted Sullivan to move in mysterious and highly effective ways. He was, for instance, in cheerful cahoots with a foreman at Ford's Ohio engine plant in Cleveland; to get crucial parts needed in a hurry, Sullivan memorized the numbers of various box-cars departing the facility.

Deprived of a dynamometer by McNamara, Sullivan carried out horsepower-developing projects on his kitchen table. The secret engines he breathed on were frequently transported by a moving van with its windows blacked out. But one of them got finished so late it had to be shipped to Daytona by air. A flat-bed truck ordinarily used to haul straw picked it up in Orlando, and a Ford Falcon was rented from Hertz. The rental's engine came out, Sullivan's went in, and Sullivan won again -- even though victory had come in a measly compact-sedan.

Sullivan's efforts notwithstanding, it wasn't Ford but Bunkie Knudsen's wide-track Pontiacs, traveling at velocities in excess of 150 mph, faster than the Indy 500, which swept Big Bill France's NASCAR into the super-

speedway era. And by 1961, Bunkie's and GM's crowning season, and Ford's most shameful, Pontiacs were winning three times as many Grand Nationals as Ford.

But a short five seasons afterward everything had swung in Ford's favor. The corporation was all alone atop domestic and international racing; in addition to NASCAR and the Indy 500 Dearborn had embarked to France, and Le Mans, not only winning the world's biggest sports car race but transforming it into gigantic Ford commercial, one that saw Hank the Deuce VIP'ed to max: as personal guest of the Gauls, the Deuce even got to flag off the 24 Hours.

Ford not only was renouncing the AMA Ban, but, according to Hank the Deuce, his company was "Going racing with both feet!" Sentimentalists within FoMoCo interpreted so wholehearted and wildly unexpected an endorsement to mean that at last the Deuce was recognizing his duty to his grandfather and the memory of old 999. They were wrong. History wasn't the only thing capable of stirring a middle-aged and lackluster mogul from his business-induced torpor, there was some else, and it was Cher'chez la femme.

Upon collapsing under the spell of a romantic and sexy 34-year-old blond bombshell – and out-dueling cosmetics czar Revson for her favors – the previously dull Deuce was a reborn man. Not-so-coincidentally he set Ford's future on racing. Racing seemed the one thing as alive as Cristina, his new woman, or, put another way, Cristina had the hots for racing.

Chrysler aped Ford by bailing out of the ban, but those executives at GM like Bunkie Knudsen were less lucky. Promoted to general manager of Chevy when Ed Cole was kicked upstairs, Knudsen hatched one racing scheme, involving the Corvette, and it flopped. Such was the saga of the AMA ban and many of its principals: Oddly mixed fates awaited some of them, including McNamara, Knudsen, Cole, and Charlie Daigh. McNamara passed up the chance to become the first non-family member to become boss of Ford by joining the presidential administrations of JFK and LBJ -- a terrible mistake, because he effectively inherited the stewardship of the Vietnam war.

Cutting across corporation boundaries from GM to Ford, Bunkie quickly ascended to the same post of Ford president which McNamara had shunned, and, for being overly ambitious, got fired by Hank the Deuce, the same as his father got terminated by Henry I. Cole spent seven successful seasons running GM, and his reward was Ralph Nader. Charlie Daigh, after getting bounced by Chevrolet, couldn't find any more work as a mechanic and had to take up employment as a racing driver, an occupation he loathed because he believed all racing drivers were, compared to mechanics, inferior. "A racing driver," Charlie once declared sarcastically, "is nothing but a mechanic with his brains blown out." When last heard from, Charlie's hobby was restoring to perfection one of Dan Sullivan's old Dillinger V8 flatheads.

And, of course, the off-spring of stock car racing's great tyrant, Big Bill France, continue turning his NASCAR into a monster. And, to this day, "Race on Sunday, sell on Monday," the great mantra France sold to the Big Three, never has been proven. **-JS**