

1966 Steve McQueen

Sting Ray L88

AT LEAST ONE MCQUEEN

CAR LEFT

Steve McQueen may have made a name for himself on the Silver Screen in films such as *The Great Escape*, *Bullitt*, and *The Thomas Crown Affair*, but his passion for collecting and driving automobiles and motorcycles is part of what has kept McQueen's legend alive for so long. Sure, he was the original King of Cool, but a big part of that were the cars and motorcycles that he owned, drove around town, rode on race-tracks, and even used in many of his films. There is no greater provenance in the collector world to this day than to own a Steve McQueen car or motorcycle. To find a McQueen car or bike that had previously been lost would net some major bucks to the finder!



The Sports Illustrated Article

The August 1966 issue of *Sports Illustrated* featured an article written by Steve McQueen in which he tested eight of the latest and greatest sports cars and grand tourers from around the world at Riverside International Raceway in Riverside, California. Although he had an agreement with his movie studio that he wouldn't race anymore, he bent the rules a little bit by going out for a glorified track day. He turned laps around Riverside in a Mercedes 230SL, Cobra 427, Aston Martin DB6, Porsche 911, Alfa Romeo Duetto Spider, Jaguar E-Type, Ferrari 275 GTS, and Corvette. McQueen's favorite car in his test was, not surprisingly, the Ferrari 275 GTS, but the close second surprised everyone, including the King of Cool himself: the Corvette Sting Ray. He wrote, "Other than the Ferrari, it was the best car I drove at Riverside. And let's face it, it went out the door at \$5,500 instead of \$14,000 No question, it's a brute, a terribly quick car. It must be one of the fastest production cars you can buy for that kind of money."

The McQueen Corvette

Steve McQueen's test Corvette that day was hardly your average, run-of-the-mill '66 coupe, however. The Milano Maroon coupe was equipped with an L88 427 big-block and M22 close-ratio 4-speed to provide blistering acceleration that McQueen referred to in the article as "turbocharged." The track-ready Corvette had a side-mount exhaust system for that ultimate big-block sound. To make laps quicker and easier, General Motors equipped the car with a Posi-Traction rear axle, J56 special heavy-duty brakes, and F41 special front and rear suspension. For comfort and handling, the car had shoulder belts, headrests (two extremely rare options), teakwood steering wheel, and saddle interior. The car is one of only a handful produced in 1966 with headrests and one of 15 built by May 1966 with shoulder belts.

Steve McQueen brought the L88 Corvette from the Sports Illustrated article home to continue his "trial" of the car. Here it is sitting in his driveway with his son Chad, and his mother-in-law, Carmen Salvador. (Photo Courtesy Neile Adams McQueen)

Like many magazine test cars in the muscle car heyday, this one was never intended for public distribution; it was a purpose-built test car. It was pulled directly from the assembly line and shipped to GM's engineering department, where it was tested and tuned by Zora Arkus-Duntov personally. Although the showroom 427-ci 425-hp big-block was good enough for the street, and going up against other American muscle, **Steve McQueen** was going to be testing the car against the very best that Europe had to offer from the likes of Aston Martin, Ferrari, and Jaguar. This **Corvette** had to be special, and it was the perfect candidate for a new high-performance race engine that GM's engineering division had been working on, dubbed the **L88**. So when **McQueen** remarked at the car's awe-inspiring power, it wasn't a typical 425-horse engine under the hood, it was secretly the **L88** engine that went on to power the best **Corvette** race cars over the next several years. Of course the King of Cool was going to love that **Corvette!**

"They put a cheater engine in there!" Kevin says. "They upgraded the car, if you know what I mean, with special stuff. They wanted **Steve McQueen's** name on this car and they wanted him to rave about the car. This was no ordinary 427/425 car and **Steve** just thought it was a regular stock production car. So when he took this car on the track at Riverside, he was completely overwhelmed. Nobody knew because all of this was top secret behind closed doors."

He loved the car so much, in fact, that he asked Arkus-Duntov if he could keep the car for "a while" with the experimental heads, tires, and wheels. Chevrolet arranged to have the car delivered to **McQueen**, where it remained in his possession until March 1967 at which time the experimental components were removed and the **Corvette** was officially sold as a stock 427/425 **Corvette**.

There are pictures of this car in his driveway sitting next to his Jaguar, Porsche, and Ferrari. After **McQueen** sold it, the car's provenance was lost.

The Hunt

A small handful of GM employees were involved in the initial **L88** program, all of whom were notably passionate about Corvettes and **Corvette** racing. Dick Guldstrand and Zora Arkus-Duntov stand out as the most well-known, but among the team of engineers and mechanics was Bob McDonald, whom Kevin got to know in the

1990s. McDonald worked for Guldstrand at Dana Chevrolet, a popular high-performance Chevrolet dealership, in the 1960s. Several extremely rare cars, many internationally known, came out of Dana Chevrolet, and Bob McDonald worked on most of them behind the scenes.

“I became really friendly with Bob over the years,” Kevin says. “I’d bump into him at the track and we’d talk. He knew all about the L88 program. I always asked him about the L88 stuff to see what he could remember.”

On February 15, 2000, Bob and Kevin were having one of their L88 chats when Bob thought to ask, “Kevin, you know that the first year of the L88 was 1967, that was the first year they were sold to the public. But did you know they did a lot of development test L88 cars before 1967?”

Kevin actually had known about the handful of 1966 L88 race cars that General Motors was secretly involved with. Bob continued with his story: “Oh, yeah, they made them in 1965 and 1966. As a matter of fact, one of them went to a very well-known actor. I forget his name. I could tell you the color and that he was really good friends with Zora Arkus-Duntov.”

After the conversation, Kevin noted everything Bob had told him about the car, a 1966 Burgundy coupe with knock-off wheels and being owned by a very famous actor. It raced at Willow Springs in 1967 as well. However, a thorough search of every race program from 1967 at Willow Springs turned up nothing.

“The years went by, and I was sitting in a class about the L88 program,” Kevin continues. “A guy put a picture up on the screen, and it was a burgundy coupe! I looked into the car, and Steve McQueen was driving! I couldn’t believe it, the actor that McDonald told me about was Steve McQueen. He was the number-one actor of that generation. I said to myself, ‘I gotta find this car.’”

That’s where the hard part begins. Anybody alive at that time who could provide useful information would have to be in their 90s. Kevin started his search online to ascertain as much information as he could about the car from articles and pictures. But he wasn’t the only one on the hunt for one of the last unknown McQueen cars.

“I was talking to my friend Franz Estreicher, who’s out of Detroit, one day,” Kevin says. “And he said, ‘What do you know about this burgundy car?’

“I said, ‘Don’t tell me you’re looking for the same car I’m looking

for!' He chuckled and told me that he'd known about the car for years. I told him that I just hoped the car was out there somewhere and that if I couldn't find it, I hoped that he could. The next best thing to find a particular car is having your friend find it."

Kevin and Franz talked about the car year after year, with neither finding it, and neither losing his resolve to find it. While in Monterey for the Pebble Beach Concours, Kevin's phone rang. This was the same weekend that he spoke with Chuck Spielman about finding his 1965 Tanker, so the weekend had already been a success in Kevin's eyes. As usual, Kevin picked up after just a few rings to hear his buddy Franz on the other line.

Franz got down to business immediately: "Kevin, I need a big, big favor from you. Remember that **Steve McQueen** car? I think I found it."

Kevin couldn't believe what he was hearing and asked Franz how he found it. Franz had been searching various **Corvette** and classic car websites for years looking for maroon/saddle **1966** coupes. The three most important things that needed confirmation were the original VIN tag, the original trim tag, and it had to be an original sidepipe car.

Franz continued: "I already got the deposit on it. I trust you like a brother. Will you go out there and look at the car and tell me if it has these certain things." He read off a list of rare, identifiable characteristics of the car that would likely make it a one-of-one if delivered from the factory in the current trim.

Kevin quickly responded that he would absolutely do that for Franz, and he switched his flight from the red-eye back to JFK airport in New York to Seattle. Luckily, **1966** big-block Corvettes are desirable cars, so Kevin flying in for an inspection wouldn't set off any red flags in the owner's head as it had in the past.

"Through photographs that Franz and I had collected over the years we knew that it was a Milano Maroon coupe with a saddle vinyl interior," Kevin says. "In the pictures from the *Sports Illustrated* article you could also see a headrest seat and side-mounted exhaust system. Of course, it had the big-block. Now, sidepipes are rare, but they're not super rare. It's the headrests and shoulder belts that make the car really unique."

Flight scheduling didn't work in Kevin's favor that day, and he was left with only a 30-minute window to verify the **Corvette** as being the original **Steve McQueen** car. He didn't need that much time.

Upon arriving at the warehouse where the car was stashed, Kevin