

# PORSCHE 356 GMÜND COUPE

The first Porsche to ever win at Le Mans was just some tired old race car.

Our nostalgic, take-no-prisoners culture of high-dollar car collecting emerged sometime in the past 30 years, and it has resulted in some curious effects. Juan Manuel Fangio's Mercedes-Benz W196R, trading hands at auction for nearly \$30 million. Seven out of the ten most expensive cars ever sold at auction, all historic race cars. Rumors of a 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO that once won the Tour de France, privately sold for \$70 million. All parties remain anonymous as to not draw approaching guillotines.

Yet there was once a time when an old race car was just that: tired, obsolete, ran hard, put away wet. Race teams ran on shoestring budgets, always looking toward the next big victory, interested in carving out the very histories that would make these machines valuable. Why hold onto something that was no longer competitive? They certainly needed the garage space. There was once a time when Porsche—desperate for cash, in exile, its founder Ferdinand just released from prison—was among this beleaguered company.

After the Second World War, from an old sawmill in the tiny town of Gmünd, Austria, Porsche built 49 examples of something new. What Ferdinand called Project 356 were hand-built from aluminum sheets, hammered over wooden bucks. Some were built to *Sport Leicht* specification: upgraded drum brakes, Solex carburetors, an enlarged fuel tank, and extra lights. In 1951, organizers invited Porsche to take part in Le Mans, just the third one after the war. It was to be the company's first official foray into

the world of international motorsport. Porsche entered two 356SL coupes.

A streamlined design with louvered windows, side skirts, and unusual wheel covers gave the SL coupes a mouse-like countenance; at just 1,350 pounds, both cars took as much advantage as they could of their 45 horsepower. The 1951 running saw the debut of Lancia alongside Porsche, a dashing performance by a young Stirling Moss, and a record-breaking victory for Jaguar—the company's first Le Mans win. With the number 46 on the 356's door, drivers Auguste Veuillet and Edmond Mouche claimed victory in the under-1500cc class—averaging 70 miles per hour, and managing a not-insubstantial 20th-place finish overall. It was Porsche's first great victory.

Gmünd coupes went on to break 72-hour endurance records at the banked track in Montlhéry, France; won their class at the grueling 3,500-kilometer Liège-Rome-Liège rally; they became the test chassis for Porsche's next greatest powertrain, the 1500 Super; and they continued racing at Le Mans for the next three years. Porsche returned to Stuttgart and began producing the 365 in earnest. The company proudly exhibited the Gmünd coupes alongside its 356s. Under the bright lights of the Paris Auto Salon, and backed by its achievements, the little mouse made an impression. Then, the Le Mans winner disappeared.

For years, attendees at the Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion had witnessed a little red Porsche 356 roadster spinning the corners around Laguna Seca. Every year he

