

Chevrolet Product Performance

The #11 Laurel Racing Camaro was sponsored by the *Chevrolet Product Performance* department within Chevrolet Engineering. *Chevrolet Product Performance* was headed by Vince Piggins. Working with Piggins at CPP were Bill Howell, John Pierce, and Paul Prior, each of which contributed to the development and race day operations of the Laurel Racing Camaro. The following article, from the July 1, 2005 issue of *Hemmings Muscle Machines*, is a brief description of Vince Piggins and CPP.

Vince Piggins

BY GEORGE MATTAR

He has been called the father of probably the most popular muscle car to ever roll off an American assembly line. Vince Piggins worked at Hudson and was the man behind the Hornet's NASCAR championships in the early 1950s. He joined Chevrolet in the mid-1950s, developed what grew into the Z/28 package and worked at Chevy until his retirement in the early 1980s.

Vince was imposing at 6 feet 4 inches tall, and although never formally trained in engineering, he knew more about engines and cars in general than most of those who worked with him. Before coming to Hudson, Vince was an engineer at Packard in their engine department, and he was chief engineer at motorized-bicycle manufacturer Whizzer, said longtime friend and co-worker, **John Pierce**, who worked at GM for 41 years before retiring eight years ago.

Another longtime co-worker, Herb Fishel, said Vince's arrival at GM coincided with the debut of the small-block Chevrolet, this year celebrating its 50th anniversary. "He pioneered the concept of using heavy-duty parts that were tagged for off-highway usage only. Given the corporate culture, this was a clever way to avoid using the words 'racing' or 'high performance.' The parts were sold and, to this day, remain a significant revenue stream for GM," said Fishel, who began working for Vince in 1969 and whose first assignment was to develop the now legendary cross-ram intake manifold for the Z/28. Vince also was successful in running a motorsports program during a period when GM mandated a ban on any form of racing, Fishel said. "Vince also was the biggest supporter of the Z/28. While the production group wanted a small-bore, long-stroke, 302-cu.in. V-8, Vince pushed for a big-bore, short-stroke combination that had more rpm potential," Fishel said.

Vince also signed a deal with Bruce McLaren to use the aluminum 427-cu.in. V-8 in the SCCA Can-Am series. This team dominated the series, with Bruce and Denny Hulme as drivers. The group was expanded to include **Pierce** and **Bill Howell**. Blessed with a great product, Vince had a lot of success with this small group of engineers, and also Bill Jenkins and Smokey Yunick.

"Vince was head of performance at Chevrolet, but 'performance' was not a good word around GM in those days," **John Pierce** said. "I began to work for him in November 1968. We used to take cars they were going to scrap and turn them into projects. I designed the chassis and brakes. Those were some exciting days back then."

In 1963, Vince was manager of **Product Performance for Chevrolet Engineering**. That year, he proposed an idea to build a mid-size performance street car, which would be powered by a 396-cu.in. V-8. Known as the Z16 Chevelle, the project involved 100 1964 Malibu Sport coupes.

When the Camaro was released in September 1966, Piggins knew that in his position, he had to promote the car as superior to the Mustang. Vince knew of the impending SCCA Trans-Am sedan racing class for the 1967 season and had many meetings with SCCA officials, notably Jim Kaser, John Bishop and Tracy Byrd. Vince suggested a car that would fit into the class, and he believed Chevrolet would go along with his plan. The rules held competitors to a 116-inch wheelbase and 305-cu.in. maximum, with a minimum of 1,000 production cars built by the end of the model year. Chevrolet built just 602 Z/28s for 1967, but they met the production rule by homologating the 350-cu.in. Camaro under the FIA Group 1 rules.

Vince proposed that, because the Camaro had no engine smaller than 327-cu.in., they take a 283 V-8 and wrap an option package around it to make it SCCA legal. In September 1966, Vince brought out his creation with a 283-cu.in. V-8. He gave the yet-to-be-named car to Chevrolet general manager Pete Estes. Pete was impressed, but while driving the car, Vince told him he thought it better to take a 327 block, stick a 283 crankshaft in it, and that would make a 4-inch bore and a 3-inch stroke, yielding 302.4-cu.in., which fell just under the 305-cu.in. limit. Estes agreed. The yet unnamed special Camaro also came with mandatory front disc brakes, 15-inch Rally wheels, F41 suspension, heavy-duty front coil springs, heavy-duty multi-leaf rear springs, an 11-inch clutch from the 396 V-8, a close-ratio four-speed with a 2.20:1 first gear ratio, a steering gear ratio with 24:1 overall ratio, 7.75 x 15 tires and a special hood with functional air intake.

The name came about when GM held a press day in November 1966 at Riverside International Raceway in California. "There wasn't any suggestion of what we were going to call this car," Piggins said at the time. "When it came down to having to decide, somebody just said, 'Hey, it's RPO (Regular Production Order) Z-28; let's call it Z/28! So the name stuck.'" RPO Z-27 is the number for an early Camaro Super Sport package, so Z/28 followed it sequentially.

The Z/28 did not win the championship in 1967, but won it back to back in 1968 and 1969, and sales figures skyrocketed. From combined sales of 7,801 the first two years, Chevrolet sold more than 19,000 Z/28s in 1969.

"I worked with Vince, though we were in separate buildings," said now-retired Camaro stylist Jerry Palmer. "I met Vince around 1967 or 1968. I was in Chevy Design, and we had just about completed the second-generation Camaro. I also worked with Vince on the first ZL-1 Camaro. They really didn't want to sell that car," Palmer says. "I remember Vince being a pretty straight guy. I remember when he came up with the 1967 Z/28. He brought one over to my office and let me take it for a drive. When I got back, I said, 'What a car!' Vince had really come up with something special. He did a great job of getting that car ready for production."

Some of Vince's employees found him tough to deal with, but Palmer says, "He was a boss and he had to be the boss. Vince was great, and if he liked you and you did your job, you had it made. He made things happen and delivered to management, and people don't know this, but he accomplished what he did on an absolute shoestring budget back in those days." Piggins died in October 1985.

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