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Bill Thomas Cheetah - The Cheetah Legend, Continued
The Bill Thomas Continuation Cheetah Updates The Classic Chevy-Powered Road Racer

From the March, 2010 issue of Corvette Fever
By Scott Ross
Photography by Jerry Heasley

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Do any of you remember the homebuilt "specials" that tore around the tracks during the early days of American road racing? Many times, an inspired mechanic/racer would fashion a race car out of a scrounged-up frame, a salvaged engine and gearbox (too many times from an unfortunate Corvette), and bodywork that was "massaged" to barely fit over everything. And, if he was lucky, that homebuilt "special" would be competitive in the Modified classes that SCCA ran back then, if not running up front and winning.



One legendary Chevy-powered road racer started out like many of those "specials," but by the time the first one rolled out of its creator's garage, it was the '60s—a time when "backdoor" technical assistance was available from Chevrolet Engineering. That car was the Cheetah, created by Bill Thomas, in the wake of the in-house work by Chevrolet Engineering to make a Cobra-killing Vette, namely the Corvette Grand Sport, a factory Vette Rod if ever there was one!

As Don Francisco wrote in the March 1964 issue of our future-brother-in-law-book, Hot Rod magazine, "Cheetah is a combination of proven Chevrolet powertrain components with a special frame, front suspension, and body assembly built in Thomas' shop." That proven powertrain was based on the 327-inch smallblock V8, teamed with a Muncie four-speed." (Sound familiar?) Francisco continued, "Cheetah's design is such that its frame is its load-carrying member. Its body, which for the prototype car is aluminum but for production models will be fiberglass, doesn't add any structural strength of the car." That frame was made of 1 1/8-inch diameter, .063-inch wall thickness, 4130 chromemoly tubing, while the suspension consisted of coil-overs on each corner, with a Corvette-type IRS and differential in back.



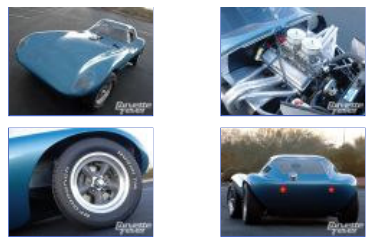
All told, once built, the Cheetah weighed in at around 1,500 pounds. That's about three hundred or so pounds lighter than the 1,800-pound weight target Chevy engineers set for the Gran Sport, and about half (if that) what a production Sting Ray coupe weighed back then. Francisco mentioned that Thomas planned a production run to build enough cars (100) to make it Grand Touring-class legal, with prices ranging from \$7,500 for a "Street" model, to around \$12,500 for a full-on competition version. This was when you could

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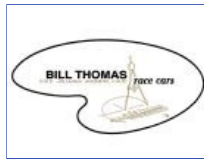
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buy two Sting Ray coupes, each optioned with F40, G81, J56, K66, L84, M20, and N11 for that twelve-five, and get almost a grand in change!

Unfortunately, no good deed went unpunished back then. GM's upper management squelched Chevy's back-door tech assistance to Bill Thomas' Cheetah program, and his Anaheim, California, shop suffered a fire, trashing his production tooling after only 21 cars were built. (13 of those are known to have survived.) But those Cheetahs made an impression on anyone who saw them, either from the distance on the printed page, or up close on the track. Especially those who saw it hit 185 mph at Road America at Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin or 215 mph at Daytona!



But that fire wasn't the last chapter in the Cheetah story. Yes, dear friends, there's a Cheetah Continuation Collectible that's not a clone of the original, but a pick-up-from-where-we-left-off continuation of the original line, authorized by Bill Thomas himself. "That's what we do," says Robert Auxier, who's the man responsible for bringing the Cheetah back into production. "Bill Thomas signed 100 letters of authenticity, and we're actually on numbers 31 and 32 in production (as of late October 2009 -Ed.)."

It was Robert's search for one of those originals that started the process that resulted in the car you see here. "I tried to buy a real one, and I found out that there's not enough of 'em to go around," he says. "My quest to buy a real one proved to me that was not going to happen." So, in the early '90s, he decided to reproduce the Cheetah. Several years later, his Cheetah-repro endeavor took a turn for the best. "In November of 2001, we signed a contract with Bill Thomas to build a hundred, and he signed on to it," Robert says. "Since he signed on to it, we've been OK."



Compact yet curvaceous body...

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The good luck didn't stop there. "We'd found a customer in Ohio who let us borrow his original Cheetah that Bill built, and we took all of the tooling off of that car," Robert says of the R&D work needed to make real Cheetahs once again. "I already had the molds for the body, doors and stuff like that. We took a brand new jig off of that original car's chassis, and we took all the molds off of the original interior." Lucky that car-a survivor of the Thomas shop fire, and a barn resident since '66-had its interior intact, as Robert says that it and only three other original Cheetahs still have their original interiors in them.

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