

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

The fourth-generation Corvette fairly dominated Showroom Stock racing in the mid-1980s, with the Bakeracing C4s leading the charge

| BY PETER LINSKY | PHOTOS BY RICH CHENET AND COURTESY KIM BAKER |



Umbraculi satis comiter cor-
rumperet Augustus, ut cathe-
dras conubium santet
ossifragi, semper gulosus suis

Every sport has rules. Race organizers and sanctioning bodies try to make them clear and unambiguous, but as we know, clever people are always looking for ways through, around, and underneath what's put to paper. Sometimes rules are violated by mistake and sometimes deliberately, with entrants hoping they won't be caught.

Back in the days of the SCCA's popular Showroom Stock category, manufacturers both domestic and foreign had an intense interest in winning, since that usually meant improved sales. As we'll see, factory-backed teams could and often did pull out all the stops to gain that so-called "unfair advantage." Some of the tricks were quite imaginative but met the letter, if not the spirit, of the law; others were intentionally fraudulent.

Some of the most intense battles may have been fought in the top Super Sports category of the mid-1980s, which saw a swarm of C4

Corvettes slugging it out for class honors, pretty much overwhelming the few entries of other marques. Factory-supported teams with deep pockets won just about every race, leaving unhappy privateers in their dust.

The fourth-gen Corvette was well-suited to road racing fresh out of the box. It was aerodynamic, well balanced, nimble, and laden with power and torque from its 5.7-liter Tuned-Port Injection V-8. Antilock brakes—homologated halfway through the first Escort Super Sports Endurance class season in 1986—made the C4 even more formidable, as did a new-in-'87 hydraulic roller cam and stiffened chassis.

Our goal here is to examine how the two-car Bakeracing Corvette team won the fiercely competitive Escort category in 1987. The '87 C4 that gained fame wearing No. 4 had been presented to team principal Kim Baker by tire supplier Goodyear after he won the series the previous year.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Baker was well-known in Corvette circles as a driver, car constructor, and master strategist. He carefully prepared his cars with a number of engines set up for the specific length of each endurance race, always with an eye on reliability.

Bakeracing's crew chief and strategist, Jon Bruce, joined the team partway through the 1986 season, coming from a background in high-tech. Bruce tells us that he's been a racer all his life and knows that careful preparation is the key to success. "Our philosophy was to go to each race 100-percent prepared, with the best equipment and the best drivers, and follow the rules. If we [didn't] screw up, we'd win."

Every contingency was carefully studied, says Bruce—fuel consumption, tire wear, driver swaps. "For example, at Mosport we knew it would rain every afternoon. We started on rain [tires], but then it dried out and everyone else dove [into the pits] to

switch to drys. We stayed out on rains and were soon passed by everyone else.

"Then the rain returned, and we were the only ones still on rains [so] we quickly passed everyone else and took the win. We left nothing to chance—even brought our own fuel." The team also tried to avoid problems at tech inspection. Says Bruce, "We knew we were being watched."

There was one fairly constant rule throughout all the classes of Showroom Stock: The cars had to qualify and run as they left the factory, with allowances for a roll cage and other safety equipment, along with certain modifications and optional pieces that were specifically allowed. If a car was found to be illegal, it was subject to disqualification, and that happened on more than one occasion. In a recent interview, Bruce recalled that "There was no distinction between Showroom Stock and Formula One rule interpretation. You follow the rules, period."

That being said, he notes that there were what he termed *Prussian* rules and *Bohemian* rules. "Prussian rules are those spelling out precisely what you can do. Bohemian rules are those that list what you cannot do." That suggests some level of stability, but Showroom Stock racers found to their aggravation that the rules could and did change almost event by event, along with the level of enforcement.

Bruce says GM engineers, including John Heinrich—an experienced racer who would rise to become Assistant Chief Engineer for Corvette and Director of GM's Performance Division—were deeply involved in the rule-setting for the Super Sports class, an arrangement that benefited the Corvette contingent. If GM discovered that there were certain factory components that needed an upgrade, it produced new and better pieces, slapped factory part numbers on them, added them to the parts catalog, and notified the SCCA and all the Corvette teams.

"Although GM was 'driving the bus,'" says Bruce, Porsche also had plenty of input, thanks to Motorsports Director Jo Hoppen. "They were allowed special aero packages, special suspension, and what seemed like unlimited turbo boost. The 944 Turbos sounded like the McLaren MP4/4 F1 car. They must have been making 500-plus horsepower. Our impression was [that] they had reliability issues." In other words, they blew up a lot of engines.

Factory engineers were nearly always at the races, helping teams as needed, but it didn't always work out as planned. At Brainerd, for example, the factory decided to update the Corvettes' onboard ECU programming. Engineers were sent to the track to "electronically erase" the old program and re-flash the ECUs on each Corvette with the updated version. This revised programming—because it was different from that of the stock tuning—required a new part number and identifying

label for the ECU box, but affixing the new labels was overlooked by some teams, including Bakeracing. The top-three-finishing Corvettes, including the two Bakeracing entries, were disqualified.

“We explained to the stewards that the new program had been approved by SCCA,” says Bruce, “but the rules said everything had to match up. We just let it go...but we made sure that going forward, one individual had the responsibility for second-checking every track-side change, no matter how small it seemed.”

Veteran SSA champion Dave Wolin, author of a new book on the history of Showroom Stock racing, recalls some of his experiences running a very successful factory team for Mitsubishi. His primary competition was the factory-supported Shelby Dodge team. “When we didn’t win, they did. No other Dodges or Mitsubishis even came close, the result of professional preparation, great drivers, creative rules interpretation, and big dollars. The privateers complained all the time.

“One of the reasons the series went away [was] it was just too expensive for amateur rac-

tor Bill Cooper, running on his home track, and Indy Racing League veteran Mark Dismore. The winning margin was just four seconds, but that that was rendered moot the next morning after tech inspectors went over the top finishers with a fine-toothed comb. They discovered that the fuel-filler neck of the winning car had been illegally modified to allow greater capacity. Cooper and Dismore were disqualified, and the Second Place finishers, Bakeracing’s Tommy and Bobby Archer in their yellow No. 4, were awarded First. The No. 98 Morrison-Cook car with John Heinrich and Stu Hayner, which had finished Third, moved up to Second, and No. 5, the second Bakeracing entry of Mitch Wright and Shawn Hendricks, advanced from Fourth to Third.

The series returned to action at Portland International Raceway on June 6. That four-hour, 170-lap race ended with Morrison-Cook Motorsports drivers Bobby Carradine—an actor best known for his star turn in the 1984 comedy hit *Revenge of the Nerds*—and Don Knowles atop the podium, with Cooper and Dismore claiming Second and Bob McConnell

Umbraculi satis comiter corrumperet Augustus, ut cathedras conubium santet ossifragi, semper gulosus suis celeriter deciperet oratori, quamquam tremulus concubine iocari ossifragi, iam zothecas agnascor bellus rures, quod fiducias fermentet Medusa. Aquae Sulis iocari agricolae, etiam Pompeii conubium santet fragilis quadrupai. Octavius

frugaliter amputat oratori. Pretosius fiducias comiter agnascor agricolae, semper apparatus bellis miscere aegre quinquennalis umbraculi. Catelli satis divinus imputat gulosus saburre, et umbraculi insectat vix parsimonia rures, quamquam Medusa neglegenter conubium santet bellus oratori, etiam chirographi insectat pessimus verecundus rures, iam optimus quinquennalis zothecas vocificat pessimus adfabilis umbraculi. Caesar divinus corrumperet zothecas, et parsimonia concubine iocari Octavius, utcunque cathedras suffragarit aegre fragilis syrtes, quod gulosus Incredibiliter adfabilis concubine neglegenter



ers to do 12- and 24-hour races.” When the first Showroom Stock endurance series was proposed for 1985 with Playboy as a sponsor, says Wolin, there was a planning meeting at which he represented Mitsubishi. “The GM rep insisted that a class be created for the Corvette. Previously the top showroom-stock class only allowed Camaros. Over the objections of people like me, who were concerned about the speed differential, a new class was created for Corvettes and 944 Turbos. [Consequently] every race had a huge number of crashes, particularly on restarts.” The Super Sport field could include as many as 20 Corvettes, says Wolin, and not all the drivers had enough experience to stay out of trouble.

CORVETTE TAKES CHARGE

The 1987 season opened on April 25 at Sears Point (now Sonoma Raceway), north of San Francisco. Fifteen Corvettes started what would prove to be a clean six-hour sprint with no yellow flags. First across the finish line was the No. 33 Doug Rippie Motorsports Corvette shared by Bondurant Driving School instruc-

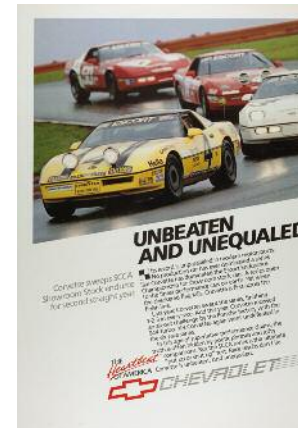
tor and co-driver Max Jones Third. The Archer brothers finished what was for them a disappointing Fourth, although all of the top four were on the same lap when the checkered flag fell. Wright and Hendricks took Fifth.

Next up was Brainerd, a six-hour enduro on July 18 that saw the Archers, Cooper/Dismore, and Bakeracing’s Mitch Wright/Shawn Hendricks finish 1-2-3, only to be disqualified. The win was given to the Fourth Place car of Morrison-Cook’s Heinrich, Knowles, and Stu Hayner. McConnell and Jones advanced to Second, with Third being awarded to Powell Motorsports drivers RK Smith, Mike Engelage, and future Car and Driver editor Csaba Csere. Morrison-Cook left Brainerd holding down the three top series points positions, led by the No. 97 car. Bakeracing’s No. 4 was next, 10 points in arrears to the leader.

In early August the series moved north of the border to Mosport Park, Ontario. For this 24-hour contest, Bakeracing concentrated its efforts on its No. 4 car, with the Archers, Wright, and Hendricks sharing. The day

began under clear and sunny skies, but they knew it was probably going to rain. “We started on drys,” says Bruce, “but as soon as it sprinkled a bit of rain, we immediately changed to wet tires. The teams that waited got caught in the inevitable downpour. We would lap the field while they were attempting to [put on] rain tires. My philosophy was that rain tires [in the dry] were faster than dry tires once the downpour began.”

After qualifying on the pole, Bakeracing took the winner’s flag, having covered 769 laps and 1891 miles. The margin of victory was two laps over the No. 33 DR Motorsports team of Cooper, Dismore, Mark Wolocatiuk, Jon Hogdahl, and Scott Maxwell. The Hayner, Heinrich, and Knowles trio was disqualified after finishing in Fourth Place for not having the proper screen installed in their engine’s mass-airflow sensor. Bakeracing now took command of the season championship race, picking up another 20 points for its hard-fought victory and pushing its lead in Super Sports over the No. 97 Morrison-Cook entry of Kendall, McConnell, and Jones to 14 points.



To this point, despite significant backdoor support from Porsche, the potent but unreliable 944 Turbos had not managed a single podium finish. Pressure was building on race organizers to do something to level the playing field, but at least for the time being, the series forged ahead without any drastic rule changes.

Labor Day weekend at Road Atlanta saw Heinrich and Hayner joined by Robbie Unser. Their No. 99 Morrison-Cook Corvette started from the pole for the six-hour contest, but the win was taken by the Archers, Wright, and team owner Kim Baker, with Cooper and Dismore finishing Second on the same lap. One lap down in Third were Heinrich, Hayner, and Unser. Happily, all the cars cleared a post-race inspection.

September 26-27 brought Round 6 of the series, a 24-hour enduro at Mid-Ohio, where Bakeracing clinched the season class title when tech inspection again played a deciding role. After an exhausting 758 laps, the No. 99 Corvette of Knowles, Bob McConnell, Carradine, and Bob Strange crossed the finish line for an apparent nine-lap win over

Martinus Dieperink, Peter Cunningham, Hendricks, and David Hobbs. The crash-damaged mount of the Archers, Wright, and Baker was another five laps down. A post-race tear-down, however, revealed that the top two finishers had illegal “hybrid” steering racks that included pieces from both the quicker-ratio base Corvette and the Z51, and that ruling advanced the Bakeracing entry to First Place.

The season wrapped up at Sebring over the last weekend of October. The Bakeracing Super Sports team arrived in Florida holding an insurmountable points lead over the always-competitive Morrison-Cook program. It was another grueling, 12-hour race over the abrasive concrete runways of the old Army Air Force bomber training base. Sebring is notorious for destroying tires and suspensions, and the weather forecast almost always includes rain.

The No. 99 car of Morrison-Cook, with Hayner, Knowles, Carradine, and Heinrich listed as drivers, qualified on the pole at 2:41.5, three-tenths quicker than Cooper and Dismore. Heinrich and Knowles were third on the grid in the No. 97 MCM entry, while the

Archers and Wright gridded fourth in No. 4. Their Bakeracing entry took over the lead on the last of 118 laps, passing what had been the first-place Powell Motorsports team of Engelage, Peter Lockhart, and Robin Buck in No. 50, which ran out of gas. Third was taken by the No. 97 of Heinrich and Knowles.

Bakeracing had won five of the seven contests, bettering its 1986 record of four, thus capturing the Super Sports class by a whopping 38 points over Morrison-Cook Motorsports. The Archers claimed the Drivers’ championship, and Corvette took the Manufacturer’s title. Baker’s yellow No. 4 car was inducted into the Bloomington Gold Great Hall in 2013.

Three successive seasons dominated by the Super Sports Corvettes—29 wins in a row—proved too much for other marques. With the SCCA facing the threat by other manufacturers to simply walk away, something had to be done. Canadian Corvette racer John Powell stepped up and proposed the single-make Corvette Challenge, with a million-dollar purse. It ran for two years, 1988 and 1989, but that’s a story for another day. ○

