

Camaro chief engineer dishes details, stokes rivalry with Ford and Dodge



Al Oppenheiser has been Camaro's chief engineer since the car's fifth-generation rebirth. Now two generations and two platforms deep, Oppenheiser and the Camaro development team are enjoying the competition in the pony car market. We sat down with Oppenheiser at this year's North American International Auto Show in Detroit, right between Chevrolet's new Hot Wheels-edition Camaro and the *Bullitt* Mustang on display at Ford's booth next door.

Ford showed off the new *Bullitt* Mustang. Are we going to get a *Better Off Dead* Camaro?

Oppenheiser: (Laughs) We're here because last year was Camaro's 50th anniversary. It was such a hot car back then that Mattel came to Chevrolet and wanted to make it one of the first 16 Hot Wheels—a blue Camaro. They're celebrating their 50th this year and wanted to work with us, and we got a chance to take 50 years' worth of Camaro and tie it into their heritage. It's our third Hot Wheels we've done with them. We did the metallic green one at SEMA in 2010. In 2012, we did a blue one as a tribute to the original and came out with that one in production. This time we thought we would do a tribute to Hugger Orange. Besides T-tops, the second question I get most often is usually, "Why don't you do Hugger Orange anymore?" That was a lacquer-born paint. We don't do lacquer-born anymore, but this is a nonmetallic waterborne paint and it takes you back to the nonmetallics of the late '60s. It gave us the palette to celebrate Hugger Orange.

Camaro Drag Development parts were unveiled at SEMA. How are you involved with that program?

The Performance Parts guys work closely with my team. They get assigned to work with me and my team.





Will we ever see the parts they develop become an option so that the consumer can check a box and get those parts from the factory?

That's why we work so closely together. They actually sit with my guys out at Milford (GM's proving grounds) and they use our test cars. In fact, when we were working on the 10-speed for the ZL1, we were gearing it towards our launch control, line lock, and Nurburgring, all the spectrum that the 10-speed had to cover; but also, off to the side, we were giving it to our performance parts guys to do drag work, trying to break it. They have not been able to break one yet, with all the work they're doing. We've shown them at SEMA for a couple years. We're looking at ways we can check the box, like you said, so that somebody who buys an SS on up can order a drag package.

What are your thoughts on the Demon?

I give the FCA guys a lot of credit, that Demon was a pretty big story last year. It challenged some rules like we like to do with Camaro. I thought they did a pretty good job with that whole Demon package, as far as what their promise was and delivering on it. Would we do a streetable package like that with drag radials and so on? We're always looking at it. But do you want to follow or do you want to lead? Where does that market go? Do people want a Demon, vs. an SS that they can put drag parts on? We're always studying. I'm glad for cars like that and what Ford's announcing these days. It keeps the segment relevant; not everything has to be autonomous.

Ford just teased the GT500. Where do you see the GT500 vs. ZL1 rivalry going?

I think they've got a lot to catch up on. They haven't had anything for a while. I think our SS 1LE pretty much put the GT350R in second place, all around. Anybody that's evaluated them head-to-head, it's a better deal on price and performance. So the ZL1 is our triple-threat car, best of the track, street, and strip. We've pushed the limits with the ZL1 1LE, so we've got a nice ZL1 package, depending on what your needs are. We've put the bar pretty high. We've shown in two generations it's not only about horsepower, it's "can you get that horsepower to turn?" Is their mission to be street/strip? Is their mission to be a triple threat like we are? We're ready. We've seen them around town in camouflage and so on. Again, I love the fact that we keep swinging at each other because it keeps the segment relevant and it keeps people asking, "What are you doing next?" We're never going to stop, but we've done quite a bit to raise the bar on the ZL1 family.



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What's been the take rate on the ZL1 and ZL1 1LE?

We're exceeding build schedules for both the ZL1 and especially the ZL1 1LE. We thought we'd be at about 1000 units (of the ZL1 1LE), so we have a weekly schedule at the plant that that translates back to. We were going to build a lot early to get them out there. Well, we talked to all of our suppliers and we built a lot early and we're continuing to build a lot.

I think our communications team did a great job with the way we launched it. Blowing out 13 seconds from the ZL1 to the ZL1 1LE's Nurburgring time caused a lot of attention. If you dive down to find out why it's a success, it's because in the fifth-gen Z/28 we talked about the DSSV (Dynamic Suspension Spool Valve) dampers and how we did a million iterations, and we tuned it perfectly for the best use for you as a customer, and you should just accept that. They

told us, “OK, I understand that, but I still want to play with my car at the track,” and we didn’t give them any adjustability.

The difference now, in the DSSV system that’s on the ZL1 1LE we give you the camber adjustment, we give you the ride height adjustment, we give you the understeer/oversteer adjustment on the rear stabilizer bar. We give you that adjustability. We’re about to put out some communication free to our customers on how you set it up, depending on what type of track you’re driving on. We want to help you. If your track is heavy braking or a lot of understeer is required, we’ll help dial it in. It won’t be, “Here’s what we did at the Nurburgring, go figure it out.” The intent would be, you set it up in your garage and save time and money on tune-in day so that you’re close and can just make minor tweaks once you get to the track, and you’re on your way. Hopefully that translates into saving time adjusting your car.

That sounds helpful, since a lot of times suspension adjustments are counterintuitive.

That’s exactly what happened at Laguna Seca. We dialed in the softest understeer setting, which you wouldn’t have expected on a track like that, and it turned out to perform the best.

How is the 2.0-liter turbo doing in the Camaro?

The 2.0-liter turbo has actually, in some months, passed the V-6 in sales. About 30 percent of our volume is 2.0-liter turbos.



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Will you be working with Chevrolet Performance on any 2.0-liter tunes or parts?

Absolutely. We are working with them. Mark Dickens, who runs that group, worked for me when I was in the performance division and we ran the Bonneville program on all the Ecotec engines that had stage kits anywhere from 40 all the to 1000 horsepower. I would love to relive those days. It was one of the reasons why I was so happy to get the 2.0-liter in the Camaro. I'd read the blogs, and a lot of younger people wouldn't consider the fifth-generation Camaro because there was no 2.0-liter that they could modify with a stage kit.

Can you tell us anything about the next performance variant, now that you've capped the lineup with the ZL1 1LE?

Who said we capped the line? We did for the moment. We surprised people with a V-6 1LE; it was actually something that a lot of people asked us about in the fifth gen. When we came out with the sixth gen and the SS 1LE, they were asking, "Why didn't you do a 1LE?" Well, here it is. We're looking at performance drag packs for the street, we're looking at any available horsepower that will fit in the car, trying to stay relevant and on top. That's a very vague way of saying we're still playing. There's a lot of bandwidth to play in this segment.

The Viper ACR went out with a bang by setting lap records at 13 different tracks around the country. Are there any of the Viper's lap times you looked at and thought you could take down with the ZL1 1LE?

I think there are. As always, any driver will get out of the car and say there's more in it. We think there's more in it. We're gonna keep tinkering around with it. Wouldn't it be cool to see a Camaro under 7:00 at the Nurburgring? I'd like to see it.