

A thoroughbred RACER

Marcus Bicknell recounts the fascinating history of the Parkinson Jaguar Special

There are but a handful of one-off Jaguar racing specials, probably because the thoroughbred factory-built Jaguars – from the XK 120 through to the D-type and later Le Mans cars – have been so beautiful and so performant. The better-known one-offs are the 1951 MkVII OTS, the 1955 Maurice Gomm Jaguar XK 140, the 1954 Sutton Jaguar and the 1953 Jaguar XK 120 Hansgen Special. The subject of this article, the 1950 Parkinson Jaguar Special, was conceived because the original body was destroyed in a racing crash. Today, this car is interesting because not only has it been racing regularly since it was built, but it also finished second at the October 2024 Velocity Invitational at Sonoma (along with the Rolex Monterey, one of the two USA historic race meets that set hearts beating like the Goodwood Revival) to another great Jaguar, Jenson Button's ex-Fangio 1952 C-type.

Within months of the XK 120 becoming available in the UK in 1949, the first road models arrived in the USA. The Americans loved the car and their top magazine wrote, 'The Jaguar XK 120 is by far the fastest car tested by *Road & Track*!'

At the Pebble Beach Road Races in November 1950, the first major road-racing event in the United States after World War II, Phil Hill drove his black Jaguar XK 120 round the lethal pine forest near Monterey in California and took victory in the premier class, the Del Monte Trophy race. And who finished second behind the future Formula 1 World Champion? His brother-in-law, LA architect Don Parkinson, in his white Jaguar XK 120, the actual example that had been road-tested in the magazine.



The 1951 Pebble Beach races were in May, just six months after the first event. Bill Pollack won in another British car – the Allard J2 into which he had stuffed a Cadillac V8 engine – yet there were no American cars in the top 10. Don Parkinson was out for glory again but he wrapped the XK 120 round a tree; the body was so badly damaged it was not used again. What next?

In the meantime, the American race shops and engineers – Kurtis, Manning, Hansgen, Baldwin, Cannon, Von Neumann, Tatum, Sorrell and Hagemann – had been stung into action by the British successes. They started to build powerful, unique-looking and quick race cars, many in a category best thought of as hot-rod road-racers because they competed on the drag strip too.

Don Parkinson's crumpled XK 120 at the 1951 Pebble Beach Road Races. Pictured right (below) is the Parkinson Special at the same venue one year later, and (above) more recently at Laguna Seca





Top: John Buddenbaum gets the camber angles working – XK 120 and Tatum in attendance – at the Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion, Laguna Seca 2019

In many cases, the Americans would hunt down axles and running gear – even Model T Ford parts – in scrapyards and would use a readily available Ford V8 flathead (side-valve) engine with reliable horsepower. They raced at Pebble Beach and continue to compete today in the Del Monte Trophy alongside the British cars: Jaguar, MG, Austin-Healey, Aston Martin, Allard and some other Europeans. For Don Parkinson, though, the decision was easy: build some different bodywork and keep racing the Jaguar.

So the engine, chassis and running gear of the crashed car became... the 1950 Parkinson Jaguar Special. It was built in just a few months at Roger Barlow's International Motors in Los Angeles, by Joe Thrall, Parkinson and Phil Hill. The new aluminum body was sketched by teenager Robert Cumberford – who later became a General Motors designer and styling critic – and constructed by Marvin Faw under

the supervision of Phil Hill.

The original XK 120 chassis, running gear and engine were re-used with little modification, although the Special weighed several hundred pounds less than the factory roadster. The engine was moved rearward about 12 inches, down about four inches and slightly to the right. Richie Ginther – Hill's future Ferrari teammate – tweaked the XK engine and displacement was increased from 3.4 to 3.8 liters, making it one of the first big-displacement Jaguars. The car today weighs about 2,000 pounds.

Don Parkinson raced his new Parkinson Jaguar Special at all of the major West Coast road races at the end of 1951 and into 1952 with excellent results, including a win at Palm Springs and a return to Pebble Beach (in April 1952) for a third time for a third-place finish. Parkinson then switched his racing to a Jaguar C-type and his Special was raced by others, principally Chuck Daigh, to continued success through 1955. It took a cameo role in the movie *Johnny Dark*, appearing in dark blue with the race number 81. The Parkinson Jaguar competed at the Pebble Beach Road Races every year from 1950 to 1955.

Oregon collector Terry Buffum bought the Parkinson Special in 1970, and it sat while he had other projects. A Cadillac engine was still installed when Terry bought the car. In the mid-1970s, Terry hired Marvin Faw to restore the car but Faw's failing health prevented completion.

John Buddenbaum took over the project and completed the restoration in about 1982. Among other things, the project required fabricating a new bonnet, creating new motor mounts, reinstalling the Jaguar straight-six engine and building up a set

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of custom exhaust headers. Keeping the car period-correct was a very high priority. For example, although disc brakes would provide a huge performance improvement, they would be conspicuously incorrect.

Terry and John have campaigned the car since 1983, John driving the Parkinson Special in almost all its races since restoration and Terry driving the car on public roads to and from races into the 1990s. The Parkinson Special has proven an uncommonly reliable race car, with only three DNFs in the past 50-plus years, while chalking up many victories and countless podium finishes in its class.

John Buddenbaum has worked for 40 years on vintage race cars and automotive fabrication in San Carlos in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley, and in the Monterey area since 2023. One of his hobbies is building very customized motorcycles; John and colleague Eric Noyes hold three world records on streamlined motorcycles at Bonneville and he has

driven their 50cc motorcycle at 145mph! Noyes has piloted the same bike with larger-displacement engines to 100cc and 125cc records.

The Parkinson Jaguar Special driven by John Buddenbaum has been a regular participant at the Rolex Monterey Historic Reunion since 1983, as well as the more recent Velocity Invitational, where it finished second in the hands of John in the Del Monte Trophy Race Group feature race at Sonoma Raceway, California, USA, on 6 October 2024. Jenson Button – 2009 F1 World Champion – won that race in his ex-Fangio C-type.

The Parkinson Jaguar Special is well-loved in the paddock. The car’s profile is so iconic among the West Coast racers that its front view was adopted for the logo of the Del Monte Trophy Race Group, which runs the register of the cars that ran at Pebble Beach and helps race organisers invite the best of the 1948-1955 front-engined, drum-brake race cars.

UK-based Marcus Bicknell runs the website www.dmtgr.com, writes articles for the Del Monte Trophy Race Group and drives the 1952 Streets Manning Special against the Parkinson Jaguar.

You can read more about the Parkinson Jaguar at www.britishracecar.com/TerryBuffum-Jaguar-ParkinsonSpecial.htm.

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