

Sometimes You Just The Moment

By Peter Cook



Get Caught Up In

I debated with myself about telling you this story, but in the end have decided to do so. It's obviously a Corvette story, but not exactly a Vette story about a happy time in my life; it happened back with Vette #1 for me. The year was 1985, and so was the Vette. You might be wondering, "why tell this story?" Well, the fact is, there's been a lot of talk on the ZR-1 net lately about *top speed runs*, as featured in this month's Motor Trend. I know, a lot of you have also expressed an interest to see what the "ZR's will do" and get to that magic 180 mark. If this sounds like you, read on...

It was late one Saturday night; in fact, it was 3:00 am early Sunday morning, and I was alone and heading home after being out with the boys. I was enjoying my new Corvette thoroughly; it was new and only 2 months old. In fact, I was really proud and excited to just finish showing "her" to my friends as she had just been detailed by yours truly.

After exiting the highway, I came to a stop sign; straight across the intersection lead home; making a right lead to fun... my favorite stretch of road, about two miles long, four lanes wide, straight, with only a curve at the very end. It was in a remote area; the "boys" used it for top speed runs.

Earlier that day, I received a new magazine talking about a "Top Speed Shootout", called "Flat out in Ohio." Some of you probably may even remember the article. Well, what I immediately keyed in on, and turned to, was "the stats". What was the top speed of a Corvette. My Corvette was supposed to do 155 mph. "Holy shi*", that's awesome! That "155 mph" figure sat in my mind, gnawing away at me all day, as I wondered what it was like at 150 mph... I made the right turn.

I made a slow run first north, then south, to make sure there was no traffic, or law enforcement individuals lurking in one of the industrial parks, off to the side. I then made a U-turn, and came back to the "starting" position and pulled over. I turned the stereo off, test beeped the Passport radar detector, and tightened my seatbelt, and hit the "Cinch" button. I was ready. No "burn outs" here to give myself away to anyone in the distance. I just rolled along at 15 mph and then hammered it!

The Corvette got to 135 in an amazingly short amount of time and I suddenly noticed the fury of the wind noise buffeting the side windows. The car then began to creep slowly towards the magic 155. First 138... then 139... 140, "Only 15 mph to go", I thought.

It got to 144 and the car just hung there... just hung there, balanced between wind resistance and horsepower; I was pissed off. "Where's the 155 mph?" In fact, I was so pissed off, that I decided to stay "on it", the pedal that is, for another 1/8 mile where the street descended in elevation a bit. I had never pushed any car in this stretch of road before, but I needed the help of gravity to nudge me over to, at least, 150.

Well, the descent came; and going slightly downhill added nothing. Not one mph; nothing. At that time I realized that I'd have to finally abort and back-off. You see, there was this lazy, slow winding left turn at the end of the road that was coming up fast! At 144, it looked more like a "hairpin" turn.

I jabbed the brakes mildly to scrub-off speed, but obviously I was going to have to do better than that to bring the speed down; I was still going way too fast for the turn the turn was approaching rapidly and I was still at 130. At that point, I pushed the brake pedal hard. Now this was pre-ABS (1985), so I tried to threshold brake the car down in speed. Never made it happen.

Instead, the rear brakes locked up. I released them, and brake again. But the rear end came out to the right. I tried to correct it by turning the steering wheel to the left, but the car just oversteered in the other direction, the rear end coming out to the left. I was young and stupid. More importantly, I was in trouble as all four wheels were locked up! I was a projectile! A projectile moving sideways at 130 mph and moving across the double yellow line towards the "wrong" side of the road.

After exhausting all of the paved space I had on the wrong side of the road, that's when it got interesting. There was a long sidewalk that paralleled the road. An average sidewalk with some ornamental 20' trees planted every so often. There were also some "No Parking" signs (for the beach bums, as this road was next to the beach) and some telephone poles.

My first impact was with the left rear wheel against the curb. I promptly jumped the curb, and hit the first object, a small tree. I just grazed the tree with the back of the car, which was instantly torn off, exposing the silver-aluminum gas tank; the whole rear fascia with the four trademark headlights was history. But that wasn't it, I was still traveling at well over 100, on the sidewalk, without the rear of my car!

The next objects were those "no parking" signs I mentioned; two of them. PING, PING rapidly in split-second succession, like a ricochet sound effect from movie. The first sign simply bent under the car. "Shi* the nose was scratched!" I thought. But the second one bent over, and came through the windshield! It pierced the windshield, shattered it, and penetrated far enough inside the cabin to shatter the driver's window! More damage I thought; at least my face is here.

The car was now being rail-roaded down the side walk, on the wrong side of the road. Although I managed to get the car straight, it's vector was stuck; caught with the two right wheels on the curb of the sidewalk and the two left wheels traveling in the path of the sidewalk. The right rear wheel jumped the curb, and the end came out again meaning came back upon the sidewalk fully as the rear of the car slid left and started to impact a 6' chain link fence beyond the sidewalk.

What was left of the rear of the Vette began to catch the fence, and the car eased into the wire mesh of the fence, pushing back about 40' of it. Keep in mind, we're still doing 80 mph at this point! As the car pushed the fence, the fence reciprocated and shattered the rear hatch glass with a loud "POP", and it was gone. At this point I figured I had enough fun; I wanted out... no such luck.

A 14" diameter telephone pole lay straight ahead, maybe 50 feet away, and I was still doing 70-80. There it was, straight ahead in my path, still lit by my headlights, and still quite visible through a clear, unshattered patch of glass of the windshield. I knew that I *wasn't* going to make it. Now, I wasn't a real religious person, but got to be real religious... real fast... I yelled for God to save me... and God obliged. (Gives me goosebumps just telling you about it!)

I impacted the pole with the front left wheel, and the car rolled over on its left side, sheering the pole off and moving it six feet off its base in the process. As the car went on its side, it felt like it happened in slow motion, as if someone were simply rolling you over on your side in bed. As the car went on its left side, the pole impacted and crushed the hood in the process. At that point, the battery and alternator left the car and ended up 100 yards down the road! They exited through the hood, not leaving much of the clamshell behind!

I came to a stop. As the driver's window was shattered, I was sitting there in the dark, in my new Corvette that was sitting on its left side looking at the sidewalk next to the left side of my face.

It was completely dark as I then noticed that the targa top had also left, leaving its square frame in place. The car was also making the classic radiator "hissing" sound; "It's going to blow " I thought. (They always did on the "Rockford Files") Get my ass out of here!

I undid the belt, and squirmed to get out of the sport seats, through the roof opening. Problem was, in hitting the pole, I dropped the 440V electric lines. There was no place to step... except on the pile of lines!

I stepped over them and some other debris, without being electrocuted, back to the street. As I looked back at the wreck, I saw the car sitting on its side on the sidewalk, and instantly began to assess and tally-up the damage; I actually managed a short laugh; it was obviously totaled.

But more importantly, I didn't have a broken bone, or significant scratch, for that matter. The only telltale sign of this incident the next week was three bruises; two on my hips and one on my shoulder, from the seat belt harness holding me in the car. Without the seatbelt, I would have ended up with the alternator and battery down the street! I guess someone wanted me to still be here telling you all about it!

Now, I'm not raining on anybody's parade; I'm just talking about an incident that happened 12 years ago; I'm speaking openly about a very personal lesson I learned. Now, I realize

that most drivers, like myself now, do their "racing" in a controlled, track, environment. Its now done with some driving school experience under my belt, and of course, without recklessness. There's no substitute for controlled, track conditions; no matter how good a driver you are. However, for those few drivers out there who still race on public roads... take it to the track. If one other person make this choice, it will have meant something to me.

Oh, and by the way. I ordered my '86 Corvette Z-51 about a month after that. A terrific car that I owned up until the time of my ZR-1 in '91. Most of my friends and family were happy that I jumped back in the saddle. To my new friends on the net, thanks for letting me share this story with you.