

“PEAKING” IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

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Corvette’s Pace Cars: A Love Affair with the Indy 500

Part 1

In this three-part series we look at Corvette's long history of providing Indianapolis 500s pace cars and their official replicas (those produced by GM for sale to the public) over the decades. Some of these pace cars make excellent collectibles: a collection of 19 Corvette pace cars recently sold at a Mecum Auction for \$1.375 million. (Sources for these articles are provided at end of Part 3.)



The Corvette has paced the annual Memorial Day Indianapolis 500 race more often – 19 times - than any other car (Corvettes have also served as pace cars for the Daytona, LeMANS, Sebring, and Road Atlanta races).

What does the Indy 500 pace car do? Well, it’s not just for looks or prestige. The pace car actually performs two key functions: (1) it leads the field through several warm-up laps prior to the start of the race, and (2) it heads to the front of the field during caution periods to reduce the speed of the cars on the track (cars are not allowed to pass during caution periods).



1978: The Beginning

After its Corvette was chosen as a pace car for the 1978 running of the event, Chevrolet then released an official pace car replica in limited numbers (note: official replicas were available for sale to the public for only six years: 1978, 1986, 1995, 1998, 2007, and 2008). In 1978 – the 25th anniversary of the Corvette – Chevy planned 2,500 of these cars but actually made 6,502 replicas – one for every Chevy dealer in the U.S. And, for the first time in Corvette's history, these pace car replicas were given a separate VIN sequence (the eighth digit is 9 versus 4), making it nearly impossible to clone one today. The 1978 replicas had some unique features - front and rear spoilers, mirrored T-top glass, silver interior and, if desired, an L82 engine (a 350 c.i., 250-hp), along with the iconic graphics; it sold for \$13,653.21 – which sounds cheap, but adjusted for inflation, that's \$63,850 in today's dollars. The pace car driver was 1960 Indy 500 winner Jim Rathmann.



1984

From this...



to this...



...and the 2014 sinkhole

The 1984 PPG pace car, custom-built for Chevrolet, was special in several ways. Initially, it was created as a one-off concept car that would be designated as one of the official pace cars for the PPG Indy Car World Series of races. This car was one that fell in the February 2014 sinkhole (of the eight, five were put back on display unrestored and two were brought back to their original condition; see <https://www.corvettemuseum.org/corvette-cave-in-exhibit/>) and was by far in the worst shape of the five Corvettes removed from it. When the car fell into the hole, a slab of concrete came down on the back end of the car, severing the rear from the rest of the body; that portion of the PPG Corvette is still in the sinkhole. [Coincidentally, the 1992 model pictured was the one-millionth Corvette produced and estimated to be worth \$750,000 - also fell into the sinkhole. After more than four months and 1,200 man-hours of labor, its restoration was completed in September 2015 at the NCM.]



1986

For 1986 a Corvette would pace the Indy 500 for the second time and also feature a convertible. Flying ace and retired Gen. Chuck Yeager served as driver, then enjoying celebrity status from the book and movie, "The Right Stuff." However, this pace car edition wasn't really very "special" as Chevrolet decided that all 1986 yellow Corvette convertibles (7,315 of the 35,109) that were produced were designated as a "Pace Car Replica" – and were shipped with "Official Pace Car" graphics in the trunk, to be applied at the buyer's discretion.



1995

The 1995 Corvette pace car came with mandatory safety features required by the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (a special rollbar, five-point driver's safety harness, strobe lights, and on-board fire suppression system). It also sported a convertible body with white top; dark purple metallic over white paint with an Indy decal package and emblems; 5.7-liter LT-1 engine; black interior with power adjustable sport buckets with Indy logos on the headrests; air conditioning and a Delco Bose sound system with cassette and CD. Chevrolet built three actual pace cars and 527 replicas for the public.



1998

By 1998, the Corvette was appearing at Indy with some regularity – and this version was hard to ignore. Bright yellow wheels, matching stripes, and an eggplant-colored body certainly demanded a lot of attention. The LS 345 hp (346 cu.in.) pace car package included an active handling system to improve road performance and a competitive driving mode for track days or autocrossing. 1,163 replicas were built.



2002

This C5 pace car package included Corvette's 50th Anniversary checkered-flags graphics forming a V for victory on the hood, 50th Anniversary Red exterior paint, a 5.7-liter V-8 engine, unique shale interior, champagne-painted wheels with special emblems, and embroidered badges on the seats and floor mats.



2004

In 2004 Corvette performed Indy 500 duties for a record sixth time - the third consecutive year and 15th time overall that a Chevrolet product had served in this capacity. This convertible featured an American flag motif, heavy-duty transmission and lower-restriction muffler system. Actor Morgan Freeman was the honorary driver for the opening lap.