



Going for the Gold

ONE MAN'S PURSUIT TO
OBTAIN HIS OWN GOLDEN
ACHIEVEMENT

BY DARREN BROWN

Gold represents the pinnacle of achievement in Olympic competition. When it comes to fifth-generation Corvettes, it turns out that gold represents a very rare and special automobile, a pinnacle in its own right. This is the story of how one Corvette enthusiast chased his dream of owning one of these highly desirable Corvettes.

Mike Olson's Iowa-based 1998 Aztec Gold Corvette is one of only 15 produced, making it one of the rarest C5 colors, second only to a "Platinum Purple" car produced by Bowling Green as an employee giveaway in 2000. A 16th Aztec Gold Corvette was produced in 2003, again as a factory promotion. Olson has done extensive research on these special Corvettes and has spoken with many past and current owners.

Aztec Gold (Color Code 58U) was not available as a regular production option, and is not listed in the 1998 Corvette sales brochure. Legend has it that the color was a trial run for possible use in either the 2000 model year or for the 2003 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition. Neither is the case, according to Wil Cooksey, who was the Bowling Green Plant Manager when the Aztec Corvettes were produced. "The decision to attempt another gold Corvette was prompted by numerous customer requests for the color," says Cooksey.

As a result, on October 22, 1997, the Bowling Green assembly plant, together with



**“The car always draws a crowd,
and its fun to see other Corvette
enthusiast’s reactions”**



TOP LEFT: Eight 1998 Aztec Gold Corvettes were delivered with oak interiors, seven with black. Six cars, including this one, were equipped with the G92 performance axle with a 3.15:1 ratio. Every Aztec with the performance axle ratio had a black interior. **BOTTOM LEFT:** John Cafaro, Chief Designer for the C5 body style, put his mark on the engine cover of this C5.

paint supplier Dupont, produced a group of five identically equipped coupes with oak interiors and automatics. Upon inspection, these cars did not meet quality standards due to color differences between body panels. Production records indicate that on November 5, 1997 an additional three cars were produced followed by two more on November 17, 1997. These did not turn out any better than the initial batch, so a final group of five was built on November 26, 1997. The final group included this car, as well as two of the three convertibles. Window stickers on the earliest cars list the color as "Aztec Gold Metallic", while later cars were described as simply "Aztec Gold".

Unfortunately, after the final five of the 15 cars were produced, it was determined to discontinue production of Aztec Gold. Cooksey indicates that all 15 cars were parked side-by-side outside of the plant, with individual body panels removed and repainted as necessary to make each Corvette's body look as uniform as possible. Cooksey selected a convertible as his personal company car

to get it out into the public, and says, "A lot of people loved that color!"

Olson saw his first Aztec Gold Corvette coupe at a dealer's tent at Bloomington Gold in 1998. The dealer said he would take sticker price for it, but that would have meant trading in a Corvette that he really wanted to keep, a 1982 white/silver two-tone. To date, Olson has been unable to identify which Aztec Corvette this was.

In 2005, when it was time to add a C5 to his collection, he chased rumors of an Aztec all over the internet, but it always seemed to be one step ahead of him. Phone numbers and links listed did not lead him to the car. Then one night in February 2006, an internet search for 1998 Corvettes on a popular auto website turned up several cars, with the most expensive one being listed as "gold" in color. Thinking that it surely must be a gimmick to lead potential buyers to this particular ad, he clicked it. To his amazement, it was the same car he had been hunting for six months! Communication with the seller the next day confirmed that it was indeed worth travelling to see. Olson and another

Corvette buddy drove 350 miles one way to purchase the car, returning the same day and getting it safely home just ahead of a snowstorm. As an added bonus, the under hood area of this Aztec came signed by: Mr. Cooksey; John Cafaro, designer of the C5; Corvette racer Jim Minneker; Earnest, who first started it at the plant; Adam Boca, National Corvette Museum, and Corvette Chief Engineer Dave Hill, who proclaimed it to be "One rare Corvette!".

Total 1998 Aztec Gold production included 12 coupes and three convertibles, with one of the convertibles having the distinction of being the only six-speed manual transmission and Z51 performance suspension equipped car; the remaining 14 cars were automatics. Other than these differences, most of the cars were built with very similar options. Eight 1998 Aztec Gold Corvettes were delivered with oak interiors, seven with black. Six cars, including this one, were equipped with the G92 performance axle with a 3.15:1 ratio. Every Aztec with the performance axle ratio had a black interior.



All of the Aztecs were designated Product Evaluation Program Cars/Special Event; however it is unknown if all of them were used in this manner. This particular car was shipped to General Motors North American Operations (NAO) in Warren, Michigan, in December 1997 and was placed in the Company Vehicle Evaluation Program in January 1998. A dated CVEP evaluation form with instructions for the driver was found in the glove box, further substantiating this fact.

Following their duties at NAO, where most were driven a few thousand miles, the Aztecs were refurbished to as-new condition and sold at a dealer-only auction. At the time, Cooksey says that he was surprised to learn that the cars were sold to the public without a notice that the paint color was custom tinted and not exact to the Dupont paint code. However, the fact that there had been only 15 Aztecs produced was no longer a secret, and there was no shortage of willing and ready buyers. It is interesting to note that while several of the large volume Corvette dealerships were able to purchase an Aztec, many of them went to smaller and lesser-known establishments. Several dealers who were lucky enough to be able to purchase one

of these special Corvettes from General Motors still own them today.

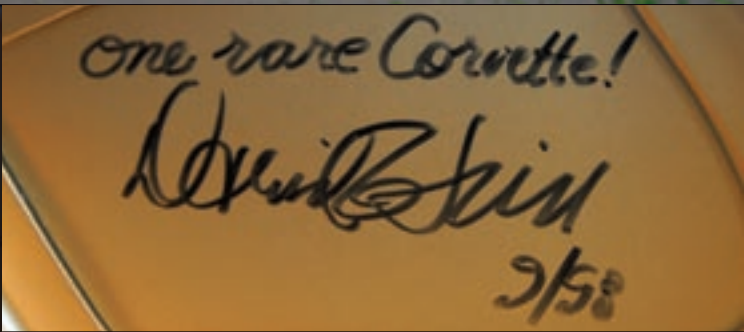
Upon completion of its evaluation duties, this Corvette was sold by GM to Bud's Chevrolet in St. Mary's, Ohio, who also received and sold one of the three Aztec convertibles. With the exception of a Corsa Pace Car exhaust, this 42,000 mile car survives today almost as it left the factory. A previous owner had the stock exhaust in his garage and gave it to Olson when he bought the car, a gesture that was much appreciated since the plan is to have his car judged in the future.

The window sticker on this Corvette indicates the following options in addition to standard equipment: Sport leather bucket seats, remote CD changer, dual zone air conditioning, six-way power passenger seat, memory package, performance axle ratio, body side moldings, fog lamps, cargo cover and net, and floor mats. You'll notice that the car does not have body side moldings, and Olson believes that they were never installed, perhaps due to the aforementioned paint match issues. Several Aztecs list BSMS on their sticker, but do not have them. He has talked to another Aztec Gold owner who reported that the BSMS came with his car separately when he purchased

it from the delivering dealer. Another mystery on this car, which could also be attributed to the paint issues, is the lack of a painted removable roof panel, which was standard equipment in 1998. The window sticker does not indicate the CC3 translucent removable roof panel option, yet the build sheet of this and every other coupe reveals that this is how they were built. Cooksey recalls that some tops were painted in Aztec Gold, however does not recall if any cars left the factory with them.

Olson is the third owner of this special Corvette, and credits the two prior owners with keeping it in such great shape. He pledges to continue to care for the car while still driving it on a limited basis. "These cars were meant to be driven and enjoyed, and that's what I intend to do. The car always draws a crowd, and it's fun to see other Corvette enthusiast's reactions. Either they don't know what it is and they like the color, or they do know what it is and can't believe they are seeing one in person!"

Of the nearly quarter million C5 Corvettes produced from 1997-2004, only 16 can claim this very unique color. According to Olson, this fact is what will make these cars future collectibles.



LEFT: The only deviation from stock on Mike's Gold C5 is a previous owner's addition of a Corsa exhaust. **RIGHT:** Ex Chief Engineer, Dave Hill said it best, "One Rare Corvette!"

"There were some great performance options and collector editions produced during the C5 era; however, none were what could be considered a truly limited production car. Color is the only major

feature that was produced in truly limited numbers on C5s, so my belief is that when some of these rare colors such as Aztec Gold, Fairway Green Metallic, and Medium Purple Pearl Metallic become

more widely known, there will be a solid demand for them". In case you were wondering, his Aztec is definitely not for sale, as he plans on enjoying it for many years to come. ■