

The natives were surprised that weekend when the strange little cars with their strange names roared into Danville from throughout the eastern half of the nation. The skeptics were agape as several thousand fans converged.

Interest in this first trial race centered on a stranger, Carroll Shelby, a lean and lanky Texan in blue-and-white bibbed overalls who was to drive a brand new Maserati 4.5 flown in from Italy that same week.

Shelby won that first race with an average speed of 78.3 mph on the torturous course which permits speeds of over 150 mph on the straightaways

yet requires braking and downshifting to 25 on the "dangerous dozen" curves. He went on to professional fame as the "father" of the current Cobra Fords and "big boys" of present "stock car" racing.

In second place that weekend was a stockily-built and relatively-silent and unassuming Walt Hansgen. He would never be second again in any major race he ever ran at VIR.

Within days after that VIR inaugural test, it was announced that the President's Cup (initially presented by President Eisenhower) was being brought out of retirement and would be presented the winner of the national points SCCA races at VIR, Oct. 27, 1957.

During that week, the "Briggs Cunningham entourage" arrived. Cunningham, the millionaire sportsman, had been busy winning the Americas Cup yachting event. However, his trailers brought a couple of brilliant white D-Jaguars, a team of mechanics headed by "Mr. Momo Himself" and a couple of drivers—Walt Hansgen and Charles Wallace (the latter a hairdresser from Washington with a yen for speed).

Hansgen, Wallace and Company won, trailed by Ed Crawford and Duncan Black.

The Spring of 1958 brought the Sprint Races to VIR—and Hansgen's first big day on the VIR track. Hansgen won by averaging 77.6 mph, including a competitive lap record of 80.094 in the feature. Crawford, a running mate in the Cunningham-Momo stable, was second and Lance Reventlow, with his first Scarab, was third.

In the Autumn Festival, Oct. 4-5, 1958, it was all Hansgen and a Lister Jag. He averaged 77.1 mph for the 30-lap feature, his best being 79.3 on Lap No. 12. Fred Windridge of Arlington, in a Lister Corvette, lead early—but it was an old familiar story when the checkered flag fell.

Hansgen made it four-in-a-row at VIR in the Spring of 1959, trailed by Don Sessler and Fred Windridge. No autumn race was held due to the illness of Promoter Kemm, and his eventual retirement from this arena.

After a layoff of one year, Hansgen's greatest day at VIR—and the one that has withstood all assaults since—came on April 30, 1961, when he set both class and track records by whirling around the course in two minutes and 18 seconds for a speed of 84.183 mph. He was driving a tiny but powerful C-modified Maserati.

The following year he bowed out at VIR in a smaller "scooter"—a D-modified Cooper Maserati—and turned in one lap at 83.879 mph. It was another mark that the "old master" left for the "younger generation" to pursue.

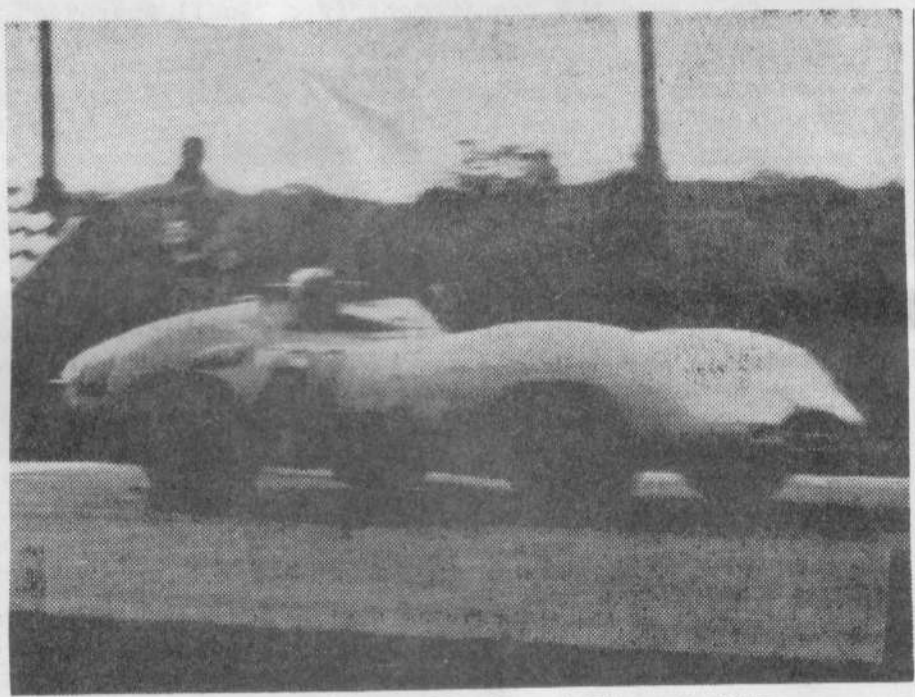
Meanwhile, an era had passed and VIR had reached sound footing. Sports car racing had imbedded itself in the Virginia-Carolinas hotbed of stock-car racing, and crowds grew at VIR as the Danville Civil Air Patrol sponsors relied first on the know-how of the Washington SCCA Region and more recently on the North Carolina Region.

Hansgen, who, doubtlessly, received certain remunerative support from Cunningham and others, had collected enough trophies (the only recognized reward within the SCCA) to fill a house, if not the larder.

This solemn perfectionist properly turned professional where his talents could be rewarded with green bills rather than silver cups.

He was a serious contender in everything leading to, and including, the Indianapolis 500. And Hansgen was a threat to international honors until last week at Le Mans.

When the starter's flag is swooshed down at VIR on Sunday, May 1, the "old-timers" will be rooting for the newer generation to threaten the records of the "Gent from Jersey"—but not to break them.



One Of Hansgen's Many Checkered Flags At VIR