

Capturing a Golden Age



*An alumnus unveils his collection of vintage racing car photos, recalling
a time in which car enthusiasts once roamed free among racing's legends.*

by Jana F. Brown

PHOTOS BY JIMMY GIBSON '59
(www.jimmygibsonphotographer.com)



Nassau 1959: Phil Hill (with lucky argyle socks)

Sebring 1959: Lucky Casner in a '58 Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa

Sebring 1959: Phil Hill drives past hay bale barrier

Sebring 1964: Lodovico Scarfiotti in his Ferrari 275P

Sebring 1959: Jean Behra in his '59 Ferrari

On January 19, 2012, Eastman Kodak, founded in 1888 and once the standard-bearer of the photography industry, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The financial woes of the corporate giant are undeniably linked to the times. As the digital age of photography has barreled into existence, it has all but erased the days of loading film, chancing a shot, and waiting anxiously for the results to emerge from a bath of chemicals.

Musician Paul Simon sang about Kodachrome, Kodak's iconic 35mm film, in a 1973 song that pleaded, "Mama, don't take my Kodachrome away."

For amateur photographer Jimmy Gibson '59, Kodachrome is a metaphor for another time, a time when he clicked away in the color film, when automated exposures were a luxury of the future, and when an 18-year-old Sixth Former from St. Paul's could leave school for spring break with a couple of pals and, days later, stand mere feet from the track around which the legends of car racing sped.

Kodak did take Kodachrome away, retiring it in 2009, a year shy of its 75th anniversary as the flagship of the company's brand. But Gibson grew up threading its glossy spools into the back of his camera. The son of a photographer, Gibson was given a Kodak Brownie as a 12-year-old and a Pentax with a 50mm lens at 17, and his fascination with seeing the world through a lens soon became a passion he was able to merge with another boyhood obsession: cars.

On Labor Day Weekend 1958, Gibson met up-and-coming driver Lucky Casner at Connecticut's Thompson Raceway. The meeting was one of fortune for Gibson and, eventually, SPS pals Ted Johnson '59 and Marty McClintock '59. Earlier in the year, Gibson had created fake letterhead identifying the members of the SPS Auto Racing Team, consisting of two drivers (Gibson and Peter de Bretteville '59), a chief mechanic (Johnson), and a manager (Alston Boyd '59). The team even bought an ad in the back of the 1959 SPS Year Book. The boys sent their

letter, adorned with an oval logo of a Ferrari grille overlaid with crossed hockey sticks (in homage to the black ice of Millville), out to as many racing teams as they could manage, hoping for a chance to crack the pit crew lineup at a race the following season.

"I met Lucky Casner and I asked him if he was going to the races at Sebring the next March," recalled Gibson, who now lives in Rhode Island. "He said he was, and I told him, 'I'm your guy. We'll shake here and I will be there.'"

Family vacations to the Bahamian Island of Nassau were integral to Gibson's childhood. Forays to nearby Sebring, Fla., had become a part of the trips' lure for Gibson. Having grown up on a quiet farm in Maryland, he recalls the first trace of his obsession with vehicles: eagerly awaiting the weekly arrival of the milkman in his fancy new Divco truck.

As SPS spring break dawned in March 1959, Gibson, Johnson, and McClintock managed to negotiate the loan of a new Ford station wagon from Johnson's mother. According to Gibson, the boys threw a mattress into the hatchback's cargo area to create a makeshift mobile motel and piled into the car for the 1,400-mile trip from Johnson's home in Ipswich, Mass., to Sebring, Fla., for the eighth annual 12 Hours of Sebring race. The boys arrived to discover that Casner had left credentials for them, providing unlimited access to the track and the drivers.

"We left the campus eager to get down there," said Gibson. "We were already exploding with excitement, with the dream of being there in the middle of it – the action, all these people. It was glorious, a fabulous thrill to stand there and watch these guys drive by in these fabulous cars."

Inside the pits of Sebring, Johnson recalls being a "gofer" while Gibson did "whatever they told me" – lifting tires and retrieving water and oil for Casner's No. 19 Ferrari 500 TRC. And, to their delight, they crossed paths with some of the greats of auto racing, names like Dan Gurney, Stirling Moss, and Phil Hill,

among others. Without the security that surrounds today's auto racing scene, with its less defined mass of rabid fans, the spectators at Sebring and the other well-appointed race tracks of the late-1950s circuit were true car enthusiasts, there to marvel at the flashy aluminum hand-built vehicles developed more for style than for aerodynamics.

"The pit pass gave me a lot of access to the various teams' space," recalled Johnson, a lawyer now living in Delaware. "All manner of big names were there."

Access, Gibson concurred, was easy to acquire. The racing community was a small one, willing to embrace those interested in joining the club. With his camera acting as the thin barrier between him and the scream of the grand marques of Ferrari, Porsche, and others in the sports car spotlight, Gibson became a member of that club, enjoying the social aspect of the many races he attended at Sebring and beyond – dinners and parties with the drivers – as much as the high-speed action on the tracks.

"I was standing in the pits next to Ferrari team manager Romolo Tavoni during practice for the 1959 Sebring

12-hour race, and I asked how the factory came to the design of the '59 Testa Rossa," said Gibson. "He said, 'If a car looks beautiful it will go beautifully.' It was sculpture. They could shape these cars into anything they wanted. It wasn't just a car packed in stamped metal like they are today. There was a certain element of art. I got to see them pushing technology, take photos of the beautiful paint jobs. It was a time when there was no advertising or promotion on the cars."

Gibson inhaled the atmosphere at Sebring with all his senses. Though he was fortunate never to witness a fatal accident, he could sense the danger and see it in the absence of roll bars, the racers' flammable cotton suits, and the presence of hay bales to somehow cushion careening cars and serve as a barrier between speedway and pit. At Nassau, relocated infant pine trees served a similar purpose. Heavy rain slicked the track at Sebring in 1959, resulting in several disabling spin-outs, but no serious injuries (a year later, driver Jim Hughes was killed when his Lotus rolled over, also killing a photographer). Lucky Casner was killed six years later during a test run at Le Mans, France.



Nassau 1959: Pine trees serve as a pit lane barrier

Sebring 1959: Jean Behra, Olivier Gendebien, and Dan Gurney



Sebring 1959: Co-driver Jim Hunt in Lucky Casner's '56 Ferrari 500 TRC

Gibson was so close to the action that he soon was able to identify each car's distinctive exhaust tone with his eyes closed. In fact, at some point in his Sixth Form year, Gibson acquired a record album containing the "Sounds of Sebring." Sitting in his room in the Upper, Gibson would listen to the machines race by, recalling that most of the friends who poked their heads through his doorway failed to understand his obsession with race cars.

"Very few people were interested in sports cars at St. Paul's, and nobody was interested in our adventures," he said. "In that way, I had a little bit of a double life."

Gibson recalls that former faculty member Bishop John Walker, who lived in the room adjacent to his in Coit, would graciously listen to the Sebring recording in Gibson's room. In February 1959, a month before Gibson traveled to Florida in the borrowed Ford, he convinced a local Chevy dealer to bring a metallic blue Corvette to the SPS Missionary Society vendor show in the old Cage.

But the pull of the racetrack was strong for Gibson, who spent the next several years widening his circle of racing friends – and thus his access to the tracks – and even getting behind the wheel, racing his own Porsche and sometimes serving as a reserve driver. A highlight was an Alfa Romeo co-driving experience at Vallelunga in Italy. Gibson also continued to crew for pals in other races, when time permitted.

All the while, Gibson used his Pentax to document in Kodachrome the color, speed, and progress of auto racing at Sebring (1959, 1962, 1964, 1965), Nassau (1959), Bridgehampton (1964), Watkins Glen (1964), Marlboro Raceway (1959), Thompson Raceway (1958), and Stillwater Lake, Pa. (1964). With a few exceptions, most of his photographs were stowed away in a box until 2007, when Gibson's wife, Cynthia, founded the Vanderbilt Concours d'Elegance, an auto show at the mansions of Newport, R.I., that included the presentation of the inaugural William K. Vanderbilt Jr. Awards for Lifetime Achievement to Dan Gurney and Stirling Moss, whom Gibson and friends had encountered on the racing circuit more than four decades earlier. The event also featured a lineup of vintage cars, some of which had been driven by the two honorees.

As the Concours approached, Gibson thought of his archival images, to which he had returned for selected shots in earlier years, soon discovering drum-scanning technology that was able to transform his half-century-old Kodachrome negatives into detailed color prints. Setting up shop as a vendor at the Newport show, Gibson sold every print he displayed in his cramped booth.

"It was a visceral, personal thing to be involved in taking pictures like this," he said. "When I look at them now, they instantly transport me back to the exact moment I took each image, and I feel I am there again."

By the end of the Vanderbilt Concours, Gibson had multiple orders to fulfill. It was then he decided that perhaps he should unlock all of the images that provided a window into a golden age of sports cars. He discovered among his stock some true gems. In a 1964 photo of Gurney – the first driver to earn victories in the Sports Car World Championships, Formula 1, NASCAR, and IndyCar, and the first American driver to win a Formula 1 race in a car he built himself – the driver's signature concentration is visible in a simple gesture: biting down on his tongue. (Gurney is also credited with being the pioneer of the celebratory champagne spray now iconic for racing victors.) Moss, the celebrated British driver with whom Gibson has maintained a friendship for many decades, communicated with the photographer about the images.

"The pictures are wonderful, bringing back memories of long and ago and, even better, not so long ago," Moss wrote in a letter to Gibson soon after the Concours.

Another of Gibson's favorite images, taken at Nassau Speed Week soon after his 1959 SPS graduation, reveals the full frame of Phil Hill, at the time a recent winner of the 24 Hours of Le Mans. In the photo, Gibson caught Hill's superstitious side as he pushed his Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa – a car similar to a prototype that set a world record in 2011, fetching \$16.4 million at an auction in California.

"I blew this up and could see that Phil has on his feet his good luck suede loafers and argyle socks," said Gibson.

Gibson sent a print to Hill, who had shared driving duties with Gurney, Olivier Gendebien, and Chuck Daigh to lead the No. 7 Ferrari to victory at a rainy Sebring in 1959, explaining how the details produced by modern scanning technology had betrayed his superstition. "Nobody ever photographed feet," Gibson said. "It was all waist up in the cars." Hill himself, Gibson added, told him the image of the gleaming Testa Rossa and surrounding casual activity in the pits "perfectly captured the ethos of that time."

Gibson recalls with nostalgia that his time among the stars of auto racing stood in stark contrast to the life he was living at St. Paul's, then an evolving but disciplined place in which student grades determined their permission to leave campus on weekends.

"They were orderly times at St. Paul's," said Gibson. "I think our form felt like we were starting to bridge out of the Victorian era to the modern era."

Gibson's photographs are resonating with vintage racing aficionados. A family-owned company, Suxtil, which once produced sleek racing suits for European teams, has requested the promotional use of some of his images, hoping to resuscitate the brand. And Ferrari's

magazine has asked to print a selection of Gibson's images in its pages.

Many of the prototype models he photographed are now some of the most valuable collector's cars in the world, selling for millions at auctions, their drivers legends of their era. But the one gaping hole in Gibson's vast gallery of images covering a decade of motorsports is a picture of the photographer himself. In an image taken at Thompson Raceway that Labor Day 1958 when Gibson first met Lucky Casner, the shadow of a figure holding a camera stretches across the path of George Constantine's Aston Martin as it battles eventual winner Chuck Daigh's Scarab

for first place. That shadow belongs to Gibson and is solid proof of just how intimate his access to the track was at the time.

"You can't get much closer to racing," he said. "Sometimes I was so close to the cars that a few brushed my pant leg as they went by."

**Gibson acquired
a record album
containing the
"Sounds of Sebring."
Sitting in his room,
he would listen
to the machines
race by . . .**



This 1958 photo is the only image that includes Gibson, as his shadow crosses the No. 49 Aston Martin.