

Auto Sunday

This engine builder and his KB Block made a weighty contribution to racing

BY JASON STEIN
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One winter, when sales were overly brisk, when black ink outweighed the red, and when profits came in as fast as his signature racing parts went out, conservative and crafty Keith Black did something unusual: he broke down.

A new Mercedes stole his heart. Getting it out of the parking lot nearly stole his pride.

As the story goes, it seems Black used to let parts customers rent out space inside his fenced lot next to his shop in California. One group of men in particular regularly kept their rig inside the fence and during one winter visit Black came out to tell them about his new purchase.

According to Black, the Mercedes was the first thing he had ever bought for himself instead of the company. Proud of his spontaneous indulgence and anxious to impress, he invited the guys out to lunch

in the new car. Just then, a young boy on a bicycle rode up asking Black if he could pick up a job after school cleaning the shop. Black listened, agreed, then told the boy he had to go.

Seated in the new car, Black turned the key to leave and ... nothing happened. Another couple of tries. Nothing. All the men got out, opened the hood looking for the battery. No battery. They looked in the trunk. No battery. They looked under the floorboards, the carpet, the back end ...

"KEITH. KEITH," the kid screamed from his bike.

"What?" Black yelled back.

"You know you have to have it in park or it won't start."

Trunks close, doors close, hood closes. Black starts the engine.

"I would really appreciate it," Black told the men on the way to lunch. "If we just kept this our little secret."

If Keith Black didn't know German engineering, he cornered the market on just about everything else mechanical in America.

He wasn't the first one to produce his own aluminum Chrysler "Hemi" engine blocks, but his design became the industry and racing standard.

His name became synonymous with quality.

From peddling parts at service stations, to revolutionizing racing boats on California's Salton Sea, to dominating the drag-racing market in the 1970s, to eventually emerging a legend, Black's relentless obsession with perfection made him an icon of racing-engine design.

"His real contribution," Hot Rod Magazine wrote when it named him one of its Top 100 Hot Rodders of all time, "... was selling good parts at a fair price."

Black was all about being fair, but he was also very fortunate.

What started out as a small, coastal California parts shop in 1959 quickly ballooned into something bigger after Black was asked to build engines for National Hot Rod Association car owner Tommy Greer.

KEITH BLACK

Greer had cut his teeth in big-time boat racing and had the skills and resources to organize a top-flight NHRA drag-racing team. The first component was Black, who had made a name for himself building Greer's boat engines into on-the-water monsters.

The combination was natural, the rest history.

Quickly, the growth of Keith Black Racing Engines paralleled that of NHRA drag racing. With Don "The Snake" Prudhomme driving, Black building and Greer organizing, drag racing would take a 30-year climb to multimillion-dollar respectability.

Considered by many to be the single most successful group ever, the G-B-P car won more than 90 percent of its matches and soon the racing community was beating a path to Black's door.

The proof was in performance: between 1975 and '84, all national records in the Top Fuel category were held by cars using Keith Black's engine blocks. His involvement in developing a clutch that put power to the ground rather than smoking the tires three-quarters of the way down the track

was paramount.

Business would get so good, and word-of-mouth advertising so influential, Black had to move his operation from its small start to South Gate, Calif., expanding the machine shop and stock parts store, then eventually going national.

But he wasn't even close to being done.

By 1974, Black introduced his aluminum version of Chrysler's 426 Hemi, an engine that became the bread-and-butter racing powerplant.

By the mid-1980s, the KB Block was in its 15th stage of development, Black was a multi-million-dollar operation supplying speed boats, drag racers and even a line of GM-offspring blocks available in Chevrolet and Oldsmobile

ADAM YOUNG/
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cars. The Keith Black Camaro was next, a beefy monster of a streetcar capable of 11-second quarter-mile times.

After his death in 1991 from cancer, Black was enshrined in the Motorsports Hall of Fame and years later,

the KB Hemi remained the only "fuel" (nitromethane) block that still carried a Chrysler part number. But it didn't end there.

There is Keith Black apparel, and catalogs that include engine blocks, race Hemis, street Hemis, gear drives and oil pumps. Parts are sold from Newport Beach to New York, and fan clubs barter and sell vintage Black products on Web sites.

A reputation built. A reputation still growing strong.

And an afternoon drive in a Mercedes long forgotten.

• Jason Stein is a feature writer with Wheelbase Communications. E-mail him at www.wheelbase.us/mailbag.html.

Why I won't hesitate to repair my older Tahoe

Sometimes things just don't go your way.

I drive a 1995 Chevy Tahoe with 190,000 miles on it. I love my vehicle and it has served me well. I tow heavy trailers and I plow snow with it and, yes, I practice what I preach with all the maintenance.

Last week I towed a 4,000-pound trailer to our church camp in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The last three miles into camp was a pretty messed up dirt road that was wet, rutted and had the frost coming out of it. We got into camp Thursday night and left on Sunday morning.

On our way out, the road had actually gotten worse and I had to drag this trailer through about 25 feet of some pretty deep mud. Foot to the floor all four wheels spitting mud everywhere — I wasn't stopping for anything. We got through it and when we reached the paved road I noticed a fairly strong vibration. It felt like a drive shaft or a U-joint askew. I realized it was still in 4WD. When I shifted back into 2WD, the vibration stopped. We drove home with no further trouble.

When I had one of my technicians look the Tahoe over on Monday, he gave me the bumper news that I had damaged my front differential and it would have to be replaced. So I'll call Jasper Engines and have them supply me a rebuilt unit and we will be good to go for another 100,000 miles.

So, what's the message here? A high-mileage, 14-year-old vehicle broke down under stress? Or ... a 14-year-old vehicle can still be reliable and driven without hesitation if well maintained?

I take responsibility for what happened but I was still able to drive the truck and trailer the 400-plus miles back home. My truck still looks good and I have no doubt about driving it cross country or towing with it after the upcoming repair is complete. Knowing I've kept up with preventive maintenance gives me the confidence to keep on truckin'!

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Doug McAllister
Under the hood

Chevy Corvette both modern, old-school at same time

By ANN M. JOB
For The Associated Press

Now that every American taxpayer is an investor in the parent company of the Chevrolet Corvette, maybe the American sports car icon will rebound from its worst sales in 11 years.

The Corvette, which dates to 1953 and is the only remaining V-8 powered two-seater built in the United States, offers a lower-priced convertible this year, new standard features as well as a new ZR1 model that's the fastest and most powerful production car ever from General Motors Corp.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$49,415 for the base 2009 Corvette Coupe with 430 horsepower, LS3 V-8, while the 2009 Corvette convertible is \$54,070, or \$1,355 less than the comparable 2008 model. The convertible has the same 430 horsepower V-8 of the base coupe.

The top and much anticipated 2009 Corvette is the ZR1

At a glance

Price as tested: \$71,000

Engine: 6.2-liter, overhead valve, LS3 V-8

City/highway fuel economy: 15/25 miles per gallon

Length: 174.6 inches

Wheelbase: 105.7 inches

Curb weight: 3,222 pounds

Built: Bowling Green, Ky.

Destination charge: \$850

Coupe with 638 horsepower, turbocharged, 6.2-liter V-8 and \$104,820 price tag, while the midrange Corvette is the Z06, starting at \$74,775, with a 7-liter V-8 putting out 505 horsepower.

No one can argue that the Corvette is one of the most instantly recognizable cars around. Its styling hasn't changed much over the past decade, with tweaks here and there for the large, round taillights, short, tall rear deck lid and long hood.

Indeed on my test drive, the

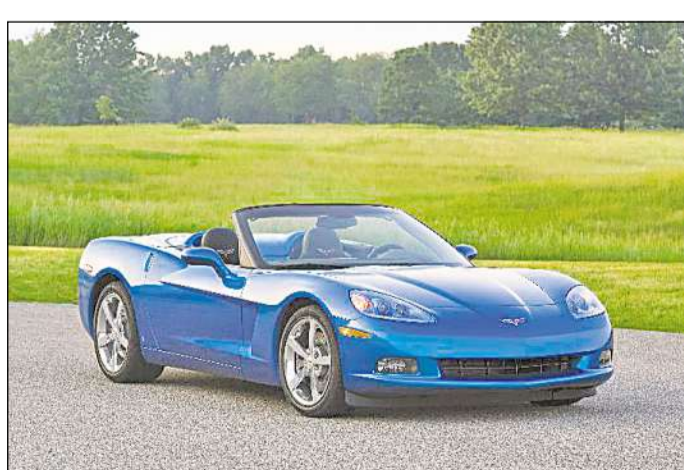
2009 Corvette Convertible drew attention from boys and young men, and the reason wasn't just because of the bright, Jet-stream Blue metallic paint.

Driving a Corvette is a curious mix of old-school flavor and new, modern sophistication.

The raw engine power is palpable as the V-8 roars to life when a driver touches the ignition button. Yes, the Corvette has a start button now, not an ignition key switch. Tap the accelerator and the car bolts from the garage and down the driveway.

This is one car where it pays to have an optional head-up display, like I did on the tester. The display projects pertinent driver information — like speed — onto the lower part of the windshield in front of the driver, so he doesn't have to take his eyes off the road to check the speedometer and other gauges that are lower down in the instrument cluster.

Indeed, the head-up display can even show G-force as



ASSOCIATED PRESS/Courtesy of Chevrolet

This 2009 Chevrolet Corvette Convertible is one of the most instantly recognizable cars around.

a driver accelerates or rounds a curve. G-force is a unit of acceleration measurement, such as what's measured on roller coasters and space rockets.

The large blue-green numbers on the windshield glass helped me keep my speeds down to the legal residential street limits, though the low-to-the-pavement Convertible often felt like it was merely crawling at these times. The

car and I were much happier on highways and country roads, where speeds were higher, straightaways were frequent, and the engine sounds became stronger and louder.

The tester was a base convertible with optional less-restrictive exhaust system, so it had the base 6.2-liter, overhead valve, LS3 V-8 generating a forceful 428 foot-pounds of torque at 4,600 rpm.