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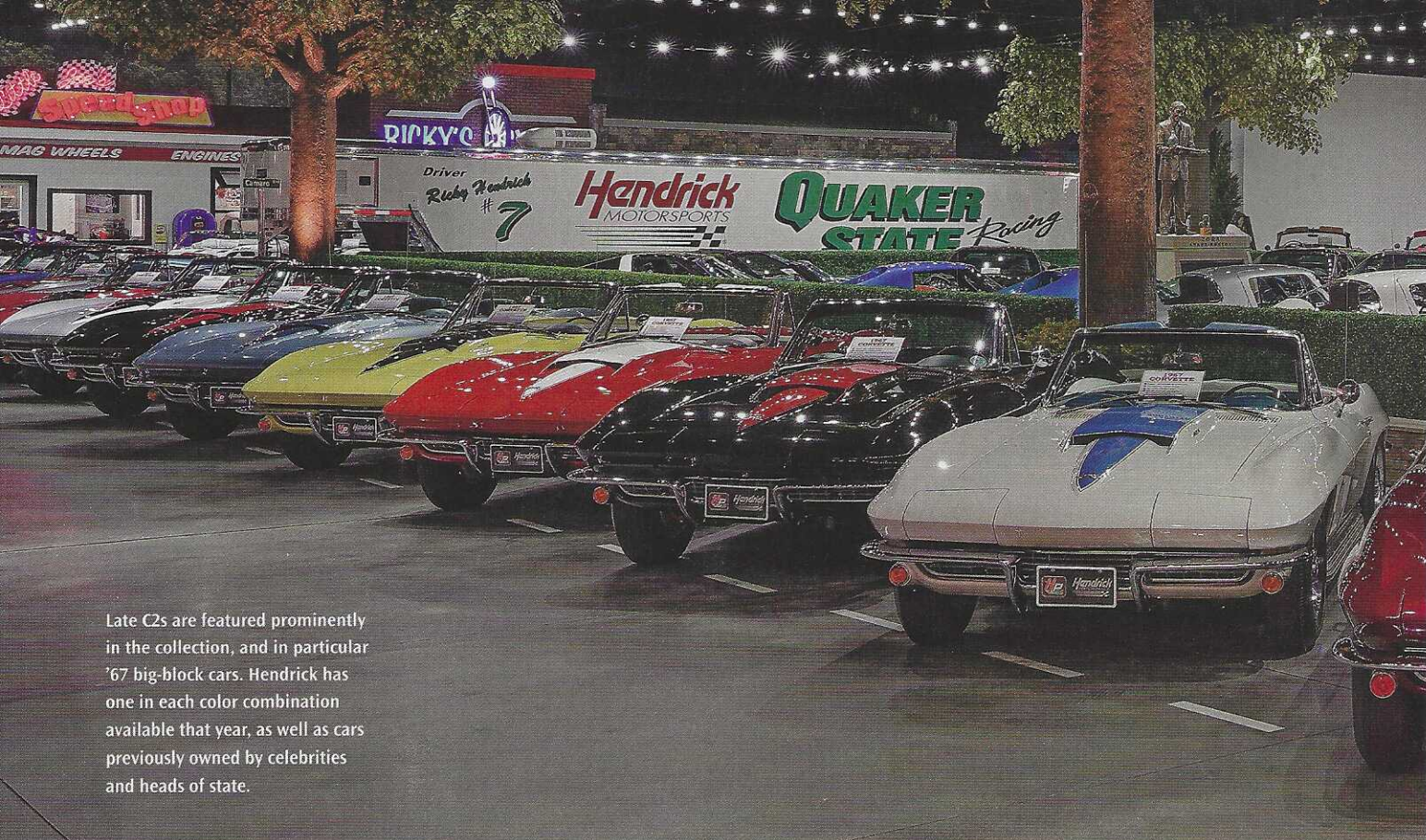


# Car dealer and racing-team owner Rick Hendrick's vast collection is chock-full of rare and historically significant Corvettes

| BY GARY WITZENBURG | PHOTOS COURTESY HENDRICK PERFORMANCE AND JAMES POTTER |







Late C2s are featured prominently in the collection, and in particular '67 big-block cars. Hendrick has one in each color combination available that year, as well as cars previously owned by celebrities and heads of state.

Joseph Riddick "Rick" Hendrick III bought his first Corvette, a well-used '63 roadster that needed work, for \$1,000 when he was just 21. His mom, who worked in a bank, helped him get the loan. And on his first date with Linda, the young woman who would later become his wife, it broke down. "We were on the side of the road," he says, "and I didn't make too good a first impression that night. But I got it running and drove away."

Just five years later, when Chevrolet offered Hendrick the opportunity to purchase a struggling Chevrolet dealership at the tender age of 26, he and Linda sold everything they had, including their beloved '63 Corvette, to jump at the challenge. Decades passed, that first dealership led to a great many more, and after searching for 18 years, he finally found that first Corvette, brought it back to his Charlotte, North Carolina, headquarters, and restored it. But not to its original state. Its chassis, beautifully polished and glass covered, became the gorgeous conference table in the Heritage Center that houses his collection. Its body, cleverly modified and tweaked to look like a five-gill '67, was mounted on a modern Corvette chassis.

"I put it on a new chassis with the late-model suspension and disc brakes," he relates, "widened it about an inch to make it easier for me to get in and out and drive it, and notched behind the seats to put C7 seats in it. We hand-made new bumpers, and the

firewall and inner fenders are all carbon fiber. We did a lot of really trick stuff, a lot of work went into it, and it took three years to build. And on our 50th wedding anniversary, we had a big party and drove away in that car. So, we had our first date in that car and drove it away on our 50th anniversary."

#### Farm Raised

Born in the small town of Warrenton, North Carolina, and raised on a tobacco farm near South Hill, Virginia, Hendrick got his very first car, a red '31 Chevy coupe, for \$250 at the age of 14. "My dad gave my brother and I a quarter of an acre of tobacco every summer, and when we sold it, we would make about 250 bucks. So, I got him

to buy the car, and we built it together. We went to a salvage yard and bought the parts. He did most of the work, I helped, and I drag raced it."

Hendrick demonstrated his mechanical abilities by winning a Chrysler-Plymouth troubleshooting contest, which included a written exam plus hands-on diagnosis and repair, at age 16. He enjoyed working on and repairing car problems, but at 19 he moved to Raleigh for a work-study program with North Carolina State University and Westinghouse Electric. He was studying there to be a tool-and-die maker while working at a service station to pay his bills.

When a customer one day asked him to replace the clutch in an Opel, Hendrick said







he couldn't because he had to go to class. "This Opel's got an \$800 loan value," the guy said, "but I'll sell it to you for \$300." I borrowed \$300 from a guy at the station, and I just happened to be working on a Jaguar for a professor who was looking for a car for his wife. I said, "I've got this Opel, and it's got a loan value of \$800." He said, "I'll give you \$1,200 for it." That lit a fire. I decided I needed to start buying and selling them, not just working on them."

At age 23, after notable success at doing that on his own, Hendrick opened a small used-car lot with dealer Mike Leith, who then named him general manager of import new-car sales. Three years later, in 1976, he grabbed that opportunity to buy chronically

troubled Bennettsville Chevrolet in Bennettsville, South Carolina, and moved two hours south to become America's youngest Chevy dealer. He renamed it Hendrick Chevrolet, turned it around, and grew it into the region's most profitable dealership. Two years later, he bought City Chevrolet in Charlotte.

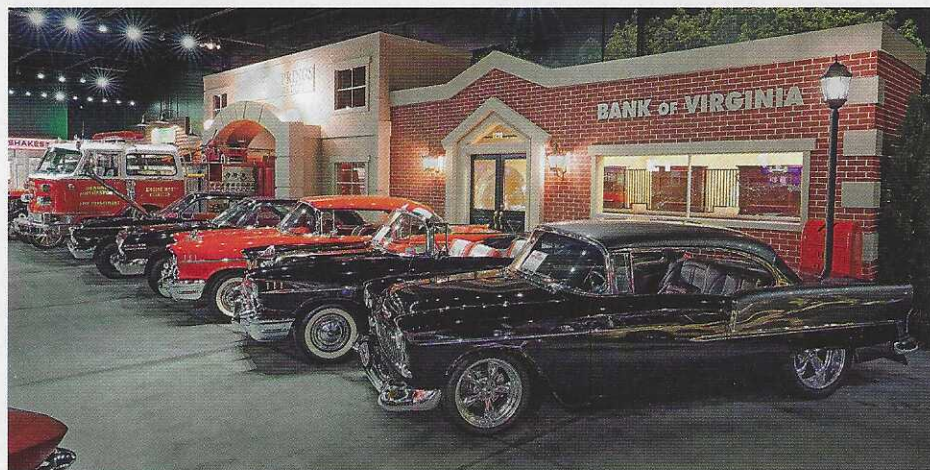
That marked the beginning of his Hendrick Automotive Group empire that now ranks as America's largest privately owned dealership group, with 131 franchises offering 25 vehicle brands "under 94 rooftops," as he likes to put it. The majority of those franchises are for GM brands, but none are for Fords. "I'm a proud Chevrolet guy," he says. Meanwhile, his Hendrick

Motorsports operation has become NASCAR's most successful team with (as this is written) 314 top Cup Series wins—the most in history—and a record 18 NASCAR national series championships, 14 of them Cup Series, three Truck Series, and one Xfinity Series title.

### For the Love of Corvettes

Hendrick fell in love with Corvettes as a kid at first from watching the TV show *Route 66* back when dealers used to paper up their windows to hide new models until they were officially unveiled. "I used to dream about Corvettes, but never thought I'd own one," he says. "The little dealership in the town I grew up in never had one on the showroom floor, but the dealer's son had a '62, so I saw that car quite a bit." Hendrick once rode in a friend's '58 "Fuelie" Vette and "couldn't believe how sweet it was." Then he fell in love with the five-gill '67 when he saw one in the showroom at a big Chevy store in Raleigh. "I still remember that car: 427, Marina Blue, black stripes, blue interior. I think it was \$4,600. The ones I really fell for were the big-block '67s with the stinger hoods and factory side pipes. They were my dream cars. I thought the '67 Corvette was the best-looking car ever built, and I've got the last '67 built at Saint Louis."

When he was inducted into the National Corvette Museum's Hall of Fame in 2015, he told its *America's Sports Car* magazine that,





as a kid, he was “a muscle-car guy and a hot-rodder. I drag raced at 15 and, to me, the Corvette was sexy, had the performance, and it was America’s sports car. I wouldn’t even think about a Ferrari. If I could own any car, the Corvette was it.”

As a team owner, his first venture was a drag-boat team that won three consecutive titles and set a world record of 222.2 mph. Then he moved to NASCAR, first in the Sportsman (now Xfinity) Series, then the top-level Cup Series, and he drove a few races himself in 1987 and 1988. He also tried his luck with a Goodwrench IMSA GTP Corvette pro road-racing team effort from 1985 through 1988, which scored several pole positions, one win, and multiple strong finishes between a spate of non-finishes for technical issues. In 2013 he was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame, and in 2017 into the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

A leukemia survivor himself, Hendrick’s charitable efforts have generated tens of millions of dollars for various causes. In 2016 he and Linda launched the Hendrick Family Foundation, which consolidated all the organization’s philanthropic initiatives, including its predecessor, the Hendrick Marrow Program, which raised more than \$15 million from 1997-2016. Its signature event is the annual Learn Live Hope golf tournament, which in 2024 generated \$1.5 million to benefit various charitable entities.

### A Rich Heritage

But our main mission was to learn about Hendrick’s truly mind-boggling collection of some 150 Corvettes within a total collection now numbering more than 400 cars. He started collecting Vettes in 1977, and more than 100 of them (nearly half of the current total of 236 cars) are now displayed in the

55,000-square-foot Heritage Center he opened in 2010 at his Concord, North Carolina, Hendrick Motorsports headquarters as a personal museum to honor his family. It is not open to the public, but we were treated to a guided tour as a prelude to doing this story.

And wow. While Hendrick’s Corvettes were plentiful throughout the tightly packed space, there were also a variety of Porsches, Ferraris, Lamborghinis, other exotics and racecars, in some cases too close to each other to open their doors, among a number of replicas of structures important to his early years. “Once we had the building,” he told us, “we started thinking about what to do inside it. I wanted to pay tribute to my family, so I’ve got a replica of the Dairy Queen that I used to hang out at in there; the general store my grandfather owned, where I built a garage in back; the Bank of Virginia where my mother worked; my dad’s tractor shop; the Citgo service station where I worked as a mechanic, and where I met my wife, and the old toolbox I used there; City Chevrolet, which was my first big dealership; the drag strip I raced my ’31 on; and a newsstand with magazines from *Hot Rod*, *Dirt Racing*, and many more.”

The Corvette collection includes an incredible 20 VIN 001 models, including the first 1955 Corvette built; the first ’56, ’57, and ’58; and a growing group of first-built Z06s and ZR1s. Among those are a ’92 ZR-1 (Hendrick’s first VIN 001 Corvette, acquired in 2009), an ’11 Z06, a ’12 Z06, a ’15 Z06, a ’16 Z06, an ’18 Z06, a pre-production ’19 ZR1, a 70th Anniversary ’23 Z06, and his most recent acquisition, the first ’25 ZR1. He paid \$3.7 million, which mostly went to the Red Cross, for the latter car at the January 2025 Barrett-Jackson auction. In past years, he has contributed \$3 million for the first C8 Corvette Stingray, \$3.6 million for the first ’23 C8 Z06, \$1 million for the first ’23 Z06 convertible, and \$1.1 million for the first ’24 E-Ray.

Hendrick also has the only Corvette (No. 17X, shown at left) ever to start and finish a NASCAR race. A 1954 model owned and driven by Bill Whitley, it made four NASCAR Cup Series starts between 1960 and 1963—all at Bowman Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, which hosted special events blending sports cars with NASCAR stockers—with a best finish of 12th in 1962. It was retired and stored in Whitley’s basement after a first-lap crash in 1963 until it was located and purchased by Hendrick in 2016 and carefully restored to preserve its historic authenticity.

Among Hendrick’s other notable Corvettes: the ’67 convertible—black with red interior, 427/435—owned by singer Roy







Fittingly, Corvette racecars get their own area. Shown here from right are the 1962 and '63 machines of Delmo Johnson and Dave Morgan, a '64 Penske GS replica, the famed '68 Owens Corning L88 car, and an '88 Corvette IMSA GT Prototype.

Orbison; the '67 convertible—white with red interior and stripe, and a 427/435—previously owned by the president of Mexico; “the winningest Corvette ever,” the '68 L88 427 Owens Corning No. 12 racecar; one of the 300 '53 Corvettes; and the last '67 built. And, inspired by his special appreciation for the '67 model, Hendrick has accumulated every color of big-block '67 ever built, including the only factory-ordered primer-painted 427 Corvette, a 427/390 convertible. He also has every generation of Z06 (except the C5) with the same last four digits of their serial numbers.

One thing we didn't see was his collection of some 300 guitars on the building's second level. “The first guitar I ever had was a Chet Atkins one from when I won a race in Nashville. I've got a couple of Bruce Springsteen guitars because one of my drivers was friends with him, and a couple of Les Paul's guitars. Some previously owned by stars, some signed by stars like Garth Brooks, because I found a Corvette for him one time, and Brad Paisley because I've built cars for him. Also, Chris Stapleton, Zac Brown, Kenny Chesney, George Strait.”

### The Road Ahead

We asked Hendrick about the future of his vast collection. “I think I will always have the collection as long as I'm around,” he says, “and I hope that my family wants to continue having it because it ties in so nicely with the

automobile business, the dealerships, and the racing. All our sponsors want to come through it, and manufacturers have meetings there. It's a destination place, and I love showing it off.”

Does Hendrick ever take any of the cars out for a spin? “I keep saying I'm going to drive my [modified first Corvette] '63/'67, but I'm afraid to get a scratch or a stone chip on it.” Are they exercised at all? “We crank them up and run them around the parking lot to make sure the seals don't leak, the brakes aren't stuck, things like that. They get exercised in that way, but we don't put them out on the road.”

Asked if there was anything he'd like to share in closing, Hendrick noted, “I'm a big Corvette fan, a Corvette junkie, and my love for that car kind of got me into the car business.” As he told *America's Sports Car*, “I owe Chevrolet, Corvette, and Chevy people for giving me the chance to more than make a living doing what I love to do. I'm very grateful for that.” He says the most important car in the collection is his first one, the '31 Chevy, which his dad converted back to a street car and presented to him on his 40th birthday. It now sits prominently on Camaro Blvd. in the Heritage Center. But that first '63 Corvette, now sporting a '67 look, is a close second because of its history. “From a value standpoint,” he says, my most significant Corvette could be the only retractable hard-

top built in '58...or Roy Orbison's car, King Leopold's car, the president of Mexico's car or [former GM Styling VP] Bill Mitchell's '68, depending on who wants it and why.”

The most moving display in Hendrick's personal museum is the racing trailer once used by his late son, NASCAR team owner and onetime driver Ricky, who was tragically killed—along with nine others, including Rick's brother John, then president of Hendrick Motorsports, and John's twin daughters—in a 2004 plane crash. It sat unused for years before Hendrick employees restored it and presented it to him. “After the accident happened, they restored his trailer and presented it to me,” he says. That's when he decided to build the Heritage Center.

“We probably would have sold it,” Hendrick told *Automotive News* in a 2017 interview. “But when the accident happened, the guys here, who [Ricky had] given uniforms to and helmets, gave them all back and restored this trailer. It was hard to go in it because there are all these pictures of him and my dad and the original radios, the chairs that my wife and my dad and I were sitting in...I believe in servant leadership, and I 'turn the pyramid upside down.' I'm there to help them and serve them. Growing up on a farm, you learn that you have to depend on other people because you don't have everything you need. My dad instilled that in me, my mom, too. I've practiced that all my life.” ○