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This year's Amelia Concours d'Elegance hosted a dazzling field of Sebring-run Corvette racecars

| BY GARY WITZENBURG | PHOTOS BY NATHAN DEREMER |

The annual 12 Hours of Sebring endurance race, held at Sebring International Raceway in Florida, has been an iconic event for sports-car racing since its beginning in 1950. As a round of the international FIA's premier sports-car series—the most important American race for European teams and drivers from 1953 through 1972—it attained a level of importance and fan interest ranking it closely behind the famous 24-hour races at Le Mans and Daytona.

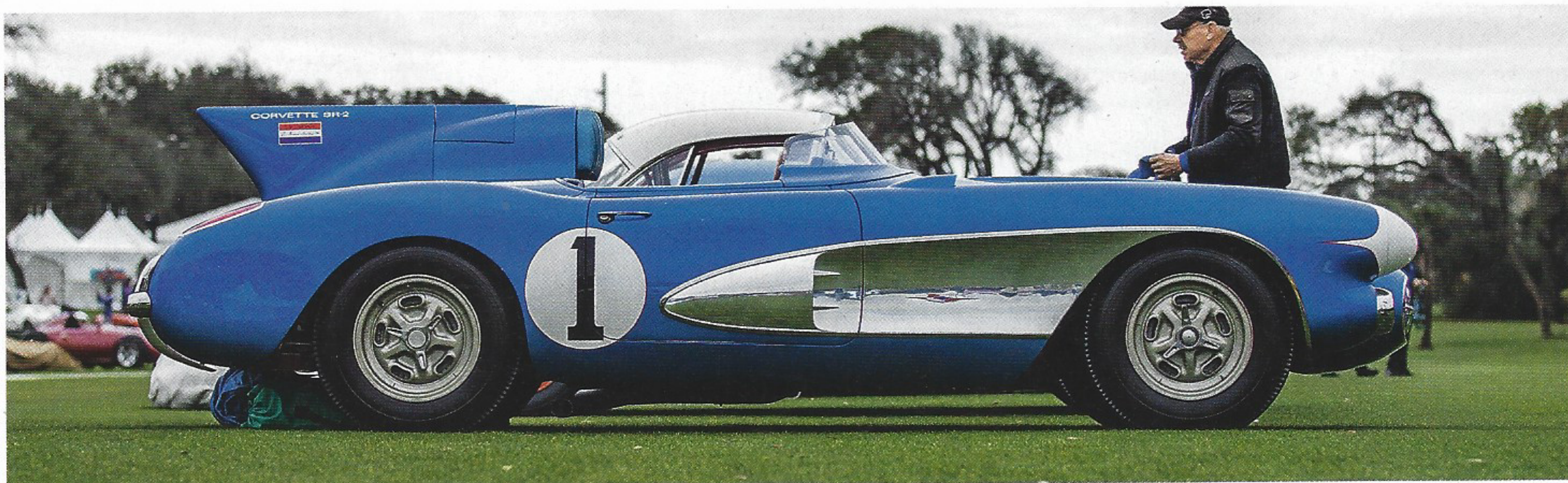
Originally combining former airport runways with narrow two-lane service roads,

the Sebring facilities were updated and the circuit layout changed after one driver and four spectators were killed during the 1966 event. Then, when the race faced near certain extinction in 1972, IMSA's John Bishop brought it into his Camel GT championship series. Famed Corvette racer John Greenwood bankrolled further improvements and promotions to save it for 1973 and beyond.

Countless Corvettes have competed at Sebring, including virtually all the big teams and hero drivers we've read and heard

about through the years. While many have failed to endure the full, 12-hour grind on the track's notoriously rough surfaces, some have shined and won their production-based GT classes. For this year's Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance in Florida, Corvette Repair Inc. president Kevin Mackay organized a class of nine of the best, and four of those nine—all body-off restored by Mackay's New York facility—won class or better awards. In this article, we'll take a closer look at all nine of these extraordinary machines.





1956 SR-2 No. 1 - Concours class award

Owner: Irwin Kroiz

When GM executives learned that aspiring racer Jerry Earl, who happened to be then-GM Styling VP Harley Earl's son, was racing a Ferrari, they "suggested" to the elder Earl that perhaps a Corvette would be more appropriate. Harley told Jerry that if he sold Ferrari, he would have a special racing Corvette built for him. The result was the '56 SR-2.

First built as a production Corvette, SR-2 was shipped from the St. Louis plant to GM Styling in Warren, Michigan, for "race modifications and cosmetic additions." These included modifying the body and mounting it on a special Sebring Racing (hence, SR) chassis with heavy-duty brakes and suspension. Additional alterations included a lengthened front, bright aluminum installed in the side coves, unique parking lamps with brake-cooling screens, fabricated driver and passenger windscreens, and a stabilizing fin for the rear deck.

After SR-2 proved heavy and underpowered in its first few 1956 races, its weight was trimmed by some 300 pounds—mostly by removing the stock interior, replacing the seats with lightweight buckets, and swapping the door panels for fiberglass ones—over the winter. It also got a new, 331-ci V-8 with prototype fuel-injection and a four-speed transmission. Longer side coves appeared, along

with a taller fin behind the driver and a special gas-filler cap.

Besides Jerry Earl, SR-2 was piloted at times by Dr. Dick "The Flying Dentist" Thompson and John Fitch. Painted purple, it then became Jim Jeffords's Nickey Chevrolet Corvette that he and Auggie Pabst raced at Sebring in 1958 but retired with rear axle failure after just 27 laps. According to Mackay, this is one of the only two "high fin" Corvettes ever built.

1957 "Sebring No. 3" - Spirit of Sebring award

Owner: John Justo

This 1957 Corvette started life as a General Motors factory team car. Powered by a fuel-injected 283-ci V-8 through an experimental Borg Warner four-speed transmission, it was prepped by GM's Test Garage in Detroit and SEDCO (Southern Engineering Development Company) in Atlanta. Driven by Jim Jeffords, John Kilborn, and Dale Duncan, it finished Second in class and 15th overall in a field of 66 in the March 1957 Sebring 12-hour. After Sebring, GM shut down the race program and sold No. 3, along with two other Sebring racers, to E.B. Rose of Dallas. At the 1957 SCCA National race in Cumberland, Maryland, Carroll Shelby drove it to Second in B-Production behind Dick Thompson in the No. 4 Sebring Car.





1960 "Race Rat" No. 6

Owner: John Essepian

This 1960 "Race Rat" Corvette was purchased from Chevrolet by racer George Reed, who owned Ferrari and Goodyear Tire dealership RRR Motors in Homewood, Illinois. The car was factory outfitted with RPO equipment such as fuel injection, a 24-gallon tank, and heavy-duty replacements for the brakes, suspension, shocks, and wheels. The suspension, meanwhile, was lowered and race prepped in the pits by none other than Zora Arkus-Duntov himself. Driven by Bill Fritz and Chuck Hall, it won the GT5.0 class and finished 16th overall at the 1960 12 Hours of Sebring, ahead of all four Corvettes campaigned by the well-financed Camoradi and Cunningham teams.

1963 Gulf Oil Z06 No. 1

Owner: John Justo

Chevrolet sold 14 exclusive 1963 Z06 Corvettes to teams with serious competition intent, and this chassis 2227 Grady Davis Gulf Oil car enjoyed one of the more impressive first seasons of that lot. Built in October 1962, it was delivered from the St. Louis plant to Yenko Chevrolet in Cannonsburg, Pennsylvania, then driven to Gulf Oil's base in Pittsburgh to

be prepared for the November Puerto Rican Grand Prix.

Piloted by Dick Thompson in 15 1963 races, it scored A-Production wins at Puerto Rico and Marlboro, Maryland, before finishing Third in class at the 3 Hours of Daytona. It dropped out of the FIA Sebring 12-hour due to transmission failure, then chalked up an overall victory back at Marlboro, Maryland; followed by Thirds at Dansville, Virginia; Road America; and Cumberland. A Second at Bridgehampton, New York, rounded out its first-season haul.





1966 Roger Penske Development L88 No. 9 - Best in Class
Owner: Kevin Mackay

The year before ace driver Roger Penske attained additional fame as owner and team leader of the legendary Mark Donohue SCCA Trans-Am Series Camaro, he received a phone call from Corvette Chief Engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov, who told him that a racing version of the newly introduced 427-ci "Mark IV" big-block would soon be available to select Corvette teams.

Developed by CEC (Chevrolet Engineering Center) and identified as the L88, the engine would be offered with a competition package that included J56 brakes, a 36-gallon fuel tank, F41 suspension, a prototype 2.73:1 Posi-Traction rear axle, TI ignition, an M-22 transmission, "off road" exhaust, a teakwood steering wheel on a telescopic column, and a prototype cowl-induction hood.

That was an opportunity that Penske could not refuse, so he bought this car and ended up winning both Daytona's first 24-hour enduro (with drivers Dick Guldstrand, George Wintersteen, and Ben Moore) and the Sebring 12-hour (with Wintersteen and Moore) that year.

"That car started Roger Penske's career as a team owner," says restorer and current owner Mackay, "and it's the only Midyear Corvette with back-to-back class wins at [those two races]. It was the beginning of the Penske dynasty."

1968 L88 Sunray DX No. 2
Owner: Steve Leitstein

While Chevrolet could not meet the FIA's 500-car production requirement in time for L88-equipped '68 Corvettes to compete at that year's Daytona and Sebring enduros, the cars were eventually granted provisional approval to compete there. Actor James Garner's American International Racing (AIR) team received the first three L88 C3s in November '67, and two of them ran at Daytona, one retiring early and the other finishing 29th.

Meanwhile, Don Yenke's Sunray-DX cars swept the GT class in 10th, 25th, and 27th overall, and this Yenke- and Peter Revson-driven car finished Second in class. It was then piloted by Yenke and Pedro Rodriguez at Sebring, where it dropped out with engine failure after 43 laps.





COUNTLESS CORVETTES HAVE COMPETED AT SEBRING OVER THE YEARS.

1968 L88 Sunray DX No. 3 - Concours class winner

Owner: Irwin Kroiz

The roughly 600-horsepower (in race trim) L88 package, offered initially only to well-financed teams such as AIR and Yenko's Sunray DX Motorsports, transformed a Corvette into a pure racecar. Just 20 were built, primarily for racing, in 1967, but nearly 200 C3 L88s were ultimately ordered during the option's three-year production run. Driven by Dave Morgan and Hap Sharp, this one finished an impressive Sixth overall and First in the GT class at the 1968 Sebring 12-hour.

1968 Leldon Blackwell No. 94

Owner: John Sloane

A former Zora Arkus-Duntov development car, this Corvette was piloted at various times by a number of noted drivers, including Wilbur Pickett, Tony DeLorenzo, Mo Carter, and Gene Felton. In 1973 it earned a Top Speed award (222 mph!) as well as Best Appearing Team honors at Daytona. Then, entered by Leldon Blackwell and driven by Bill Bean and Pickett, it finished 16th overall at Sebring. Due to its fame, the car has been featured in an online racing game and numerous books and articles. It also appeared in the 1974 IMSA brochure.

1985 IMSA GTO/Trans-Am No. 55

Owners: Kent and Melissa Hussey

Veteran Corvette racer Dave Heinz had this C4 built with a Ray Dillon custom chassis and experimental GM independent rear suspension. Its first outing was the 1985 Daytona 24-hour, where it completed just 138 laps. Heinz then ran the car at Sebring in 1985, '86, and '87, but failed to finish any of those races.

After acquiring No. 55, its current owners enlisted Ray Evernham's Big Iron Garage to do a full restoration, returning it to its 1985 Sebring livery. Thus refreshed, with a 690-horse PME engine under the hood, it ran in the HSR Classic 24 Hours of Daytona with GM factory driver Andy Pilgrim at the wheel. And in 2022, it won all its HSR Daytona Classics races with Canaan O'Connell (Corvette Racing legend Johnny O'Connell's son) doing the driving.

"I have been a 'Corvette guy' since I was a kid and have owned too many to list," says owner Kent Hussey. "My brothers and I raced a 1965 C2 back in the '90s, and our first race was at Sebring. When my wife discovered this car, as a pile of parts, on eBay and read its history, we knew we wanted to bring it back to life exactly as it was raced back in the day. We were able to convince Ray to take on the project, and the result is a wonderful piece of Corvette history that can be raced and enjoyed today."

