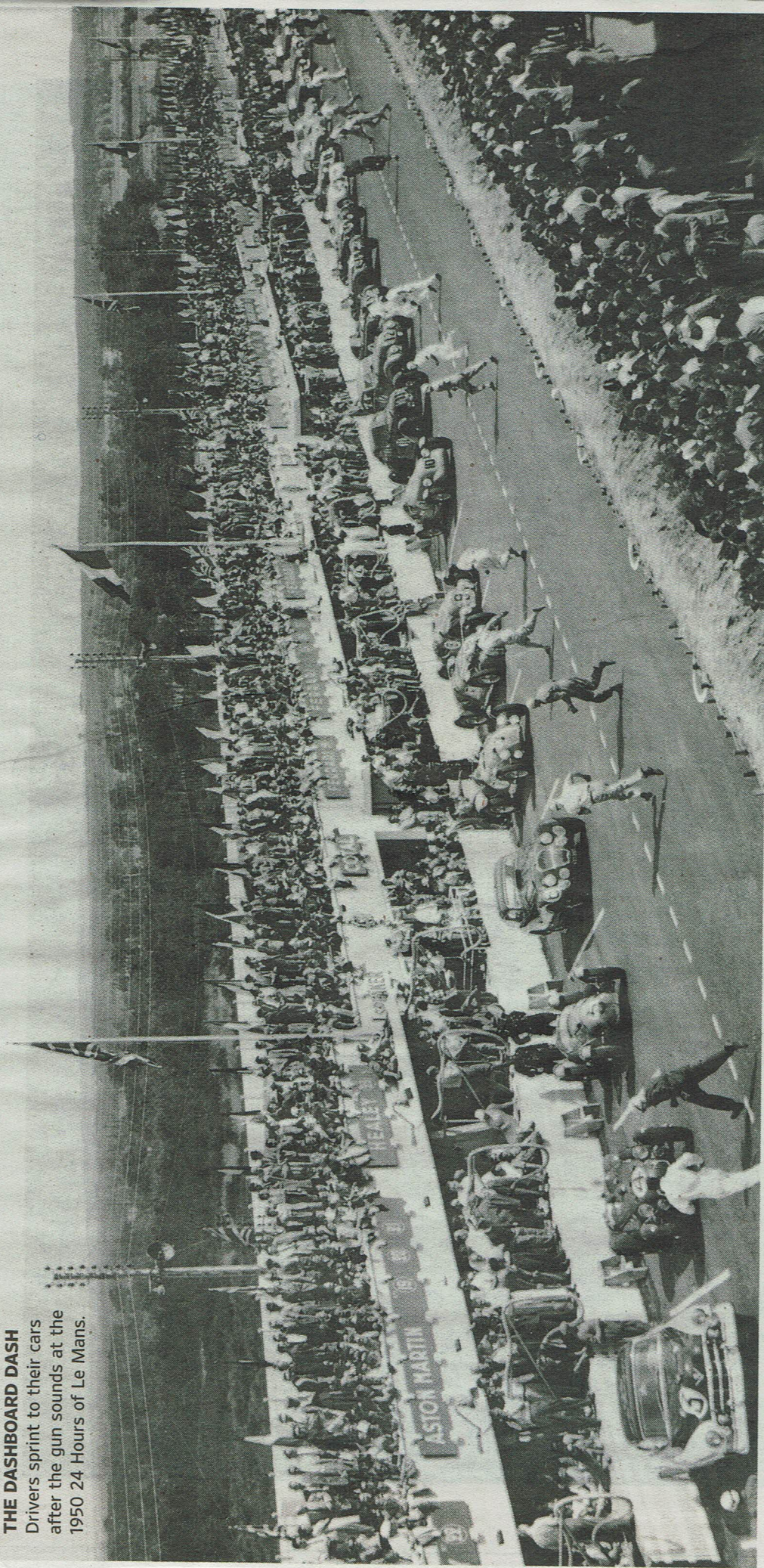


THE SPRING OFF DUTY 50 | GEAR & GADGETS

THE DASHBOARD DASH

Drivers sprint to their cars after the gun sounds at the 1950 24 Hours of Le Mans.





Start Your Engines the Right— No, Make That the Left—Way

NEWBIE PORSCHE owners may experience brief disorientation. It could take a few mornings to get used to the German luxury-sport cars' ignition switch being to the left of the steering wheel, outboard of the driving position, not inboard like every other make of car in the known universe.

What's the deal there? Most Porsche drivers would probably tell you the story their dealers told them: The outboard-placed ignition keylock (now the Start/Stop switch) was a racing innovation. Up until 1970, the 24 Hours of Le Mans endurance race employed a running start, when competitors would sprint across the track, jump in their cars and roar away. The ignition switch on the left allowed a Porsche driver to start the car while shifting into gear and steering off.

As origin stories go, that's pretty good. It has the virtue of being plausible. You can see how the

outboard switch might save a driver a couple of valuable seconds in a Le Mans-style start—and it serves the legend that everything about Porsche cars is honed by competitive motorsports, right down to the ignition switch.

Porsche has legitimately owned endurance racing for the last half-century, winning Le Mans a record 19 times. The switch merely provides an opportunity for a sales associate to expound upon the same.

But that's not quite how it went down. My source in this matter is unusually good. In August 2008 I drove the Porsche 356-001 (1948), a tube-frame, mid-engine prototype built by Ferry Porsche—son of Ferdinand Porsche—during the company's postwar exile in Gmund, Austria. The Ur-Porsche's ignition switch, cannibalized from a VW, is indeed on the left of the cockpit; but as then-Porsche Museum curator and keeper of keys Klaus Bis-

chof explained, its placement had nothing to do with racing. In the early Postwar period, when the company amounted to a mere handful of men hammering and welding in an old sawmill, electrical wire was scarce. Putting the switch on the left "saved a little bit of wire, a little bit of money," Mr. Bischof said, "and maybe 200 grams."

Also contra the legend, the accompanied switch, sometimes accompanied by a start button, moved around in the early days. In the Gmund Coupes (1948-51) the switch occupies the center of the dashboard—likely to be close to the fuse box. But in the Reutter-bodied 356 Cabriolet RHD (1951), the first Porsche successfully imported to the U.K., the ignition switch is in the outboard position (to the right in RHD cars).

Another untidy fact is that many of the company's most famous sports-racers, including



TURNING POINT Keys dangle left of the wheel in a 1964 Porsche 911.

James Dean's ill-fated 550 Spyder (1955) and the 904/6 Carrera GTS (1965), have their key-switches inboard of the steering wheel. The outboard position hasn't always been canon law.

It is now. Call it brand narrative, design DNA, provenance, *echt*. If Porsche were to build a car with an inboard ignition switch

now, enthusiasts' heads would explode in righteous, albeit misguided indignation.

Most probably see the left-side ignition as tribute to the motorsports legend Porsche became. I prefer to let it remind me of the sawmill days, when all that stood between Porsche and oblivion was a little length of wire.