

The Sebring Corvettes



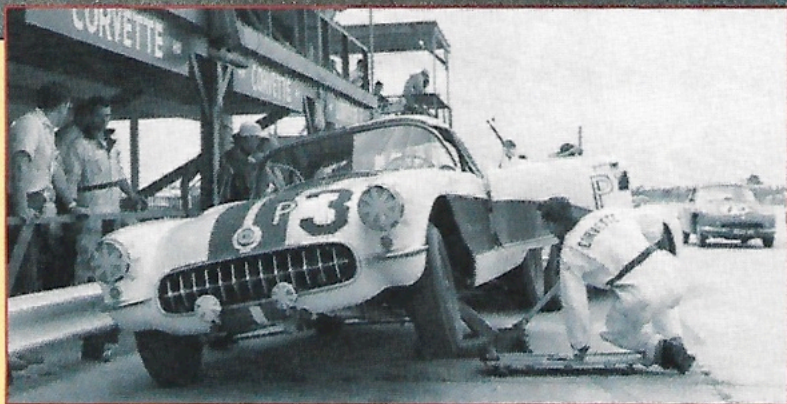
Through the cool, damp Florida night a pair of white-and-blue Corvettes raced lap after lap, well ahead of their competition. To finish the event, the twin racers would have to withstand hundreds of brake applications and thousands of gear shifts, traveling almost 1,000 miles to reach the finish. Consider that in 1956, just 13 months earlier, it was unusual for a Corvette to run at competitive speed for more than 30 minutes without breaking. Now, in the 1957 Sebring 12-Hour Grand Prix of Endurance, would these Corvettes be victorious?

After decades of being one of the world's great performance cars, it is easy to forget that the first Corvettes were failures in the showroom. Not that they were bad automobiles, just not terribly *exciting*. With poor comfort, average performance and controversial styling, sales were dismal, and many within General Motors were calling for the demise of their sports car project after just three years of production.

1956 was the make-or-break year for the Corvette. New, classic styling was incorporated with greater creature comfort. The 265 V-8 engine and three-speed manual transmission introduced in 1955 was continued, and performance and handling were greatly improved. But how to convince a skeptical car-buying public?

Edward Nicholas Cole knew. Cole was chief engineer of Chevrolet Motor Division, a dyed-in-the-wool sports car man, and one of the fathers of the Corvette. His baby was not going to die, not without a fight. The old auto industry maxim, "Win on Sunday, sell on Monday," was not to be taken lightly, and Cole knew it.

March 24, 1956, saw four Corvettes on the starting grid for the 12 Hours of Sebring. The cars were entered ostensibly by Dick Doane's Raceway



Enterprises of Dundee, Illinois, but these sleek machines were not the work of amateurs. Ed Cole had brought a brilliant young engineer named Zora Arkus-Duntov into the Corvette program in 1955. With Duntov's expertise and the resources of General Motors behind him, Cole began to whip the Corvette into fighting shape.

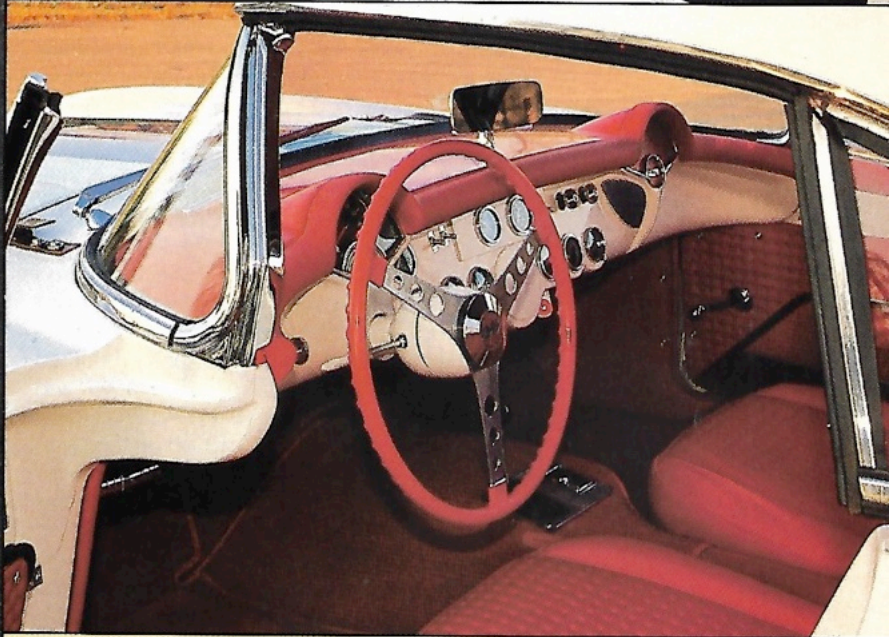
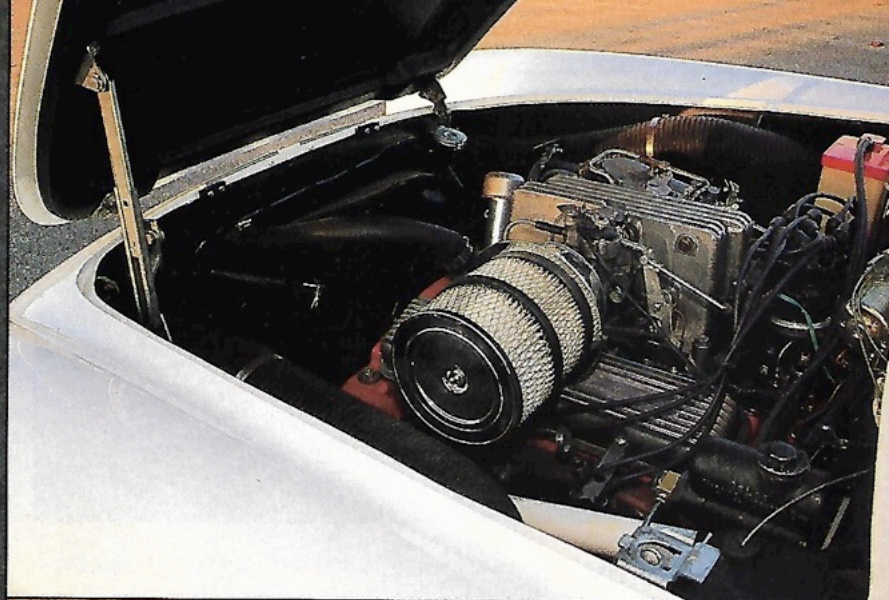
Beginning on February 18, 1956, four Corvettes and an engineering "mule" were tested on the 5.2-mile Sebring course. America's most notable road racer at that time, John Fitch, was hired by Cole to prepare the cars for the 12 Hours. Fitch said, "It was quite some time before we could finish a full lap of the course before breaking something!" But the results of each day's testing were relayed back to Duntov, improvements were made, and components that endured were given factory part numbers and catalogued.

Just 33 days after testing began, the four Corvettes — three in Production class and one 307-powered car in Modified class — were competing in the most important auto race of their lives. It was an automotive shot in the dark, and two of the Production cars dropped out early, but the third,

In 1957 two racers turned the tide of Corvette history
text and photography
by Thomas Glatch

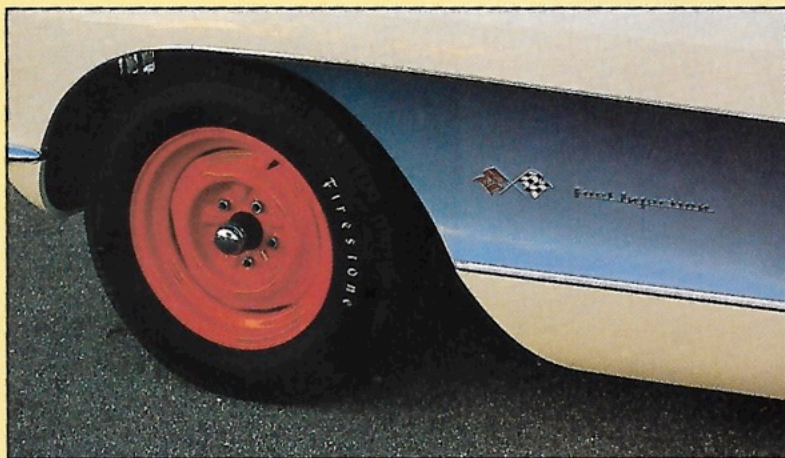
Corvette
FEVER





1957 Sebring Corvette Specifications

Car	1957 Corvette Sebring Race Car
Owner	Tim Partridge, South Barrington, Illinois
Engine	RPO 579E (283 cubic-inch V-8 with Rochester "Ram Jet" mechanical fuel injection, "Duntov" solid lifter cam, AC mechanical tachometer)
Brakes	RPO 684: 11-inch diameter, 2.5-inch wide front, 2.0-inch wide rear, with Cerametalix linings and special brake booster
Tires	Firestone SuperSports Gum Dipped, 6.50/6.70x15 front, 7.10/7.60x15 rear
Wheels	RPO 276 15x5.5K steel
Transmission	RPO 685 Borg Warner T-85 Close Ratio four-speed (prototype dated 8/22/56)
Axle	Positraction: as raced, special 3.89:1, currently RPO 677 3.70:1
Other modifications	Aircraft landing lights; 37-gallon fuel tank; bolt-in roll bar; leather hood straps; shortened steering column; tach mounted in speedometer location; auxiliary gauges in dash; twin electric fuel pumps; special brake booster



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stuck in high gear, and the Modified car, nursing a slipping clutch, managed to circulate at reduced speed and survive the ordeal. Amazingly, both were first in their respective classes, their competition having retired early on. Sebring, John Fitch admitted, "was less than we had hoped but more than we deserved." Finally Chevrolet advertising had something to boast about, calling the Corvette "a tough, road-gripping torpedo-on-wheels with the stamina to last through the brutal 12 hours of Sebring." It was, as the ads said, "The Real McCoy."

In April of 1956, Dr. Dick Thompson, the "Flying Dentist," began racing a privately-owned but factory-supported Corvette in the SCCA C-Production class. After each race the car was returned to Detroit where Duntov and crew tore down and evaluated the Corvette. Because this was Production class, "We couldn't change very much on the car as the year went along," Thompson remembered. But the package must have been right, and the Pebble Beach event that summer was proof positive. Thompson stalled his engine on the starting grid, and the field was long gone by the time he got it refired. The leader at the end of the first lap? To everyone's amazement, the "Flying Dentist" and his Corvette! By year's end Thompson was national C-Production champion. Additionally, Corvette sales jumped 244 percent from 1955. Coincidence?

In July 1956 Ed Cole was named a vice-president of General Motors and general manager of Chevrolet Motor Division. With Cole as division boss, and improved performance on the race track and in the showroom, the necessary ingredients were in place to propel the Corvette to a position of world prominence.

In mid-November of 1956 two '57 Corvette hardtops rolled off the St. Louis assembly line. These were no ordinary Corvettes, as the pair was equipped with a variety of special and prototype parts developed over the past year of competition. For power, they were fitted with the revolutionary Rochester "Ram Jet" fuel injected 283-horsepower, 283 cubic-inch V-8s, equipped with mechanical tach and "Air Box" ram-air induction — pre-production versions of the RPO 579E option introduced in April 1957. Transmissions were Borg Warner four-speeds, prototypes of the RPO 685 option available in May 1957. Suspensions and brakes were special, too, again pre-production designs of the RPO 684 big brake/heavy-duty suspension option offered in mid-model year. And positraction was installed for the first

time with 3.70, 4.11 and 4.56:1 ratios to choose from (RPOs 677-679 respectively). Added to that were 37-gallon fuel tanks, bolt-in roll bars, electric fuel pumps, special brake boosters, and many other small modifications. Dick Doane's Raceway Enterprises may have been the entrant of record, but this was General Motors engineering through and through.

Both cars were entered in the Nassau Trophy Races on December 7, 1956. Though plagued with mechanical gremlins, the problems were small and the results encouraging. Then, as a prelude to Sebring, one of the cars was entered in races at the New Smyrna Beach, Florida, airport track in February 1957. NASCAR and Indy star Paul Goldsmith qualified the Corvette third fastest behind a pair of Ferraris, and was battling for second during the race when a tire had to be changed. Goldsmith settled for fourth, and hopes were even higher.

Thompson continued serious testing of the cars at Sebring, too, this time with veteran NASCAR chief mechanic Red Byron running the program. "They didn't tell me what was inside the various engines and transmission," Thompson recalled, "They had two cars, and I'd run one 'till it broke, bring it back, then I'd take out the other one." From the information gathered during the test sessions, each car was modified in a number of ways: The steering column was shortened to give the drivers more leverage on the wheel, while the tachometer was relocated to where the speedometer had been; the "Air Box" was eliminated when it was found to have a negative-pressure or "chimney" effect at high speed, replaced with dual air cleaners on the injector's air horn; a special 3.89:1 gearset was machined to match the engine's power curve to the track, and the generator was moved to the right of the engine to give more belt tension. The 1957 Sebring cars were exceptionally fast, but of equal importance, they were seemingly unbreakable.

About 10 days before the race, noted road racer Gaston Andrey was asked to try the Corvettes. He had never driven one before, but he called the Corvette "absolutely fantastic. It was handling as well as a Ferrari and a Maserati at that time. Perfect balance, and they set it up perfectly. We had excellent competition in the Mercedes 300SL, and we surprised them and we surprised ourselves." And he was impressed with the Chevrolet organization: "We worked with Zora Duntov, and we had Red Byron for our chief manager, so we had a very good team." But, Andrey, a Swiss emigre, had to pass Byron's scrutiny. "I had my first encounter with Red, because he did not like anyone who came from the SCCA. He thought we were a bunch of sissies. He didn't speak very much the first week I was there. He wouldn't let me sit in the car the first two or three days. There were a couple of USAC drivers there, Paul Goldsmith was one. Surprisingly they could not make the times we could. Finally Red sent me out. In the first lap I noticed I had no water temperature or oil temperature readings. So he flagged me and asked me how the car goes. Fine, I said, but the instruments are not reading accurate. So he finally said, 'Okay, you're not as bad as I thought you were.' As a matter of fact, Red did me a big favor, he painted a Swiss cross on the side of the car."

March 23 dawned with four factory Chevrolets
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in the Sebring starting grid: the SR-2 in Modified class (see *Corvette Fever* February 1990), the SS prototype (CF April 1990), and the two Production-class Corvettes. In Production, driving No. 3 were '56 Sebring team members Dale Duncan and John Kilborn along with Jim Jeffords, while Dick Thompson and Gaston Andrey were piloting No. 4.

The race was an uneventful one for the No. 4 Corvette. "We had our usual brake problems," said Thompson, "We had other little problems but brakes were the main things." But teammate Andrey recalled, "The car performed flawlessly, absolutely perfect."

Gaston Andrey had another event on the track — with Red Byron. "During the race I was really holding a good lead," he recalled, "and they gave me a sign that said something like 'Good & Sassy,' but I read 'Sissy' and got mad. I started to really, really press very, very hard, and they gave me a sign that said 'Slow Down,' and I thought *what the heck are they doing?* When I came in the pit I asked 'Why do you tell me I'm a sissy?' and Red laughed and said, 'No, no, no — sassy!'"

At 10 p.m. the Production-class Corvettes roared under the checkered flag. The No. 4 Dick Thompson/Gaston Andrey car

was first in class and 12th overall, while second-place belonged to the Dale Duncan/John Kilborn/Jim Jeffords No. 3 in 15th overall. It was a rout, with the Corvettes' next competitor, a dreaded Mercedes 300SL, 20 laps behind them. With fast, reliable equipment, talented drivers, and solid teamwork, they made it look easy this time, but Gaston Andrey remembered the team had something else: "When Dickie came into the pit after the race, after all the pictures were taken etc., etc., a mechanic was driving the car down to the hangar where we were headquartered, and the car broke down. It broke an axle! We had the luck of the Irish!"

An ecstatic Ed Cole was in the pits to welcome his drivers. His Corvette had come a long, long way in little more than a year. On the track and on the street, the Corvette was truly "the Real McCoy."

On October 12, 1986, Tim Partridge of South Barrington, Illinois, saw the following ad in the *Chicago Tribune*: "Corvette '57 fuel injected, air box, power brakes, needs restoring..." Tim was curious. He knew the "Air Box" cars were rare (43 were built), and he had to travel on business to western Illinois, near where the car was located. He called the number.

A couple of weeks later Tim was the owner of a 1957 "Air Box" Corvette. The car had been sitting for 18 years, and it was

disassembled, but was in restorable condition, and mostly complete. And the owner mentioned that "it had been raced at Sebring." Still, as far as Tim knew, it was just a rare, interesting Corvette.

Things became apparent as Tim began to piece together his fiberglass puzzle. The motor mounts had been welded solid, the special 24-gallon fuel tank that the former owner included was too small for the opening in the frame, the steering column had been shortened and the tach relocated to the dash, there were studs welded on the frame for a bolt-in roll bar, and there were a number of holes drilled and brackets installed that were unusual. In all, Tim found over 70 modifications to the standard RPO 579E/684 road race Corvette.

With the tenacity of a detective, Tim Partridge slowly pieced together the history of this automobile with the help of a number of Corvette historians and experts, especially Dave Bartush of the National Corvette Restorers Society. The car was built on November 15, 1956, which was about the time the Sebring cars were known to have been assembled. A title search revealed that the car had indeed been delivered through Dick Doane Chevrolet. But the convincing evidence was that the locations of those 70-plus mounting points, brackets, and other special components on Tim's car perfectly matched the photos and

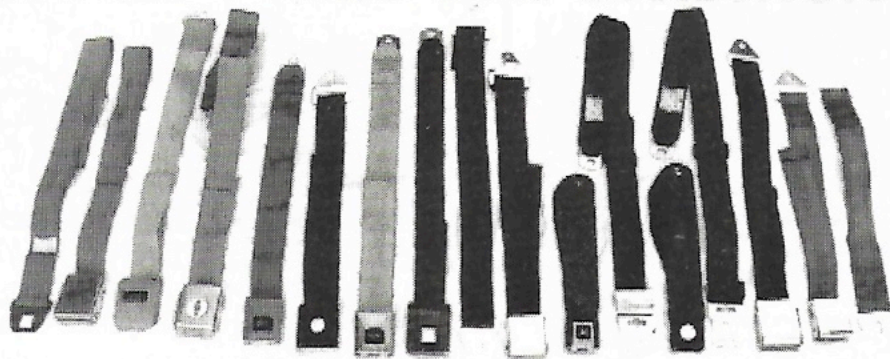
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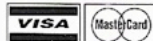
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documents of the Sebring race cars that Dave Bartush had on file.

Undoubtedly, Tim Partridge owns one of the two 1957 Sebring race cars. But does Tim have the class-winning No. 4 Corvette, or the second-place No. 3 car? Evidently only GM would have the documentation to provide the serial number of the winning car, but they have yet to locate or reveal that information. What is known is that the 1956 Sebring race cars were numbered according to the last digit of each car's serial number, and that some practices were often used from year to year. The serial number of Tim's 1957 race car is 57S100834. The famous No. 4 Sebring class winner? You be the judge.

Whichever car Tim Partridge owns, its importance in Corvette history cannot be overstated. Ed Cole, the man who believed in the Corvette the most, and felt the pressure of it's failure the greatest, declared: "[Sebring] was the turn of that tide. That was when the car started to attract attention in the areas where we had to have visibility. It began to take off and go, to confirm our original premise: that there was a demand for a product that captured the sport and fun of motoring."

Now the past could be forgotten. There would be no looking back. **CF**

—Tom Glatch is a free-lance automotive journalist and is a frequent contributor to Corvette Fever.

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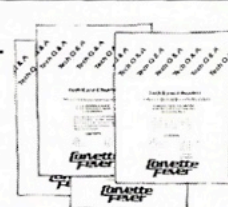
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