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## KIT CAR

### The Cheetah Is Back!

#### There's a new/old sheriff in town

From the February, 2009 issue of Kit Car  
By D. Brian Smith

The Cheetah sports [car](#) had most of the ingredients for racing dominance in the early 1960s: an incredible power-to-weight ratio, four-wheel independent suspension borrowed from the Corvette, a 520hp Chevy small-block V-8. And with its unparalleled looks—a road-hugging wide stance, a rakishly long and low hood, and a perky kicked-up rear-GM couldn't resist supporting it. The car's creators, Bill Thomas and Don Edmunds, built the Cheetah to compete against the Cobra 289 and the Ferrari 250GTO, which were winning every contest in sight in the early '60s. In 1963, Thomas sent the second Cheetah built to GM's Tech Center, where Zora Arkus-Duntov (aka Mr. Corvette) and other engineers test-drove it extensively. At the Milford Proving Grounds the car registered 1.18g, the highest lateral acceleration for any front-engined/rear-drive car they'd ever tested. The first and second Cheetahs had lightweight aluminum bodies, which was good, and tubular chassis that weren't quite rigid enough. The cars were wickedly fast in the straights and quite demanding in the turns. With a 90-inch wheelbase and a 45/55-weight bias, Cheetahs were super light coming out of a turn under heavy acceleration, not unlike the Cobras. Racers were challenged to keep the car pointed in the right direction. Thomas sorely needed backing from GM to evolve the Cheetah into a proper racecar.

For a short time, Bill Thomas Manufacturing received assistance from Chevrolet. After the first two aluminum-skinned Cheetahs, subsequent bodies were comprised of fiberglass, which could be produced quicker, were less expensive to manufacture, and didn't weigh too much more. Cheetahs won 11 SCCA races in the sports/modified class by the end of the 1964 season. They could run a quarter-mile in 10 seconds. At Daytona, a couple of Cheetahs reputedly attained 215 mph on the straights, and one was clocked at 185 mph at Elkhart Lake. Just when the future appeared brightest for Bill Thomas Manufacturing and the Cheetah, Chevrolet officially pulled out of racing with the culmination of the '65 season. Without Chevrolet's financial backing needed to refine the car and build enough units for homologation (100 identical units built within a year), Thomas wouldn't be able to campaign the Cheetah in the production class against the Cobras. Not long afterwards, a shop fire destroyed a few of the last Cheetahs built and helped seal the fate of the Cheetah program. Automotive historians disagree about how many Cheetahs were built before the fire, anywhere from 16 to 23 according to different accounts. A good number of the surviving examples are campaigned in vintage races, despite how rare they are and how much money an original example fetches at auctions or private sales.

Speaking of the genuine article, Bill Thomas has granted Robert Auxier and Charles Auxier, owners of BTM in Arizona, the sole right to build continuation Cheetahs. We're not talking replicas. The Cheetahs that BTM is creating—a street [coupe](#), a street roadster, and a vintage racing eligible coupe, are all considered continuation cars. Ladies and gentlemen, the Cheetah is back, and with a vengeance!

KIT CAR visited BTM during its open house earlier this year. Racing aficionados, muscle car fans, Chevy enthusiasts, and children of the '60s (now grown to gearheads) gathered to see these rare swoopy racers arisen from the ashes like a phoenix, in Tempe, Arizona. Bob showed us original coupe bodies, a surviving chassis (which BTM is restoring for the owner), drawings, vintage Cheetah parts, literature, and historic photos. The man's knowledge of the Cheetah marque is unparalleled, with the possible exception of Messrs. Thomas and Edmunds.

Later that day, we met Ron Keck of Cheetah Continuation [Cars](#), a distributor for BTM. He told us how many Cheetahs had been built and sold, and the number under construction. We also found out about a list of customers waiting with bated breath for their continuation Cheetahs to begin the build process.

BTM took one year to replicate and refine the chassis, making it out of chrome-moly tubing like the original, but more rigid, by using 4130, 1.25-inch diameter, .095-inch walled tubular steel. The continuation Cheetah wouldn't have the chassis flex of the ones from the '60s. Like the first Cheetahs, the power is from Chevrolet, in the form of a new 350ci small-block V-8 (originals had the then new 327ci V-8) and Muncie M-20 wide ratio four-speed trans. Customers can either opt for dual air meter Rochester mechanical fuel injection or dual four-barrel carbs, just as buyers did in the '60s. Bob first introduced a racecar, which he has campaigned at

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vintage racing events the past couple seasons. BTM began distribution of the street-legal cars last year.

BTM is a small, family-run shop that's building handcrafted continuation Cheetahs that are more refined than the original. The cars are probably what the original Bill Thomas Manufacturing of Anaheim, California, would have wrought in the '60s with Chevrolet's continued backing, or if it hadn't been for that shop fire.

Depending upon [drivetrain](#) selection, a complete BTM continuation Cheetah street coupe costs \$100,000+. Like what was in the works at the time of the '65 fire, customers can opt for small- or big-block Chevy power, one of three Muncie transmission choices, and Positraction rear-axle ratios ranging from 3.08 to 4.56. The interior is just like the original, with Stewart Warner instrumentation, a Bell-style Moon steering wheel, and racing bucket seats in vinyl or leather. Bob admitted he'd grudgingly install an HVAC system as an option. Even with this luxury item, the new/old Cheetah is a '60s-era racecar that will still run with just about any supercar on the road today. In terms of authenticity, it has the original creator's emphatic seal of approval. The continuation Cheetah is not a kit or replicar-it's the genuine article developed to go like it did back in the day, but without the drama. If only Chevrolet had seen fit to continue its support, the '65 and later SCCA Championships might have gone to Cheetah, Bill Thomas Manufacturing, and Chevrolet instead of the Cobra roadsters, the six Daytona coupes, Shelby American, and Ford.

Those with the means can obtain a continuation Cheetah and write their own history going forward. Whether it's a street roadster, a vintage coupe, or a road-going supercat that's desired, BTM of Arizona can build your favorite history-making machine. Show them some green, and you'll have a street supercat without peer, or maybe see some vintage racing checkered flags from the cockpit instead of the grandstands.



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