

CORVETTE RACING MILESTONES: CARS THAT MADE THE MARQUE

The roster of drivers who have raced for glory in Corvettes could fill a motorsports hall of fame: John Fitch, Roger Penske, Walt Hansgen, A.J. Foyt, Jim Hall, Dr. Dick Thompson, Dick Guldstrand, Bob Bondurant, Johnny Rutherford, John Greenwood and dozens more. The Corvette Racing program has added names like Ron Fellows, Johnny O’Connell, Oliver Gavin, Olivier Beretta, Dale Earnhardt and Dale Earnhardt Jr. to the pantheon of Corvette stars.

A chronicle of Corvette’s success in motorsports could fill a book – several record books, in fact. Competition has been a part of Chevrolet’s heritage since race car driver Louis Chevrolet and financier William Durant founded the fledgling car company in 1911. Forty-four years later, the debut of the small-block V-8 heralded the dawn of a new era in auto racing. GM’s versatile small-block has powered more winning race cars and won more championships than any other production motor.

Corvette played a crucial role in recasting Chevrolet’s image from a producer of conservative automobiles to a company that appealed to youthful, performance-minded customers. Ed Cole, Chevrolet’s visionary chief engineer in 1955, persuaded GM’s leadership that the terms “affordable” and “high-performance” weren’t mutually exclusive.

The press and public responded to Chevrolet’s new image. Writing in the January 1955 issue of *Hot Rod* magazine, technical editor Racer Brown commented on the reasons behind Chevrolet’s transformation: “Perhaps the continued popularity of Chevrolets lies in the fact that it is an ‘average’ car for an ‘average’ buyer,” he wrote. “But the average American driver is becoming more performance minded. He expects things to happen when he punches the throttle.”

Corvette was the vehicle that drove the small-block’s development in the early days. Legendary racer/engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov continually pushed the performance envelope with his beloved two-seater. Dual quads, fuel injection and Holley four-barrel carburetors turned the Corvette into a bona fide performance machine.

Duntov was frequently at odds with the ban on corporate racing enacted by the Automobile Manufacturers Association in 1957, and he launched a number of unofficial programs to ensure that independent Corvette racers had the equipment they needed to compete. There was talk of entering the mid-engined CERV I Vehicle in the Indianapolis 500, and the five lightweight Grand Sport Corvettes constructed in 1962-63 bore the unmistakable mark of Zora.

More than 1.3 million Corvettes have been produced. No car in America – perhaps in the world – has created more excitement and fostered more lasting memories than these million-plus Corvettes. While every Corvette is a very special automobile in the eyes of those who own them, a chosen few were destined for greatness. Here is a look back at some of the Corvette racers that made the marque.

Sebring Corvettes

The Sebring road course was the crucible where Corvette’s racing reputation was forged. Once a training field for bomber pilots, the converted airport circuit became a proving ground for legendary road racers. It was on this flat and featureless track that Chevrolet’s fiberglass roadster first seriously challenged the European makes in March 1956.

Fresh from a record-setting session on the sands of Daytona Beach (where Zora Arkus-Duntov set the flying mile speed record at 150.583 mph), the Corvette crew hastily prepared a trio of Corvettes for the 12-hour Sebring endurance race. The untested Corvettes encountered numerous problems, but drivers John Fitch and Walt Hansgen claimed a ninth-place finish overall and first in Class B. That first Sebring experience became the cornerstone of the Corvette legend.

Corvette SR-2

The Sebring Corvettes sired a trio of SR Corvettes – the acronym standing for “Sebring Racer” or, alternatively, “Sports Racing.” According to Corvette folklore, when Jerry Earl, the son of GM Styling chief Harley Earl, announced that he wanted a Ferrari, his father commissioned a racing Corvette for him instead. The result was the SR-2.

Starting with a Sebring Corvette chassis, the SR-2 sprouted a rear fin, two small racing windscreens, air scoops on the side coves and an extended front end with driving lights that gave the machine a purposeful appearance. Corvette repeated as the GT class champion at the 1957 Sebring enduro – although it was a production model, not one of the sleek SR-2s, that took the honors.

Corvette SS

The 1957 Corvette SS was Duntov’s technical *tour de force*. Originally conceived to take on Jaguar and Mercedes at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the SS was a stunning machine, both visually and mechanically.

A featherweight magnesium body enveloped a tubular steel space frame that featured coil-over-shock front suspension, a de Dion rear axle and inboard-mounted aluminum drum brakes. A fuel-injected small-block V-8 resided under its long, sloping hood.

The SS made its maiden voyage at Sebring, where suspension problems forced its retirement after only 23 laps. But there was worse news in store: the Automobile Manufacturers Association announced its opposition to factory involvement in motorsports. The SS project was shelved – although the SS was resurrected long enough to lap Daytona International Speedway at 155 mph during opening-day ceremonies in 1959.

Sting Ray Corvette

After the Corvette SS program was dismantled, one of the remnants was the chassis for the “mule” car that had been used to test various components. GM Styling Vice President William Mitchell obtained the chassis, asked Larry Shinoda to design a new body, and created the sensational Sting Ray.

Dr. Dick Thompson, a.k.a. “The Flying Dentist,” drove the handsome Sting Ray to a SCCA C-Modified championship in 1960. After its racing career ended, the car was refurbished for car show duty – and ultimately driven by its proud owner on the streets of Detroit. The original Sting Ray previewed key styling elements of second-generation production Corvettes.

Le Mans Corvettes

It fell to sportsman Briggs Cunningham to fulfill Duntov’s dream of competing at Le Mans. Cunningham fielded a trio of Corvettes at the French classic in 1960, and he was rewarded with an eighth-place finish overall and first in the big-bore GT class by drivers John Fitch and Bob Grossman.

The lure of Le Mans has proven irresistible for Corvette racers. Dick Guldstrand and Bob Bondurant topped 171 mph on the infamous Mulsanne Straight with their L88 Corvette in 1967, but dropped out with mechanical problems before the halfway mark. Another generation of Americans returned to France in 1972 when John Greenwood and comedian Dick Smothers brought a Corvette painted in stars and stripes; it lasted 10 hours. Greenwood went back four years later to celebrate America’s bicentennial with an outrageous wide-bodied, tri-colored Corvette, but a leaking fuel cell sidelined the American effort after five hours.

In 1994 a Corvette prepared by specialist Reeves Callaway was the fastest qualifier in the GT2 class, but was disqualified after 11 hours when it was refueled on the course. Callaway’s second- and third-place finishes in the GT class in 1995 foreshadowed the arrival of the all-conquering C5-R Corvettes.

CERV

Although not related to production Corvettes, four cars wearing the CERV designation – Chevrolet Engineering Research Vehicle – influenced the marque’s development. In the beginning, Duntov’s first CERV was actually conceived as a purpose-built racing vehicle – a single-seat, open-wheeled, mid-engine bullet. Its successor, the two-seat CERV II, was the first mid-engine car with full-time four-wheel drive.

CERV III continued the mid-engine theme – this time in a fully functional Corvette show car that debuted at the 1990 Detroit Auto Show. During the development of the fifth-generation Corvette, a fourth CERV was created – the only CERV with a front-mounted engine.

Grand Sport Corvettes

The significance of the original five Grand Sport Corvettes cannot be measured in racing victories and championships won. Built by Duntov to compete with Carroll Shelby’s lightweight Cobras at a time when racing was officially discouraged at GM, the handful of featherweight ’63 Grand Sports keep the flame of performance alive for the Corvette faithful.

Ambitious plans for a limited production run of Grand Sports were dashed when the program was canceled to comply with the AMA’s racing ban. Consigned to the modified classes because the 100 cars required for production status were never built, the Grand Sports were outclassed by the rear-engined specials that were taking over road racing. Two coupes were eventually converted to roadsters.

Road racing Corvettes

The availability of race-proven heavy-duty parts has made Corvette the first choice of grassroots racers. For example, checking the Z06 option on the order blank turned a ’63 Corvette into a factory-built race car outfitted with a fuel-injected 327ci small-block, metallic brakes, heavy-duty suspension, and limited-slip rear axle. An optional 36.5-gallon fuel tank gave Corvette the fuel capacity for long-distance events.

Independent racers also recognized the potential of the Corvette’s small-block powertrain. Chevrolet V-8s became the preferred power source for road racing specials. Corvettes have figured prominently in the SCCA Trans-Am road racing series, propelling four drivers to Trans-Am titles: John Greenwood (1975), Greg Pickett (1978), Gene Bothello (1979) and Eppie Wietzes (1981).

Drag racing Corvettes

Corvette also found favor with drag racers. With a relatively short wheelbase and an engine that was mounted well back in the chassis, Corvette racers enjoyed a traction advantage at the starting line. The Corvette’s small frontal area and aerodynamic shape also boosted top-end performance on the quarter-mile.

Corvettes found success in the Super Stock, Modified Production and Gas classes in the ’70s as drivers such as Paul Blevins, Don Coonce, Tony Christian, John Lingenfelter and Bernie Agaman all notched national event victories on the NHRA drag racing circuit. Lee Shepherd rose to national prominence in Reher-Morrison’s wheelstanding Modified Production Stingray Corvette before he went on to win seven Pro Stock championships with the team’s Chevrolet race cars.

Corvette’s aerodynamic shape also inspired one-piece replicas that competed in the Funny Car class. Tom “the Mongoose” McEwen put his nitro-burning Corvette Funny Car in the winner’s circle at the 1978 U.S. Nationals, the most prestigious event on the NHRA drag racing tour.

Showroom stock Corvettes

The burgeoning popularity of showroom stock racing provided a new world for Corvette to conquer in the ’80s. Like the Z06 package of the previous generation, the Z51 option had the right stuff for racing.

In the three-year run of the Sport Car Club of America (SCCA) Escort Endurance Championship for showroom stock road racers, Corvettes won every race. Chevrolet teams and drivers dominated, winning every championship the series offered. Morrison-Cook swept the titles in 1985, and Kim Baker’s Bakeracing Corvettes won consecutive drivers and team championships in 1986 and 1987.

After witnessing this devastating display, SCCA officials concluded that the only competition for a Corvette was another Corvette. Thus the Corvette Challenge was born in 1988. Organized by John Powell and supported by Chevrolet, the Corvette Challenge pitted 50 drivers in identically prepared Corvettes racing for a \$1 million purse. Bill Cooper won the inaugural Challenge championship in 1988, and Stu Hayner took the prize in 1989.

In 1990, the SCCA World Challenge arrived, but the results didn’t change: Corvettes swept the manufacturers championship two straight years, and won three consecutive drivers and team titles.

World record Corvettes

In March 1990, a pair of Corvettes prepared by Morrison Engineering and Development – one a standard production model powered by an L98 small-block and the other a ZR-1 equipped with a DOHC LT5 – broke three world endurance records and established 12 international class standards on a 7.7-mile oval in Fort Stockton, Texas.

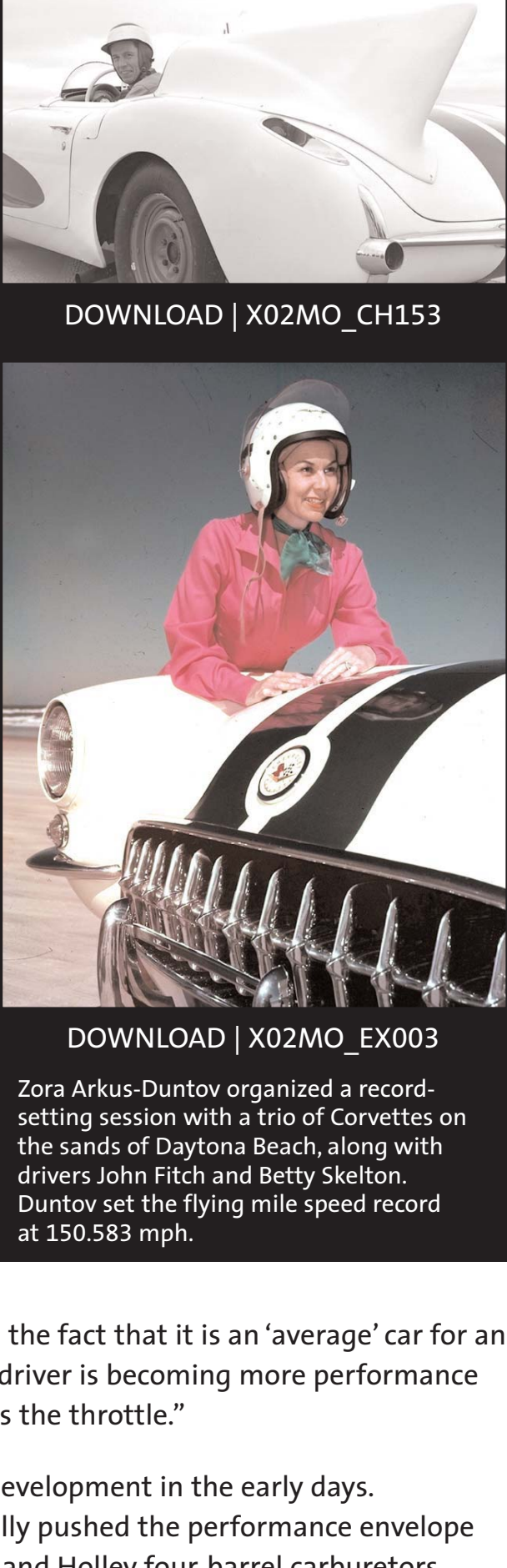
The ZR-1 set the mark for the most prestigious endurance record on the books: 24 hours at 175.885 mph. Not to be outdone, the L98 set the 6-hour record at 170.877 mph.

The Corvette record runs were organized by endurance racing specialist Tommy Morrison. The team of eight drivers included Corvette engineers John Heinrich, Jim Minneker and Scott Allman.

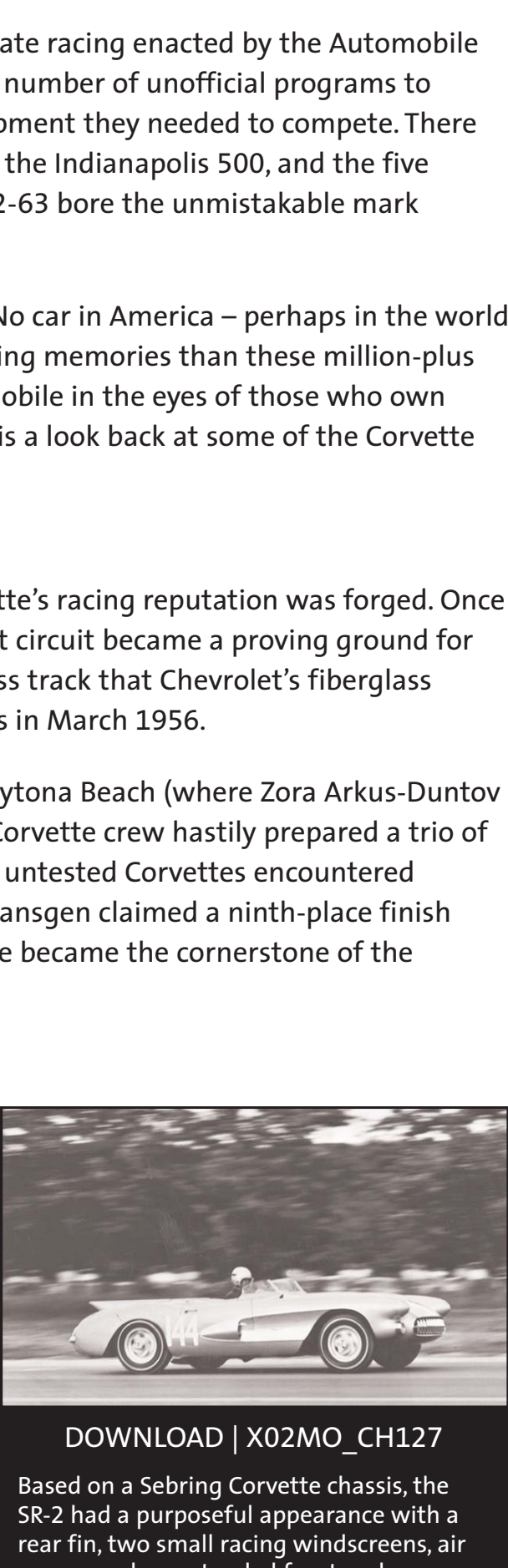
Corvette GTP

A Corvette in name and styling elements only, the Corvette GTP (Grand Touring Prototype) was one of the fastest and most exotic race cars ever to wear a red Bowtie. Based on an English Lola T600 chassis and powered by an all-American turbocharged Chevy V-6, the mid-engine racer was a rocketship. At full boost, the Corvette GTP’s 3.4-liter (209-ci) V-6 pumped out more than 1,000 horsepower. This amazing machine claimed seven poles in the IMSA Camel GT series in 1986 and won two races. In 1987, the Corvette GTP captured four more poles.

The Corvette GTP became a testbed for even more exotic technology when it was outfitted with an active suspension system and carbon brakes. In the twilight years of the program, a naturally aspirated all-aluminum small-block V-8 replaced the turbo V-6.

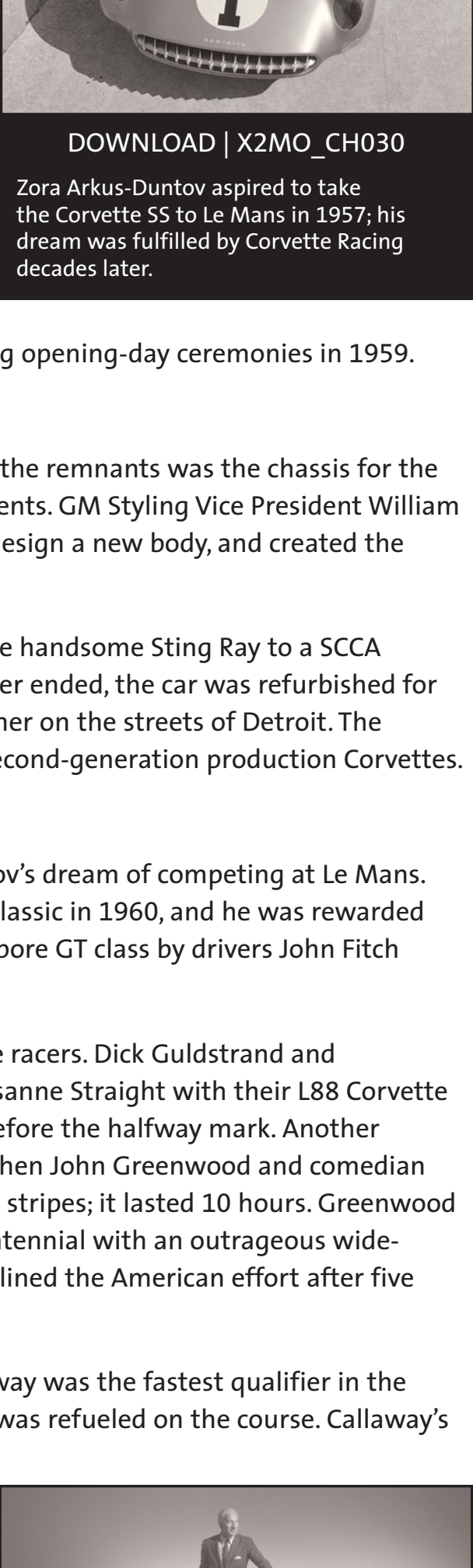


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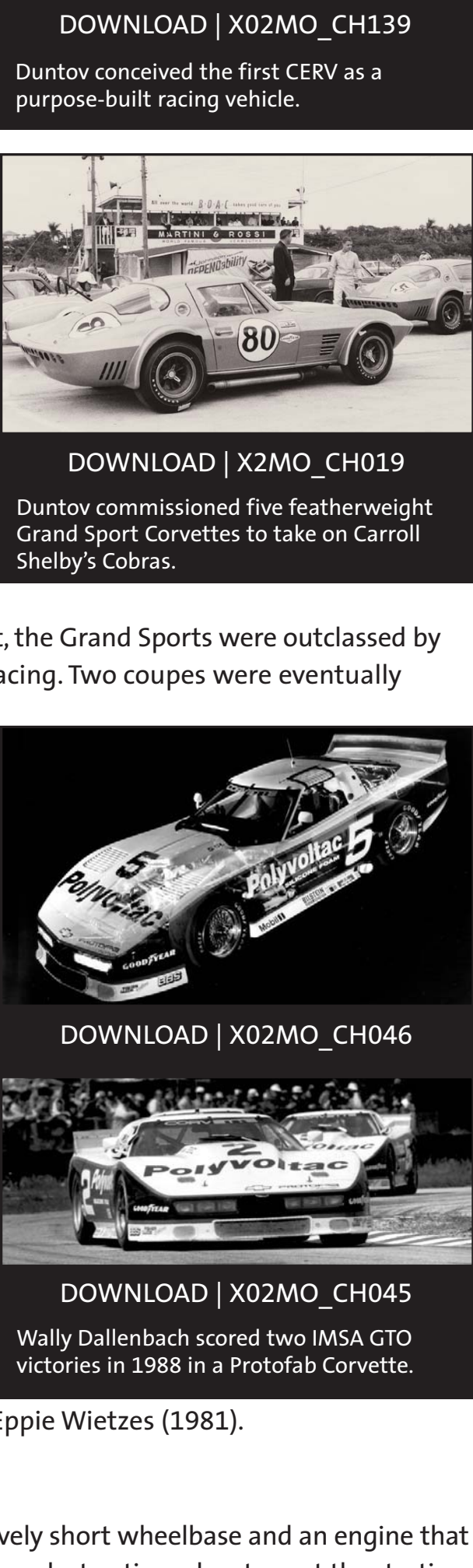
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Zora Arkus-Duntov organized a record-setting session with a trio of Corvettes on the sands of Daytona Beach, along with drivers John Fitch and Betty Skelton. Duntov set the flying mile speed record at 150.583 mph.



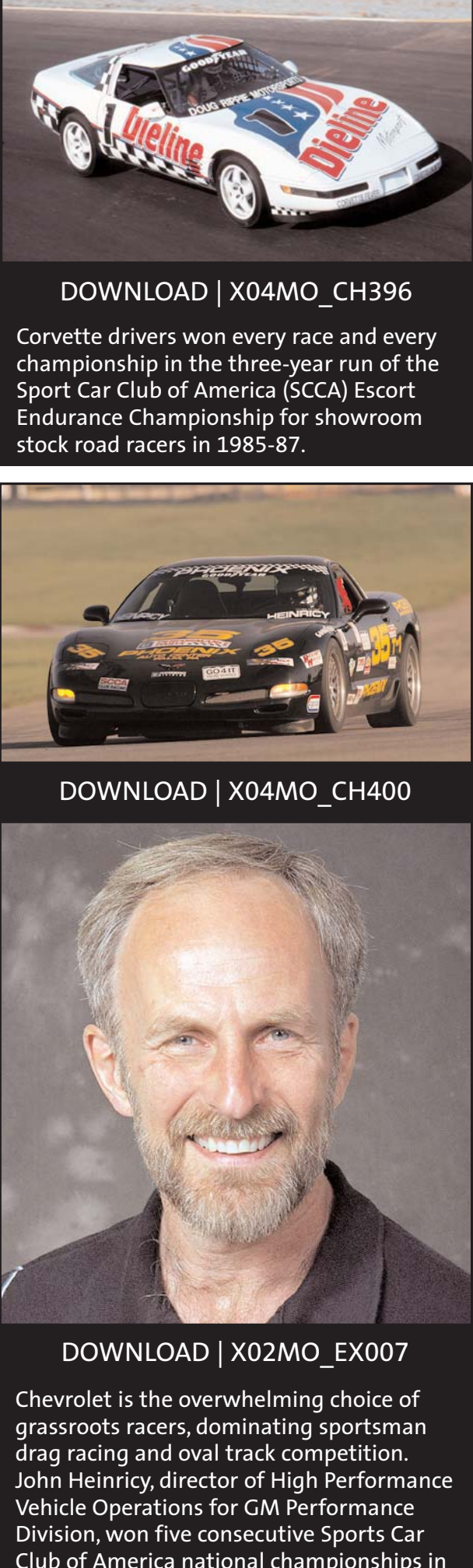
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Based on a Sebring Corvette chassis, the SR-2 had a purposeful appearance with a rear fin, two small racing windscreens, air scoops and an extended front end.

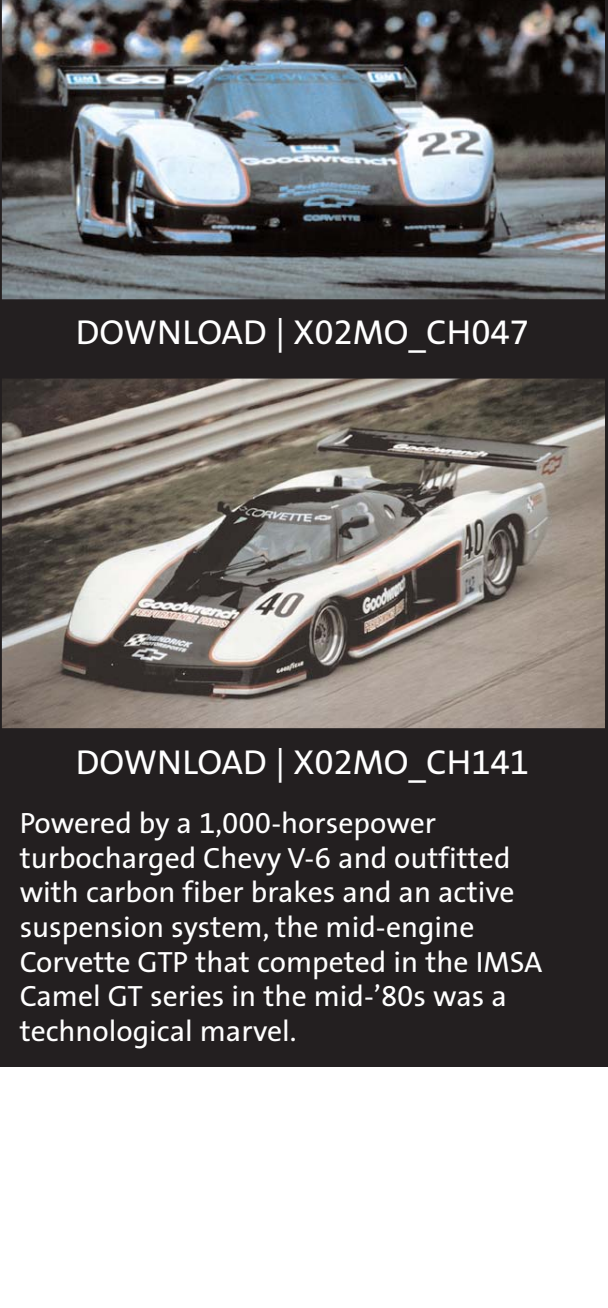


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Zora Arkus-Duntov aspired to take the Corvette SS to Le Mans in 1957; his dream was fulfilled by Corvette Racing decades later.



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Duntov conceived the first CERV as a purpose-built racing vehicle.

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Duntov commissioned five featherweight Grand Sport Corvettes to take on Carroll Shelby’s Cobras.

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Wally Dallenbach scored two IMSA GTO victories in 1988 in a Prototab Corvette.

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Chevrolet is the overwhelming choice of grassroots racers, driving sportsman drag racing and oval track competition. John Heinrich, director of High Performance Vehicle Operations for GM Performance Division, won five consecutive Sports Car Club of America national championships in the Touring 1 class.

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Powered by a 1,000-horsepower turbocharged Chevy V-6 and outfitted with carbon fiber brakes and an active suspension system, the mid-engine Corvette GTP that competed in the IMSA Camel GT series in the mid-'80s was a technological marvel.