

## A Domestic V-8 Feud

With the new Camaro still in the embryonic stage, the Ford and Chevy faithful cross swords with the Mustang and Corvette.

By TOM WILSON, ANDREW BORNHOP, AND DOUGLAS KOTT



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Every hero must have his villain, and for Chevrolet and Ford fans, it's the other guy. It's been that way since Ford's flathead ruled the Earth, is a simmering conflict today and promises another explosive era pending the arrival of Chevy's rejuvenated Camaro, perhaps two years hence.

A V-8 intramural, this uniquely domestic feud began with the flathead Ford, an engine that unreservedly dominated its era. Fords were for go and Chevys were "stovebolts." Nothing could touch a Ford, certainly not the limp-cranked straight-8s in doctors' cars, the agricultural sixes and barely post-Victorian 4-bangers chugging along from the Depression until a decade into the jet age. Imagine, then, the wrenching reality of Chevrolet's small-block V-8 introduction in 1955. Suddenly, overhead valves were for the masses and Ford's time-tested flattie was looking mighty quaint. It was a shock the Ford faithful had a tough time accepting. They had established the performance and numerical dominance in American performance cars, and now they were getting their doors blown off by staid old Chevrolet.

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Far more than a better mousetrap, the small-block Chevrolet's greatness did nothing less than redefine performance. Lightweight, free revving and flooding out of Detroit in everything from commuter cars to commercial trucks, the first perky, then roaring orange V-8 instantly consigned Ford's performance dominance to a fading second place. Ford fans' resentment grew as they begrudgingly became the other brand.

It took Ford a surprisingly long time, until 1962, to introduce its own timeless small block, a timetable no doubt influenced by the parallel need to develop the signature engines of the classic muscle-car era, the big blocks. Furthermore, Ford's menagerie of overlapping engine families -- there were three branches of two small-block families and two big-block families -- contrasted to Chevy's focused approach of improving their one-each small- and big-block lines.

Naturally, all of these engines came in chassis of ever-increasing importance. Prewar Fords were certainly empowered by overwhelming economies of scale, and just as certainly, mid-'50s and '60s Chevrolets showed how modern design could help level the competition. But the tire smoke didn't blossom into an anvil-headed thundercloud until the introduction of the populist Mustang, the follow-on Camaro and all the other Torinos, Chevelles, Falcons, Novas, Cobras, Corvairs, GT40s, Shelys and Corvettes that the wild performance era from 1965 to 1972 had to offer. Here the battle was joined on a titanic scale, from the factory boardroom to the world's greatest racetracks and, most tellingly, on back streets late into the night.

When the lights went out in 1973 thanks to strangling insurance plus an oil embargo, it is most accurate to say Chevy had won the muscle-car round of the rivalry. Chevy hardware was more widely available and less expensive to run as the early cars were recycled through the dark ages of the late '70s and early '80s. Ford fans found themselves increasingly marginalized, their cars and engines falling to near curio status as Chevrolet dominated the remaining racing and performance scene with their available and affordable small block.



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But when the Mustang and Camaro went at it again during the mid-1980s performance renaissance, it was Ford's turn to prevail. The late-model Mustang's combination of

aggressively low pricing, stout performance, ease of modification, durability and daily practicality overcame the more expensive Camaro's superior road-holding, swoopy looks and squeaky build quality. So while an entire generation of enthusiasts had grown up knowing nothing would supplant the small-block Chevy's dominance, Ford's Mustang outsold the Camaro right into the guardrail.

Today the rivalry is in flux. With the Camaro taking an extended shower, Chevrolet fans lack an affordable entrant, rallying instead around the more sophisticated Corvette and its neo-exotic Z06 derivative. Blue Oval fans revel again in the Mustang's success, which has regained Dearborn's primacy on the street largely on the shoulders of the overhead-cam modular V-8s. There simply is no other classic American performance car besides the Mustang at the moment.

Understandably, Mustang sales are robust, and its vast enthusiast base has proved that although trucks and front-wheel-drive compacts may beckon, America's popular performance engine is fueled by affordable front-engine, rear-drive V-8s in reasonably compact cars.

In this article editors Andy Bornhop and Doug Kott examine the current protagonists in America's classic automotive rivalry, the Mustang GT, Mustang Shelby GT500, Corvette and Corvette Z06. All are thoroughly modern performance cars, but fundamentally different in character. The Mustangs are outstandingly more affordable, more practical and more popular. The Corvettes champion thoroughbred performance, trading mass affordability for flagship excellence.

Don't expect this situation to remain static. Already Ford has end-run Corvette-and perpetual third-place Dodge -- by releasing the exotic Ford GT in a short, but alas, now finished production run. Chevrolet is busy countering with an all-new Camaro, a fact Ford faithful should welcome as a very useful, breed-improving bad guy. A new rear-drive, 400-plus-horsepower Impala SS is rumored and exciting big-inch, naturally aspirated performance engines have been hinted at for the Mustang.

Like the Mustangs and Corvettes tested here, each of these future cars will be a hero to the faithful -- and a villain to the guy in the other lane. -- Tom Wilson