

Under the Hood August, 2020

I have been asked why I don't write more about the latest Corvette offerings. There are a lot of sources of the latest Corvette info from people who have far more knowledge than I do. I tend to write this column at least a couple of months before the publication, so much of this latest Corvette information would already be old by the time the column was printed. However, our automotive world is huge and there are a lot of stories to tell. A lot of what I write is from personal experience, or at least related experience.

One of my favorite series of stories revolve around the 1963 Corvette Grand Sports (or Lightweights, as they were originally called). Corvette had won four straight national sports car racing titles with the C1 fuel injected Vette. When Corvette introduced the new C2 with independent rear suspension, everyone assumed that the Corvette fuelies would continue to dominate. Chevy even upped the ante by offering a Z06 version. The first outing for the new 63 Vette racers was the Oct 1962 Riverside Gran Prix. Four new Z06 models were on the grid. In photos of the start you can see several Vettes and then a lone bright red Shelby Cobra. The Cobra had VIN CSX2002, the first car built for competition and only the third Cobra. Cobra featured a rather thin aluminum body and a tube frame chassis with little in the way of creature comforts, which created a lightweight racer. Although much of the Cobra lore is based upon the legendary 427 Cobras, these first Cobras were powered by Ford's new small 260 ci engine. The first 75 Cobras had 260 engines before Ford introduced the larger 289 engine in 1963. Peter Brock (later the developer of the BRE Datsun racers) was the early development driver for the Cobra, but he was replaced by Billy Krause for the Riverside race. Not only was the Cobra a light body, but the new Ford engine was of the new "thin wall casting" technique and the engine was close to 100 lbs. lighter than the Vette 327 engine. The lone Cobra ran away from the Vettes and an hour into the race, the Cobra was over a mile ahead of the fastest Vette. Only an axle hub failure with the Cobra kept the Vettes in the running. However, the handwriting was on the wall and this race prompted Zora to start development work on the Grand Sports. The first goal was to reduce the weight of the Vette, and a thinner fiberglass body was created to fit on a tubular chassis. Then acknowledging that horsepower was also important, several engines were developed, including the ultimate 377 ci, all aluminum engine, with 4 dual throat Weber carbs. Of course, GM pulled the plug on the Grand Sport program after five vehicles were built.

All of us watched, with some frustration, the construction of the Highway 99 tunnel. Also, I expect most of us anticipated that there would be numerous claims filed by both the State and the contractor. Most of these claims were related to the long delay in completion of the tunnel due to the failure of, and need to rebuild, the huge tunnel boring machine, which broke down in Dec 2013. In December 2019, a Washington court awarded the State over \$57 million in liquidated damages from the contractor. One of the tunnel contracting partners, Tutor Perini, then took a \$119 million charge against the books for the 99 tunnel. The other contracting partner in the project was Dragados USA. Apparently, this was not the only problem project for Tutor Perini, as the company then posted a loss of almost \$400 million for the 2019 fiscal year. I recently read that Tutor Perini directors are now considering a buyout offer from a private equity firm, which for now would leave CEO Ron Tutor in his management role. You might remember Ron Tutor as the plaintiff that sued the Hailey (Sun Valley) Idaho airport when they told him he would have to use his private jet, rather than his Boeing 737 business jet, as the 737 exceeded the small airport weight limits. Tutor lost and the court ruled his suit frivolous (perhaps stupid?), and Tutor paid all the court and defendant's costs. I suspect that the tunnel construction partners wish they had never heard of the Highway 99 tunnel.

A few months ago, I wrote about Dow Chemical's experiment using recycled plastic in asphalt pavement. In that column I also commented about Washington State's experience utilizing recycled tires in our pavement. I can add one more comment about the efforts to recycle in pavement. In 2010, the State of Illinois changed their highway specifications to allow reclaimed asphalt shingles (RAS) in paving. By 2011 the legislature had passed a bill telling IDOT to maximize the use of RAS and by 2013 the state was consuming 12 times the amount of RAS compared to 2011. An industry developed to satisfy that demand and laws were quickly passed prohibiting used asphalt shingles in the landfills unless the closest recycle facility was located more than 25 miles away. After a rash of failures in Illinois and a few other states, the Federal Highway Administration has stepped in declare that RAS should only be used "within limits". I do note that "within limits" seems to allow a lot of discretion. Recently, a key Illinois state senator has pleaded guilty to bribery and tax evasion and is cooperating with authorities. The RAS industry has been a big campaign fund supporter of this senator, although the senator has other charges not related to RAS. Do we see any problem here? I suspect this is another example of how easy it is to promote any idea that is seen as "green" without adequate research and experience before jumping in with both feet.

I recently reported on the demise of "Autoweek" magazine and then "Automobile". Both were national/international automotive publications. In late June, our local magazine "Cruzin" ceased publication. "Cruzin" featured northwest classic cars, people and events. The notice indicated that Covid 19 did them in, and I expect it was the cancellation of hundreds of automotive events and the resulting advertising. If this keeps up, we won't have any print media left.

Has Grey Poupon been replaced? No doubt many of you remember the Grey Poupon commercials, which originated in 1981. In the original commercial, a very dignified rear seat passenger in a luxury automobile is slathering Grey Poupon on his meal. Near the end of the commercial a second Rolls Royce pulls up next to the first car and the passenger in the second car puts down the window and asks: "Pardon me, do you have any Grey Poupon?" The implication was clear, people with lots of money/class used Grey Poupon. In his infinite wisdom, about 30 years ago, our neighbor bought a 1970 era Bentley at an auction. As he came by our house to show off his prize, he presented me with a small jar of Grey Poupon. Of course, he had the automotive marque wrong, but at the time Bentley and Rolls Royce were in the same family. I have written before about the Goodwood Racing Circuit. This racetrack is located on the Goodwood Estate, 12,000 acres of English countryside. Next to the estate, Rolls Royce has a 42 acre manufacturing facility that is definitely "green". The plant has a living roof on most of the buildings, thermal ponds, and rainwater collection among its many features. The plant also has an apiary, or bee collection, with about 250,000 English honeybees. The bees have all those acres of countryside to roam and come home to fill the hives with their special honey. Naturally, Rolls Royce is bottling that honey and selling it under the Rolls Royce brand. I suspect that this a premium priced honey. Regardless of the pricing, kudos to RR for creating their apiary. Honeybees are endangered throughout the planet. Speaking of Rolls Royce, did you know that RR owners have access to a special phone app called Whispers, assuming you are wealthy enough to have a 2003 or later RR. It allows the user to access special RR features, shopping, new car previews, red carpet treatment at the Academy Awards and even direct communication to the RR CEO and board of directors. Do you think Mary Barra of GM will acknowledge any of us that own a Corvette?