

The Original King

In 1986, the first ZR-1 prototypes lit the fuse that launched a legend

*text by Greg Pernula
photography by Thomas Glatch*

Every journey begins with a single step. In the automotive industry, that adage is taken to heart. Before a new model hits the showroom floor, years of planning and testing have nit-picked, tweaked and perfected the vehicle long before mass release.

The Corvette is especially subject to the rigors of pre-production testing because of its high performance nature and cutting edge technology. However, enthusiasts rarely see the "component" cars that create the legend since they are used, abused and destroyed — never meant for public consumption.

But sometimes the test mules escape, and the Corvette you see here is a historic example of one of the most famous Corvette models of all — the King of the Hill ZR-1.

This 1986 ZR-1 prototype is owned by Corvette enthusiasts Ed Simmons of North Carolina and Keith Beschi of England, who met in 1992 while Simmons was stationed in England with the Air Force. They soon struck up a friendship through the Classic Corvette Club of UK, and in 1994, they struck gold.

Acting on a rumor, Simmons and Beschi visited a junkyard and found a number of Corvettes that had been "crushed" with a backhoe. Simmons said it was difficult to determine just how many were there since some were cut in half and all were in rough shape; but the pair suspected there was something special about these late-models.

There was.

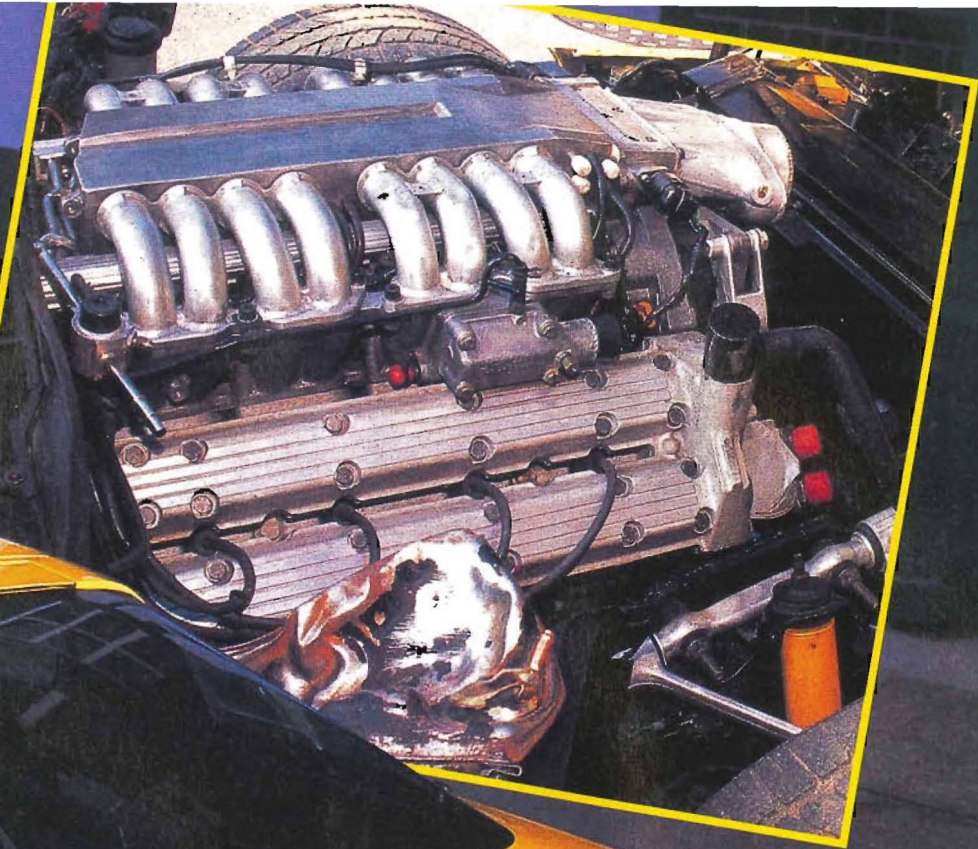
A little history. During early development of the ZR-1, 20 1986 models were sent to Lotus in England to have them outfit with early models of the famed LT5 engine developed for GM by Lotus. The Corvette you see here is one of those '86 test cars, and it has a very early Phase 1 LT5 nestled between the frame rails.

Still, the pair was on a learning curve

regarding the find. "When I first went down to the junkyard, I knew they were ZR-1 parts," said Simmons, "but I had no idea of the Lotus connection or the historical significance of what they actually were."

With the help of Corvette enthusiasts and experts in England and the US, the pair soon found out what they had a line on and promptly paid the junkyard owner for rights to the parts of several Corvettes — some of which have turned up in the US.

The yellow '86 came to the United States in 1996 as a bare frame and was subsequently put together with parts from a hard-to-find donor '86, and the rare LT5 Phase 1



engine was installed. "We bought a complete running wrecked car in Boston with a similar VIN number so all the date codes would match up," Beschi explained. "But our intention was never to restore it to as-new condition. We're trying restoring it to the point it was the day before it was destroyed. There are too many very nice cars out there. This is a real car."

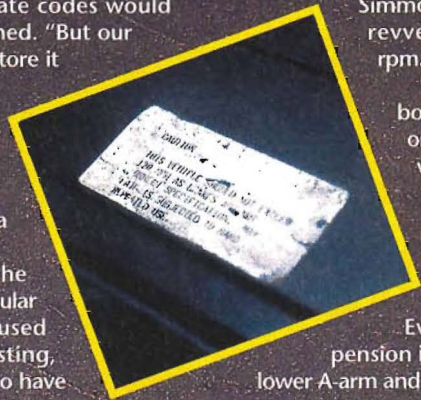
From their research, the pair divined that this particular LT5-equipped ZR-1 was used mainly for emissions testing, although it was rumored to have

run up to 160 mph in testing. There are an estimated 19,000 miles on the clock and the car retains a goodly number of original parts.

"And this particular car was restricted and used in lower power ranges so they [the test team] could continue using it long enough to get some data out of it," Simmons said. "They rarely revved it up over 3000 rpm."

"We used every nut, bolt and screw from the original car that was salvageable," Beschi added. "All the interior's virtually original except for the door panel. All the frame's original."

Everything on the suspension is original except one lower A-arm and a few of the links. The



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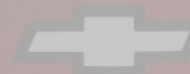
majority of the underneath of the car was perfectly reusable."

While the location and eventual restoration of early ZR-1 prototypes have raised

a few eyebrows within the Corvette community, it's undeniable that this '86 is a rolling piece of Corvette history. The '86 is a showcase of the early stages of the devel-

opment of a Corvette that will go down in history as one of the best ever made — The King of the Hill ZR-1.

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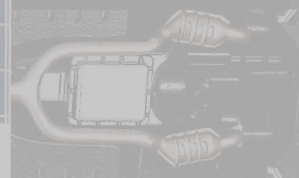
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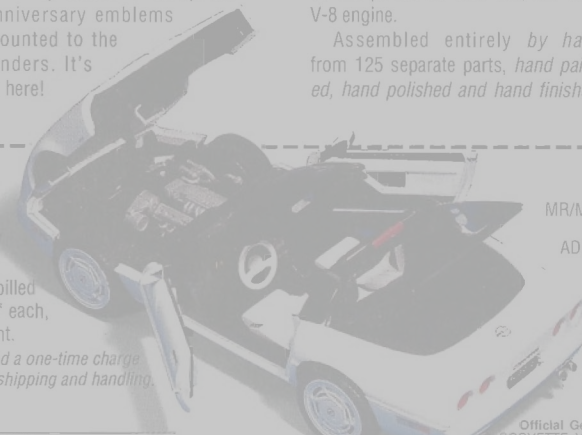
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