

Long, Live the King!

by Peter Cook, ©1997



Nine years ago, I sat in hundreds of other dealer over the country. The

Corvette Specialist program; a week of lectures, discussions, driving instruction, and simply tearing around Firebird International Raceway with folks like Stu Hayner, Doc Bundy and Tommy Archer riding shotgun and teaching us how to drive... real fast.

Phoenix, Arizona, with representatives from all event was a Certified

One evening, as all of us were gathered into the banquet hall of the hotel to hear Chevrolet big-wigs Doug Robinson and Jim Ingle give their presentation. There, by the podium, was the car we all had been waiting for under wraps.

...It's been called the "wide body", the "super-vette", and the "king of the hill".... And as Doug Robinson said that, Jim Ingle pulled off a car cover to reveal the first, real ZR-1 I had ever seen in person; an '89 red on red prototype. As all the cameras flashed around the hall, time seemed to slow down, and stop. You could feel the excitement and the emotions in the room; they couldn't have been any stronger if they had pulled the wraps off a naked Cindy Crawford.

No one would argue that the ZR-1 was the most greatly anticipated car of the last twenty five years. And ever since production halted, the ZR-1 has become the forgotten date for the evening, disregarded in favor of some flashy, but late arrivals. The Viper, the Acura NSX-T, the Porsche Boxter, the Mercedes SLK, and the Ferrari F-50, to name but a few. Although some have caught the camera's eye, none have come close to the legend called "ZR-1". Now relegated to be a part of automotive history, the ZR-1 was retired early from service with vehicles like GM's EV-1 to be the hallmark. Those who know, however, have not forgotten that the ZR-1 is the living and reigning "king of the hill". A symbol worthy of our fidelity; it still can capsize all of these stragglers in its wake. We were all ready for the birth of the ultimate Corvette. One that was as American as the USA itself; a combination of different ethnicity's. Right down to its soul, the ZR-1 is no pure-bred; and it makes no apologies for being so. Like all Americana, it tries to be the best it can be and drew internationally from the parts bin. In result, the ZR-1 is a mixture of the best the world has to offer. It's heartbeat was born within Lotus of England. It's long legs came from ZF in Germany, and its physique came from a native born design and chassis.

GMs board should have killed the ZR-1 program in its infancy. Its character isn't one of political correctness. It is not a zero emission vehicle, it seats only two, and it doesn't get 100 mpg. Rather, it is socially unacceptable to the masses; illogical, illegal and immoral. The cars concept is so shamelessly one of personal gratification, that your guilt will lead you to expect that a sandal-clad Greenpeace member will hurl themselves beneath your wheels to stop all this fun. But fun was just the point with the ZR-1; it was not built for mass consumption, but for a few select drivers to experience an intimate exchange between car and driver. The ZR-1 is the ultimate sports car; an untempermental, drive-

around-the-town, supercar. Pristine ZR-1s can still be had for a fraction of their original price. And although many of the ZR-1's little brothers (the C-5's) can be had for less money, we all know who would win the brotherly brawl; and which one would capture the checkered flag worthy of the name Corvette.

It's amazing that I was able to sit there in Phoenix, and witness a small part of automotive history. It's also amazing that such an unveiling took place; GM has always reacted to other manufacturers offerings, and rarely taken the initiative. But nine years ago, on that evening, it was GM's moment. GM actually had done something right and was on the cutting edge with a new product. GM was the first to recognize the supercar market, and actually build a niche sports car for it; the ZR-1.

It's an easy car for the average pedestrian to miss; just another Corvette roaring by. But even the average car enthusiast would notice the center-high-mounted-stop-lamp atop the glass rear hatch... on a late model C-4 Vette? Further inspection would reveal that the name Corvette isn't sculpted into the body, but is written in bold, convex letters on the end cap. This car looks bigger... pumped, like a body builder finishing a set of biceps curls. Oh they'd comment with a smile, that's a ZR-1.

Every magazine has featured not one, but several articles on the ZR-1. It has graced countless magazine covers, simply because publishers knew it would ensure huge circulation numbers. In the beginning, as in the end, they all raved about the car. Media encounters with the supercar (superstar?) ended in all too short interviews. Most people could only imagine what the car was like; it had personality, and it seemed unreachable. Everyone had seen Jim Dunne's telephoto spy photos on the cover of Autoweek back in '88 that showed a wide, mean and elusive King of the Hill Corvette. But back there in the real world in Phoenix, sat the car in person to touch, smell, and sit in. The ZR-1 had arrived.

On walking up to the ZR-1, you still notice just how low it sits, under four feet high. As you open the door, you plant your right leg into the foot well, lean forward, and squat into the driver's seat as the left leg follows. Many have complained about the effort required to get in and out of the Corvette, but these happen to be the same people who don't really understand biceps curls either.

As you adjust the outside rear-view mirror, it's easy to notice a little more curve in the driver's door compared to a standard Corvette. The ZR-1 is 3 inches wider than its C-4 sibling, and the subtle 1 1/2" bulge per side reminds the driver that they are piloting a very special and powerful Corvette. In looking around the familiar cockpit, the driver feels at home. The interior layout was updated back in '90 with the car's premier, and in '92, with many of the dash bezel areas changed to matte black finishes instead of the original gray color. At your fingertips, the feel of the air-bag equipped steering wheel is unmistakably European; its texture and material are not unlike one of the German offerings. The European feel is no coincidence for GM's world class sports car.

As you scan further, you notice that the interior's designers intended to have you feel integrated with the car, as if you wear it. The instrument panel is covered by a black, semi-circular hood that descends into the driver's door arm rest, and the center console, both also in black. The resultant "U" wraps around the driver and blends the control panel nicely to its surroundings. It also contrasts well with the rest of the inside of the car, as long as your interior isn't black.

The instrument panel fans out and houses a large 7,000 rpm analog tach on the left, a digital speedometer in the center, and four analog engine/function gauges to the right; voltage, oil pressure, water temperature, and battery voltage. The dashboard curves down gently from the windshield, and gives the effect of a spacious cockpit.

The standard sports seats are great in feel and aroma, incorporating electric bolsters (for width control) plus an adjustable three section lumbar support. The seats are so effective at holding the driver in place, that few after market seat suppliers have made sales from Corvette customers looking to change them.

As you look below the CD player with am/fm cassette, you notice a key with words above it; "normal" and "full". This and the 7,000 rpm tach are the only telltale signs of this special Corvette's capabilities.

As you turn the ignition key to the "on" position, you hear the ferocious buzz of the primary fuel pump for a few seconds, and then it pauses, waiting for you to light the engine; there is also a secondary fuel pump for those demanding situations. As you crank the engine, you hear the high pitched and rapid "nyet, nyet, nyet" sounds of the starter and the engine fires with a soft, yet fast idle. Your heart races even though you've driven the car many times before. Like an old love dear to your heart, the ZR-1 has a special hold on our emotions.

"Long, Live the King! - Part Two" by P. Cook, (C)1997

As the old standard Corvette's LT-1 engine was known for its smoothness and torque, it is always surprising to see how the LT-5 of the ZR-1 shatters the old benchmark on both counts. Plenty of torque is created at low rev's (300 ft-lbs @ 2000 rpm) and peaks at 4800 rpm (370 ft-lbs). Peak horsepower (405 hp) is generated at 5800 rpm and the redline is 7000 rpm; fuel cut-off occurs at 7200 for those who don't know when to call it quits. And although the numbers may look similar to a regular Corvette on paper, make no mistake about it, there are no similarities in real world driving.

At your fingertips is a German ZF 6-speed that incorporates two overdrives, 0.75 in fifth, and 0.50 in sixth gear. Its feel is light, precise, and easy to read, thanks to the center sprung loading. If you've ever driven one of the '84-'88 C4 vettes with the Doug Nash transmission backed with a two-speed overdrive, the ZF unit represents a "night and day" improvement. Long throws and balkiness are replaced with short throws and a nimble, light feel.

The shifter has three easy-to-feel gates that let you know where you are in the shift pattern; a critical feature when you combine the availability of six gears with the intensity of a racing situation where it is easy to misplace a downshift. For instance, in switching from 5th gear to 4th gear, it could be possible to select 2nd gear by mistake. Perform this error at high speed as you enter a tight turn and you'll find yourself swapping ends instantly. All you have to do though, is pull the shifter out of gear... feel no side-to-side resistance, you're in the 3-4 gate. Feel a push to the right? You're in the 1-2 gate. Feel a push to the left? You're in the 5-6 gate. It's that simple.

Ahhh, what a dozen years of development have done to refine the car's ride quality. The front tires of all ZR-1's are Goodyear's unidirectional and asymmetric GSC 275/40ZR-17's. The massive 315/35 ZR-17's that fill out the rear fender wells of the ZR-1 are called on to provide the additional traction that is required with the car's power. All Corvettes have a tendency to kick out their tail when the throttle is pressed too hard in the turns. Thus, the engineers wanted to make sure that this unwelcome over-steer would not happen easily with 400+ horsepower at your disposal.

The ZR-1 comes standard with the FX-3 selective ride control, an adjustable suspension that was developed jointly with Bilstein. Each of the three settings has six "steps" of computer regulated suspension stiffness that increase with the car's speed. The base setting is called "touring", the intermediate setting is called "sport", and the third is called "performance". The stiffest level of the base touring mode overlaps the lower end of the intermediate sport setting, just as the high end of the sport setting overlaps the bottom end of the third performance mode. How these settings allow the driver to adjust the ride is remarkable.

If the driver sights an approaching washboard surface and does not feel like riding it out, just dial in the "tour" setting for a ride that is soft and forgiving. Try this with a car equipped with a stiff autocross suspension and you'll be bouncing and rattling all over the road. See a beautiful stretch of freshly paved asphalt and want to blast through its apex with speed and control? Dial in "performance" for a taught suspension that offers the maximum handling potential and road feel.

Despite speculation and prototypes badged otherwise, the ZR-1 received its namesake from a suspension designation, rather than from its engine designation "LT-5". The letter "Z" has always been used as the first letter of suspension options at Chevrolet. And although LT-5 seemed very likely to be the supercar's name for many years, corporate edicts (keeping engine designations off of cars exteriors) would keep "LT-5" as simply an engine designation code. ZR-1 would be resurrected from the available RPO bin from the late 70's Corvette to carry the torch for the Corvette into the '90's.

The ZR-1's handling inspires confidence. Even when pushing the car to the limit, the driver feels safe with the car. In fact, this car's level of forgiveness is measured by its grace under pressure in a panic situation. Suddenly, you're in a decreasing radius turn too hot and heavy. G-forces build as the tires give way to a slide. If you are comfortable with the transition, maintain the throttle pressure and the car is balanced. Feel nervous? Let off the

throttle and the car will obey and regain traction as if nothing ever happened. Panicked? Stab the brake pedal hard and the car will still be forgiving and slow down. Try this in some other "supercars" and you will describe yourself as "lucky" when you are climbing out of the grass after wondering where the road went.

This is not to say that the ZR-1 is without fault, however, its lingering flaws are mainly those aesthetic ones that relate to interior materials; hard plastic pieces do not belong in a \$65,000 sports car. Anyone, however, that has compared a ZR-1 to any prior Corvette will notice the improvement in fit and finish. The doors close with a solid "thunk". Attention to detail is also evident in, of all places, the exhaust system and in particular, the resonators. The engineers went through several designs of resonators until they achieved just the right sound from the exhaust system. The result is an engine that generates the best sound effects around, without announcing your arrival to the constables.

There are those drivers who turn on their car stereos to overcome ambient noise. With the ZR-1 though, you may find yourself turning "off" the 200 Watt Delco Bose system (that sounds decent albeit, too neutral) for the engine listening pleasure. The intoxicated whirring sound of four cams is hard to convey and impossible to describe to those who haven't heard it. Let's just say that you might find yourself hanging in first gear for the sheer pleasure of blasting through an underpass to hear the symphony and reverb of the engine din at 7,000 rpm.

Just as you may be getting used to the exhilaration of the car's acceleration, you may want to throw the gear selector into neutral, jam your foot on the brake pedal, and attempt to lock up the brakes at say... 85 mph. If you never thought that braking could be thrilling, then you've never experienced anti-lock brakes system (ABS) and had your heart race from a 1.0+ G stop; try this with your partner in crime, but not with someone weak of heart. It's also wise to make sure that the road behind you is clear when you try it! Besides getting your adrenaline going, the familiarity from this practice will probably save you from an accident at least once during the course of ownership of the car. The ABS braking system was developed by Bosch and introduced in '86, and has been upgraded for the ZR-1's performance. Huge 13" rotors provide the stopping power up front, and the three channel system modulates these front brakes independently, and modulates the rears together as a single unit. New in '92 was the ASC (Automatic Slip Control) developed by Bosch. It uses the anti-lock brake sensors to anticipate wheel slippage during acceleration. It combats this by pushing back on the accelerator, retarding the timing to reduce power, and automatically applying the brakes to stop wheel slippage. If you live in the North Pole, then you'll probably feel that ASC is a God-send. But for those of us who live elsewhere, an ASC equipped Corvette hinders performance in flat- out racing situations where the driver may want to slide the end of the car out in a sweeper. Although ASC has an "off" switch, it offers little consolation as it must be turned off each and every time the engine is fired up. Also, a Corvette that inherently pushes the accelerator pedal up is an anathema.

Overall, the ZR-1 is awesome in performance and looks. Owners have to get used to the attention the car garners, and the myriad of questions that follow from admirers. On one

particular occasion, a gentleman was caught looking at the parked ZR. The resultant conversation revealed that he really liked the car, but didn't quite understand its mission. "Where are you going to drive 180 mph? ... the posted limit is 55 mph" he asked. A smile came over my face as I raved about the 25 mpg the ZR gets on the highway, the beautiful ride quality she exhibits on rough pavement, the awesome Bose stereo, and the utility of even throwing groceries beneath the hatchback when called on to do so. I said matter-of-factly that you really can drive the ZR-1 around town mildly and still appreciate its character. He looked blankly back at me as we said our good-byes, and I got into the ZR-1 and left.

As I pulled out onto the street, I steadily pressed down on the throttle until the engine reached 3,500 rpm... the whirring of the cams taunted me to press the pedal all the way to the floor... and I obliged. A rush came over me as I was pushed back into the seat... people on the sidewalk stopped in their tracks, turned around in slow motion, and hailed "long live the king". At least, that's the way it seemed from the wideness of their eyes. As the engine's symphony reached its crescendo, I laughed and thought of what I had just said before to the gentleman on the sidewalk... I laughed and thought, OK, so maybe mildly was a poor choice of words.