

# THE GRAND

BY WILLIAM JEANES

**I**N MARCH 2003, at the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance, the only five Grand Sport Corvettes appeared together for the first time. Or so said the publicity material; new evidence indicates that there were six Grand Sports. Still, the reunion of the mighty "lightweights," purpose-built racing cars constructed in 1962-63 to battle the hated Ford-powered Cobras, fascinated the Corvette faithful. Rounding them up had been difficult.

"I'd been trying to get all five of them together for eight years," says Bill Warner, chairman of the Amelia Island event. "But each year, there'd be a reluctant owner, a car that wasn't ready, or both." In 2002 Warner went to work in earnest on the last owner holdout, former General Motors engineer Bill Tower.

Tower attended the 2002

the Flat Earth Society.

Now why would anyone say something tacky like that?

Maybe because a Grand Sport Corvette never won a major race. Their best FIA-sanctioned showing was a 1-2 class finish at Sebring in 1964. They never came near a world championship—a trick turned by Carroll Shelby's Cobra. Further, what few wins the cars notched were almost always the result of someone else's problems. Finally, you could point out that the Grand Sport was an aerodynamic carnival ride. At speed, its front end was lighter than a confetti soufflé.

Roger Penske, whose accomplishments as a racing team owner and businessman long ago eclipsed his distinguished career as a driver, said, "It was so light at the front end that when you really stood on the gas, the front end would come off the ground like a dragster."

Former Texas Chevrolet

icon. Why then, when five surviving Grand Sports appeared together, did Corvette lovers take to their fainting couches?

There are reasons, some of them excellent.

First, the Grand Sports were the product of Zora Arkus-Duntov, the volatile Russian who wasn't the father of the Corvette but was the worldly uncle who taught it how to act. As Corvette's chief engineer he did everything a crafty zealot could do, in the face of GM stodginess, to make the Corvette a genuine sports car. If you don't know his story, read Jerry Burton's *Zora Arkus-Duntov, The Legend Behind Corvette*. In it, you can read of how Arkus-Duntov took the Corvette racing in defiance of the 1958 Automobile Manufacturers Association ban on competition activity.

That constitutes the second reason the Grand Sport enjoys legend status: One thing better than a corporate racing effort

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—FORMER TEXAS CHEVROLET DEALER DELMO JOHNSON

Amelia Island show and conceded that its Ritz-Carlton backdrop merited a Grand Sports convocation for 2003, Corvette's golden anniversary year. Furthermore, Amelia Island is an easy drive from Plant City, Florida, where Tower lives. With Tower aboard, the fabulous five would at last appear together. Why was this event so noteworthy?

You must understand that Corvettes constitute the country's third-largest religion—behind Overeating and Money. Within that religion lurks a sect that worships the Grand Sports with the fervor and logic of

dealer Delmo Johnson, who logged more seat time in a Grand Sport than most, called it "...the only car I ever drove that would lift the front wheels off the ground in all four gears." Said Johnson, who drove his Grand Sport in Mexico's 1964 Carrera de Costa a Costa: "I was clocked at 205 in the car. The front end was off the ground from 160 on up, but the road was straight so it didn't make any difference."

The Grand Sport's lackluster record, frightful aerodynamics, and outdated front-engine configuration would seem to militate against its becoming an

is a secret corporate racing effort. That the cars emerged from a hidden program opposed by top GM executives contributes mightily to their aura. Finally, some of racing's greats laid hands on them. These included drivers John Cannon, A.J. Foyt, Masten Gregory, Dick Guldstrand, Jim Hall, Penske, Hap Sharp, Dick Thompson and Don Yenko—plus Texas oilman John Mecom, who bought and campaigned the cars.

Arkus-Duntov's disobedience to the AMA ban manifested itself first in the Z06 Corvette, named for an option



group that fitted a stock Vette with stiffer springs and shocks, more horsepower and thicker antiroll bars. Seeing that the Z06 would not best the Cobras without divine intervention, Arkus-Duntov next built the Grand Sport. The new racer was more than a half-ton lighter than a stock Sting Ray and shared few parts with the showroom version.

# SPORT CORVETTES

NOW WE ARE SIX



For years it was thought just five Corvette Grand Sports were built for racing, and they were grouped for a photo earlier this year. We now know there was a sixth.

After a December 1962 test session at Sebring, word of Arkus-Duntov's racing activity reached the GM executive suite. Though Arkus-Duntov had tacit support from GM vice president Ed Cole and Chevrolet general manager Bunkie Knudsen, word came down from GM chairman Frederic Donner to stop the lightweight Corvette program. Arkus-

Duntov's plan to produce 125 cars—and thereby achieve FIA homologation—died aborning.

Conventional sources say Arkus-Duntov handed out the five Grand Sports to private racers for 1963: one to Chevy dealer Dick Doane, one to Gulf Oil executive Grady Davis and three to the Mecom Racing Team. Davis hired Thompson as a driver, and

he recorded the only Grand Sport win of 1963—an SCCA club race at Watkins Glen.

A high watermark for the Grand Sport came at the Nassau Speed Weeks in December 1963. The post-season Bahamian races had a certain international cachet, but they lacked FIA sanction. And if racing's big boys came primarily for the party, at least they

showed up. It was face-off time.

With Arkus-Duntov looking on, Hall and Thompson put two Mecom Grand Sports on the front row of the grid for the Tourist Trophy. Neither finished. In the Governor's Cup event, Penske turned in an excellent third overall. A week later, Thompson finished a decent fourth in the Nassau Trophy. The Grand Sports earned

respect, but at a cost.

Arkus-Duntov, who could not have hidden his light under a Quonset hut, let alone a bushel, generated so much publicity at Nassau that GM brass threw a running fit and slammed the door on the Grand Sport program. Once again, the cars left GM and went to privateers.

Here, new information refutes accepted wisdom. In a recent interview with *AutoWeek*, Mecom asserts that Arkus-Duntov built a half-dozen Grand Sports and sold all six to Mecom Racing.

"I thought I'd bought them all—to make it legal. It wasn't for a whole lot of money," Mecom said. His recollection

book, two Grand Sport roadsters went to Penske, who immediately sold one to George Wintersteen. One coupe went to Hall, and the remaining two coupes to Mecom. Not exactly, says Mecom. At the 2003 Amelia Island event, Hall recalled paying Penske for one of the coupes and was convinced he'd bought it. Mecom is equally certain Penske never owned it—or any other Grand Sport. Mecom did, however, use Penske as a go-between with GM.

"I paid Roger to pay GM for all six of them because he knew how to do it with no problems," Mecom told *AutoWeek*.

Three Grand Sports raced at Sebring in March 1964 and

"Bill Mitchell got hold of one and, I'm sure from what he told me, made a styling car out of it," Mecom said. He went on to describe a walk with Mitchell through one of the buildings in Warren, Michigan, where GM stored styling cars in big racks. And where such cars were frequently destroyed.

"Lance Reventlow had given Mitchell a Scarab. He [Mitchell] always commented about a Scorpion and another car. I don't know whether the Scorpion was the Scarab or the old Corvette. But one was sitting next to the other on the third level, side by side, both painted blue. I never saw it again although I'd paid for all six of them."

me for those books," Mecom said. One author of a book devoted solely to the Grand Sport called Mecom after the book was published. "He told me he didn't interview me because he'd already talked to the experts." But the reunion nonetheless pleased Mecom.

"I was glad to see them there. It's just hard to realize those things are as valuable as they are."

How valuable is the Corvette quintet? As Warner put it, "A car is worth what someone is willing to pay for it on the day that the owner decides to sell." He also noted that, "If two owners decided to sell on the same day, we'd find out what one



Three Grand Sports attacked Sebring in 1964, including this one driven by Delmo Johnson and Dave Morgan. The car DNF'd.

is that each car cost between \$3,000 and \$6,000.

To examine the relationships in the 1960s between Mecom, Hall, Penske and the two camps of GM racing engineers—one headed by Frank Winchell and the other by Arkus-Duntov—would require a book. Suffice it to say that the interaction was complex. But Mecom is positive that he not only owned all the Grand Sports but also had all six of them together in his Houston shop at least once.

"I'd swear on a stack of bibles there were six," he said. "We had all six of them together one time here in Houston. Now everybody says there were only five. There is a sixth car."

According to the Burton

finished first (Penske/Hall) and second (Foyt/Cannon) in class after leader Ken Miles' Cobra failed with 10 minutes remaining. Johnson's entry did not finish. In December Penske won the rain-shortened Tourist Trophy at the 1964 Nassau Speed Weeks, and a Miles Cobra again failed to finish after leading. The cars made sporadic appearances after that, in the hands of various owners, but were never again competitive.

Where, then, is Grand Sport No. 6?

Mecom is convinced Bill Mitchell, the GM design boss who died in 1988, took it and turned it into a styling exercise. Why would Mecom believe that? Because Mitchell said so.

Mecom describes one of the warehoused cars as a brighter purple than the Mecom Blue, which is a 1959 Cadillac Pelham Blue with added metal-flake. He said that none of the Amelia Island reunion cars restored to Mecom Racing trim got the color right.

"None of them were the same as they were when I had them. I know a lot of things change, but there was crap hanging on those things I never saw before. Even the ones that were painted in our old livery got the color wrong." Speaking of wrong, if you accept Mecom's version of the Grand Sport saga, all the books are incorrect.

There's a reason for that. "No one ever interviewed

is really worth." At least two experts familiar with the collector car market estimate \$1 million plus. That's per car and with or without a sixth example.

Was there a sixth car? Dallas artist and Mecom friend Bill Neale says yes. "There was a framed photograph of the Hobby Airport shop in John's trophy room, and you could see, if you looked, six Grand Sports." Neale added that more than a few people saw the photo and spoke of the six cars.

Until the photo is located, skeptics will insist that no sixth car existed. But it's difficult to fault Mecom's memory. To paraphrase the Packard slogan, "Ask the man who owned all six." ■