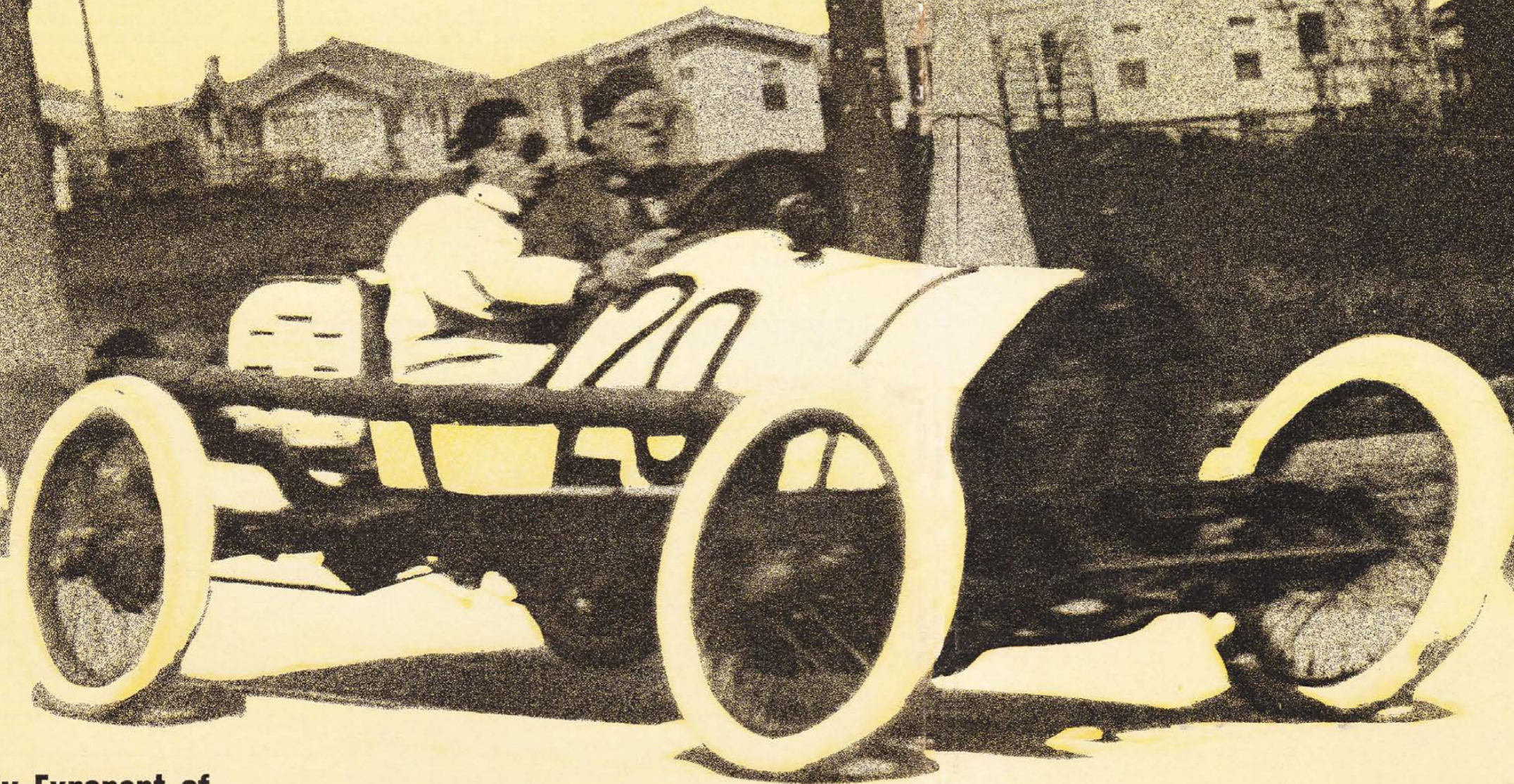


CLIFF DURANT AND HIS GOLDEN GANG



An Early Exponent of Profit from Performance

DURING THE LONG autumn nights of 1922, lights burned at the Miller Racing Engine factory on the outskirts of Los Angeles as mechanics feverishly put the finishing touches on six brand new cars for the Golden Yellow Durant Special racing team. The team's debut was to be in the annual 250-mile Thanksgiving Day race at the Beverly Hills board track—an event in which, with some of the na-

tion's best drivers aboard, they took most of the first 10 places and the winning driver nailed down a new World's Record.

Working in a pair of grimy coveralls with the mechanics was the backer of this electrifying team, a chunky millionaire in his forties named R. C. (Cliff) Durant. A lavish spender and confidant of movie stars, he was heir to the huge motor car fortune of W. C. Durant, one of the giants among early-day motor car manufacturers. In the preceding

eight years, young Durant had carved himself a reputation as a top-caliber driver and builder of racing cars.

Cliff Durant was born about 1880 in Flint, Mich. His interest in learning the fundamentals of motor cars led to a job in his father's Chevrolet factory in Detroit, and he was finally installed as head of the Chevrolet agency in Los Angeles about 1912.

With a highly developed taste for speed, Durant began making record runs in Chevrolet cars between Los

Angeles and Oakland, Calif.; Los Angeles and Seattle, Wash., and other places, establishing himself as a driver of ability and determination. It was not long before he entered a stripped-down Chevrolet in West Coast dirt track races, showing his ability in competition and earning an AAA racing driver's license.

In the fall of 1914, he entered the famous Los Angeles to Phoenix road race with his Chevrolet, competing against such racing notables as Oldfield,

the Nickrent brothers, Billy Carlson, Omar Taft and others. One of the roughest, most dangerous and destructive races of its day, the Los Angeles to Phoenix course led over mountains, through blazing hot deserts and across wide rivers.

Braving all this, Durant was running well near the finish in Phoenix when an axle snapped and the steering assembly gave out. Durant and his mechanic repaired the axle as well as they could, then attached a pair of pirated fence

pickets to the front wheels to guide the car over the finish line and place in the money.

The next year, as the Stutz Co. was preparing to field a new 16-valve racer, Durant purchased one of the 1913-14 model race cars. After towing the Stutz to his Los Angeles agency, Durant and a new young mechanic he had hired, Al Nielsen, rebuilt the racer into the kind of mount Durant wanted. The body was altered, a large gas tank was installed, wire wheels replaced the earlier wooden spoke wheels, and a deep maroon paint was applied. Durant called it the Chevrolet Special.

With this car, Durant and Nielsen (who was later to become a noted riding mechanic) competed in West Coast events during 1915, appearing at races at the old Ascot mile oval at Los Angeles, the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair Vanderbilt Cup and Grand Prix races, and a series of special 50-mile events at the San Diego and San Francisco World's Fair mile horse tracks.

Appearing against such drivers as Barney Oldfield, Lou Disbrow, Earl Cooper and Bob Burman, Durant managed to win only a few of these special races. However, the experience gained proved invaluable during the 1916 racing season, when he drove a chain-drive Italian Fiat he had bought from Oldfield.

With the more powerful Fiat, Durant made good showings at Corona, Calif., Tacoma, Wash., Hanford, Calif., and Fresno, Calif., among the West Coast outings he entered that year. With Stutz' exit from racing, Durant purchased one of the 16-valve racers at the end of the season.

The Stutz was repainted, overhauled and renamed "Chevrolet" and a new riding mechanic named Fred Comer replaced Nielsen, who had gone with another driver. Durant stormed through the 1917-18 racing seasons to score victories on the Ascot, Fresno, Hanford and Santa Rosa dirt tracks. He claimed a major win in the Liberty Sweepstakes on the old Tacoma, Wash., board track on July 4, 1918, when he defeated such stars as Hearn, Cooper, Pullen, Sarles, DeAlene and Mulford in the 25-mile, 75-mile and 100-mile events.

The famous Santa Monica road race was revived in March, 1919, following the end of World War I and Durant's speedy Chevrolet led from start to finish, winning the 250-mile contest in three hours and four minutes at an average of 80 mph. He had eclipsed such drivers as Pullen, Hearn, Sarles, Taft, O'Donnell, Thomas and Koster, among others, and tossed it off in a post-race interview, as "recreation . . . like playing golf."

But at Indianapolis that year, Durant's mount lasted only 54 laps before

BY L. SWEENEY
PHOTOS BY TED WILSON

CLIFF DURANT

a connecting rod broke and put him out of the contest. Then, in a Tacoma, Wash., meet on July 4, Durant won a 100-mile board track event.

Durant's luck faded during the 1919 road race at Elgin, Ill., when his car skidded on a dangerous turn during the first lap and bounded through a barbed wire fence. Flailing strands of the wire encased the car as it overturned and trapped Durant and Comer for a considerable time before they could be cut free and treated for their numerous barb slashes. The accident enabled father Durant to convince his son to quit racing, return to his Chevrolet dealership and oversee a new factory assembly branch just being opened at Oakland, Calif.

The retirement was short-lived, and early in 1920 Durant provided the land and was the largest stockholder in the construction of the Beverly Hills board track at Beverly and Wilshire and Olympic Boulevards in Los Angeles. His Chevrolet Special was prepared for the opening event on Feb. 28, putting up a good race until engine trouble forced its retirement halfway through the 250-mile event.

Durant's interest in aviation bloomed about this time, and he opened the Durant Aviation Field at Oakland, Calif., at the same time forming the Durant Air Craft Corporation, one of the first commercial aviation firms in the country. He limited his racing through the rest of 1920 to appearances at Santa Rosa and Fresno in special races against Cooper, Pullen, Crosby and Moosie. He entered a car for the opening race at Fresno on the new board track, but did not drive.

While Durant stayed away from the wheel throughout 1921, he had the Chevrolet Special rebuilt, replacing the tired Stutz Wisconsin engine with a new Miller racing engine. The car, now renamed the Durant Special, was driven by Tommy Milton to win the 1921 AAA Championship and generate a controversy with the AAA contest board.

The car would not be allowed to race at San Carlos or Cotati, the board ruled, unless the name was changed or Durant himself drove it. So Durant slid behind the wheel for



PERSONABLE Cliff Durant, at the peak of his driving career.

the 1922 Indianapolis 500, since Milton had built a new car for himself, and finished in 12th place—enough to spur him back into racing in a big way.

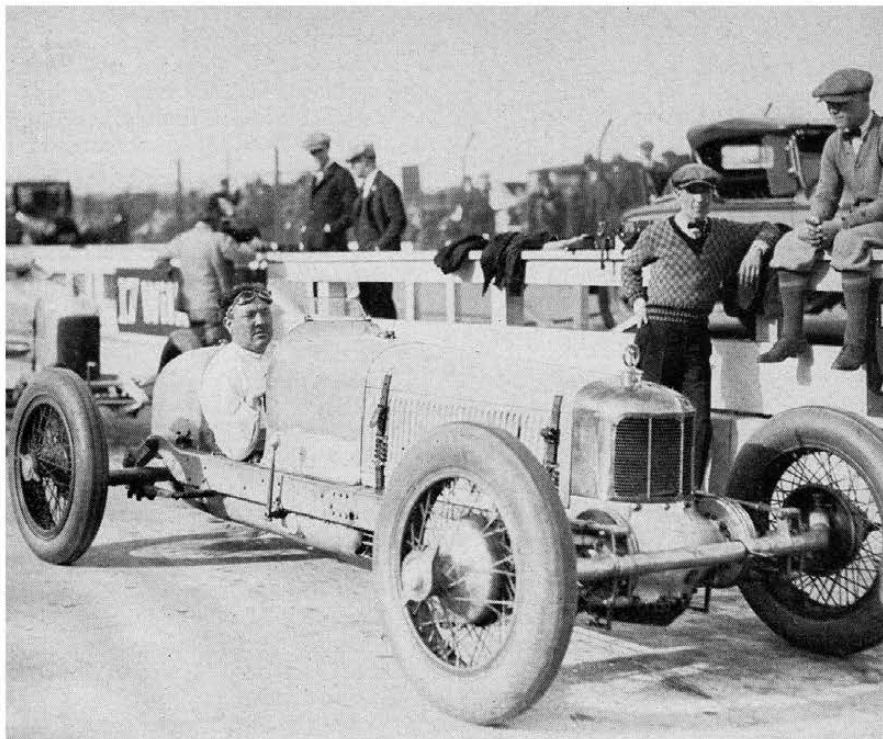
He competed in most of the remaining events in the 1922 schedule, such as the San Carlos Shriners' Day race, the Cotati closing race and the final event at the Tacoma board track. But Durant turned the car over to Roscoe Sarles for the ill-fated race at Kansas City, where Sarles lost his life when the car crashed and burned.

Durant started work on his long-time dream of a team of identical racing cars in August, 1922, and signed up the best driving talent available. Earl Cooper, Jimmy Murphy, Dario Resta, Eddie Hearne, Art Klein and Durant were to drive the bright yellow machines. The cars had 183-cu. in. Miller racing engines, 2-place cockpits, aluminum disc wheels at the rear and red wire wheels in front.

The speed turned up by the cars in practice at Beverly Hills gave an indication of what was to come and it was no surprise when the six filled out the top ten list after the Thanksgiving Day race there. Murphy's mount set a new world's record in winning at 114 mph. Murphy led the team to victories in the first two races of 1923 at Beverly Hills and Fresno. In the meantime, Durant staged record runs with his No. 7 at the Beverly Hills track, to establish marks of 75 miles at 115 mph, 25 miles at 117 mph, and 50 miles at 118 mph.

Durant's use of Golden Yellow team cars in his advertising brought him into conflict with the Los Angeles Motor Car Dealers' Association, which questioned the ethics of his ads. Buyers reportedly thought Durant's stock passenger cars had the same engine and parts as the racers and many were sold on the strength of the ad, it was alleged. The passenger cars were fitted with

DURANT DROVE front-wheel-drive Miller for opening of Culver City board track in 1924.



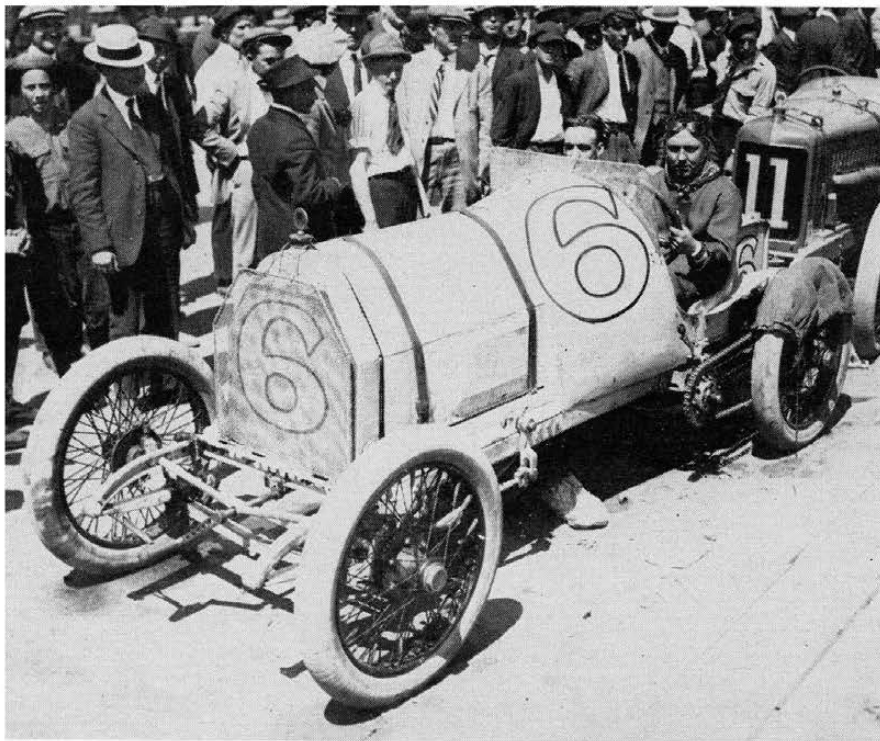
small 4-cyl. engines, while the Specials had 8-cyl. Miller engines.

A new team of Specials, with one-man bodies and 122-cu. in. engines, was built for the 1923 Indianapolis 500. New teammate Hartz placed second, with Murphy in third, Hearne fourth, Elliott fifth, and Durant seventh. Tom Alley, who had relieved Cooper at the wheel of one of the Durants, was injured and a young boy killed when that car went through a fence. Wins were recorded by the team at Altoona, Kansas City and Fresno during the year. Durant and Murphy took a rebuilt Miller with 2-place body to Europe for the Italian Grand Prix in 1923, where Murphy won third place.

Through the years Durant had developed a reputation as a lavish spender—\$18,000 for a Duesenberg tourer, \$250,000 to build a summer resort, a \$50,000 Stradivarius violin, palatial yacht, etc. It was thus no surprise when he entered a \$30,000 all-aluminum Durant Special in the last race to be held at the Beverly Hills track in February, 1924. The lightweight (for its day) lightning bolt carried a head rest, or hump, on the tail of its one-seat body, a feature that didn't become common in racing design until many years later.

Engine trouble forced the aluminum Special out of the race, and a subsequent appearance at Indianapolis ended with a breakdown at the 199-lap mark. For the opening of the new Culver City board track, Durant was at the wheel of a new \$25,000 front-wheel-drive Miller Special originally built for Jimmy Murphy. This race was won by Bennie Hill.

Durant's racing career began to de-



CHAIN-DRIVE Fiat purchased from Barney Oldfield brought many victories in 1916.

cline rapidly and the millionaire driver-builder competed only in West Coast events during 1925, the period when his father sold his Chevrolet interests to General Motors and began producing the Durant and Star cars.

Cliff disposed of his front-drive Miller and, in 1926, drove a rear-drive Miller entered as a Locomobile Junior 8 Special at Indianapolis, where it lasted 63 laps. He also entered, but finished out of the money, at Altoona and

Rockingham board tracks that year.

After an absence from racing for a year, Durant piloted a front-wheel-drive Detroit Special at Indianapolis in 1928. The car, which had been built by Tommy Milton, lasted 175 laps for Durant's final ride in competition.

Though retired from active racing, Durant continued his interest by financially helping young drivers. Until his death in 1935 he concentrated on the stock market and aviation interests. ■

STRIPPED-DOWN Chevrolet was used for numerous record runs over long distances which gained Durant his early reputation for skill and stamina.

