



# LEADING THE PACK

Tom Russo and George Stradlater team up to examine the next gen in Indy pace cars.  
Photography courtesy General Motors.

**P**ace Car enthusiasts may adore their '78s, but no Corvette from this era gets a lot of respect from the hobby in general. Forever overshadowed by earlier C3s with screaming engines and later C4s of more sophistication, late-'70s cars appear doomed to fall through the cracks.

Chevrolet would probably agree. It's fair to say the first Corvette Pace Car was born out of desperation. The Corvette was still selling well, but Chevy desperately wanted more profit and publicity out of the fast-aging model. What its marketers created was the idea of a turnkey collectible—a notion that fired the public's emotions both for the Pace Car's look and its unspoken promise of finan-

cial return. So does the recent introduction of a 30th Anniversary model honoring the original Pace Car—an '08 whose black-and-silver exterior pays homage to the groundbreaking '78 special—mean Chevy is at last giving the original Corvette Pace Car its due?

Yes. And no. Technically, the 2008 Indy 500—Corvette's fifth pace-car gig in a row and the tenth time this model has taken the duty—will be paced by a color-shifting green Z06 running E85 ethanol. The one-off concept car will be driven by former F1 champ (and two-time Indy winner) Emerson Fittipaldi, who also just happens to be heavily invested in the ethanol business back home in Brazil. The 500-unit run of MY '08 Corvette

Pace Car Replicas, however, will be totally different cars: black-and-silver LS3 coupes and convertibles with silver upholstery, chrome wheels, special badges, dual-mode exhaust, and Fittipaldi's handwritten signature.

Why the disparity? Well, let's cover the Replica—for lack of a better term—first. Back in 1976, when Chevrolet was just starting to think about the Corvette's upcoming 25th anniversary, it seemed to have nothing to work with. Most of the model's always-tight engineering resources had already been reassigned to new emissions, economy, and safety tasks, and what little remained was supposed to be used for updating the cabin and body. Nor was any additional capital likely to be com-





ing from headquarters. Despite excellent sales, the division already felt the Corvette soaked up more money than its volume justified. So: How to celebrate 25 years on the market when high-performance mods were off the table, a next generation was nowhere in sight, and the car had a ten-year-old body?

What the Corvette *did* have, the marketers realized, were heritage, looks, and a raceready image. Granted, Chevy's longstanding repudiation of motorsport made embracing the Indy 500 seem like a bit of a stretch, but few buyers would make such distinctions.

The resulting Indy 500 Pace Car wildly exceeded expectations. The paint-and-spoilers package didn't offer too much, but at a time when Chevy's rivals were offering exactly nothing, it smashed a home run. All it took was an aesthetically brilliant package, a few lucky news stories, and the faint air of longterm collectibility to set off an eight-month rollercoaster ride for car magazines, speculators, and regular buyers.

An article in the September '77 *Vette Vues*, still a relatively new publication, made a big deal about a "limited edition" 25th-anniversary car coming from Chevy. Buyers began walking into showrooms and putting \$1000 down on the model, even though few had any idea what it would look like. That prompted more fans to consider the car, and the cycle took off. By March of '78, the resulting stir made *The Wall Street Journal*, which chronicled a buying frenzy in which Pace Cars that listed for \$13,653 had brought \$30,000. The bubble quickly burst, of course, but the frenzy itself makes the '78 Corvette Pace Car a remembered collectible to this day.

Inside Chevrolet, the unpredicted attention and hype didn't obscure the key lesson of the Pace Car experience: That when given in limited doses, a little paint, some decals, and a few minor body mods could hugely increase profitability. It was this formula the Corvette team subsequently harnessed, packaged, and man-

aged through later Pace Cars and other special editions, all the way up to today's '08 Pace Car Replica, thus taking the process full circle. Chevy will build only 500 (as opposed to 6502 for MY '78), but that number should be about right. If '78 taught Chevy anything, it's that the ideal number for special editions is "too few."

Meanwhile, the (literally and figuratively) green E85-powered Z06 that will circle the track in May isn't ready for dealership prime-time. As a way to raise GM's enviro-credentials at minimum cost, however, "one" seems an ideal number as well. ○

## 2009 CORVETTE INDY 500 PACE CAR REPLICA

### GENERAL

Body: hatchback or convertible

Construction: composite body over steel frame

### DRIVETRAIN

Engine: Normally aspirated V8, two pushrod-operated valves per cylinder, wet-sump oiling

Displacement (ci/cc): 376/6162

Bore x Stroke (in/mm): 4.06x3.62/103.25x92

Compression ratio: 10.7:1

Peak power (bhp): 436

Torque (lbs-ft): 424

Transmission: 6M or 6A

Final-drive ratio: 3.42 or 2.56

### CHASSIS AND SUSPENSION

Front suspension: double wishbones with cast-aluminum control arms, transverse leaf spring, and tube shocks

Rear suspension: double wishbones with cast-aluminum control arms, transverse leaf spring, and tube shocks

Front brakes: 12.8- or 13.4-inch diameter

Rear brakes: 12.0- or 13.0-inch diameter

Front wheels & tires: 18x8.5 & 245/40ZR18

Rear wheels & tires: 19x10 & 285/55ZR19

### MEASUREMENTS (coupe/convertible)

Wheelbase (in): 105.7

Length (in): 176.2

Width (in): 75.9

Height (in): 49.0

Curb weight (lbs): 3217/3246

## CORVETTE INDY PACE CARS

Year	Driver	Replicas
1978	Jim Rathmann, 1960 Indy winner	6502
1986	Chuck Yeager, test pilot	7315
1995	Jim Perkins, Chevrolet division boss	527
1998	Parnelli Jones, 1963 Indy winner	1158
2002	Jim Caviezel, actor	0
2004	Morgan Freeman, actor	0
2005	Colin Powell, Secretary of State	0
2006	Lance Armstrong, cyclist	0
2007	Patrick Dempsey, actor	500
2008	Emerson Fittipaldi, '89 and '93 Indy winner	500

