

Nice Guys FINISH FIRST

Corvette Racing team captain **Ron Fellows**
is one of North America's best sports-car drivers,
a devoted family man, and a genuinely nice guy

By Gary Witzenburg
Photography by Janine Menlove

When approaching Ron Fellows' home in a pleasant suburb of Toronto, you would never guess what he does for a living. The house is tastefully furnished and decorated, but nothing jumps out and shouts "Championship racing driver!" He could be an accountant, an engineer or a dentist.

Corvette Racing's C5-R team captain's work and passion is a bit more visible in the family room. Above the fireplace is a framed photo of Corvette No. 3 at speed at Daytona. Above a big TV and entertainment center is a selection of racing trophies and plaques. On one wall is a signed and numbered Ken Dallison print of the C5-R team, taken during their first visit to Le Mans in 2000.

Still, you would never know that this easy-going guy is one of North America's most talented and fiercely competitive racing drivers. One of the team captains for



GM's highly successful C5-R team since its beginning, he has earned back-to-back GTS class wins in the grueling 24 Hours of Le Mans (2001 and 2002), overall victory in the 2001 Daytona 24 Hour and 12 wins in 18 starts in the '01 and '02 American Le Mans Series (ALMS). His résumé also includes wins and championships in competition ranging from small sedans to thundering NASCAR racers.



In and out of the cockpit, a major part of Fellows' job is communicating with team engineers and mechanics about the cars' performance and how to improve it.

Born in Windsor, Ont. (across the river from Detroit), to a teacher and an Anglican minister, he is the oldest of five children. As a youngster, Ron found himself interested mostly in sports, especially hockey ... until his uncle Chuck McLaren, a professional driver, took him, at age 10, to the 1969 Canadian Grand Prix at nearby Mosport. "I watched the cars roll onto pit lane," Fellows recalls. "The first car was a V12 Matra ... what a noise! I could not believe the emotion that race stirred in me."

Who could have known that a child's newfound interest would, some three decades later, guide him into leading one of the world's best racing teams to achievements unprecedented in 50 years of Corvette competition? Now in its sixth year, the team is defending both Le Mans and ALMS titles, and 11 races and a half-dozen

test sessions will keep Fellows on the run from February to November. At least on the weekends.

"Except for Le Mans, which is a two-week deal, I'm home Monday through Wednesday most weeks," Fellows says. Happily, wife Lynda, 18-year-old daughter Lindsay, and sons Patrick and Sam, six and five years old, respectively, are all highly supportive. Lynda attends every race and helps with his diet and fitness needs, and the whole family travels together in a motorhome when school is out. Are they concerned for his safety in the risky business of car racing? "That is something we've talked about," he says. "They know it's part of the job."



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Fellows' family (left to right): Sons Sam and Patrick, daughter Lindsay and wife Lynda are highly supportive. They know racing can be risky but understand "it's part of the job," he says.



time they tested at Daytona, they were three-seconds-a-lap slower than the class record; two years later, they went six seconds faster to set a new record. "Nine seconds' gain in two years is huge!" he grins.

Fellows participated in football and hockey and played a 12-string guitar in high school, but spent much of his time working part-time jobs for money to race. From age 15, he raced go-karts with his brother, Rob, winning "more than our share." After graduation, he took a job with a natural gas company digging trenches for pipelines, eventually working up to backhoe operator, the highest-paying job on the crew. Still, three frustrating years with his own uncompetitive car left him heavily in debt, so he quit for three years, drove the backhoe and paid debts while dreaming of racing.

Fellows' fortunes improved upon his re-entry into racing in 1985, when he scraped together enough cash to attend Richard Spenard's racing school. He won a couple of races and talked Spenard into hiring him as an instructor. The timing was perfect, as the following year GM Canada and Players Tobacco started a series for "stock" Camaros and Firebirds. Fellows financed a new Camaro and went racing in earnest. It would be the first of many successful seasons

in GM cars and, though it was not yet a Vette he was driving, it was the next best thing.

For a time, anyway. But in a Toronto street race on national TV he crashed heavily, which landed him flat on his back in bed, nursing a sore neck. Fellows' parents came calling — with some alternative career suggestions. His father suggested a backup plan, his mother gave him a book on golf, but his friends at the dealership repaired the car. Then he won the season's only other televised race, on the Sanair oval.

It took three years, but on a windy, rainy autumn Sunday, Fellows reached an incredible high by both clinching the GM Player's series crown and winning his first Trans-Am series race. But it was a bumpy road to the championship. The day before, in a qualifying session, an unexpected wet patch had sent his Camaro spinning, flipping and rolling into the middle of the track, where it was center-punched by another car. Sunday morning, with a sore back and a "big swollen elbow," and with the series on the line, he drove a back-up Camaro to seventh place, good enough to secure the championship. And that afternoon, he drove a Roush

Mustang to win the Trans-Am event. Fellows recalls, "I'll never forget when (team owner) Jack Roush leaned in the window. 'You play pretty good hurt,' he said."

After that, Fellows proved a factor in Trans-Am from 1990 through '94 in factory-backed Mustangs, often challenging the factory



Camaros. "I was a pain in their backside," he laughs. Then came a fateful call. "It was a friend at GM Canada, who had been contacted by GM Racing: 'Do you think Ron would be interested in driving our factory Camaro?' Scott Sharp had left, and Scott Pruett was leaving after winning the championship. For three years, I had seen these guys as the enemy. I had some great battles with them and with Jack Baldwin. I was thrilled that the factory Chevy team was interested in having me."

For the next two years, Fellows drove for Chevrolet, boosting his record to 19 Trans-Am wins in 95 starts, fifth all-time behind Mark Donohue. After GM quit the series in 1997, Fellows won a NASCAR truck race and a three-hour sports-car race, and nearly won the Daytona 24 Hours in a prototype Ferrari. That impressed GM Racing boss Herb Fischel. "He said they were going to take a Corvette to Le Mans, and was I interested ... as lead driver? It would be a year of testing and development

in '98, Daytona in '99 and Le Mans in 2000. I said, 'I can do this.'"

Then approaching 40, Fellows was at the top of his game and in excellent physical shape. He had begun cardiovascular training during the Trans-Am years and added strength training for enduros. He now works out about eight hours most weeks. Good thing, since the Corvette drivers have had to run virtually flat-out around the clock to win at Daytona and Le Mans.

His finest achievement? "Definitely what we've done with the Corvette team. We had very specific goals and have accomplished everything we set out to: Le Mans wins, Daytona wins, overall wins, manufacturer championships, team championships, driver championships. It was a huge undertaking, building a team from the ground up and developing a winning car from a production platform.

"I've enjoyed the relationship with GM and GM Racing and can't see doing anything with anything other than

GM products. They are committed to this form of racing. As long as they're building and selling Corvettes, they want to race them. And the people at Pratt & Miller are the finest I've ever worked with. It gives me a great sense of pride to have been part of it."



Between test sessions and races, Fellows cherishes time at home with his family.

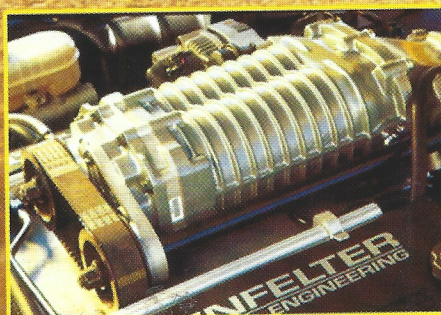
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Fellows laments that he has not yet enjoyed Corvette ownership. "Not enough room in the garage," he admits. But he looks forward to it in the future. "Corvettes are terrific cars, especially for the money, and the Z06 is fantastic!" Naturally, Fellows is also a huge fan of the C5-R racer he has helped to develop, calling it as safe and comfortable to drive as it is fast and durable.

Besides contributing markedly to the C5-R program, Fellows wants to give back to his country. Last year the Sunoco Ron Fellows Karting Championship was founded

N.Y.), and in all of the remaining ALMS events. Wherever he goes, he'll no doubt enjoy the great many friendships made throughout an impressive career — friendships that will last far beyond his racing years. For in racing, as in life, such friendships prove that good guys can and do finish first.



Gary Witzenburg, a former racing driver with an engineering background, is a feature editor for *Automotive Industries* and a senior editor for *Automobile Quarterly*.

to help young Canadian drivers hone their skills while connecting with the racing sponsorship so necessary for advancing to top professional series. "For such a small country," he says, "Canada has produced more than its share of world-class racers. "But it can be very difficult for young drivers with talent to get the opportunities they need."

This year, you can watch for Ron at Le Mans on June 14-15, in a Dale Earnhardt Inc. Monte Carlo in NASCAR's road races (June 22 at Sears Point, Calif., and August 10 at Watkins Glen,

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