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One of Those Guys

What do you do when your Z06s keep being too clean to modify? Get one that's already built and then take them all out in rotation. Jeff Glenn reports; photography by the author.

I once found an ad for an old MGB with a Scottish flag painted over its hood. When I forwarded this to a friend with the same kind of car sporting a Union Jack on its hood, he wrote back, "I saw that, but I don't want to be one of those guys."

Of course I knew what he meant. You probably do, too—*those* guys are the enthusiasts

who get so deep into one single model that they wind up with ten different flavors of exactly the same car. With four different late-model Corvettes, Les Oesterreich (say it "A-Strike") is on the verge of being one of those guys, but at least he can make a case for each of his three Z06s—a stock '04 Commemorative, a modified '02, and a bone-stock '06.





Does anyone really need three Z06s? Of course not, Les quickly affirms. In his case, "It just sort of happened. Every time I bought a new car I was going to set it up, do a few things to it like most guys, spend a little money, do a few more things, and get the whole thing together over the span of a couple of years. When I got the Commemorative Edition I was going to set it up like that, but then, before I did, the 2006 came out. So I got that car with the same intentions. But as it turned out, both cars were so darn nice I just couldn't bring myself to mess with them."

To Oesterreich, acquiring Corvettes isn't a new thing. "I bought my first new Corvette in 1970, a 454 big-block. I wish I had that car today—I paid \$5500 out the door!" Since then he's had a "...1978, '82, '85, '95, '97, and a

"As a neat extra, MSI mounted a shift light inside the housing of the Head Up Display. When it goes off, there's no missing it."

50th Anniversary convertible. That last one is the car that I traded in for my wife's current C6 convertible." Eventually Les put those two shiny Z06s in his garage, which brings us up to today and the point at which he realized he wanted one more example to hotrod in clean conscience. In due time Les came across the extensively modified 2002 Z06 you see here, thanks to contacts with the Roseville, California Corvette shop Motor Sport Image and Performance. "It had a lot more on it already than I was planning to put into my own, and for a lot less than I'd have spent trying to duplicate it."

Motor Sport Image boss Mark Stein initially built the car for Tony Battistella, whose son Phillip happened to work at the shop. "It kind of evolved over the course of about a year and a half," Stein explains. The mods began with a supercharger and an RK Sports hood. After a little while Tony decided he still needed more power, so in went a custom-ground cam, high-performance valvetrain, FLP ceramic headers, high-flow cats, GHL stainless mufflers, an uprated fuel pump and injectors, and a Be Cool aluminum radiator. The driveline also received a B&M Ripper short-shift kit, Spec 3

clutch (rated to 650 bhp), 24-pound steel billet flywheel, ceramic clutch housing, and DTE Stage 3 diff gears with 4.10 final drive. As a neat extra, MSI mounted a shift-warning light inside the housing of the Head Up Display. When it goes off, there's no missing it. Stopping power was also increased via Baer brakes and slotted/crossdrilled rotors.

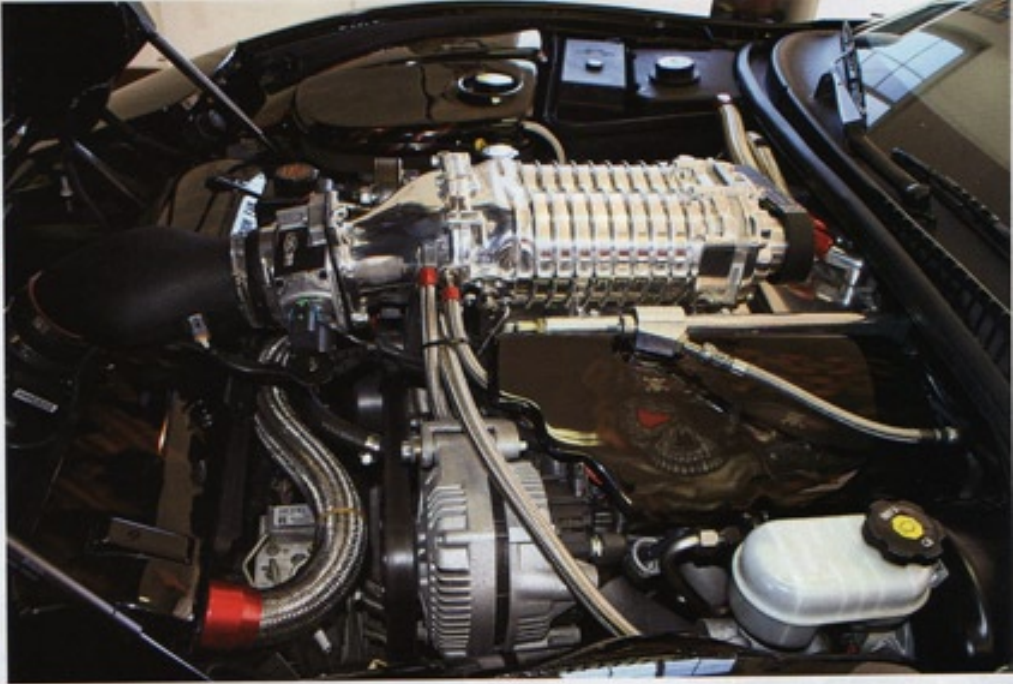
That kept Tony happy for a little bit longer. Sure enough, though, he eventually came back seeking even more grunt. At the same time the car had a California smog test coming up, and MSI needed to plan around that. "Prior to this," Stein goes on, "Magnuson didn't have a California-smog-legal supercharger for this car. But, as it happened, they came out with an intercooled unit that was legal at around the same time. Even better, they started a really nice exchange program where you could send in your old supercharger and they'd send back an intercooled unit with a full retrofit kit." While they were at it, MSI added a boost-raising undersized pulley, stainless hoses, and slick-looking show fittings.

Because the new system also required trimming the stock coil covers for additional clearance, "...we laid up our own fiberglass covers and worked with motorcycle-helmet painter Rick Briggs of Offbeat Productions to come up with a custom design." (Briggs, a factory painter for Arai, does the helmets for current MotoGP World Champ Nicky Hayden, among others.) Tony gave the artist a vague *Pirates of the Caribbean* theme to work with, from which Briggs developed his own pirate-and-skull iconography. A close look reveals his attention to detail: The skull's bandanna is dotted with Chevy Bow Ties, for example. (Les Oesterreich admits this particular theme wouldn't have been his own first choice, "...but it fits the car well enough.")

By this time the Z06 sat on 18- and 19-inch Ronal wheels wrapped in Michelin Pilot Sports and was evolving from a performance piece into a showcar. With that goal in mind, Tony's next yen was for a killer stereo setup. Stein obliged with an Alpine 7998 CD/MP3 head unit, Bristol Audio speakers, Silk tweeters, custom ten-inch enclosed subs behind the seats, and all the necessary amps and connections. Sound-deadening mats were added to damp out vibrations and transient noise, at which point the car's owner announced that he also wanted to start doing track-day events. In went a rollbar and five-point harnesses.

Stein has an extensive background in road-racing, and he's set up track- and street-driven Corvettes for years. "I got in and drove the car myself, and with all that added power I really didn't like the stock shock setup. Also, because he was running 18s and 19s and liked





Above, right: Roots-type Magnuson blower has become increasingly popular in the world of late-model Corvettes; Callaway uses a similar unit as the starting point of its recent C16 engine build (see CM32).

Below: Puffed-up RK Sports hood is a little bit taller than necessary, but it certainly speaks to the changes inside.

it so low, there wasn't any suspension travel before the shocks bottomed out. I came up with a set of QA1s that were designed for a different car. We're a QA1 dealer, so I can't really tell people what they came off of, but suffice it to say they weren't made for the C5. In any case, I came up with a combination where the shocks were about an inch shorter than stock, so we picked up that much in suspension travel. It's not the optimal answer, because you still kill the roll centers by lowering the car that much, but at least Tony was able to keep the ride height he wanted and I was able to get back a lot of the handling that had been lost. Also, because these shocks are

adjustable, we can soften them up and give it a nice ride on the street; then, when you get to the track, you can just lay on your side, reach around the tire, grab the adjusting knob, and turn. With the detent clicks on the adjusters you don't even have to see the knob—you just reach in and count the clicks."

Stein agrees that Sachs T1 shocks—today's kneejerk solution for many track-used C5s—are fine roadrace pieces, but on the street he finds them a little too harsh. Ditto T1 antiroll bars. "Road courses just aren't as rough as the street. And while a lot of companies put road-race parts out on the street, often you can't drive those cars very fast (on the road) because





Left: With more finicky turbos, boost gauges are highly educational; on a supercharged engine, they're more of a fun-to-watch novelty item.

Below: Between the blown LS6 and frequent track-day use, a rollbar with shoulder-harness capacity seems sensible.



the suspension no longer gives. I tend to look at the problem from the other direction: If 90% of your driving is done on the street, then let's make a good-handling street car that will also serve as a good track car, too, rather than making an awesome track car that feels lousy on the street."

After his Z06 custom had been tuned, shown, and tracked, Tony Battistella bought a retirement home and decided to part with his race/showcar. Enter Oesterreich, who recognized a golden opportunity when he saw it: Here was a Z06 built to even higher standards than he planned on, all at a much lower cost. Nor was Les shy about putting such a car through its paces in autocrosses, the dragstrip, or the roadcourse. "I'm still getting used to it," he says. "My first autocross was a few months back. But each time I get a

little bit better and a little more comfortable with it." A Bondurant vet and experienced autocrosser, Les says he knows the car's capabilities well enough to give it its due respect.

Oesterreich is the president/CEO of Superior Farms, a lamb-processing company with operations in Australia, Boston, Denver, and California, which explains his cars' personalized plates: EWE plus a Roman numeral. He's also a longtime American-muscle fanatic, going all the way "...back to my college days in Texas, when I had a '66 Impala two-door hardtop with four on the floor and a 427/425. I had friends at the time with Corvettes, but I was always able to get better traction to the ground, so eventually I started drag racing—just threw the slicks in the trunk and drove to the track. It's really humid down there, but after I figured out how to cool the fuel no one beat me and I grabbed a couple A-Stock cham-

pionships." From there he got into motocross, which led to "hairscrambles" through his 30s, 40s, and 50s. "Those are enduros that run like a time-speed-distance rally. You run a constant speed and get your helmet marked at checkpoints that are randomly laid out along the course, which usually runs through rivers, gullies, and other motocross-type terrain."

The same spirit now animates Les's relationship to his supercharged MSI tuner car. "I think it'll turn low 12s or high 11s at the strip, eventually. I went to a test-and-tune day up in Sacramento recently, just getting a feel for the car and for the new starting trees they use now. My reaction time was a .73, then a .18.... I got it down to a .10 by the end of the day." Les has also done testing at Thunderhill Raceway outside Willows, California, where the intercooled LS6 was soon pushing the car past 125.

Does all this fun cut into his time with the rest of his Corvettes? "Nope, I drive them all, depending on the weather. And frankly, until I joined this damned club (Vaca Valley Corvettes), I used to drive them *whenever*. But the people in the club are always saying 'Oh, we don't drive them on rainy days,' and somehow I guess it sank in!" Rain delays notwithstanding, Les drives every one of his Corvettes to work, club days, or just for fun in turn.

"Each one is different, I think. At one level I feel the C6—whether it's my wife's convertible or my 2006 Z06—has a lot better feel and balance than the C5. Ergonomically it's better, certainly, and the C6 Z06 has *plenty* of horsepower for most people; you really have to respect it and use it just where you need and want it." Nevertheless, Oesterreich finds his earlier cars having their own charms, so that each gives its own kind of pleasure. That's especially true of the MSI hotrod—a car that in just a few miles I, too, understood was quite different from any stock Z06. The clutch is noticeably stiffer, and the short-shifter linkage raises effort—and reduces certainty—in every direction. The power of course is considerable, but the most surprising aspect is the lowered car's street-friendly ride. Despite the big wheels and slammed height, MSI's Stein wasn't fooling around—he's definitely cooked up a great all-around road chassis here.

Best of all, Oesterreich is every bit as interested in using this car as Stein was in making it usable. While many other Z06 tuner cars remain hidden in heated garages, Les just hops in and takes off. "I don't tape up the paint to avoid chips at the track, or any of that stuff. It just doesn't bother me." His attitude may not be typical of most custom-Corvette owners, but he thinks it's quite "...typical of most people in their 50s or 60s with a little expendable income and a desire to be out there enjoying life. My feeling is simple: You might as well go have some fun." ○