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# Tony DeLorenzo

Along with Jerry Thompson, this fast-driving son of a GM VP scored an astounding 22 straight Corvette wins in 1969-70

| BY GARY WITZENBURG | PHOTOS COURTESY THE DELORENZO ARCHIVES |

**F**ormer Corvette ace racer Tony DeLorenzo jokes that the closest he's come to death was after crashing big-time in a 1974 Pontiac, Michigan, street race. Not in the crash itself, but from his parents' reaction.

"I crashed so huge," he relates. "And if God hadn't been watching over us, I might have killed 50 people. I was accelerating out of the hairpin turn onto northbound Woodward Ave. at about 120 mph, and suddenly there was a wounded car going maybe 40 mph. It happened in a nanosecond. I was either going to jump on the brakes, lock everything up, and maybe hit him, or try to sneak by between him and the hay bales. I chose the latter."

But the hay bales snagged DeLorenzo's car, turned and flipped it high in the air, headed for a crowd of spectators on a hillside. "Thank God a light pole was there," he continues. "I hit the pole, bounced back into the street, flipped end-over-end three times, and

landed on the roof, spinning and pissing out fuel from a torn-off vent line. Sparks from the roll cage set the fuel on fire, and the fire was following me."

When it finally stopped, DeLorenzo looked in the mirror and saw red. He set off the halon fire-suppression system and popped the belts, which dumped him upside down. "The whole freaking street was on fire," he says. "I was squirming, trying to get out, when a couple corner workers ran in and grabbed me. 'We'd better get the hell outta here,' I said. And we did."

Miraculously, his only injury was to cartilage in his sternum. "My dad was at a party when someone called him: 'Tony's been in a 100-mph crash at Pontiac. He's at Saint Joe's.' Click. I was lying on a gurney in the hospital, waiting to be X-rayed, when my mom came down the hallway thinking I was dead, and saw that I was alive. I think she wanted to kill me. But she didn't."

## School Days

Born in Detroit in 1943, DeLorenzo was the son of Tony Sr., a reporter-turned-adman who moved to Buick and later rose to become GM Vice President of Public Relations. Teenage Tony discovered racing when an uncle took him to Meadowdale Raceway, near Chicago. "Walking into the paddock," he remembers, "there was the Meister Brauser Scarab on stands with its body off. The crew chief squirted fuel into the injectors, then started it. I heard that wonderful noise and was forever hooked. Somehow, some way, I was going to drive a racecar."

In 1964, he and younger brother, Peter, talked their dad into getting a Corvette as his 'company car.' "A big mistake," he laughs. "His other big mistake was letting us order it—a '64 fuel-injected coupe with heavy-duty transmission, rear axle, and brakes, and knock-off alloy wheels."





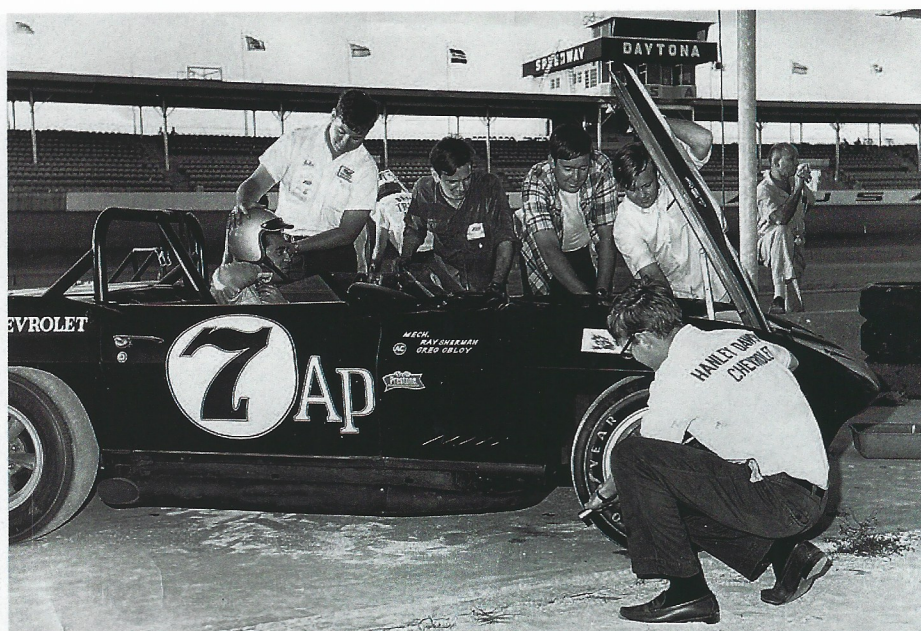


"I was at my summer job at Chevrolet Sales Promotion when my phone rang. It was God himself, Zora Arkus-Duntov. He said, 'Tony, your father has ordered a heavy-duty Corvette. Who's going to drive it?' I said, 'He is.' I visualized his eyes rolling back in his head. 'Who's going to drive it?' he demanded. 'I am.' 'What are you going to do with it?' 'Take it to SCCA driver's school at Watkins Glen.' 'That's all I needed to know, thank you.' Click."

Duntov asked him to drop the car at Chevrolet Engineering to "take care of a few things." Two weeks later, they went to get it, "and Zora took Tony out to the little test track that sits inside the Tech Center," wrote Peter in a 2017 blog post. "It sat lower [than stock] and it was wearing the biggest Goodyear Blue Streak racing tires that could fit inside the fenders on the knock-off wheels."

The chief engineer also had the stock dual exhaust system cut and flanged ahead of the mufflers, so they could attach four-foot pipes straight out of the back at the track. "The car had been completely gone through," Peter continued, "including the brakes, the suspension, and, sure enough, the engine...because the thing was a rocket." Tony says he "ruled Woodward" with it for a couple months, then prepared it for the school. They ripped out the interior, bumpers, brackets, and spare tire carrier, installed a scatter-shield and racing belts, and had a roll bar welded in.

He and Peter drove it to Watkins Glen, where Tony impressed his instructors and earned a Regional license. "After we got



(Right, from top) DeLorenzo at the '67 SCCA Nationals, where he finished Second in the A-Production category. Powering through a corner at the Wilmot Hills (Wis.) race that same year, where DeLorenzo and the Hanley Dawson L88 took First ahead of a 427 Cobra.

back," he says, "my dad said the car [had] to go back to Chevrolet. He had no idea what we had done to it. With no time to put it back together, we threw everything into the car and turned it in. Someone called my dad and told him [about the modifications], and he called me, and, God bless him, he never yelled at me. He just said, 'When the car comes back to the house, don't touch it.' He had sold it to a guy who worked for him in the Chicago PR office, and it took a couple weeks for Chevy Engineering to put it back together. Sadly, two weeks after it arrived in Chicago it was stolen, stripped, and burned."

### From Corvair to Corvette

During DeLorenzo's senior year at Notre Dame, his father gave him a 1965 Corvair.

"Do what you want with it," Dad said, "but if you can't drive it on the street, you'll walk or take the bus." So I turned a 140-horsepower Corvair into an A-Sedan racecar that I drove on the street and to the tracks. Then, in 1966, I went to graduate school at Boston University and took it with me. My Dad was friends with Chevy dealers in Boston and Manhattan, and they gave me a place to store the car in Boston and a place to work on it in Manhattan.

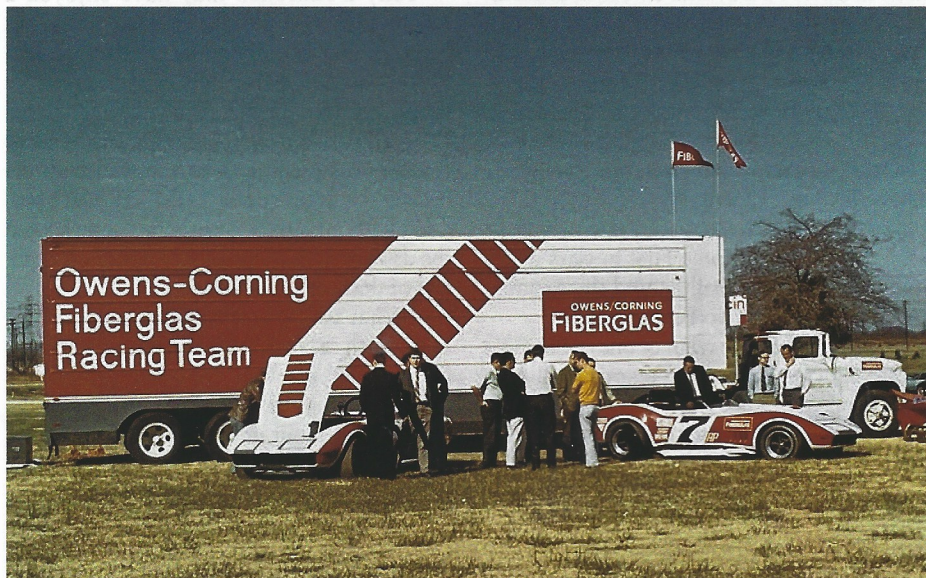
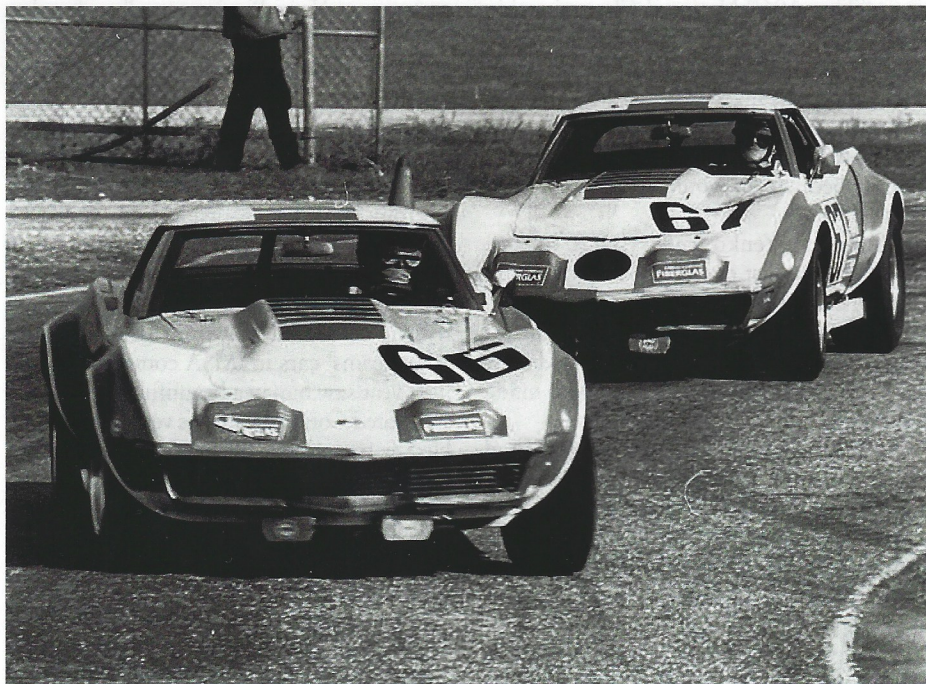
"At the end of the first semester, I was sent to Manhattan to work as a graduate resident in public relations at the Herald Tribune Fresh Air Fund charity, and I raced that Corvair all over the East—Lime Rock, Thompson, Watkins Glen, VIR, Cumberland, and others. The Manhattan Chevy dealer, Don Allen Chevrolet, 'sold' me a used Chevy wagon for

\$500 for a tow car, and 'bought' it back from me when it was time to leave Manhattan."

DeLorenzo won his first race and finished third in Divisional points, which earned an invitation to SCCA's American Road Race of Champions (ARRC) "Runoffs" at Riverside, California. But he couldn't afford to go that year.

Back home in Michigan in 1967, DeLorenzo went to work for Rockwell. He did a lot of sponsorship proposals and finally found support from Hanley Dawson, Jr., of Detroit's Hanley Dawson Chevrolet, beginning that August. "He got me a '67 L88 Corvette, the first of 20 built that year," he relates. "I bought a trailer, and Hanley provided a used Impala wagon off his lot to tow it. I paid my own expenses, and the team was a couple of





buddies. We won our first race at Wilmot Hills, Wisconsin, and we were off and running."

DeLorenzo finished second in Central Division A-Production points in that car (now a highly coveted collectible), which earned another invitation to the SCCA Runoffs, scheduled that year for Daytona. He qualified third among a pack of 427 Shelby Cobras and finished Second behind Dick Smith's Cobra. He then partnered with Jerry Thompson, a Chevrolet engineer and skilled racer who had won the D-Production National Championship in a (Corvair-based) Yenka Stinger at those same 1967 Daytona Runoffs. "We decided to team up and get a '68 Corvette to have a two-car team," DeLorenzo says.

Chevy dealer/racer Don Yenka, impressed with the two men's Runoffs performances,

invited them to join his Sunray DX Corvette team for the 1968 Daytona 24-Hour. Hanley Dawson, keen to retain its driver, tried ordering a new '68 L88 but was told they were all "spoken for."

"So, we built our own car from scratch," DeLorenzo says. They got a body, frame, suspension, engine parts, electricals, and everything else from the St. Louis Corvette assembly plant and the GM Parts warehouse in Swartz Creek, Michigan, then spent most of December and January laboriously bolting together a new L88 Corvette. In fact, they were still buttoning it up in the garage at Daytona.

"And we ended up busting everything you could bust," DeLorenzo continues. "Wheel bearings, front and rear hubs, transmissions,

driveshafts, half-shafts, rear ends. In night practice at Daytona, I got on the brakes for Turn One, the steering-relay rod bent, and the car wouldn't turn! Lucky it was Daytona, so I went straight, stayed on the banking, and didn't hit anything. We straightened it out and welded angle iron onto it."

Only by borrowing parts from actor James Garner's American International Racing team did they keep the car going to finish Fifth in GT, 27th overall. "Garner stopped by our pit in the middle of the night, and the crew were anxious until [he] flashed that famous smile and said he was just checking on how his parts were doing. He was our crew's new best friend after that. And Zora, God bless him, and [Corvette engineer and racer] Gib Hufstader fixed everything in time for Sebring." Even so, they were forced to drop out of the '68 Sebring 12-Hour with a broken half-shaft.

### Hitting it Big

The team repainted the '68 car black for Tony to run in SCCA A-Production, and replaced the '67's L88 with a small-block Chevy for Thompson to pilot in BP. And 1968 turned out to be the "pivotal year," wrote Peter DeLorenzo. "Tony and Jerry started kicking ass in their respective classes." But when Hanley Dawson decided to discontinue its sponsorship by mid-summer, they needed new support.

"Once again," Tony relates, "God smiled upon us. I was having dinner with my parents at Bloomfield Hills Country Club. Ed [Cole]

(Left, from top) The Owens-Corning Corvettes of DeLorenzo (No. 66) and Thompson at the '69 Daytona 24-hour, where they finished out of the top 10. At the SCCA Nationals at Road Atlanta later that year, where Thompson wrapped up the A-Production title.

walked in with his wife, Dolly, and stopped at our table. Dolly asked, 'How is your racing going?' I said, 'We're doing pretty well, but Hanley Dawson is going to end our sponsorship.' She said, 'Can you get me a copy of your proposal? I'm going to New York with Edward next week.'

"She gave it to Loris Norstad, an Owens Corning Fiberglass executive vice president in their New York office. I was at my desk at Rockwell when Spif Kerivan from OCF headquarters in Toledo called: 'We have your proposal, and we'd like to have a meeting.'

"They bought into Dollie's idea that sponsoring our team would be good for OCF's OEM business in Detroit," Peter wrote. "The...deal began in August, with Tony delivering an SCCA National win the first time out



at Mid-Ohio, OCF's 'home' track. We were off and running."

Tony won the Central Division AP Championship, while Thompson was second in BP, and both just missed National Championships at the Riverside ARRC Runoffs with Second Place finishes in their classes. "I came out of Turn Six, and there was a slow car and a yellow flag ahead," Tony relates. "If I passed him, I'd get black-flagged, and my race would be over. So I waited behind him, and Pete Consiglio in his 427 Cobra made up...22 seconds and...finally passed me with four or five laps left. I closed up and was trying to figure out where I could get him back, and just ran out of time. I finished Second by .004 second. I never got over that."

### The Streak

After selling the '67, putting a new frame under the '68 and getting a new big-block '69, DeLorenzo and Thompson began what would become a streak of 22 SCCA AP and FIA International GT wins. It started with a 1-2 finish in a heavy rainstorm at the May 1969 SCCA Nationals at Meadowdale, then ran through a two-year string of SCCA AP wins, the 1969 Watkins Glen Six-Hour, the 1970 Daytona 24-Hour and Sebring 12-Hour, and ended with the 1970 SCCA Runoffs at Road Atlanta. "At that...championship race," DeLorenzo relates, "John Greenwood, Jerry, and I were running 1-2-3...for the first few laps until a loose fuse slowed me, and I finished Seventh. John and Jerry finished 1-2."

The year before at Daytona, the pair had qualified 1-2, with Thompson winning the National Championship and DeLorenzo coming home a disappointing 17th after two flat

tires. "That 1969 National Championship was actually a downer," Thompson admits. "I already had a championship, and it was Tony's turn—we prearranged winning when we had control in an event. Yenko was a threat, so my job was to be the 'rabbit' and let him crash me if he wished, which would clear the way for Tony to win."

"Some say Yenko was trying to hit me, others that he just overcooked it going into Turn One and made a yard sale out of his car. And in the process, Tony cut a tire. Pitting for the tire took him out of contention and blew the most important plan we had made together so far."

Still, the Owens Corning Corvettes had clearly become "a force to be reckoned with in FIA endurance racing," as Peter DeLorenzo wrote. "Everyone...assumed we were dripping with money, but they were wrong. [O]ver the entire course of the program, the...team was predominantly an all-volunteer operation."

Perhaps the crowning FIA GT achievement came at the 1971 Daytona 24-Hour, unfortunately the swan song for OCF sponsorship after a tough 1970 season saw the team field a pair of Camaros in SCCA Trans-Am in addition to their AP Corvette efforts. Don Yenko was paired with Tony DeLorenzo in the No. 11 OCF Corvette, while Thompson would co-drive the No. 12 car with John Mahler. DeLorenzo and Yenko, with some help from Mahler, thundered home First in class and a stunning Fourth overall behind the winning Porsche 917K and two Ferrari 512Ms.

And with that, the reign of one of the most successful Corvette racing teams of all time came to an end. While many assumed the OCF cars had received factory backing, Chevrolet

racing guru Vince Piggins actually refused to help them. "The only help we received from Chevrolet Engineering was a parts-exchange arrangement," Peter wrote. "We'd break something on the track, and Chevrolet Engineering would study, learn, and replace it with a better part. That's how it worked."

Tony landed sponsorship from Walter O. Briggs III from Detroit, bought two Bud Moore Mustangs for Trans-Am pro competition, and scored a second and three more top-fives in 1971 and '72 while also co-driving other teams' cars in IMSA competition. The next year saw him in a beautifully built Budd-sponsored Corvette that was very fast but hobbled by frequent engine troubles. A lone 1973 win came co-driving Mo Carter's Camaro in an IMSA Pocono 500-miler. He continued competing off and on with some good results through 1988, but his Corvette glory years were over.

### "Lucky Man"

Tony DeLorenzo may have enjoyed a unique advantage getting started in racing, but he notes that he only asked his dad for help twice over the years, including one time he desperately needed an engine he had ordered shipped to Daytona. He adds that Chevy Racing boss Piggins "was annoyed with me because I was the son of a GM VP." But operating without family wealth, he soon showed the driving skills to make something very special of that early advantage.

"What we accomplished was good," he says with a grin. "Jerry was National Champion in '69, I won Divisional Championships in '68 and '69, Jerry won the Daytona 24-Hour in '70, and I won it in '71,







(Above, left to right) On the high banking at Daytona, circa 1972. Longtime DeLorenzo co-conspirator Jerry Thompson is pictured here during the '71 Trans-Am season.

(Right) The '73 Daytona 24-hour got off to an auspicious start, with DeLorenzo and co-driver Mo Carter putting their No. 11 Corvette on the pole in the GT category. But the car's 467-ci big-block engine expired after just five hours of hard running, relegating the team to a DNF.

(Below left) DeLorenzo en route to an A-Production class win at the Brainerd (Minn.) SCCA race in 1969.



our last race for Owens Corning. And we both got into the Corvette Hall of Fame."

"The OCF team came about when two guys nuttier than squirrel turds decided they wanted to race more than anything else," Thompson adds. "Our skill sets fit together well, we supported each other and made it look like we had more support...than we really did. One thing that helped us get the most out of our cars was practicing together. There would always be some turns he did faster, while I could pull up on him in others. That allowed me to copy him where he was better, and he did the same, which made us both faster."

And both were so good in near-equal cars that it was tough to tell which one was the quicker driver. Thompson recalls one rain race at Mid-Ohio where DeLorenzo especially impressed him: "A well driven B-Production car looked poised to race with us where the slick track negated our likely 200-hp advan-

tage. The race settled in with Tony leading, me in second, and the B-car chewing on my rear panel. Suddenly, Tony slid off the end of the straightaway. It was his turn to win, but things weren't working out, so it was everyone for himself. I gave it my best, left the B-car behind and ran hard for the checker.

"Approaching the last turn on the last lap, I spotted a red-and-white dot in my mirror. I couldn't believe it was Tony because he would have lost many seconds getting out of the grass, and I had been pushing all race. He must have been so mad that he was driving twelve-tenths, and when I slowed and moved over just before the finish line, he flew by. Folks thought we were showing off, but it was my tribute to incredible driving by my partner."

And DeLorenzo was lucky to walk away from some big crashes besides that Pontiac near-disaster. "At the '69 Daytona 24-Hour," he remembers, "going as fast as the car

would go around the oval Turn Four, I blew a tire. The car went straight up and hit the wall so hard it stunned me and knocked my hands and feet off the controls. I heard this roar of the car grinding itself against the wall at 100-plus mph. I finally got my feet back on the pedals, got it stopped, dumped the belts, slithered out, got on the roof and climbed up the 31-degree fence. I heard from a guy 20 years later who was in a Camaro trying to get by a couple of 911 Porsches: 'I missed you by an inch.'

"About a dozen years ago, a chiropractor took X-rays, hung them up, and said, 'So, Mr. DeLorenzo, when did you break your neck?' I said, 'I never broke my neck.' She said, 'See that little gray smudge there on your C2 vertebrae? That is a healed fracture. How could that have happened?' I started relating all my racing crashes, and I got through three before she said, 'It could have been any one of those. You're a very lucky man.'" ○