

What a Cheetah!

Chandler, Ariz.—Forty-four years is a long stretch between chats, but race school impresario Bob Bondurant did just that



recently at his Phoenix-area facility when he undertook a reunion with Bill Thomas, creator of the iconic Cheetah sports racer.

In 1963, Thomas, now 87, in partnership with Chevrolet, sought to beat Carroll Shelby's Ford-powered Cobras with a Chevy-powered counterpart; a sleek, Chevy small-block coupe to counter Shelby's "snakes" on the U.S. road racing circuit. Bondurant first test-drove the Cheetah prototype at Riverside in 1963 at the behest of Thomas, who sold Bondurant his first racing Corvette in 1958, a '57 B/P roadster in which Bondurant won 18 of 20 SCCA races.

Bondurant, now 74, recalled the Cheetah "wasn't really ready to run ... it was quick and a little nervous on handling ... it needed more suspension development."

Problem solved: Thomas gave his blessing to local race manufacturer Bob Auxier's BTM to construct replicas of the original Cheetah, from Thomas' original

designs and body molds (street and race versions are now available).

Bondurant put the new Cheetah race prototype through its paces at Firebird Raceway, punching the car through a dozen hot laps, after which he enthused, "it handles a lot better now, with more rubber and disc [vs. drum] brakes." He said he wished the original "had this kind of power [530hp] and torque [620 lb-ft] and tires" back in the day.

A catastrophic fire in 1965 destroyed the tooling for the 26 Cheetahs built to that point, and killed the program. Thomas later became an accident reconstruction expert in the courts. "I went from making skid marks, which was a lot more fun, to analyzing them," he chuckled.

At the conclusion of the hot lap session, Bondurant and Thomas retired to the facility's racing museum for a more leisurely and personal trip down memory lane. We didn't intrude on that certain moment. For more information on the newborn Cheetah, email rauxier@cox.net or call 623-606-3155.—Mike Silverman