

# “PEAKING” IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

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## CORVETTE’S CHIEF ENGINEERS



### PART 3

TADGE JUECHTER, 2006-2024



Photo credit: GM Authority

As with the four previous Corvette Chief Engineers – perhaps most especially Zora Arkus-Duntov - it is impossible to cover the length and breadth of the career and engineering advancements of Tadge Juechter. In this case, entire book chapters can (and have) been written about him and his accomplishments. Indeed, while all four prior chief engineers contributed mightily in their own unique ways, only Tadge, owing to his 47-year long career with GM, had the distinction of working with five generations of Corvettes. He is responsible for helping to hone the front-engine C5, C6, and C7 generations of Corvettes to their best-ever balance of straight-line performance and tight handling, eventually realizing Duntov's dream of moving the engine “behind the seats” in the C8.

Tadge was born in 1957 in Laredo, Texas to a military family and was raised in a Porsche household. He liked to tinker with mechanical things. While a teenager growing up in Chappaqua, New York in the '70s, his folks noticed his love of such tinkering and even gave him their wrecked Cadillac to take apart.

During his college years at Stanford, he worked two summers on a GM assembly line in Lordstown, OH - an experience that he found not to his liking. Thus after he graduated with degrees in aerospace and mechanical engineering, he had no intention of working for GM. Then, in 1978, a friend asked Tadge to accompany him to a GM interview, where he ended up also interviewing and being offered a position. Eventually, although Tadge had a secure job, he realized that to be promoted to high levels in the automotive world, an MBA degree was essential; he thus earned an MBA at Stanford. He then held several positions at GM prior to joining the Corvette team in 1993 as assistant chief engineer, just as the C4 was nearing the end of its 13-year run (in 1996).

Early in the C5 (1997-2004) generation, Chevrolet General Manager Jim Perkins argued for an inexpensive Corvette that would appeal to racers; this brought the 1999 hardtop (345 hp, \$38,777, about \$7k cheaper than the convertible); that in turn led to the 385 hp Z06 in 2001 (launched by the creation of the Corvette Racing Team in 1999 with Pratt Miller race car engineering).

In the summer of 2004 Tadge was shocked to hear that they were to begin working on a ZR1 (which had appeared in two prior generations, C3 and C4), to become the fastest Corvette ever. Their goal was to build the best possible Corvette for \$100,000, and when the ZR1 appeared in 2009 (376 ci, 638 hp) it sold at a base cost of \$103,300. The Z06 was to be the track car and the ZR1 would be GM's Grand Touring supercar.

[Note: regarding the C7 ZR1, initially there were no plans to make the car because designers didn't think they could go beyond the Z06. But after a few years, with input from the Corvette racing team, a new plan emerged to make the ZR1 the most powerful, stable, advanced front-engine Corvette ever offered. Many people speculated that Chevrolet might build a front engine and mid-engine Corvette side-by-side, but that was not to be the case. C7 production ended in summer 2019 and the last C7 was a black Z06 that was auctioned for \$2.7 million to a charity helping injured veterans.]



**The last C7 Z06 Corvette sold at auction for \$2.7 million for charity to help injured service members. Photo credit: Hagerty**

After helping to launch the C4 and C5 generations, in 2006, as the C6 was recently launched, Tadge was given what he termed “the promotion of a lifetime” as Executive Chief Engineer. Then the economy stalled and the in-progress C7 was put on hold indefinitely. When GM declared bankruptcy in June 2009, the future of GM was bleak. That might well have shut the corporation down – but for a government auditor looking at the Corvette who was a car enthusiast and hoped to see a C7 model built. Upon examining the books and discovering that the Corvette was the one GM car that was profitable, Tadge’s team was told to continue working on the C7. The Corvette and the Bowling Green assembly plant were spared.

A big part of Tadge’s job as an assistant engineer had been to ensure that there was a Corvette for virtually everyone, with a variety of price points. He said that “It helps having worked on the C5 and C6 because you know where a lot of the land mines are.” However, the C6 took big hits for its interior. To get the C7’s interior beyond criticism, Tadge ensured that designers had knew how it felt to experience riding inside a 1-g cockpit, and how it felt having the driver’s skin pressing on hard interior objects (the C7 would later receive rave reviews for its interior). He also ensured that there were no distracting infotainment systems, but only important information for speedy driving.

With respect to the C7 under the engine, Tadge and his team made certain that horsepower was ever increasing (the newly launched 2014 C7s had 455 hp – an optional performance exhaust system upped it to 460 hp - far more than any big-block before), but it was critical that the Corvette be made easier to handle. The

coupe version cost \$51,995 and was noticeably easy to maneuver. And for the more speed-driven crowd, the 2019, 755 hp ZR1 could perform on par with exotic sports cars yet be a comfortable, maneuverable car that sold for under \$120,000. Electronic suspension, steering, braking, rev-matching, paddle-shift eight-speed automatic and fuel management brought a balance of extreme power and drivability.

The C8 made its debut in 2020 and, as everyone now knows, it was undoubtedly the most revolutionary Corvette ever. [Previously, the C5 had that honor because of its all-new engine, drivetrain, and other structural improvements, while the C6 and C7 generations were both evolutionary versions of the C5.] And while the C5 and C6 Corvettes were considered to be Dave Hill's creations, the C7 and C8 were clearly Tadge's.

The first C8 2020 model was offered for public sale in February 2020, the first mid-engine Corvette in history – for a base price that was just under \$60k; 20,368 units were built. They offered numerous options for customization and personalization, including colors, trim packages, and power (up to 495 hp). Its arrival came not only during a pandemic but was also delayed due to a GM workers' strike, but buyers waited patiently and were rewarded – and this beast had greater demand than any Corvette had witnessed in the previous 25 years.

Tadge and his team brought to the new C8 generation a Corvette that had:

- better weight distribution, with the rear weight bias enhancing performance in a straight line and on the track.
- better responsiveness and sense of control due to driver positioning closer to the front axle, sitting almost on top of the front wheels.
- the fastest 0-60 time of any entry Corvette ever — under three seconds when equipped with the Z51 Performance Package (adding \$5,000).
- a racecar-like view of the road due to the lower positioning of the hood, instrument panel, and steering wheel.

Automobile magazine writers gushed about an outing where Tadge and Jay Leno drove a 2020 Corvette Z51 at more than 200 mph at the Milford Proving Grounds – and the fact that Tadge never blinked...



**Tadge Juechter and Jay Leno driving a 2020 Z51. Photo credit: Vettes of Atlanta Magazine**

**Corvette's fifth Executive Chief Engineer announced in April 2024 that he was retiring after 47 years at GM, causing shock and sadness within the Corvette community. Tadge was described by NASCAR team owner and car dealer Rick Hendrick as not only "brilliant," but one who focused on the details of the car and made it great. Of course, Tadge will always be idolized for making the "biggest leap ever" in Corvette design and engineering, taking Duntov's dream of transitioning to a mid-engine design (Hendrick paid \$3.6 million for the first mid-engine Corvette Z06 with VIN 0001 to add to his extensive collection; he also bought the first E-Ray Corvette VIN 001 for \$1.1 million. He was inducted into the NCM Hall of Fame in 2019).**

**Tadge stated that:**

**It's been the honor of a lifetime to work at this company, leading the men and women who have brought to life one of the most iconic and recognizable vehicles in recent American history. Their tenacity and ability to push what is possible with every variant and generation of Corvette was inspiring to see. I know the future of the nameplate is in the right hands.**

**Many people have recently considered Tadge Juechter, like Duntov, to be the "godfather of the modern Corvette." While Duntov could claim responsibility for dreaming about those mid-engine concepts, Juechter is responsible for making the dream come to fruition. The awards his team received for the mid-engine C8 included Motor Trend's 2020 Car of the Year. the latest Z06 leading to its 2023 Performance Vehicle of the Year award, and North American Car of the Year for 2020.**

## TONY ROMA, 2024-PRESENT



**Tony Roma, newly named Executive Chief Engineer of GM's newly formed Global Corvette and Performance Cars team. Photo credit: GM Authority**

**Tony Roma was named Executive Chief Engineer of GM's newly formed Global Corvette and Performance Cars team, on June 14, 2024, the sixth person to hold the position. GM President Mark Reuss said that Roma was "a natural fit to succeed Tadge" given his years of experience.**

**Tony, who previously served as the chief engineer for the electric Cadillac Celestiq, graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering from Purdue University. He began his career at General Motors in 1993, where he worked with the calibration team on an automatic transmission project for the Corvette and Camaro. He later worked in engine development for the LS1, LS2, LS6, and LS7 platforms, and then began a long stint in powertrain integration for some of GM's most exciting cars. Tony also spent time as the high-performance vehicle operations manager for GM Performance, as well as a performance variant manager for Chevrolet and Cadillac.**

**Tony became Vehicle Chief Engineer for Cadillac in May 2013, working on such products as the Cadillac CTS, ATS, CT4, CT5, CT6, and the Celestiq; this list includes the V-Series and Blackwing models. Tony's personal collection shows a preference for high-performance cars, owning a C4 Corvette ZR1 (up to 405 hp), a C6 Corvette ZR1 (up to 638 hp), a C8 Corvette Z06 (up to 670 hp), and a CTS-V wagon (made from 2011-2014, if supercharged, 556 hp).**



**Tony Roma team's high-performance Cadillacs: the Blackwing (up to 668 hp) and Celestiq (600 hp). Photo credits: YouTube and Cadillac**



**Cadillac's CTS-V Wagon. Photo credit: GM Authority**

Like his predecessors, Tony is not a stranger to the racetrack, serving as race engine team manager for Cadillac's World Challenge program as well as racing autos himself. He currently holds a GM Level 6 driver certification – the highest level within the company. In that capacity he has driven more than 1500 laps in vehicle testing at Nurburgring (a 150,000 capacity motorsports complex in west-central Germany featuring a Grand Prix racetrack; its slogan: "Make your heart race.") and completed the 24-hour endurance race at the famed circuit as well.

Tony understands that this position requires a deep respect and admiration for those who came before him, and that Tadge Juechter left a big pair of shoes to fill. He stated that:

Corvette earned and continues to earn its place in American car history thanks to the people behind it, like Tadge Juechter. These are big shoes to fill, but we will work every day to continue the strong legacy this nameplate deserves.

Moving forward, Tony will work to continue the legacy of the Corvette, as it will no doubt continue to push the envelope in terms of all-out performance. As mentioned earlier, Tadge Juechter's departure has been hard for many Corvette fans to internalize; however, Tony Roma appears to bring a similar amount of passion and promise to the position. The products he has been a part of at GM have been some of the brand's favorites, so the long line of engineering improvements should be in good hands for the C8 Corvette and beyond.

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