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## “Race of the Century”

In the day’s first race at last weekend’s “Race of the Century” held at the Collings Foundation, the two-horsepower Concord Coach outlasted the 1904 Franklin horseless carriage in a slow-speed race. Shortly afterwards, the stagecoach, brought to the event by the Wayside Inn, pulled well ahead of the Franklin.

Photos by Ralph Fuller



## Racing Through Technology

By Ralph Fuller

It was the Race of the Century – the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

And, truth to tell, it was four races that pitted horse against horseless carriage, horse against steam-powered automobile, early flying machine against early sports car, 1937 race car against 1942 airplane.

Parents, kids and just plain interested spectators turned out for the first “Race of the Century” event at the Collings Foundation on Saturday and Sunday. Three of the cars and both of the planes were drawn from Colling’s collection of more than 90 classic cars and aircraft.

If a race between a horse and a Stanley Steamer sounds like a gimmick, there was a method to it: Collings Foundation is about education. The match-ups were designed to highlight the ways technologies have progressed to advance transportation.

“In the early 1900s, the automobile was new and the horse and carriage was still the most dependable mode of transportation,” noted Collings Marketing Director Hunter Chaney before the event. “But the story of transportation is one of constant experimentation and innovation. We wanted to tell that story in a hands-on way.

“And,” he added, “at a time when alternative fuels are big topics of discussion, we wanted to point out that inventors have been experimenting with fuels and engines from the beginning.”

### ■ First Race: Stagecoach versus 1904 Franklin Horseless Carriage.

The Concord Coach stagecoach, borrowed from the Wayside Inn, was built in 1867 and remained in service until 1912. For this race, it – literally – boasted two-horsepower. The Franklin, with an air-cooled engine that ran on leaded gasoline, was generally a reliable car with a top speed of 35 miles-an-hour (in 1904, two men drove one across the country in 33 days). Saturday, however, the Franklin was being balky, it was a relatively slow-speed event and the stagecoach handily ran away with the race. Advantage: Horse.



Frank Poulin's horse-and-buggy and Brent Campbell's Stanley Steamer to a lap for the crowd following the second race. In the second race, the Stanley left the buggy far behind. Stow's Marcia Rising rides as passenger on the Stanley.

■ **Second Race: Horse-and-buggy versus 1908 Stanley Steamer.**

One of the early 1900s' most famous cars, a Stanley Steamer, was matched against a modern-day horse-and-buggy set driven by National Carriage Driving champion Larry Poulin. Powered by steam generated by a kerosene burner, Stanleys could be fast – one set a land speed record of 127.7 miles per hour at Daytona Beach in 1906. Before the race, Poulin demonstrated considerable speed for with his two-horse team. But Brent Campbell of Northboro, driving his own 1908 Stanley Steamer, simply whooshed, easily leaving the horse-and-buggy far behind. Advantage: Steam-powered automobile.

■ **Third Race: 1914 Stutz Bearcat versus 1909 Blériot Type XI Flying Machine**

The efficiencies and economies of gasoline-powered autos – and the marketing skills of petroleum companies in making gasoline easily available – led to the quick predominance of internal combustion vehicles like the Stutz Bearcat – one of the fastest cars of the 19-teens and 1920s.

At the same time came the emergence of powered airplane flight. One of the first distance fliers was the 1909 Blériot Type XI Flying Machine, created by Frenchman Louis Blériot, who made the first successful flight across the English Channel in a Type XI in 1909. Blériot subsequently manufactured planes that dominated racing and went on to design the famous SPAD fighter planes used by all the allies in World War I. The Collings' Blériot is about 80 percent original, and is one of the oldest flying aircraft in America.

Saturday, the two machines raced the length of the 2,200-foot Collings airstrip, the Blériot lifting only 30 feet off the runway. The Blériot was piloted by Rob Collings, the Stutz by Collings mechanic Brian Shippert. The Stutz flew metaphorically but the Blériot flew literally – far ahead of the automobile. Advantage: Airplane.

■ **Fourth Race: 1937 Sprint Race Car versus 1942 PT17 Stearman Trainer Airplane.**

By the 1930s, aircraft had evolved into reliable, relatively safe flying machines. The Stearman, a bi-plane introduced in 1937, was the trainer on which World War II pilots learned to fly. At the same time, race car innovators were creating small, extremely fast vehicles called sprint cars, and sprint racing was a popular spectator sport throughout the country. Most cities had a sprint race-track. In Boston, sprint races were sometimes held inside Boston Garden.

Each sprint racer was custom-built and unique. Collings has about dozen, including "Walt's Offy," equipped with an Offenhauser engine – a frequent Indianapolis 500 winner. The Offy was one of the first vehicles to use an alternative, wood-based

*Race of the Century - continued*



**In the fourth race, the Stearman trainer zooms over the Offy spring racer to begin the final lap. But the Offy squeaked out the win at the finish line.**

fuel called methanol. Like many sprint cars, it raced at more than 100 miles an hour. Sprint cars crashed a lot, often horrifically.

This match-up involved a complete lap. The Stearman, flown by Rob Collings, and the Offy, driven by Collings mechanic Bruce Harrison, ran down the runway together. As the Stearman lifted off, the Offy sped back to the starting line while the Stearman circled around. Stearman above, Offy below, the real race began. The Offy poured the speed on and the two raced over the course together. The Offy just maintained a lead at the finish line.

If the course had been longer, the airplane would likely have won. But for the race on that day, the automobile was declared the winner. Advantage: Automobile.

But, then, they did the whole thing again the following day.

Advantage: Spectators.