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The Story of Corvette Racing: Twenty-Three Years and Counting

For more than 65 years, the Chevrolet Corvette has stood alone as America's sports car. And for the last two decades, Corvette Racing has helped push the development, performance and popularity of Chevrolet's top-line performance automobile on race tracks around the world. It's the hallmark of North American endurance racing's longest-running factory effort as the calendar turns to 2021 and the continuation of Corvette Racing's third decade in top-level motorsports.

The 2021 IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship season sees Corvette Racing and Chevrolet attempt to defend their sweep of full-season GT Le Mans (GTLM) championships as the program took the Manufacturers, Drivers and Team titles in the first year of the C8.R.

"The first season for the Corvette C8.R has shattered all of our expectations," said Mark Reuss, GM president. "The success of the Corvette Racing team wouldn't be possible without the close link between the crew and the Corvette engineering team. It has been great to watch these two teams work closely together to learn from each other. I can't wait to see what next season brings."

Corvette Racing owns one of sports car racing's top pedigrees with victories in the biggest events and at the most famous tracks around the world. It also represents the highest level of technology transfer between racing and the showroom with an increasing number of common elements as the years have progressed.

"The Corvette Racing program allows us to race what we sell in one of the most extreme environments in all of motorsports," said Mark Stielow, Chevrolet Director of Motorsports Competition. "We learn an incredible amount competing in events like the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship and the 24 Hours of Le Mans. One is that it allows us to show the efficiency, reliability and ingenuity of the Chevrolet Corvette. Secondly, we develop technologies through racing that carry over to our production vehicles in order to make the safest and most advanced Corvettes for our customers."

Those advancements have led to the Corvette brand's ultimate destiny – the mid-engine Corvette Stingray. The C8.R is based on the strong foundation of its road-going counterpart. There is a deeper level of technology transfer between the race car and production Corvette than ever before, which helps contribute to many of its advancements. As a result, the C8.R shares the highest percentage of parts between the production version and race car than any previous generation.

"It was important for us to develop the new race car alongside the production car, so that each product could properly take advantage of the new architecture," said Ed Piatek, Corvette chief engineer. "The benefits of this mid-engine supercar, including its incredible balance and connected-to-the-road feel, will be obvious on the street and the track."

Corvette C8.R: Engineered for the Racing Environment

Since certain features of the 2020 Corvette Stingray aren't necessary in a racing environment, the engineering and design teams found innovative ways to get benefits out of every part of the vehicle. For example, on the C8.R, a single centrally-mounted radiator was placed in the area used as the front

storage compartment on the production Corvette. Ultra-bright racing headlights were packaged on the race car where the radiators are located on the production car.

In compliance with IMSA engine displacement rules, the C8.R features a 5.5L naturally-aspirated, flat-plane crank V8 engine, producing 500 hp and 480 ft.-lb. of torque.

A new compact Xtrac six-speed sequential gearbox was developed in order to provide room at the rear of the C8.R to package a race car specific diffuser.

“We have looked forward to racing a production-based mid-engine Corvette for a long time,” said Jim Campbell, Chevrolet U.S. vice president of Performance and Motorsports. “The debut of the C8.R was the result of immense collaboration between GM Engineering, Propulsion, Design and the Corvette Racing team. As Corvette Racing continues its third decade of competition, we’re excited to write the next chapter.”

Laying the Groundwork

The 2021 season marks the 65th anniversary of the Corvette’s first professional race. Its competition debut as a factory effort came at the 12 Hours of Sebring in 1956 with five Corvettes. In 1960, the Corvette brand raced for the first time at the 24 Hours of Le Mans with Briggs Cunningham entering three Corvettes in the French classic. It marked the Corvette’s transition to an international icon.

The modern era of Corvette competition began in 1999, with the debut of the Corvette Racing team – a partnership between Chevrolet and Pratt & Miller Engineering, which builds the race cars and operates the program for Chevy Racing.

Since that time, Corvette Racing has accumulated 117 victories around the world – more than any other entrant in IMSA history. Among those are eight wins at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, four at the Rolex 24 At Daytona (including the 2021 race) and 11 at the Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring. From 1999 to 2013, Corvette Racing led the American Le Mans Series (ALMS) in all-time victories and 1-2 finishes. It also won an ALMS-best 10 Team championships, 10 Manufacturers titles for Chevrolet and nine Drivers championships.

During those years, the Corvettes competing on the track and those available at Chevrolet dealerships became more closely related, with racing elements adapted to make better road cars. One of the best and most recent examples was the 2019 Corvette C7.R race car and the Chevrolet Corvette Z06 production car, which shared a common aluminum frame, similar aerodynamic strategies, engine technologies and even tire construction.

Corvette C5-R (1999-2004)

Even before the fifth-generation Corvette rolled into dealerships, plans were well underway to return Chevrolet to professional endurance racing. The Corvette C5-R debuted in 1999 at the Rolex 24 At Daytona and was a fixture of global GT racing for the next five years. From 1999-2004, Corvette Racing and the C5-R set the standard for racing success with 31 victories in the ALMS, along with an overall victory at the Rolex 24 in 2001.

Success wasn’t limited to North America. The C5-R scored the first of its three GTS victories at Le Mans in 2001, following with wins in 2002 and 2004. ALMS team and manufacturer championships came in 2001-04.

The C5-R also helped instill Corvette drivers such as Ron Fellows and Johnny O’Connell as faces of the team and the ALMS. Fellows won 21 ALMS races in the C5-R and captured the GTS drivers’ championship three times, including twice with O’Connell. It also helped launch the sports car careers for future stars like Oliver Gavin.

Corvette C6.R (2005-2013)

Chevrolet introduced the sixth-generation Corvette for 2005, and the Corvette C6.R made its competition debut at Sebring in March that year. What followed was a period of unqualified success that came to personify Corvette Racing and its new car – first in GT1 and then the GT/GTE categories.

The Corvette C6.R was homologated on the Corvette Z06 production car's architecture. Each was powered by a 7.0L small block V-8 engine, with dry-sump lubrication system, CNC-ported aluminum cylinder heads, titanium valves, forged steel crankshaft and plate-honed cylinder bores.

The C6.R proved to be a worthy successor to the C5-R. It won 39 GT1 races in the ALMS and delivered Driver, Team and Manufacturer championships every year from 2005 to 2008. In that era, Corvette Racing won 12 straight races from 2005 to 2006, followed by 25 consecutive wins from 2007 to 2009. Four drivers claimed GT1 titles, too: O'Connell, Gavin, Olivier Beretta and Jan Magnussen.

The C6.R also won the GT1 class races at Le Mans in 2006, 2007 and 2009, the latter being Corvette Racing's last race in the class.

Corvette Racing and Chevrolet took another step forward in 2009 with the introduction of a GT2/GT-spec version of the C6.R – this one based on the Corvette ZR1. The GT rules, along with GTE at Le Mans, required many production-based components. The regulations made the C6.R and ZR1 the closest street and racing Corvettes since the 1960s. Components from four major areas carried over between the C6.R and ZR1:

- **Aluminum frame** – The same as the Z06 and ZR1, the shared structure included the windshield frame, hoop surrounding the passenger compartment, door hinge pillars, drivetrain tunnel, firewall and floor pan
- **Steering system** – The C6.R used the production steering column and production rack-and-pinion steering
- **Body profile** – The two cars are practically identical in appearance, as mandated by GT rules
- **Aerodynamics** – The C6.R used the production rear spoiler from the ZR1 and a production-based front splitter.

The GT-spec C6.R won 12 times from 2009 through 2013, plus a 2011 win at Le Mans, leading Corvette Racing and Chevrolet to Team and Manufacturer championships in 2012 and 2013. Tommy Milner and Oliver Gavin won four times in 2012 to claim the GT Driver Championship. Antonio Garcia and Jan Magnussen followed with their own title in 2013 with three wins.

Corvette C7.R (2014-2019)

Starting with the new TUDOR Championship – a merger of GRAND-AM and the ALMS – in 2014, Chevrolet and Corvette Racing entered the Chevrolet Corvette C7.R in the series' GT Le Mans class. Based on the seventh-generation 2015 Chevrolet Corvette Z06, the C7.R wrote a new chapter in technology transfer. The two represent the closest link in modern times between Corvettes built for racing and the road, sharing unprecedented levels of engineering and components including chassis architecture, engine technologies and aerodynamic strategies.

- **Frame Production** – As before, the race car and the Z06 will share the same, production-based aluminum frame. However, for the first time, the frames for the race car and production Z06 will be built in-house at the Corvette's Bowling Green, Ky., assembly plant.
- **Direct Injection** – The addition of direct fuel injection to the Corvette Z06 will enable the technology to return to a Corvette race car for the first time since the end of the GT1 era in 2009. It promises greater efficiency, which can make a significant difference in long-distance endurance racing such as Daytona and Le Mans through fewer time-consuming pit stops.
- **Aerodynamics** – The Corvette Z06 and C7.R take the aerodynamic foundation to the next level, sharing aggressive strategies for increased cooling and aerodynamic downforce, including similar front splitters, rocker panels, and front- and rear-brake cooling ducts.

“It’s difficult to imagine what the Corvette brand would look like without the Corvette Racing program,” said Tadge Juechter, Corvette Executive Chief Engineer. “For more than 20 years we have been working toward total integration of the race- and street-car teams. Endurance racing provides us with a treasure trove of information in any number of areas – aerodynamics, engine performance and chassis, to name a few. That kind of real-world data is highly valuable to production engineers and designers, and we have made great use of those lessons from the racetrack. It really improves our products, and resonates with our fanbase and Corvette owners.”

CORVETTE RACING FAST FACTS – 1999-2021 (through Lime Rock)

Le Mans class wins: 8

Class Manufacturer titles: 13

Class Driver titles: 13

Class Team titles: 14

Worldwide starts (by car): 478

Worldwide starts (by event): 244

Worldwide wins: 117

Team 1-2 finishes: 66

About Chevrolet

Founded in 1911 in Detroit, Chevrolet is one of the world's largest car brands, doing business in more than 100 countries and selling more than 4.0 million cars and trucks a year. Chevrolet provides customers with fuel-efficient vehicles that feature engaging performance, design that makes the heart beat, passive and active safety features and easy-to-use technology, all at a value. More information on Chevrolet models can be found at www.chevrolet.com.