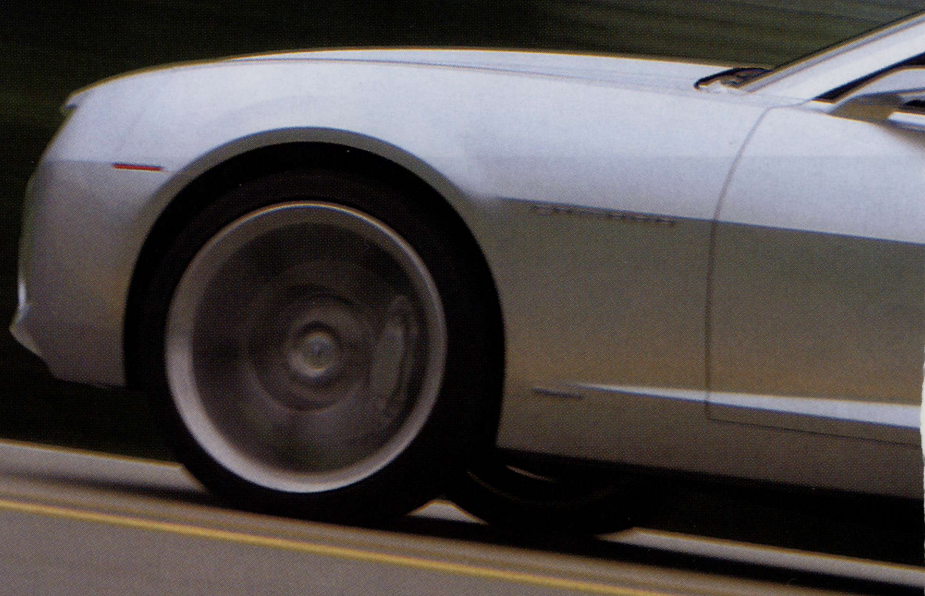


# ON-TRACK

Driving the Camaro  
concept toward  
production.

# PONY

BY JOE DeMATIO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLIE MAGEE





DUE  
'09

It's Friday afternoon, our appointment with the Chevrolet Camaro concept car is at hand, and the gray clouds hanging over Milford, Michigan, don't look like they're going to disappear anytime soon. As we head east on I-96 toward the Milford exit, a few splatters of rain hit our windshield. General Motors operatives have already warned us that if the ground is wet, the handbuilt prototype won't be allowed out onto the proving ground's Black Lake or the south loop—the most action we'll be granted is to roll the car around under a porte cochere attached to a testing garage.

All of our worries are for naught. The clouds remain, but they've shut off their rain faucets and the testing tarmac is dry. My GM escort, designer Christos Roustemis, motions for me to get in the car, with a warning to shut the driver's door behind me slowly and deliberately. Door closed, I'm sitting

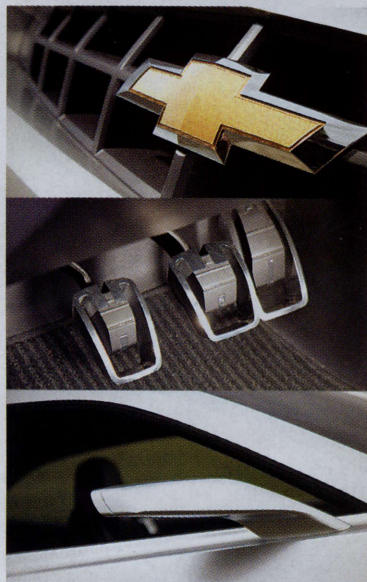
in a tall bucket seat with limited adjustments, so I'm perched a bit too high. The seat-mounted belts are not usable. There are no panes of glass in the doors or in the rear quarters, so we've got wide, uninterrupted sightlines to both sides.

Roustemis gives me the go-ahead to start the car. I depress the clutch and hit the rudimentary rocker switch on the dash. The concept's 400-hp, 6.0-liter LS2 Corvette V-8 rumbles to life, I palm the six-speed manual's huge, billet-aluminum gearshifter knob into first gear, and we're off. But not like a rocket, that's for sure. Although this Camaro feels just about as solid as any last-generation F-body car from the 1990s, it's limited to





## It's in the details



The woven-metal bow-tie badge is very smart; like many interior features, the pedals are machined from billet aluminum; the sleek side-view mirrors likely would be bigger for production.

40 mph and fairly low revs. (Neither the speedo nor the tach actually works.) We never get beyond third gear. What can we tell you about the way a production Camaro would actually drive? Not a helluva lot.

GM vice chairman Bob Lutz has indicated that, in order for a viable business case to be made for the Camaro, projected annual sales would have to break the six-figure barrier. You don't have to get the concept car to 60 mph in five seconds or blast into triple digits to know that there ought to be at least a hundred thousand people out there who would want to buy this car if it ever reaches showrooms. After all, one of the bright spots in Ford's recent gloom has been the Mustang, which sold some 160,000 copies last year, so GM ought to be able to turn two-thirds that many Camaros. This car looks awesome, it will be available with a V-8 driving the rear wheels, and it will be affordable. Most important, unlike so many vehicles in GM's stable, it's a car that commands people's attention. Why else would dozens of automotive journalists from North and South America and Europe have clamored for the opportunity to get behind the wheel of a fragile Camaro prototype that was so emasculated, you couldn't even hope to burn rubber?

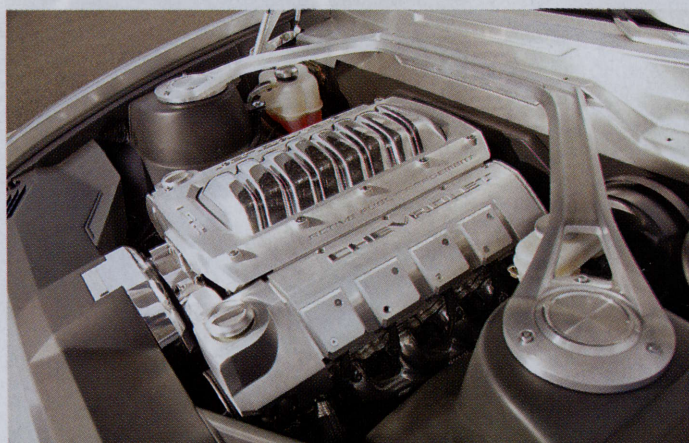
Clearly, it's too early for anybody to pronounce what a factory Camaro will be like to drive, although some quarters have attempted to do so. We can tell you, though, that sitting in the Camaro's cabin while the vehicle is in motion just feels right. There's more than a whiff of retro design in here, but the overall ambience hits all the high notes. Of course, the copious use of billet aluminum for the gearshifter, the center console, the pedals, and the other trim is bound to help any car's interior; it's too bad none of it will ever see a showroom. The big sweeps of orange trim on the dash and the door panels, though, are production feasible. "We were going for an anodized [aluminum] look," says Roustemis. "The orange material is painted Plexiglas, which gives more depth to the color." The orange trim is mirrored in the secondary gauges in the center console, which thrusts under the instrument panel like a spear, just like the original Camaro's did.

The wide, short CinemaScope windshield frames the view over the long, broad hood in a way that most of today's sharply sloped windshields do not. What you see immediately in front of you, of course, is familiar to anyone who's ever been in a first-generation Camaro.

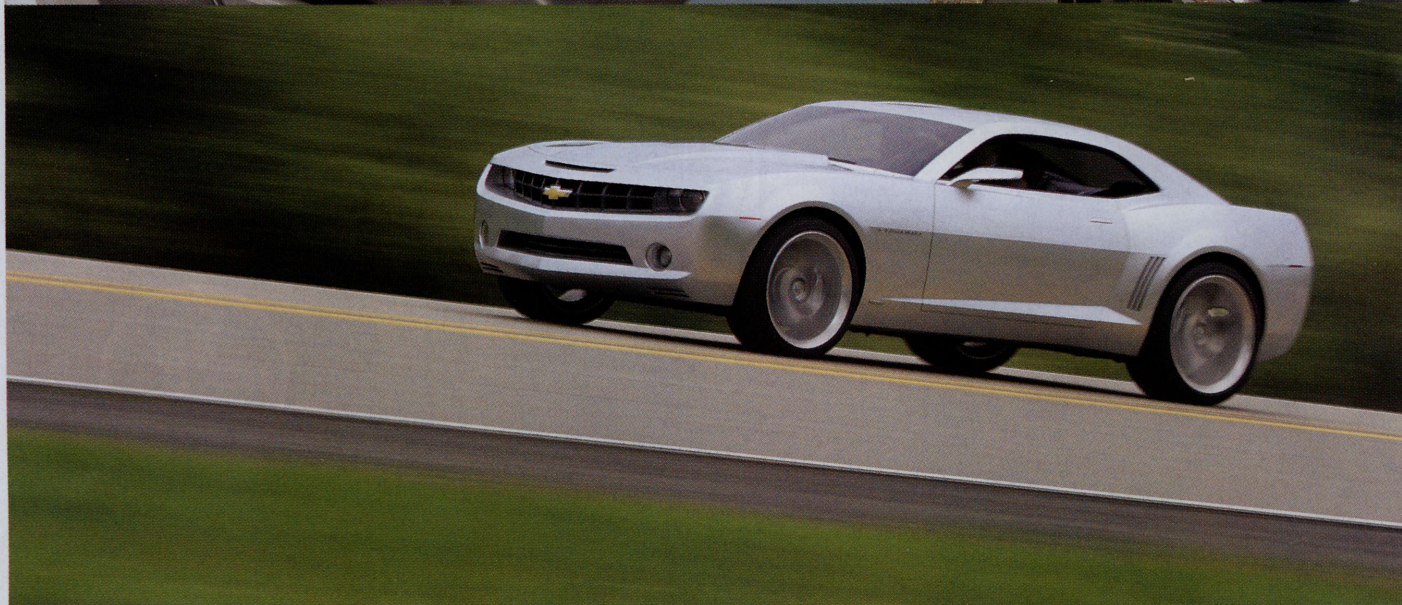
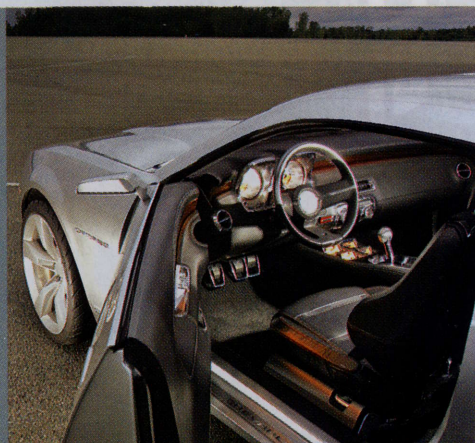


Even at low speeds, the Camaro is cool to drive. Cabin shapes are realistic, even if the materials are not.





Never has a Corvette V-8 been dressed so fine: all the shiny stuff in the Camaro concept's engine bay is the Real Thing—billet aluminum—including the gorgeous strut tower braces. Open the Camaro's door (right) and step back in time, to 1969.



## PONY CARS ARE A WAY FOR DETROIT TO RECONNECT WITH AN INDIFFERENT PUBLIC.

### SPECS

**Engine** 6.0-liter OHV aluminum V-8  
**Output** 400 hp  
**Transmission** 6-speed manual  
**Suspension, f/r** Strut-type/multilink  
**Projected on sale** 2009

There's the deep-dish steering wheel, although its spokes are much thicker than the original's. Beyond the wheel, the prominent twin gauge cluster reaching deep into the dash also harks back to 1969. It was drawn at GM's California studios by a Frenchman, Julien Montousse, who evolved the surrounding chrome rectangles into strong architectural elements. In a bit of Gallic-influenced hyperbole, he says that "the cluster is the window to the soul of the Camaro." *Mais bien sûr, Julien.*

In our March issue, we detailed the circuitous road the Camaro concept followed through GM's design studios before it landed like a meteorite on the Chevy stand at this year's Detroit auto show. We also described the engineering and financial hurdles that the Camaro must leap before it can roll off an assembly line. The concept car was cobbled together on a modified Cadillac CTS/STS platform, but a production Camaro likely would ride on a version of the rear-wheel-drive Zeta platform from GM's Down Under division, Holden. Will the Camaro have a live rear axle, like the Mustang, or be independently suspended? It will all come down to money. A V-6-powered model priced in the

low \$20,000s is crucial in order for the car to meet volume targets and to compete with the Mustang. GM has plenty of six- and eight-cylinder engines in its stable. A V-8 would need to be cost-effective and more powerful than the Mustang's 300-hp unit, yet not rub up against the 400-hp Corvette.

In the same way that the Mustang has been a megawatt star for Ford, the Camaro could be one for GM, which could certainly use such a vehicle right now. A modern, relevant Camaro could ride the current muscle car wave, which shows no sign of abating. More important, it could serve as an image flagship for a resurgent Chevy brand in a way that the more expensive Corvette cannot.

There are lots of questions to be answered about the Camaro, but the main one for GM to concern itself with is how, not if, it will take the car to the masses. Only American automakers have the heritage to build pony cars, and pony cars are one of the best ways for Detroit to reconnect with an indifferent public. General Motors has to build the Camaro, because Toyota and Hyundai and BMW can't. ■

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