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Chevrolet Corvette Timeline: Milestones and More From C1 through C7



Over its 60-odd-year run, the Corvette has largely stuck to its original objective of providing homegrown performance wrapped in a stylish, two-seat package. Its journey has at times been an uncertain one, but now in its seventh generation, it's safe to say the hits have outnumbered the misses. Here's our look at the Corvette story from conception to 2014 C7. 4

C1 1953-1962

1951: Harley Earl, GM's chief designer, drives the Le Sabre concept car to Watkins Glen, where he falls in love with the Jaguar XK120. The wheels begin to turn.

1953: Chevrolet reveals the Corvette dream car on January 17, 1953, at New York's Waldorf Astoria hotel, as part of the kickoff to that year's GM Motorama. Named after small, highly maneuverable naval escort ship, the show car is also known as the EX-122.



On June 30 of the same year, the first production 1953 Corvette rolls off the assembly line in Flint, Michigan. Production is capped at 300 units, all in the now iconic Polo White/Sportsman Red exterior/interior color scheme and powered by the 150-hp, three-carb "Blue Flame" inline-six and a two-speed Powerglide transmission. The only options are a heater and an AM radio.

1954: Corvette production begins at GM's St. Louis, Missouri, facility on January 1. Chevrolet expands the exterior color choices to include Pennant Blue, Sportsman Red, and Black. Beige is added as an interior option. The straight-six engine gets bumped to 155 hp. Just 3640 Corvettes are produced by year's end.

1955: The small block Chevy V-8 makes its first appearance between a Corvette's fiberglass fenders, and a three-speed manual appears as an option. The year closes with the six-cylinder bidding adieu. Production totals 700 units.



1956: Factory-installed removable hardtops are offered for the first time, and the exterior gets exposed headlamps, sculpted side coves, and roll-up windows. Seatbelts make the scene as a dealer-installed option, and one-hundred and eleven buyers drop \$188.30 on a high-lift cam (order code: RPO #449). Head Corvette engineer (and future legend) Zora Arkus-Duntov tells the brass to go racing, but his pleas for a racing program fall on deaf corporate ears. Two four-barrel carbs enhance the 265-cubic-inch (4.3-liter) V-8, and our own Karl Ludvigsen (back when we were known as *Sports Cars Illustrated*) **deems the '56 credible**: "Without qualification, General Motors is now building a sports car."

1957: The V-8 grows to 283 cubic inches, and can be ordered with fuel injection and a four-speed manual transmission. (Our original June 1957 test says the setup "works very well

indeed.”) So equipped, the small block produces up to 283 horsepower, propelling the fiberglass wonder to a reported 132 mph. An optional column-mounted tach makes its first appearance on fuelie Vettes.

1958–1962: A redesigned hood with louvered vents and 160-mph speedo appear for 1958, while 1960 brings an aluminum radiator option. 1961 marks the Corvette’s first use of four round taillights, and the aluminum radiator becomes standard. That year’s mild styling tweaks mean the exhaust no longer exits through the bodywork. The engine grows to 327 cubic inches (5.4 liters) in 1962, which was also the last year for the solid rear axle and (until the C6) exposed headlamps. We note in [our 1962 test](#) that “rear-axle bounce is a problem on standing starts, in spite of the torque arms above the axle.”

C2 1963-1967

1963–1964:

Restyled along lines laid down by design boss Bill Mitchell’s 1959 race car and re-engineered to be the first Corvette that Duntov wouldn’t be ashamed to drive in Europe, the Sting Ray arrives for ’63 with



hidden headlamps the famed “split-window” fastback that lasts for only one model year. It is smaller, has an independent rear suspension with a single transverse leaf spring, and offers electronic ignition. The Z06 Special Performance Equipment option is introduced on the 1963 Sting Ray (199 built), and the Corvette Grand Sport program builds five lightweight, race-ready cars, all sold to racing privateers. **1965:** The big block V-8 arrives in the form of Chevy’s 396-cubic-inch “L78” engine. Four-wheel disc brakes become standard, and fuel injection disappears until 1982’s throttle-body injection.

1966: The big block grows to 427 cubes. Originally listed at 450 horsepower in Chevy literature, numbers for the solid lifter beast were revised to 425 after introduction. This is solely an administrative decision, and no changes to the engine were made. Backup lamps and Holley carbs (previously available only on certain models) were made standard.

1967: The C2's swan song, the 1967 model introduces the legendary L88 cast-iron big-block engine. GM rates it at 430 hp, but it routinely tops 500 hp in independent testing. Aluminum cylinder heads became an option for the L71 engine, and a dual-master-cylinder braking system becomes standard.

C3 1968-1982

1968: Sculpted to resemble the Mako Shark II show car of 1965 and offering a 435-hp, 427-cubic-inch (7.0-liter) engine, the third-generation Corvette starts a 14-year run on what is essentially a carry-over chassis. The '68 debut ushers in that '70s sun-seeker's savior, the T-top, although full convertibles are still on the menu. The battery is moved to a compartment behind the seats, and the ignition switch makes its last appearance on the dash until 1997. [Our 1968 road test](#) calls it the “Barbarella of the car-maker’s art.”

1969: The 250,000th Corvette, a gold 1969 convertible, rolls off the line on November 19. Only two buyers opt for the ZL1 all-aluminum big block V-8; priced at \$4,718.35, the ZL1 option is only \$62.65 shy of the base Corvette Coupe’s base price. The Stingray name returns to the car in the form of scripting above the fender louvers, and it is one word as opposed to the C2’s “Sting Ray.”

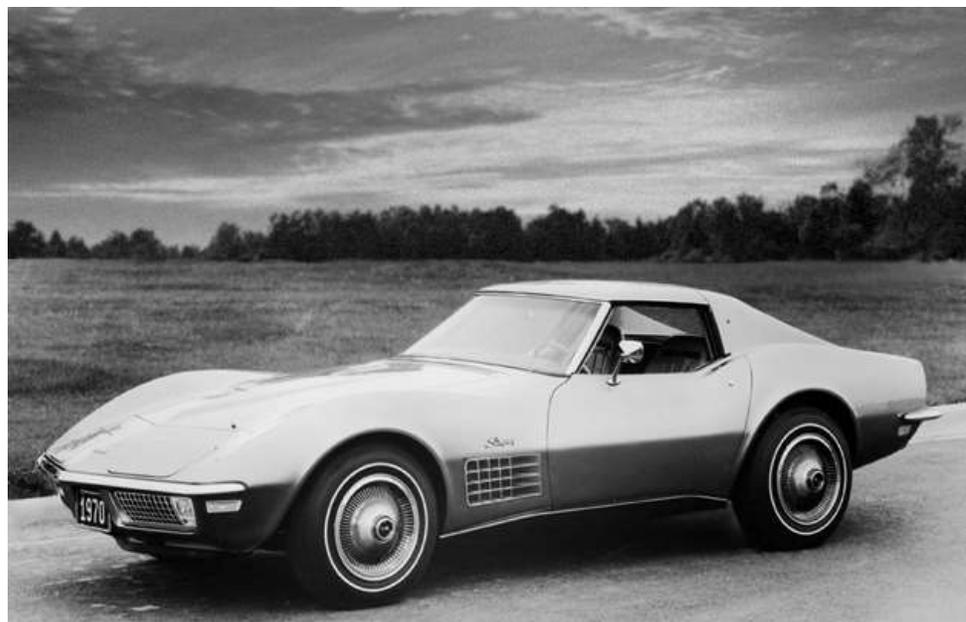


1970: The 390-hp solid lifter LT1 small-block debuts, and the big-block grows to 454 cubic inches from 427. The ZR1 factory-racing package arrives and fender flares are added.

1971: All Corvette engines were designed to run on the new unleaded fuel, and the LS6 big-block 454 V-8 engine option is introduced.

1972: A factory-installed theft-deterrent system becomes standard, and the first-gen LT1 gets ready to be put out to pasture.

1973: A body-colored, 5-mph-crash-compliant plastic nose replaces the sleek



chrome unit. Radial tires become standard.



1974: The last year for the 454 big-block, and the pair of stylish rear chrome bumperettes are replaced by a body-colored plastic blob, offending purists.

1975: The final year for the convertible until its 1986 return, and the first year a government-mandated catalytic converter is fitted.

The stock 350-cubic-inch V-8 produces a depressing 165 horsepower, the L82 “performance” engine managing 205.

1976: An over-the-radiator, carburetor air-induction system—designed to reduce noise, as air was previously drawn under the hood near the windshield—is a new standard feature, and a partial steel underbody is added to add strength and increase shielding from exhaust heat.

1978: The 25th year of Corvette production is marked by a new fastback body style, and the traditional crossed-flag emblem is replaced with a special anniversary emblem. “60 series” tires—referred to as “low-profile,” laughable by today’s standards—are offered for the first time. An AM/FM stereo with integrated CB radio is offered as an option at the 10-200 inducing price of \$638. More than 6500 buyers inexplicably drop an extra \$4301.32—over the car’s \$9351.89 base price—for a two-tone silver Indy 500 Pace Car Replica edition. It is among Chevy’s initial forays into limited-edition Corvettes, but certainly not the last. ([Read our history of special-edition Corvettes.](#))



1979: Chevy sets an all-time Corvette sales record, peddling 53,807 of the comparatively gutless wonders during the 1979 model year, likely due to all the hoopla over the standard for '79 AM/FM radio. Halogen headlamps become available for the first time.

1980: New front and rear plastic bumper caps with integrated spoilers and a new hood improve claimed drag coefficient from .503 to .443 compared to '79 models, and a new aluminum diff housing and crossmember are used. GM doesn’t bother to certify the 350 V-8 for California, so Cali-bound Vettes make do with a 305-cubic-inch V-8.

1981: Corvette production begins in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on June 1; St. Louis production ends August 1. During the two months of simultaneous production, St. Louis continued to use lacquer-based paints, while Bowling Green used enamels with a clear coat, which later causes a bit of confusion for restorers. The fiberglass-reinforced rear monoleaf spring appears for the first time on automatic-equipped cars, weighing in at 36 pounds less than the steel unit it replaced.

1982: To commemorate the last year of C3 production, Chevy built 6759 Collector’s Edition Corvettes, all with bespoke silver and beige paint and an opening rear hatch. Total production

for the year was 25,407 units. 1982 was also the last year for the optional in-dash 8-track tape deck, which followed elephant bells, feathered hair, and male jumpsuits into the dustbin of history.

1983: As they say on ESPN, it was a rebuilding year. Although no 1983 model-year Corvettes were officially built, 43 prototypes of the upcoming 1984 model were assembled in Bowling Green, and are sometimes referred to as “1983 models.” The 750,000th Corvette (a 1984 C4) is produced on October 26, 1983.

C4 1984-1996



1984: Chief engineer Dave McLellan finally starts fresh with a new and smaller-perimeter frame, forged aluminum control arms, power rack-and-pinion steering, and a slippery exterior. The Stingray name goes into hibernation, where it slumbers next to—initially at least—powerful engine options. Introduced in March 1983, the C4 features 205 horsepower, 290

lb-ft of torque, a one-piece removable roof panel, and digital instruments. Drag coefficient clocks in at a claimed 0.34, 24-percent more efficient than that of its predecessor.



[Our road-test report by Brock Yates](#) calls attention to the 0.90-g skidpad grip (then a C/D record), phenomenal braking, sub-seven-second 0–60 acceleration, and 138-mph top speed. “This is a dead-serious sports car,” writes Yates. “It defers to the bizarre only with its video-game instrument panel, which features all manner of multicolored, liquid-crystal bar graphs, and digital displays in metric and English.” The base price is \$21,800, and 51,547 1984 Vettes are produced.

1985: The second-year C4 debuts tuned port injection on the 5.7-liter V-8, boosting horsepower to 230. 39,729 1985 coupes are built, 16 with the optional AM/FM Citizens Band radio.



1986: The convertible model returns after a 10-year absence, and serves as a pace car for the Indy 500. All 7315 1986 convertibles are in fact “pace-car replicas,” with the decals included for dealer or owner installation. Antilock brakes (ABS) are standard.

1987: Horsepower climbs to 240 thanks to roller valve lifters. A new Z-52 suspension option is available on 1987 Corvettes for all-around ride and handling improvements. A Callaway twin-turbo setup is sold through select dealers as option “RPO B2K” for a cool \$19,995. The blown cars produce 345 hp and 465 lb-ft of torque.

1988: New dual-piston front brakes appear as standard kit, and 2050 35th Anniversary Editions are produced. Chevy also builds 56 street-legal cars for the 1988 SCCA Corvette Challenge race series.

1989: A jointly developed ZF/Chevrolet six-speed manual replaces the Doug Nash 4+3 manual transmission. Chevy begins dropping ZR-1 hints. 26,412 1989 models are produced.



1990: The Corvette ZR-1 debuts, sporting a 5.7-liter V8 capable of 375 hp. A Lotus/Chevrolet design, the engine boasts four camshafts and 32 valves, and is assembled by Mercury Marine in Stillwater, Oklahoma, before being shipped to Bowling Green for final assembly. The \$27,016 ZR1 price nearly equals the base car’s \$31,979 MSRP. 3049 ZR-1s are produced. In the shadow of the ZR-1’s hubbub, a driver’s-side airbag becomes standard, and ground is broken at the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in June 1990.

1991: The first major restyle since 1984 adds ZR-1–style exterior bits to the 1991 Corvette coupe and convertible. Finned power-steering coolers are introduced and the [Corvette ZR-1 beats the 911 Turbo](#) in a comparison test we published in April 1991 Issue.

1992: A new 300-hp 5.7-liter small-block V-8 wearing the LT1 designation debuts in the standard Corvette. Traction control becomes standard. The one-millionth Corvette—a white convertible with red interior, matching the first Corvette—rolls out of the Bowling Green facility on July 2, 1992.

1993: The term “STINGRAY” is finally registered as a trademark to General Motors, prompting rumors of a badge renaissance that wouldn’t come to fruition until the 2014 model. Another special edition, this one featuring “Ruby Red” exterior paint, marks the Corvette’s 40th anniversary. ZR-1 power is increased to 405 horsepower.

1994: The National Corvette Museum opens in Bowling Green. Sequential Fuel Injection provides improved response, idle quality, driveability, and emissions. Twenty-five examples are built as “official cars” for the inaugural Brickyard 400, some finding their way into private hands.

1995: The ZR-1 concludes its five-year run with 6939 examples produced. A Corvette paces the Indy 500 for the third time, and 527 purple-and-white special-edition convertibles are produced. The big-brake package that previously came only with the ZR-1 and ZO7 packages is now standard.

1996: The C4’s final year includes Collector’s Edition and Grand Sport special models. The former features Sebring Silver paint, emblems, and an LT-1 engine. The Grand Sport gets an LT4 engine, as well as blue metallic paint with a white stripe and red “hash marks” on the left-front fender. New for ’96, the LT4 350-cubic-inch small-block is rated at 330 hp. The optional (\$1695) Selective Real Time Damping system appears for the first time.

C5 1997-2004



1997: Dave Hill makes his mark as the new chief engineer, sweating details to deliver a refined sports car. The 345-hp, LS1 V-8 engine features an aluminum block. A new backbone frame, a rear transaxle, and a small-block moved behind the front suspension add nimble handling to the Corvette’s long-standing virtues of high performance and affordable price. Our Csaba

Csere writes, “Purists have tended to dismiss [its] value by reciting the litany of quality and refinement shortcomings that accompanied it. With the C5, that list is suddenly very short indeed.”

1998: Available as a coupe only in ’97, the convertible returns for 1998. Although it weighs 114 pounds less than the 1996 convertible, it possesses more than four times the torsional rigidity. The Corvette paces the Indy 500 for the fourth time.

1999: A hardtop joins the lineup as the lowest-cost Corvette, completing of Chevy’s three-model Corvette strategy for the C5. It was the lightest of the bunch by about 80 pounds, yet also the stiffest. The Head-Up Instrument Display option comes onboard at the price of \$375.

2000: The passenger-side key cylinder lock is deleted as standard Active Keyless Entry renders it redundant.

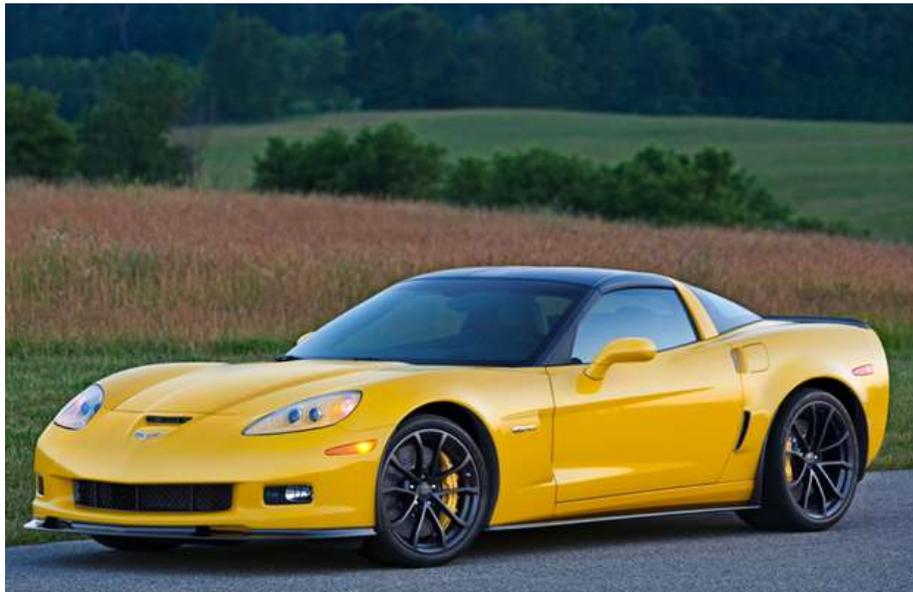
2001: The Z06 is introduced, packing a 385-hp LS6 V-8, and reaching a top speed of more than 170 mph. New front fascia grilles improve airflow to the engine air inlet, and the algorithms for the Selective Real Time Damping are refined. It hits 60 in 4.3 seconds in [our road test](#)—”goes like stink” indeed.

2002: Horsepower for the Z06 crests the 400 mark, totaling 405 ponies. All 2002 Corvettes come standard with Active Handling and Traction Control systems.

2003: It would have been a sin for the Corvette’s golden anniversary to pass without a special model, and so buyers can celebrate by plunking down an extra \$5000 to get a coupe or convertible with special red paint, a unique two-tone shale interior, special emblems, and Magnetic Selective Ride.

2004: The final year of the C5 sees some models receive a carbon-fiber hood, the first use of a painted carbon-fiber panel for a production vehicle in North America. Base prices range from \$44,535 for the coupe to \$52,385 for the Z06 hardtop.

C6 2005-2013



2005: Filing the C5 down to a tidier, lighter, 5.1-inch-shorter package on a longer wheelbase, the C6 is the first Corvette with headlights since 1962. It also gets a nicer interior and seats, and finally powers up the convertible top. Plus the base price is \$290 lower. Hill says it is more about perfecting

rather than inventing. We think they succeeded: Writes *C/D*’s Larry Webster in [our first test](#): “It’s the perfect everything sports car: fast enough to keep you interested during a day of lapping

and refined and comfortable enough to make the slog home, or the daily commute, a relaxing experience.”

2006: A redesigned Z06 returns after a one-year absence. An aluminum frame, fixed magnesium engine cradle, and carbon-fiber appointments all contribute to weight savings. A new 7.0-liter small-block makes 505 hp and 470 lb-ft of torque in the Z06, and a six-speed paddle-shift automatic transmission is introduced.

2007: The Ron Fellows Championship Edition is the first signed limited edition in Corvette history.



2008: A new LS3 6.2-liter V-8 appears as the base engine, increasing output from 400 hp to 430 hp. And lest anyone in Speedway, Indiana, forget what the Corvette looks like, an E85-fueled Z06 paces the 500 with Patrick Dempsey at the wheel.

2009: The new Corvette ZR1 debuts, roaring to a top speed of more than 200 mph thanks to the muscle of its supercharged 6.2-liter LS9 V-8.

2010: The Grand Sport model returns, powered by the base LS3 V-8 and packing the elements of the discontinued Z51 performance option. Side airbags are now standard on all models.

2011: With seven available models, including the Z06 Carbon Limited Edition, the lineup and option availability is the greatest in Corvette history. Curiously, a Corvette doesn't pace the Indy 500.



wheel.

2012: To celebrate the division's 100th birthday, Chevrolet busts out a Centennial Edition package (available on all Corvettes), featuring Carbon Flash Metallic paint, satin-black graphics, satin-black wheels with red stripe, unique badges, a specially trimmed interior, and Magnetic Selective Ride Control. More important, the Corvette returns to pace Indy with celebrity chef Guy Fieri at the

2013: With the C7 around the corner, Corvette news is limited to the 60th Anniversary package and the introduction of the one-year-only 427 convertible, which is as close as Chevrolet got to producing a droptop Z06. It sprints to 60 mph in 3.9 seconds.

C7 2014-

2014: The [C7 Corvette Stingray](#) debuts at the Detroit auto show in January 2013 wearing a hood and a roof made from carbon fiber, and is followed in March 2013 by the introduction of the



[Stingray convertible](#) at the Geneva auto show. Packing a naturally aspirated [455-hp](#), 6.2-liter pushrod V-8 mated to either a seven-speed Tremec manual or a six-speed automatic, we can tell you it's plenty quick. The optional Z51 performance package adds an electronically controlled limited-slip diff; closer gear ratios for the manual gearbox; dry-sump lubrication to prevent oil starvation in racetrack settings; additional

cooling for the brakes, differential, and gearbox; larger brakes; and aerodynamic bits to increase high-speed stability. Z51s also get 19-by-8.5-inch front and 20-by-10-inch rear wheels and tires, up from the standard 18-by-8.5- and 19-by-10-inch package. In addition to all the go-fast dirty bits, the C7 generation brings a pretty thorough interior overhaul, including new seats and unprecedented attention to detail. We've already published enough stories on the C7 to fill a small book, but there are many more chapters to come.