SCCA Crowns 24 Champs

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75 Cents

Corvette: 25 Years to Indy 500

By **Paul Lienert**
Detroit Editor

The Chevrolet Corvette which paces the Indianapolis 500 Mile Race next May will be a milestone model in more ways than just the fact that it is the car's 25th anniversary.

The Corvette is the fastest American production car—with a top speed of over 125mph. Thus, it doesn't need the special equipment usually installed on Indy pace cars to make them go fast enough to get the 33 car race field off to a safe start.

The word is that Chevrolet plans call for the Corvette pace car to be a stock model, complete with all the usual power-robbing emissions equipment normally found on other American cars.

And it will be equipped with air conditioning, power windows and the other comfort features also found on this $12,000 car. In short, it will be the first showroom stock car to pace Indy in many years.

It will be Chevy's answer to those who complain that the new Corvette isn't as powerful as it used to be.

But, of course, despite the complaints, the car is more popular than ever. And why is this?

Sex appeal...

How else can one explain America's 25-year love affair with the Chevrolet Corvette?

Since its deput as a show car in January, 1953, Corvette has achieved a lofty status in the marketplace that many others have aspired to but few have attained. Not only has it demonstrated remarkable longevity, it remains the one true sex symbol to emerge from Detroit in

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The Corvette wowed 'em when it appeared in 1953. In 1978, it will make it to the Indy 500—in box-stock form, as the pace car.

Why the 'Vette Stays the Same

The "next great change" in the Chevrolet Corvette is always just around the corner. It is a moving target, always a few years away.

The man in charge of designing the Corvette admits some planned changes have been shelved and suggests as a reason, "Demand is so great that it's hard to get off a winning horse."

Jerry Palmer, director of designing the Corvette, Camaro and Monza cars for Chevrolet, notes that the 'Vette is now selling around 45,000 a year, even though it has not had any major change in a decade.

"The basic body is about 10 years old but it sells so well because it is the country's only true sports car and is still a lot of fun to drive.

"The ride and handling have been refined, but it is not a brutal car like it used to be in the late 1960's and early 1970's when you could buy one which was almost an all-out race car.

"The appearance is almost timeless. The car still looks good 10 years later."

Palmer says the changes on the 1978 model would have been introduced two years ago but were delayed because of problems caused by the energy crisis and the recession. In other words, the Corvette was down on the list of priorities of things to do when GM decided it had to redesign all its cars to make them smaller and more economical.

The 1978 Corvette with its fastback roofline and added room behind the seats "is now big enough so I can even carry my two small boys in back, although we can't advertise it as such," Palmer says.

Palmer notes that his former boss, retired General Motors Vice President for Design Bill Mitchell "used to call this the candy store where I work because we deal with the most interesting cars in the line."

Palmer was at the recent International Race of Champions (IROC) events in Riverside. "I'm just watching out for our interests," he said as the identical Z-28 Camaros sped by.

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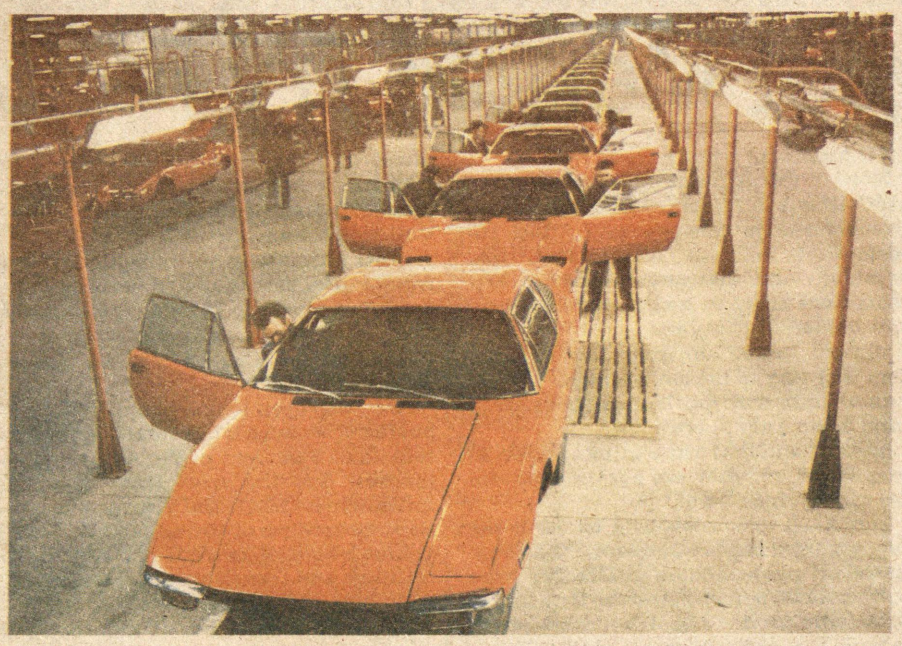
Pantera Rust Woes



A spotted Panther? The Italian-built Ford Pantera has some rust problems, owners are reporting. See page 2 for details.

AUTO TALK

Buick Will Not Offer the two-barrel version of its turbocharged 231-inch V-6 until after Jan. 1 due to a delay in federal certification of the engine. The four-barrel turbo 231 is currently available in the '78 Regal and LeSabre sport coupes.

Electronic Fuel Metering looks like a sure thing now for Chrysler on some 1978 model cars. Engineers had run into problems with some of the hardware earlier this year and had been doubtful of any sizable use on cars late in the 1978 model year. "We are much more optimistic now because we are getting good fuel economy and emission numbers," a Chrysler insider said. The system is said to combine the best features of the carburetor and electronic fuel injection.

The End Is Not In Sight for new auto safety standards. Joan Claybrook, chief of the federal safety agency, said "we have a task force examining what standards are needed over the next five years. We are drawing up a plan for future regulations and it will be ready in early December. I can tell you it will deal with theft prevention among other things."

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Ford Checking Pantera Rust Woes

By Bob Irvin

Dave Arnold, a Cleveland attorney, bought a Pantera in 1974 and says he still believes it is "a super car despite what we discovered six weeks ago."

"What we found in routine maintenance was some sort of corrosion damage to the frame," Arnold explained. "I have been told by people in California that it has happened to other Panteras."

It has, to dozens of others. As a result, the Customer Service Division of the Ford Motor Co. has launched a major investigation to decide how to handle the problem. It could involve safety because some suspension parts are rusting.

It is not just a matter of rusting and supplying new parts to replace the corroded pieces. The problem is that the company is out of these parts. The Italian-built car is no longer sold in the United States and Ford has exhausted the supply of some parts.

The firm had 250 of its Lincoln-Mercury Division dealers franchised to sell the Pantera, a mid-engined, $10,000 sports car designed by Ghia, engineered by deTomaso and built by Vignale. Ford had bought a majority interest in the three Italian companies.

The Pantera is a two-passenger coupe with a 98-inch wheelbase and a height of only 44 inches. The powerplant was Ford's 351cid V8 engine, which was built in Cleveland.

Ford sold 130 of the cars in America in 1971. Sales reached a peak of 1831 in 1973 before falling to 526 in 1975, the last year on the American market. In all, the L-M dealers sold 5269. DeTomaso continued to market the car on his own in Europe and last year sold 103—including eight in Austria, 11 in Belgium, 54 in Germany, one in France, two in The Netherlands, two in Sweden and 25 in Italy.

When it was introduced, the car was priced at $9995 and rose to $11,061 by the time it was discontinued two years ago. The car disappeared for lack of sales and also because of problems meeting new federal auto safety standards.

However, the car is still popular and a Ford spokesman says that is one of the problems with parts. "When we phased out the car we purchased what we thought would be an adequate supply of parts to supply those on the road," the spokesman said.

"But it has become a very collectable car and there is no such thing as a Pantera in a junkyard. People who have them are holding onto them and presumably keeping them in tip top shape.

"We are currently out of a supply of three parts—the rear inner wheel housings, a rear suspension support and the rocker panels. We have a task force looking at the problem and we will determine within 60 days what to do—how many parts we need and how to get them.

"If we decide we will need 50 parts we will do it one way, 1000 another way. Right now we need about 35 of these parts. We are trying to decide how many additional parts will be needed."

The parts prices include $116 for the rear suspension supports, $40 for the inner rear wheel housings and $68 for the rocker panels. One way or another Ford will have to supply the parts and observers expect the firm to order many more than it now needs to service other Panteras which may develop rust problems. "We will handle everyone's requirements," Ford said.

What caused the rusting? The Ford spokesman said, "I'm not sure the salt on the winter roads had anything to do with it. From what I have been able to learn, there should have been drain holes in the body and they weren't there." Thus, water collected and the metal rusted.

Asked about any safety implications, the spokesman said, "My understanding is that the rear suspension support part of the inner rear wheel housing is an integral part by definition of the car's suspension. So there could be a problem. But there have been no accidents as a result of this rusting, to my knowledge."

The rusting problem has been developing over the past two years, according to Evelyn Blanchette, who is the coordinator for the Pantera Owners Club and who publishes the club's magazine, called Pantera International.

"I think it is a fairly serious problem," she said in an interview in Los Angeles. "I am trying to bring it to the attention of my members—we have about 1,200. We have been aware of the rust problem for two years, but were not aware of the extent of it. We believe it is because of improper design."

That was what the Ford spokesman implied as well. Another person involved in the investigation, but who asked that his name not be used, said, "You expect to find some rust on cars which are four or five years old but not to the extent that we are seeing now. I haven't seen rusting like this on other vehicles."

The Pantera people hate to talk about its rusting problems because they believe that doing so may "make the bottom fall out of the car," as one put it. He meant that figuratively, not literally.

Arnold, the Cleveland Pantera owner, has 37,000 miles on his car. "I still think it's a fantastic car—and I had two Corvettes before buying the Pantera—but this latest problem came out of left field," he said. "It's a mid-engine car which can compete with Maserati or Ferrari but the beauty of it is that it has an American engine and any old Joe can work on it."

What's Arnold doing about his rust problem? Waiting on Ford. He called Ford President Lee A. Iacocca and is now dealing with some customer service people.

"I feel Ford should bear the responsibility for this and apparently they are willing to do so," Arnold said. "I have taken absolutely good care of this car and I believe they recognize their responsibility here."

The Pantera was the first mid-engine sports car ever built in volume using a large American V8.

In introducing the car, Ford said it was "designed to appeal to the enthusiast who wants sleek styling with superior performance and workmanship."

Standard were four wheel power disc brakes said to deliver the best braking in the U.S. Ford said it would stop from 60 mph in only 134 feet. It was also able to go from zero to 60 mph in 5.5 seconds, Ford said. It has a five speed transaxle. Standard are power windows and tinted glass.

'Vette Looks Good after 24 Years

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the last three decades.

There was a time back in the '60s when the Corvette, with its big-block V8s and "rock crusher" four-speed transmission, was a real terror on wheels, and it had the kind of jazzy styling to match its balls-out performance image.

The days of the tire-smoking, gut-wrenching machines have since faded, yet the Corvette lives on. The "only production sports car in America," as Chevy likes to bill its baby, has undergone few cosmetic changes since the last major body revision in 1968, yet its popularity continues unabated.

Why?

ACCORDING to David R. McLellan, Corvette chief engineer, it is because of "the image that has built up around the car—that of an exciting sports car, distinctive in appearance, a car to be seen in and an exciting and sensuous car to drive."

Chevrolet has carefully cultivated that image during the past quarter century.

The first production Corvette rolled off the assembly line in Flint, Mich., on June 30, 1953. The little two-seat convertible featured a molded fiberglass-reinforced body (available only in white with red cockpit), a hopped-up version of the venerable Blue Flame Six with triple side-draft carburetors and Powerglide transmission. Chevy turned out 300 examples in the '53 model year at $3250 a copy.

Sales sputtered briefly in '54 and '55 after production was shifted to St. Louis. The appearance of optional 265cid and 283cid V8s in 1955-56, however, plus the addition of such goodies as synchronized four-speed transmission, dual-quad manifold and fuel injection in the late '50s, did much to enhance Corvette's growing reputation as a street rodder's dream. Production climbed steadily through the latter part of the decade, exceeding 10,000 units for the first time in 1960.

THE LIST of high-performance equipment grew longer in the early '60s, and modest design changes heightened the car's appeal to enthusiasts.

Then in 1963, Bill Mitchell, head of GM Styling, dropped his bombshell. The Corvette Stingray, probably the most striking and influential design of its generation, was unveiled to almost universal acclaim.

The introduction of the Stingray split-window coupe and its successors opened up a whole new market of Corvette buyers. Production jumped from 14,531 in 1962 to 21,513 the following year, and the legend continued to grow.

Chevy introduced independent rear suspension and four-wheel disc brakes on the Stingray in the '60s, and the first big-

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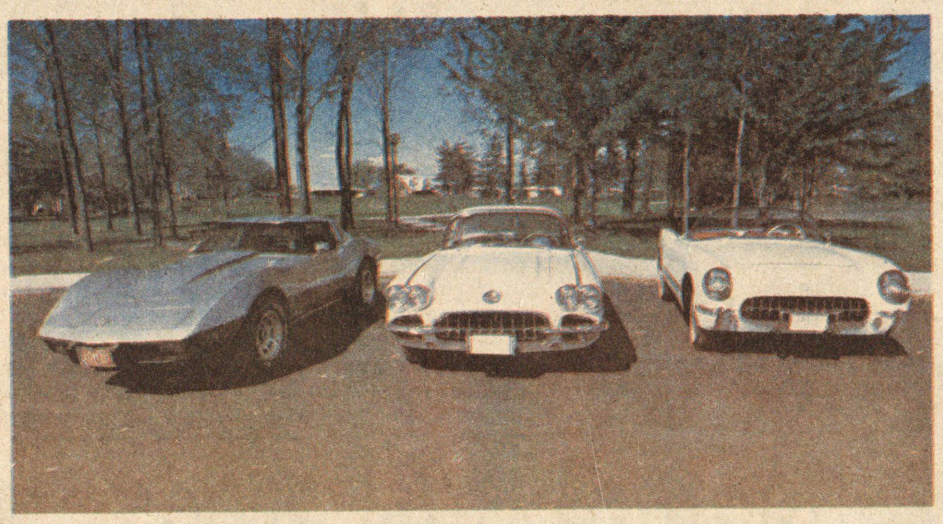

A '78, a '58 and a '53—Corvettes have sold performance when possible, prestige and image when not.

AMC/Peugeot Merger Try Fails

Troubled American Motors Corp. has failed in an effort to work out a merger or sale with Peugeot, the French auto firm.

"It was all set but then Peugeot said they didn't want any part of us," said one AMC insider.

Dale Dawkins, the man in charge of marketing for AMC, was in Europe last week trying to resurrect the deal, according to the insiders.

Earlier, the sources said, AMC Chairman Roy D. Chapin Jr. and AMC President Gerald Meyers were in Paris working on the proposal.

It was after the deal fell through that Chapin resigned as chief executive officer of the beleaguered No. 4 U.S. auto firm and Meyers succeeded him, according to the sources.

They said Peugeot was interested in a link with AMC to get the firm's dealer and distribution network, including over 1,500 American sales offices.

Word of the negotiations filtered out of AMC offices in Michigan and Wisconsin. One Wisconsin newspaper printed reports that the sale of the firm was imminent and that several vice presidents were about to resign. AMC spokesmen denied this report.

Meyers, in another interview, said the firm will stay in the car business despite rumors in Detroit that it might be ready to wind down auto operations.

Meyers said that while things appear to be going down, they are not because "we are on the right track."

The AMC executive said sales of the new luxury compact Concord are strong. However, overall sales in October were down over 25 percent. And the firm had to shut some production lines this week to reduce the inventory of slow selling Pacer and Matador cars.

The proposed tie with Peugeot is but the latest in a series of reports linking the ailing auto firm with several other companies, including at one time or another Volkswagen and Honda.

AMC officials recently denied reports from Japan that they had been trying to work out a sale to Honda. The Japanese firm is now outselling AMC on the American market, as are the Toyota, Datsun and VW cars.

AMC has been losing heavily on its car business because it is now accounting for less than 2 percent of the American car market. But the firm made about $4 million in its last fiscal year which ended Sept. 30 because of strong sales of its Jeep vehicles as well as a good market for the military and transit vehicles built by its AM General Subsidiary.

In the car business, AMC must compete not only with the new small economy imports but new models from the U.S. Big Three firms.