



ash - through the esses

This column originally appeared on TheRaceSite.com

Through The Esses - Masten Gregory - Totally Fearless

5/24/2005 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

"Masten, I would say, of all the drivers, he was totally fearless. He was really almost fanatical. I mean, he didn't know fear. He drove to the limit, absolutely beyond the limit! Interesting, once off the track he was mild-natured. But once that flag dropped, he became totally dedicated."
- Louis Stanley, Owner, British Racing Motors (BRM)

As a teenager in the 1960s, I looked forward to visiting the local luncheonette each Saturday to pick up a copy of the latest issues of Auto Racing magazine - my all time favorite - and Autoweek and Road & Track. I couldn't wait to read about the people and the cars that were competing in sportscar racing. Magazines like Sports Car Graphic and Car & Driver also fed my desire to learn all I could about the people who could drive such exotic race cars so fast.

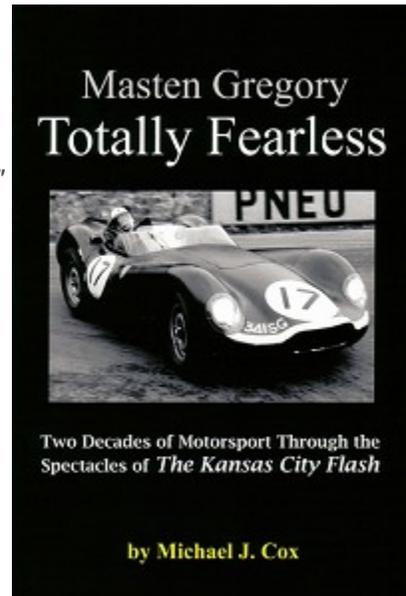
As I would eagerly pour over the pages of each magazine, certain names would regularly appear in stories and in photo captions. I came to readily recognize names like Mark Donohue, Roger Penske, Dan Gurney, Phil Hill, Stirling Moss, Jack Brabham, Bruce McLaren, Chris Amon, Dennis Hulme, Peter Revson, Masten Gregory, Jim Clark, Graham Hill, Jim Hall, Briggs Cunningham, and countless others. And with each new issue I learned a bit more about each.

But I never really learned enough about Masten Gregory. I would often see pictures of him wearing his trademark black square-framed glasses, in the pits or in the paddock at a race meet. Typically he would be shown with a group of other drivers or racing personalities whose background and success stories were more familiar to me. I never really knew much about him, but I knew he always seemed to be deeply involved in the sport with which I was so intrigued.

And now, thanks to my wife Shirley, I finally know quite a bit about Masten Gregory. No, she didn't know him when she was younger, but she did know that I had mentioned (alright, nagged her about) my interest in a new book entitled, "Masten Gregory: Totally Fearless" and so she presented me with a copy.

Author Michael J. Cox has written an outstanding review of Gregory's life in the sport of auto racing. When time permitted I would steal away to a quiet place to read one entertaining and enjoyable chapter after another. It was like having the latest issue of AutoRacing - circa 1960 - in my hands all over again. All the famous names were there and this time, the name of Masten Gregory wasn't buried in the body of a race report. Masten Gregory's name was the very reason the other words on all the pages appeared there at all.

The son of Ridelle and Rowena Gregory, he a successful businessman and she a former actress, young



Masten quickly established his capacity for extracting more seconds out of a minute than nature intended. From drag races in the streets of his native Kansas City, to brilliant stints at the wheel of some of the leading sports cars of the day, Gregory was admired for his courage and respected for his talent in a race car.

From 1953 to 1970 he would go on to compete in championship sports car and Formula One races across North America and Europe, often pitting his skills against - and beating - the best talent in the sport of auto racing.

Oh, and did I mention he could leap out of a speeding race car better than almost anyone? (Of course, there weren't many who wished to challenge his elevated status in this endeavor.) His propensity for leaping out of about-to-crash race cars could perhaps be attributed to his having been born a leap year child, arriving on this planet on February 29, 1932.

What follows is an excerpt that illustrates the leap of life Gregory so often found himself making. The event is the 1958 BRDC International Sports Car race at Silverstone. Gregory was driving a Lister-Jaguar.

"I was passing a car. He pulled over on me, I had to go on the grass, it was wet with rain, and when I turned the wheel to get back on the circuit, the car didn't respond, it was in a full understeer attitude and it was heading straight for an embankment.

"Well, I thought, this is a poor situation... (After attempting to correct the slide)...I finally said to myself, if this car hits that embankment going at this rate, there's going to be one hell of a wreck, it's going to destroy the automobile, I'd be better off out of it.

"So I stood up on the seat and stepped over the side. The car hit the bank and wiped itself out. I landed on the grass, I hurt my shoulder. It was paralyzed for a while, but relatively little happened to me, really. Afterward I started thinking about it, I wondered if I had done the intelligent thing. Actually, of course, I had certainly done the right thing, because I was alive."

Attempts to leap from danger like a Batman facing death aside, Gregory was a talented driver and his expressions of that talent brought a measure of pure excitement to a sport that already oozed of an intoxicating blend of sophistication, bravado and raw speed. The little man in glasses was all muscle when a steering wheel was in his grip.

"(Gregory) was the fastest American to ever go over and race a Grand Prix car." - Carroll Shelby

Gregory did not have the kind of excellent eyesight that we take for granted as a prerequisite for our premier athletes today. Shelby described Gregory this way, *"He couldn't see shit; his glasses were as thick as Coke bottles!"* But that was no detriment to Gregory. When someone asked him if he could see better with the new pair of corrective lenses he had just put on, Gregory replied, *"No. Now that I can see where I'm going, I scare the hell out of myself!"*

I would like to share even more with you about the contents of this wonderful book, but I suggest you get hold of a copy of your own. For anyone who looks upon the sportscar racing scene in North America today as a golden time, I suggest you brush up on your history. The time of Masten Gregory was the time of Stirling Moss and Juan Manuel Fangio and Peter Collins and Dan Gurney and Phil Hill. A time when race cars went fast and safety considerations were on the top of no one's list of items to be addressed before a race. It was a time when drivers literally took their lives in their hands every time they pulled away from a starting grid.

Sportscar racing was still in its infancy back then, and Masten Gregory was one of the people who helped it to grow into an international sensation. And I know that about him now - and so much more - because I read the book *"Masten Gregory - Totally Fearless. Two Decades of Motorsport through the spectacles of*

The Kansas City Flash."

At the time of this writing, copies of the book were available through several sources including Amazon.com, MTCAbooks.com (the publisher), Motolit.com, and Motorsportcollector.com among others.

"Starting on the 11th row of the grid, he was 17th at the end of the first lap and passed four more on the next lap including Dan Gurney. Gregory was ripping through the corners, the tail hanging out, spray flying, arms crossed in opposite-lock and he charged around the course. He was ninth by lap six, sixth on lap eighteen and then took fifth on lap forty two. It was a jaw dropping performance and all the more so since despite everyone's expectations, he kept it on the track. Many team managers looked at Gregory with a new opinion of his talent as a result of this race." - Don Capps in an article he wrote about Gregory's performance in the 1961 Aintree 200 Formula One race held on a track steeped in water.