



# The Source

How Gary Pratt's technical and leadership genius, combined with Jim Miller's vision and business skills, has created the greatest Corvette-racing program in history. Words by Peter Brock, photos by Gayle Brock.



The flash and fury of Corvette's international competition successes have been with us for more than five decades. But it's only been in the 21st century that America's best known performance car has been a consistent, reliable racewinner. Why did that take so long? And, more importantly, what's made that possible today?

Surprisingly few enthusiasts seem to be asking these questions, and fewer still recognize the source of the car's recent racetrack ascent. The first issue, of course, starts a long time ago, when GM's racing activities were pushed underground by the powerful Automobile Manufacturers Association's voluntary ban on factory-backed racing and performance-themed advertising. While the other Detroit carmakers backed out of this deal in short order, GM outwardly held to its mandates for two and a half decades. Inwardly, minority forces inside the company constantly tested its limits. The result was a quietly schizophrenic race record through the mid-1980s, followed by a publicly schizophrenic one afterward.

Feeling unshackled at last, Chevrolet spent its way into top-tier American series as soon as the AMA ban was officially lifted: the Indy 500, NASCAR, and (to a lesser extent) IMSA GTP. That pattern continues to this day, with the bulk of the division's hype and resources going to TV-intensive NASCAR efforts that have little relation to any production machine, or indeed any roadable GM technologies.

Much less has been spent on the brand's foray into world-class sports-car racing, namely the ALMS championship and the 24 Hours of Le Mans. The stunning successes of that program, which pits street-derived cars against the best international teams and the world's most prestigious marques, wouldn't have happened without GM funding and dedication, of course, but the story is hardly that simple. Politic or not, it's fair to say that if GM hadn't tapped Pratt and Miller Engineering, of New Hudson, MI, to be its surrogate factory racing team with the Corvette, you wouldn't be reading this article now. There'd probably be nothing to write about.

Today, it's hard to picture the Velocity Yellow Corvettes anywhere other than leading a GT1 field or sitting in Victory Circle. Getting there, however, was neither simple nor preordained. When team co-founders Gary Pratt and Jim Miller dedicated themselves to the historically lost cause of works-backed Corvette competition, they inherited a mantle of sporadic programs defined by a lack of continuity, ill-defined goals, and frequent *financius interruptus*. GM's past management generally seemed indifferent, uneducated about, and/or patently hostile to these endeavors.

Jim and Gary believed this had changed—due, in no small part, to GM's reduced circumstances in its core business, namely the building and selling of street cars all over the globe. From the 1950s through '90s, General

Clockwise from top left: The unassuming face of the most successful Corvette-racing team in history; Gary Pratt gets his hands dirty; whatever the source, every competition part is put through a dedicated quality-control process before being catalogued and shelved for future use; spare body parts are nested before stocking the transporter—they'll be organized again at the track for fast access in an emergency.

Motors was an all-powerful force whose massive sales tended to leave upper management confident of unending success. Racing programs—in particular with the already famous Corvette—suffered as a result: As long as GM dominated the industry, the executives in control saw little value in shining its public image.

Even after the late 1970s, when it became obvious at the division level that foreign competitors were going to carve giant chunks out of GM's once-unassailable marketshare, many in upper management persisted in this self-destructive conceit. Incredibly, not 'till the mid-1990s did GM's Board truly recognize the importance of defending its carmaking image at home and abroad. Upon making this realization, however, a quick look around showed they had one vehicle uniquely positioned for the task: the good-selling, historically beloved, internationally recognized Chevy Corvette.

Today, Corvette competition has become an integral part of GM image-building activities abroad, where its success can paint General Motors as a technically adroit manufactu-

rer to a skeptical foreign audience. If anything, the Corvette's racing success has become not just a symbol of GM power, but of America's carmaking skills as a whole.

The group that has made it all possible comes from New Hudson, Michigan, 40-odd minutes northwest of the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit. New Hudson's farmlike environs speak to an agricultural past. But, as with many similar communities surrounding Detroit, that bucolic anonymity hides the supporting lifeblood of America's auto industry: small, independent companies under contract to giant carmakers.

Until one discovers an unmarked road and turns down its worn pavement, there's little indication that beyond the next row of trees lies the huge, thoroughly modern engineering complex behind one of the top racing outfits in America. The most important realization, when assessing this facility and the people inside it, is that everything you see was acquired the hard way: By being the best in a field that has no use whatever for failure. Pratt and Miller's ten-dozen employees are fulltime hired guns in the racing business.

Publicly, Gary Pratt—the almost taciturn head of this outfit—and his close friend and

business partner Jim Miller tend to say little about their own roles, preferring to let their team's performances speak for them. At races, it's even hard to see who's in charge: Everyone has an identical team firesuit and moves with the same fluid, deliberately practiced efficiency. The little additional guidance required on race day is subtle, respectful, and instant.

When asked where this level of coordination and control actually came from, it takes Gary Pratt a few moments to get at the truth. Like most people who love racing more as a sport than a business, for him it began with the simple delight of the thing, banging fenders on dirt in the bullrings found all around Michigan. Occasionally forsaking his gas-station-mechanic's job to work at a small outfit called AVC Engineering, Pratt began picking up some of the arcane points of designing and building racecars. In the '70s he started working with Bob Riley, now acknowledged as one of America's top competition designers. "It was about then that I began doing some work for Joe Ruttman, who was just beginning his career in NASCAR," he says modestly. (Ruttman's legendary record is still recognized as one of the longest and most successful in racing.)

By 1981 Pratt was going to Indy with AJ Foyt and had already established the reputa-

tion for professionalism he still has today. "That was about the time IMSA began its professional roadracing series," he says. There were offers to build cars for John Greenwood, Wally Dallenbach, and of course Jim Miller, the successful Chicago businessman who later became Gary's best friend and the team's all-knowing financial advisor. "Jim and I established our first shop in '86 over in Wixom, about five miles from the place we (have) now. We began with a couple of rented industrial spaces, about 6500 square feet. I think we had about 15 guys then, many of whom are still working for us."

The ability to find and retain talent is one of the more telling aspects of Pratt and Miller, especially in a business that's famous for fickle relationships. "Some of our original men have retired, but our workforce is pretty steady." Certainly, Gary and Jim's vision has had something to do with that. "We wanted to build a team that had our same moral and ethical standards and that trusted our intentions. They had to understand there were no hidden agendas of dollars over excellence."

One client who began using the newly formed business was GM's legendary racing boss Herb Fishel, who quietly became famous in the business for pushing GM's many clandes-

