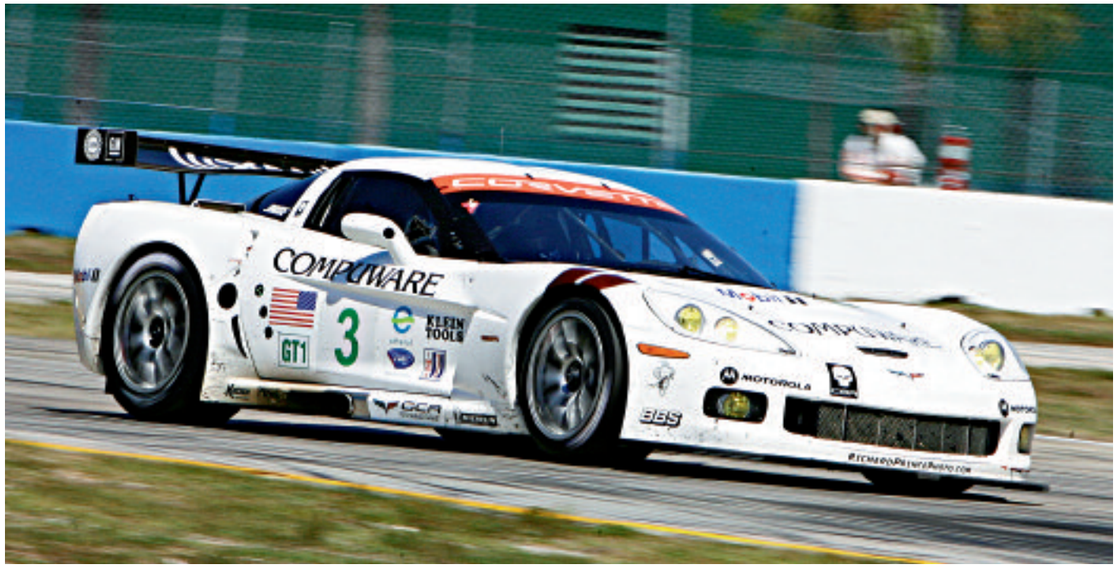
Dress Rehearsal

Corvette Racing's 2007 horizons looked short: Win Sebring, then put that experience into its next shot at Le Mans. Peter Brock points out the real question is what's going to happen after that? Photos by Gayle Brock.

Sebring, the opening round of the ALMS season, usually brings out the best. Traditionally, it's the only chance to test new hardware and strategies against worldwide opposition before the all-important 24 Hours of Le Mans in June.

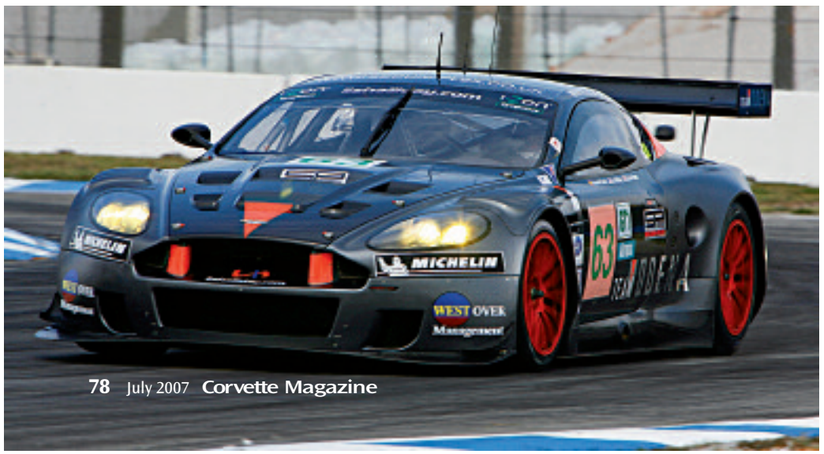
The fact that a cloud currently hangs over the ALMS GT1 category—more on which in a moment—didn't change that reality for Corvette Racing, under the direction of GM program manager Doug Fehan. Campaigned by the crack Pratt & Miller crew out of New Hudson, Michigan, the factory Chevy team brought two brand-new chassis to Florida, serial-numbers R5 and R6, built expressly for the '07 season. Besides predictable evolutionary fillips, the most significant change to these well proven machines was the inclusion of air conditioning—an impending requirement of the Le Mans-sanctioning *Automobile Club de L'Ouest*, or ACO.



The issue of skyrocketing cockpit temps is the latest *bête noire* of the Sarthe-based organization, which every few years seems to find a new mechanical hobgoblin to fret over. As far as hobgoblins go, this one isn't too unrealistic. As the series' GT entrants struggle to improve their aerodynamics, they've increasingly turned to fully enclosed cockpits. Given Le Mans' often-scorching summer temperatures, the result is potentially fatal heat loading that can leave drivers passed out in their cars. Indeed, oxymoronic though it may sound, putting a/c in endurance-racing cars is an idea that makes lots of sense—so much so that its detractors are reduced to complaining that any refrigerant leaked in a wreck might overly tax the Earth's ozone layer. Puh-*leez*.

The more the idea got kicked around back at Pratt & Miller, the more it began to get traction. It's been shown time and again that any device which aids driver comfort can pay big dividends in lap times and, even more importantly, consistency—power steering and liquid-cooled vests are just two examples. So, a new lightweight a/c system was developed with GM's production HVAC engineers. The boffins came up with a complete kit weighing just 35 pounds and compact enough to be tucked away in a safe corner of the chassis. In testing, the team's drivers came back out of the 80- (versus 115+) degree cockpit looking fresh and ready to tackle another double stint. The ACO hasn't made air conditioning mandatory for coupes this year—that happens in 2008—but to encourage teams to start doing the necessary research, in 2007 it allows a/c-equipped cars to use slightly larger intake restrictors.

So much for paving the road with good intentions: Now the question is whether "*having* a/c" versus "*using* a/c" will be the ACO's perdition. Apparently, nobody asked whether these systems could be turned off when "not needed"—such as when you want a few extra horses for going flat-out down the Mulsanne. Or all through the night. Or even the whole 24 hours—brain-frying cockpit be damned—in order to gain the advantage of bigger restrictors without the drag of the power-sapping a/c unit. Nobody seems to have answers.



Top: One-race-only Arctic White finish let Fellows stand out—and publicize Chevrolet's roadgoing Ron Fellows Edition Z06 simultaneously.

Above, left to right: Ron Fellows suits up one last time; the empty #3 pit will prove an awfully big slot to fill; celebrating a bittersweet second-in-class finish with longtime Corvette codriver Johnny O'Connell.

Left: Buckinghamshire-based Team Modena brought its battle-proven DBR9, chassis #10, to Sebring for its first American appearance. The same car has won global Le Mans Endurance Series events at Bahrain, the Nürburgring, and Brazil since its 2005 debut.

Corvette's latest nemeses, the Prodrive-built Aston-Martin DB9Rs out of England, didn't come to Sebring this year, to no one's particular surprise. Prodrive had a rocky go of it in '06: When they lost, they got hosed by the American Corvettes; when they won, they got hosed by the American press. Aston's tenuous business case hadn't helped either, with strapped parent Ford trying to sell off the brand for cold cash. Perhaps most of all, the privately held Prodrive team wanted to husband its resources for one massive onslaught on the Sarthe in June—for 2007, Prodrive's singular goal was to not lose Le Mans yet again to the cars from Detroit.

There was one DB9R on the Sebring grid, a veteran privateer entered by European Le Mans Series regulars Team Modena (which, despite the name, hails from the UK). Darren Turner, a Prodrive regular last year, shared the Modena entry with Liz Halliday and Spanish newcomer Antonio Garcia. In qualifying, the quick Spaniard clicked off a 1:58.2, roughly one second off the Corvettes' (almost certainly sandbagging) pace.

As to drivers, this year's Sebring Corvette squad was familiar: The shock was that team fixture Fellows chose the event to announce it would be his last race. Ron Fellows' contributions to the most successful Corvette effort in history are legend—the affable, self-effacing Canadian has been with the program from the start, including its very first win in 2000. As a tribute to his abilities and loyalty, Corvette Racing declared Ron's familiar #3 C6R was to run Sebring '07 in pure Arctic White—the same color chosen for the Ron Fellows signature-series Z06 special recently launched for the public (see *CM33*).

Though neither party revealed Fellows' impending retirement in previous interviews, this was clearly no last-minute decision. Scale models of the one-race Arctic White C6R were already in the pipeline, meaning Chevy knew.

Fellows and Johnny O'Connell, his usual co-driver, were joined by the gregarious Italian Max Papis for the race; the #4 car hosted France's Olivier Beretta, UK ace Oliver Gavin, and Denmark's Jan Magnussen. The same trio shared the GT1-winning C6R at this track in '06, bringing the Corvette home third overall behind two full-bore prototypes.