

Snowball Effect

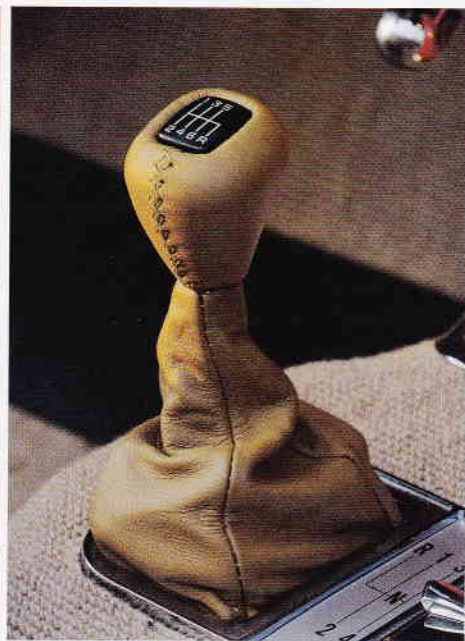
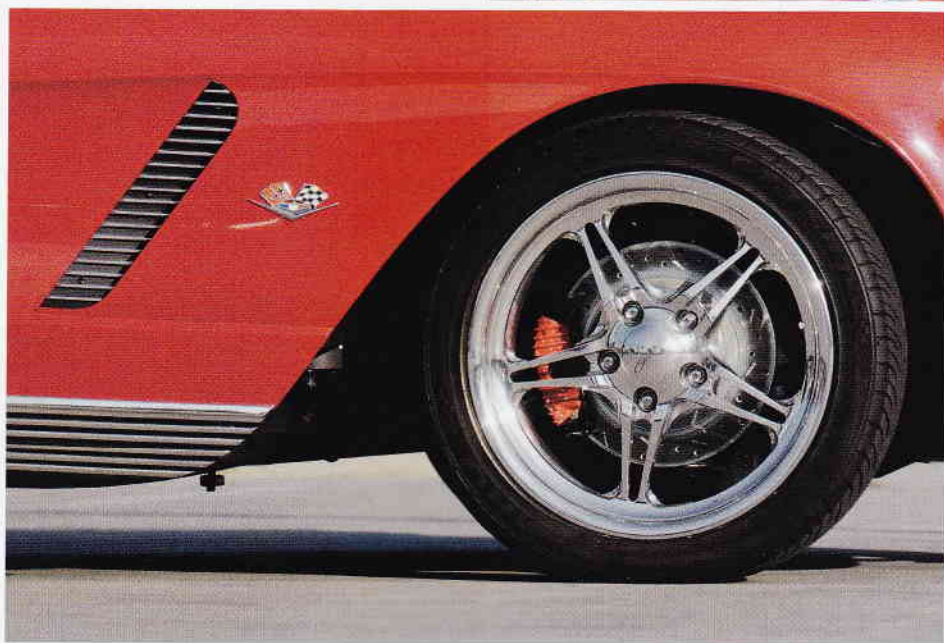
Like a lot of car projects, the goals for this '62 Corvette were modest at the outset. But before the owner knew it, he had signed off on the building of a radically customized restomod.

BY DAVID NEUHWART · PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR





Even the most die-hard straight-axle Corvette aficionado has to admit that a C1, while beautifully curvaceous and iconic, drives and rides a bit like a low-slung truck. In its era, it was a fine sports car, but compared to today's Corvette—with its leech-like handling and cultivated ride quality, as well as its breath-taking acceleration and enormously powerful brakes—the first-gen car hasn't aged well. It's no wonder many C1 owners are tempted to upgrade their cars with newer mechanicals, but the challenge is to do so while maintaining the original car's aesthetic purity. That was the goal of the owner of the '62 restomod on these pages.



Adam Assal bought the Corvette in 1992. While clean and unmolested, there was nothing special about this roadster. It didn't have a rich history, or rare options. The car's base 327-cubic-inch 250-horsepower V8, though big improvement over the early Blue Flame inline-6 engine, was merely adequate in Assal's opinion; he wanted more power, lots more. He was also less than pleased with the car's harsh ride and vague handling.

Before long, a late-model fuel-injected Chevy ZZ3 5.7-liter crate engine had been shoehorned under the hood, and the fenderwells were filled with C4 suspension parts. The car's upgrades were completed in 1994, but over the next 14 years, Assal drove the Corvette a total of just 400 miles. He had been underwhelmed with the car's transformation; he says the Corvette didn't feel "put-together," and was not pleasurable to drive.

However, Assal didn't want to give up on the C1. Instead, he felt that the time had come





Opposite top: With 400 horsepower and effortless drivability, the 6.0-liter LS2 V8 is the best of both worlds.

Opposite middle, left to right: Custom Budnik alloy wheels house upgraded C4 brakes; ZF six-speed transmission provides for both hard acceleration and relaxed cruising.

Opposite bottom: Sumptuously swathed in yards of supple tan leather, the interior is a work of art. Above: By narrowing the C4-based independent rear suspension, wider wheels and tires could be fitted without having to modify the bodywork.

to rework the old car and create an automobile that would beg to be driven.

Figuring a new engine was the place to start the project, Assal took the '62 to Troy's Speed Shop in Huntington Beach, California, with instructions to just replace the ZZ3 engine with an LS2 crate motor. Though the engine's 400 horsepower and 400 lbs-ft of torque would no doubt improve the Corvette's ability to convert solid tires to gaseous rubber, Assal hoped its modern fuel-injection system would greatly improve drivability, something he found lacking with the ZZ3. He felt that such a swap wouldn't take too long, and once completed he'd soon be putting the miles on his Corvette.

It didn't quite work out that way.

As soon as the crew at the Speed Shop started looking beneath the fiberglass, they started seeing things that needed attention. Some items needed a lot of attention, and Assal told the shop to do the job

right; if it took a little longer and cost a bit more, so be it. Those turned out to be fateful words. Longer ended up being over a year, and as far as the expense, let's just say a couple of new Corvettes could have been purchased for the cost of this project.

When the C4 suspension was originally fitted, some of the mounting brackets and fixtures weren't exactly up to snuff. Worse yet, these modifications had weakened the car's original frame. It would need to be strengthened, which meant the engine swap had escalated into a body-off restoration. To bring the frame up to snuff, a new, custom cross member was installed and new hardware was attached. The latter would help attain the lower ride height that Assal desired. Once the upgrades were completed, the frame was refinished in a gloss black powdercoat.

The next step was to modify the suspension to function at the lower ride height and to accommodate wider, modern wheels. By narrowing the rear suspension by 4.5 inches,

some fat rubber could be fit without needing to modify the fenders; Assal wanted to keep the body intact. The C4 front suspension was retained, but the Aldan Eagle coil-over shock absorbers were modified to deliver the desired ride height. These adjustable shocks were also used in the rear, giving the technicians at Troy's Speed Shop the ability to tailor the compression and rebound characteristics to the weight of the car.

The wheels were custom-built by Budnik. They house powder-coated C4 calipers clamping down on cross-drilled rotors. Troy's Speed Shop came up with a slick solution for the age-old C1 problem of raising-line brake pressure. It installed an ABS Power Brake electric high-power master cylinder, which provides the proper line pressure without relying on engine vacuum. Using an electric pumper plumbed to an hydraulic accumulator, it creates a steady 1,600-1,800 psi of pressure under normal use. The result is more consistent brake-pedal feel. Another advantage of this setup is that it takes up a much smaller space under the hood than a vacuum system; the 8 x 6 x 6-inch pump can be mounted almost anywhere.

The body was stripped to the fiberglass and repainted by Mick Jenkins in Pomona. The interior was reupholstered in supple tan

leather by Pete Engel at Westminster Upholstery. Power windows were fitted, and the instruments were converted from mechanical to electronic, although the stock appearance of the gauges was retained.

Another modification to the interior was a smaller steering wheel, which increases leg room in the cramped cockpit. First-gen Corvettes needed a huge wheel to allow the driver to get enough leverage to steer at parking-lot speeds; the only power in the steering was in the driver's upper body. Assal's '62 already had power rack-and-pinion steering—it had been installed during the original C4 suspension upgrade—so it no longer needed the larger wheel.

On the road, the V8's exhaust note is perfect, with a subtle grumble at small throttle setting and a snarling roar when the accelerator is mashed. Letting off the gas results in an overrun full of burbling and crackling, which is why we found ourselves repeatedly accelerating and slowing down. The exhaust system is bespoke, built by Troy's Speed Shop; it's not like you can order an exhaust system for a '62 with an LS2 out of a catalog. Of course, such customization doesn't come cheap.

The sound isn't the only addictive part of driving this Corvette. The sheer grunt from the very healthy LS2 combined with the C4's light weight means that the driver had better pay attention when the whip comes down. The engine responds without hesitation and the resulting acceleration is fierce. We found ourselves rowing through the sweet-shifting ZF six-speed manual transmission in a hurry.

When it comes to cornering, this Corvette doesn't know the meaning of body roll, allowing the driver to concentrate on pointing it in the right direction rather than waiting for the vehicle to right itself. This '62 handles, and rides, like a much more modern car. It's an automobile that begs to be shown then explored—something not true of most C1s.

One thing that remains unchanged, however, is the cockpit's tight confines. While the smaller steering wheel helps, the interior is not as friendly to tall drivers like yours truly. Still, the overall driving experience is so vastly improved that we had a difficult time returning this Corvette to its owner. Assal had to wait a long time and spend a pretty penny to get the C1 of his dreams, but it was clearly worth it. ○

“ It's an automobile that begs to be shown the open road and have its capabilities explored—something not true of most C1s. ”

