

1953

The genesis of the 1953. General Motors engineer Harley Earl road rally at Watkins the level of sports car determined to create breed of American car favorably with Europe's Jaguars, MGs and Ferraris. He ordered a stylish two-seat convertible design readied for the company's January 1953 Motorama Exhibit at New York's prestigious Waldorf-Astoria.



Corvette began in legendary design came away from a Glen impressed by competition and an entirely new that could compare

The resultant prototype "dream car" was an immediate "show stopper" and management gave the word to start manufacture at a part of Chevrolet's Flint, Michigan assembly facility.

On June 30, the first Corvette was ready, with a sticker price just over \$3,000. The hand-assembled unit, with molded fiberglass body, was powered by a vintage Chevrolet straight-six, overhead valve engine that had been in service since the 1930s. Dubbed the "Stovebolt Six" and rated at 115hp, the 235 cubic-inch, in-line block was mated with three single-barrel carburetors, dual exhausts and a floor-mounted, two-speed "Powerglide" automatic transmission. Renamed the "Blue Flame Special," the engine now generated 150 horsepower.

Many of the other basic components were standard, tried and true, off-the-shelf items from Chevrolet's inventory. Weight consciousness drove the design team. The X-frame chassis with box section side rails weighed a little over 210 pounds and the nine sub-assemblies that constituted the revolutionary fiberglass body topped only 410 pounds when assembled.

The body sported a Polo White exterior, a red interior with two bucket seats and vinyl trim, a front grill with 13 "teeth," a wraparound wind-shield, two headlights sculpted and recessed into softly rounded front fenders and covered by wire-mesh stone guards, rocket-style taillights mounted at the tip of small tailfins extending above rounded rear fenders, dual exhaust pipes emerging from ports low in the sloping rear deck, a manually-operated black canvas convertible roof and whitewall tube-type tires. The Chevrolet script-style signature was affixed on each front fender behind the wheel well above a long, slender trim strip that extended from front to rear wheel well.

Perhaps what the new sports model lacked was equally significant. There were no exterior door handles; doors were opened from the inside. Also, plastic side curtains were used in place of windows.

Assembly line procedures were soon introduced to mass produce the revolutionary "fantastic plastic" body and, by year's end, 300 models were available.

The 1953 "roadster," carried a price tag of \$3,498 for the basic automobile. A heater was \$91.40 extra, and the AM radio option cost another \$145.15.

Not everyone enthused over the newest entry in automotive circles. The powertrain did not meet the expectations of some sports car aficionados.

Hardly meant to race competitively, with no clutch and only a two-speed automatic transmission, the Corvette did offer advanced styling, superior handling, comfort, beauty, convenience and performance for that era. And, it was able to go 0-60mph in a respectable 11 seconds, clock the quarter-mile in 18 seconds and attain a top speed just shy of 110mph.

Still, some leading industry experts concluded that the Corvette was merely an experiment and perhaps go the way of other short-lived, post-war automotive phenomena.

The American auto scene, however, was about to change forever.