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Corvette is fastest of them all

Carroll man's street-legal speedster can do a quarter-mile in under 7 seconds

By Joe Burris

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Going from zero to 60 mph in one second will make people stop and stare, but Rod Saboury need not drive his 2,400-horsepower, twin-turbo-charged Corvette that fast to grab attention.

Sometimes, the Millers resident and National Hot Rod Association driver cruises along Carroll County's streets or pulls up into a McDonald's drive-through, and then heads turn - fixated on the Corvette's dragster-engine sound, fire-red exterior and hot-rod designs.

"It's like driving a UFO on the highway," says Saboury, 58, whose 1963-model Corvette is widely regarded as the fastest street-legal car on the planet. The car so impressed the editors at Super Chevy magazine that the 35-year-old publication named Saboury's Corvette as its inaugural Car of the Year in its February issue.

In fact, Super Chevy editor Jim Campisano is among those who have seen the Corvette's performance up close. He was there when Saboury posted eye-popping practice-run times in the Corvette during last summer's O'Reilly Auto Parts Super Chevy Show at Summit Motor Sports Park in Norwalk, Ohio.

Saboury clocked his car at zero to 60 mph in one second. Moreover, the track's Compulink timing system (which doesn't measure miles per hour until the eighth-mile mark) clocked him reaching the eighth-mile mark at 4.56 seconds (159.27 mph).

Then the Corvette reached the quarter-mile mark in 6.95 seconds at 210.54 mph - the fastest-ever recorded drag strip run by a street-legal car.

"You can tell that he was so exited that he almost forgot to brake," said Summit race director Nettie Damon, who clocked Saboury's eighth-mile and quarter-mile times.

The feat was the accomplishment of Saboury's much-sought-after goal of running a quarter-mile in the six-second range with a car that meets

all requirements necessary to pass an inspection and be registered and insured in a state. That includes working headlights and tail lights, working doors, windshield wipers and turn signals.

Saboury's efforts also silenced detractors in hot-rod circles who claimed that such speeds were not possible in a 1963 Corvette.

"Think of a plane getting catapulted off the deck of an aircraft carrier; it was insane," Campisano said of Saboury's feat. "And the tires he uses are street legal tires. His car runs on pump gas. It's not unusual to have a fast street car, but his has cup holders and power windows."

All this from a full-time roofing contractor who has been designing and racing cars as a hobby for 40 years. Though he lives quietly on farmland in Carroll County, Saboury is known worldwide for the 15 supercharged cars he has designed and the speed marks they've set.

He's also credited with helping to take an illegal activity - street racing - to the safety of the closed track, bolstering its popularity.

To get an idea of the impressiveness of Saboury's ride, consider the Shelby Super Cars Ultimate Aero, which is listed in Guinness World Records as the fastest production car. It can travel a quarter-mile in just under 10 seconds.

Yet Saboury's four-speed-transmission car has twice as much horsepower as the Ultimate Aero.

The Corvette took two years to design and five years to build at auto-builder Lowdown Hotrods of Cambridge, Ontario. Saboury declined to say how much the car cost.

The car takes off in first gear, then shifts into second gear at 8,200 rpm. The car is designed to transfer power from the engine to the wheels in a way that promotes traction and prevents spinning at takeoff.

That means that as quick as you can say "one Mississippi," Saboury's Corvette goes from the starting line to 60 feet, or a distance of nearly two-thirds the length of a regulation basketball court. At takeoff, its front tires go airborne.

Upon reaching 210 mph, the car requires a half-mile of braking distance to come to a stop, which Saboury does with the help of two parachutes.

"This is not a street car that you can race. It is a race car that you can drive on the street," said Saboury, whose other vehicle is a 1992 Ford F-250 truck. "We have designed and built this car to leave the starting line as fast as possible to get the forward momentum going. When you drag race, the first eighth of a mile is where you pick up all your miles per hour."

Auto racing experts say that going from zero to 60 mph in a second is nothing new. Indeed, an August 2002 issue of Car and Driver magazine highlighted vehicles in the funny car class of drag racing that have been clocked going from zero to 100 mph in 1.2 seconds and in less than 100 feet.

"Cars like Saboury's are pretty much built for extreme acceleration, and zero to 60 in a second is pretty much the norm," said Pete Epple, associate editor of Muscle Mustangs & Fast Fords magazine.

In fact, Saboury's more thrilled with reaching the quarter-mile at 210 mph. He says at that speed wind resistance is so significant that "if you were to stick your hand out the window you'd break your wrist."

Saboury is a self-taught car builder whose penchant for speed began at 15, when he immersed himself in auto magazines and movies. Back then, he purchased his first car, a 1932 Ford, and while his friends spent the weekends at the movies or the shopping centers, he worked on his car, picking up spare parts at a nearby junkyard.

Saboury competed in his first official drag race at 18 and established himself as a builder of street cars that went very fast. He built two Corvettes (a 1957 model in 1995 and a 1953 model in 1998) that won National Muscle Car Association (NMCA) pro street class championships. He has posted eight world-record times.

"If you can imagine hockey before Wayne Gretzky, that's what street car racing was before Saboury came into the mix," said RPM magazine editor Chris Biro. "He's one of the guys who says, 'Racing on the street can kill somebody; come to the track and see what can be done in a safe, controlled environment.' He's a role model for kids out there."

Saboury abhors illegal street racing incidents such as one last year on Indian Head Highway in Prince George's County that resulted in eight deaths.

"That's so dangerous, because their cars aren't safe," he said. "If they would crash their cars they're going to kill themselves or someone else."

Despite all his exploits at high speeds, Saboury says he has never wrecked a vehicle, which for his sake is fortunate since his 1963 Corvette has no air bags. Moreover, he said, his souped-up ride doesn't raise eyebrows among state troopers.

"I went driving down to Ocean City recently, and I was told that they were going to be mean to me," Saboury said of the state troopers, "but they were all waving at me.

"But I'm not a young kid driving this car. I guess they look at me and feel ... 'Look at that old guy driving that car.'"

Lt. Andrew G. Winner of the Maryland State Police's Westminster barracks said that he has heard about Saboury's Corvette but isn't concerned about a car that fast on state roads.

"I'm not concerned because it all comes down to the driver," said Winner. "The truth is, you can have an automobile accident driving anything. I don't care about the horsepower; it's about driver error, common sense and using good judgment.

"That's a very, very fast car, but you put the right driver behind the wheel, and he knows not to be reckless and endanger anyone."

Saboury's Corvette gets 10 miles per gallon, so it will never be confused with a family car, and when running errands or cruising on the town, he's careful not to show off what it can do.

It's on the closed track that Saboury indulges his need for speed.

"As far as wow factor, of doing something at the moment, I've never had anything in my life like that," Saboury said about his run at the Ohio track. "I've never been sky diving, but I bet you it has to be similar to the thrill of sky diving, because it's something that kind of frightens you in one way, but the adrenalin rush is something that you can't wait to do it again."

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