

GETTING OFF TRACK

INSIDE **JOHNNY O'CONNELL'S** C5
STREET CAR

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Loyal VETTE readers will be well accustomed to reading about the professional exploits of Corvette Racing's Johnny O'Connell, lead driver of the No. 3 C6.R. While many enthusiasts dream of racing a Corvette for a living, O'Connell has lived the dream, competing in 13 American Le Mans Series races a year for the team, including the historic 24 Hours of Le Mans every June in France. He produced Corvette Racing's first overall victory, at the '01 24 Hours of Daytona, as well as its first Le Mans class victory that same year. Perhaps most impressive, he holds the record for the most career victories (seven) at Sebring International Raceway.

With all that time behind the wheel of the C5-R and C6.R race cars, it's no surprise that

O'Connell's love for the Corvette extends into his private life. "My first Corvette was my '02, which I still own today," he says. "I bought it after joining the [Corvette Racing] team, after I had the opportunity to really drive one. I fell in love with it."

O'Connell previewed the '02 Corvettes at the National Corvette Museum's Birthday Bash in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on April 17-20 of that year. It was there that he made the decision on how his first Corvette, a six-speed convertible, would be optioned. "I special-ordered what



I wanted, having picked out the options and colors after seeing all the cars at the Birthday Bash," O'Connell recalls. "I went with Light Pewter as it was more under the radar and





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not flashy; it was kind of a classy, clean look."

Somewhat surprisingly, O'Connell didn't test the Corvette's upper limits when he purchased it. He gets plenty of that in the C6.R. "The first drive was nice, but I didn't pull the trigger," he laughs. "About a week after I got it, I sat in it in the garage and thought, Wow, I love this car."

But how does one go from driving the world's fastest Corvette race car to driving a production model? Was it like pushing the slow-motion button on a DVD player? "Not at all," O'Connell says. "I was completely happy with the LS1 Corvette. But like most Vette owners, I wanted to do something to jazz it up for fun."

It wasn't long before the crew of Corvette

Racing learned that O'Connell had bought a Corvette of his own. Ron Helzer of Katech Engineering, the builders of the C5-R and C6.R race engines, asked if he could "jazz up" the car to Johnny O's specifications. "Ron had been begging me to let him build it some for me," O'Connell says. "That guy's an engine-tuning addict. Finally I told him yes, but that I didn't want something over the top. [I didn't want] too aggressive a cam or anything that would make it noisy and run rough at low idle."

The Katech crew left the LS1's bottom end as the factory intended, topping it with one of its proprietary head/cam packages to achieve O'Connell's output bogey. The setup consists of

CNC-ported LS1 heads with 2.00/1.55-inch valves, LS6 springs, LS1 lifters, and Trend push-rod. The camshaft is a Katech Torquer LS6 unit with 204/218-degree duration, 0.551/0.551-inch lift, and a 112-degree lobe-separation angle. Extrude-honed LS1 exhaust manifolds, an SLP Blackwing CAI, Katech valve covers with coil-relocation kit, and a Katech billet belt tensioner complete what is informally known as the "Johnny O'Connell" package.

O'Connell then added a Corsa exhaust system and Michelin Pilot Sport tires to the Corvette. After that, he lowered it by cutting the rear bushings and turning down the bolts on the front. The upgrades provided him with what

he was looking for in a well-behaved—but very powerful—street car.

"They did an amazing job. When you pull the trigger it's awesome, but around town the Corvette is still pleasant and not annoying," O'Connell says. "Versus the stock LS1, it's slightly cleaner feeling at slow acceleration, and not much louder. But when you pull the trigger, and especially from 4,000 rpm up, it's a completely unreal animal. The power and torque in that area greatly improved." According to Jason Harding of Katech, the car puts out 380 hp at the rear wheels.

Katech mods notwithstanding, O'Connell's street Vette is an entirely different creature from the C5-R and C6.R racers he's driven to 34 ALMS





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wins over the last seven seasons. "Most of the Vettes that I've driven have been made more for the racetrack," O'Connell says. "They're like a top thoroughbred horse: fun to drive, but lots of work. There's absolutely no relaxing at any time

[when] you're in one. And that is what I love about my [street] Corvette. A C6.R wouldn't be fun to drive every day, as it would beat you up. Adjusting to my C5 is easy, as I can relax in it."

O'Connell enjoys driving his Corvette in his

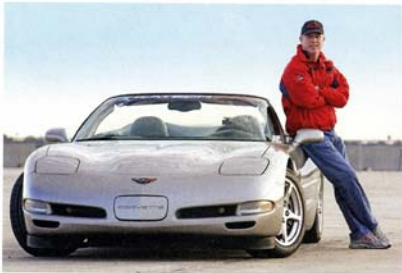
hometown of Flowery Branch, Georgia, and occasionally exploring the car's limits on the sinuous mountain roads of north Georgia. Corvette Racing's resident quipster has had some hilarious moments in his car, too. "I did a video for the team's Christmas party, where I was doing doughnuts and completely smoking the rear tires, and then had the local police pretend to arrest me. That was fun," he says.

When he's not having fun in his Corvette, O'Connell provides valuable feedback to the Corvette design and engineering teams on how to improve current and future models. "I do know that with both the Z06 and the ZR1, my testing of the cars enabled [Chevrolet] to find things out that might have taken them longer to find without me there. So I think my input with both cars has been greatly appreciated," he says.

O'Connell has advice for mod-hungry VETTE readers, too. "Honestly, I would tell them not to mess with the suspension much. I've yet to drive one that had things done to it that turned it into a better car. The best advice I

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would have, and [I'm] being honest, would be to ditch the Goodyears and get on Michels. I use the Pilot Sport and keep away from the EMFs. The ride is so much improved, and how the Corvette goes into a skid is much nicer and easier to deal with."



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Given that the racing passion still burns red-hot in this championship driver, it seems only natural that O'Connell will eventually consider adding a new ZR1 to his nascent Vette collection. After all, he's one of a handful of professional racers worldwide who can compare the similarities of the street-legal 638hp flagship to its race-only counterpart, the C6.R.

"I think I'll wait for the 'Johnny O'Connell Corvette' that Tom Wallace [Vehicle Line Executive and Global Chief Engineer, GM Performance Vehicles] promises will be just a tick faster than the 'Ron Fellows Corvette,'" O'Connell says with a laugh. "I've driven the ZR1 lots and did a great deal of testing with it. To compare it to the race car is impossible, as

again the race car is not civilized, whereas the ZR1 is very civilized. Power-wise, they are very close, but the race car is much lighter and has way better tires, brakes, and aerodynamics. But the ZR1 is completely sick with its acceleration, and so smooth with how it delivers the power. And yes, I am considering getting one."

Until that happens, O'Connell will savor winning ALMS championships and setting race records in the No. 3 car,

while enjoying his '02 C5 in a considerably more relaxed manner. Should you happen to pull up next to him on the street, don't even think of revving your engine. "I don't race on the street," he says firmly, "so if someone acts like they want to race, I just smile and wave to them."

Johnny O'Connell and Corvette Racing will begin the '09 season at Sebring International Raceway in Sebring, Florida, on March 18-21. He invites all Corvette fans to come out and watch him race. "2009 is going to be a race all Corvette fans will want to watch. It's going to be the last time we compete there with the C6.R, as the car will be retired to museum use after that. So it will be one of the last opportunities to see this amazing car up close." 

For more information, go to www.corvette.com or www.johnnyoconnell.com.

