

Fangs for the Memories

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1992 roadster, raw by design

The discontinuation of several Chrysler models to help stop the corporation's financial bleeding is no secret. Rumors abound about Dodge's Viper being on this list, and numerous Dodge "insiders" claim the Viper will be discontinued after 2009.

Has the Viper been a resounding success, merely in danger of corporate cost-cutting, or would its termination brand it as a failure? To make that determination, let's look back at the Viper's history to see if it has stayed true to its original goal, and how Vipers have fared in the marketplace.

In the dark days of K cars and minivans at Chrysler, the Viper was a dream car from former United States Marine fighter pilot Captain Robert Lutz. Lutz "transferred" from Ford to Chrysler in 1986, yet still drove his 1985 Mk IV Autocraft Cobra to work at Chrysler. Lutz, well-known car guy extraordinaire and longtime friend to SCM, was no doubt irritated that Chrysler had nothing even remotely as exciting as his Cobra.

Building a modern Cobra

As a friend of Carroll Shelby's, Lutz wanted to build a modern Cobra—two seats, big engine, rear-wheel drive, no cupholders, no a/c, no cruise control, and no Corinthian leather. Anyone who considers a Viper without taking its original mission into consideration is missing the point. The USMC boot camp and training program may be the toughest in the world, so Marine/car guy Lutz's dream car was liable to be unforgivably spare.

Lutz also enlisted his co-workers at Chrysler—design head Tom Gale and chief engineer Francois Castaing. Consummate car guys themselves, Gale and Castaing had already been working on a two-seat roadster concept called "Big Shot." The decision was made to introduce a concept car at the 1989 Detroit Auto Show to see if anyone would actually buy a modern-day Cobra from Dodge. Lutz wanted to retain some "snake heritage" while naming the new car but rejected Python and Sidewinder to settle on Viper. The overwhelming response from the Detroit show proved him correct about the market.

The problem was how to sell a car with an estimated build cost of \$70 million to the brass at Chrysler, including Chairman Lee Iacocca. Remember, this was in the post-bankruptcy days, when Chrysler's finances were still partly controlled by bankers. Who better to sell a modern day Cobra to Lee Iacocca than Carroll Shelby? Shelby was brought into the project by Lutz, and Iacocca trusted Shelby. The Shelby influence is very much evident on the Viper, and he is considered one of the so-called Viper "four fathers," along with Roy H. Sjöberg, Gale, and Lutz.

Lutz was adamant the Viper's powerplant had to be bigger than anything else on

the market. Dodge had a new cast-iron 488-ci V10 for its pickups, and they used it on the second prototype Viper with a 6-speed transmission.

Engine developed by Lamborghini

Lamborghini, owned by Chrysler at the time, was enlisted to develop an aluminum version of this V10 for the production Viper. Thinking outside the box to get the car built, "Team Viper" was born—a team made up of car guys and racers who were able to bring the first production Viper to market in about 30 months. Led by chief engineer Roy Sjöberg, Team Viper was the beginning of the platform concept that Chrysler still uses successfully to this day.

The Viper came to market in 1992 for \$52,000, with 400 hp from the 488-ci V10. Two hundred were sold in North America, plus another 85 export cars. They were a huge success, even with rampant dealer mark ups. In 1993, 1,043 were built, followed by 3,083 in 1994—the year air conditioning becoming available. For 1995, 1,577 were built and a factory hard top was marketed. This was the Viper's first generation, known as the RT/10.

In 1996, Dodge unveiled the Viper GTS, a coupe with styling loosely based on the Shelby Cobra Daytona coupe. The RT/10 roadster was still available and 721 were built, now with 415 hp. The coupe boasted 450 hp and had rear-exiting exhaust rather than sidepipes. For 1996, Vipers added outside door handles and NACA ducts on the hood for the coupes; ABS came along in 2001. The cars from 1996 to 2002 are considered second-generation Vipers.

The Viper was given a complete redesign in 2003 to begin its third generation. Renamed the Viper SRT-10, with 505 hp and a/c but still devoid of other creature comforts, it was now a true convertible, with no coupes built. In 2006, the Viper coupe returned for one model year before the Viper went on hiatus in 2007.

Cautious critics treated with scorn

For 2008, the fourth-gen Viper, available in both coupe and convertible form, boasted an 8.4-liter V10 with 600 horsepower. When automotive writers at a press day commented on the dangerous nature of a 600-hp car with no electronic driver aids, original Team Viper engineer Herb Helbig responded scornfully, "Your driver's aids are attached to your ankles."

Like significantly more expensive exotics, the Viper's low build volume has caused six of the 16 model years to appreciate already, though few have come to auction. Low-mile "in the wrapper" 1992s can bring \$80,000 or more. First-year GTS coupes with low miles can fetch \$65,000. Blue and white RT/10s from '97 bring over their original MSRP, and the 100 GT2s of 1998, with an original MSRP of \$85,000, bring from \$100,000 to \$150,000, depending on mileage. Low-mileage 1999–2002 American Club Racer editions are good for more than MSRP, with the Holy Grail being the 2002 "Final

Edition" ACR.

For the time being, you can walk into a Dodge dealer and order a new 600-hp Viper the way you want it. Just remember, no cupholders and no electronic driver aids—a modern-day Cobra true to the original plan. Lutz, now with GM, just brought to market a new Corvette with 638 hp, spurring his old buddies at Dodge to develop a new ACR that is reportedly significantly faster than a stock 2008 Viper. The horsepower wars rage on, bean counters be damned.

Popular "halo" car 16 years later

So is the Viper a success? From a marketing perspective, ask any of the 25,000 Viper owners if they had ever walked into a Dodge dealership before 1992. Or ask them how many other Dodge products are sitting in their garages because of the Viper. Ask Chrysler how many times it won Le Mans or an FIA Championship before the Viper came along.

From an enthusiast perspective, how many cars in the early 1990s excited us like the Viper? Factory and club support? The Viper Club of America is one of the nation's largest and most successful car clubs, enthusiastically supported and funded by Dodge. I'd say having a "halo" car that is as popular today as it was 16 years ago is successful.

The Viper may be perhaps the most misunderstood

modern supercar. It is a car built exclusively for people who appreciate affordable, raw American horsepower packaged with a lack of refinement. Lutz has often been quoted as saying about the Viper that Dodge "needed a car that one out of three people hated, one out of three didn't know what it was, and one out of three people absolutely had to buy it. If we can get 1/3 of the market of people who absolutely have to buy our cars, we hit a home run. If people say it's a nice car, we haven't got a chance." Makes sense to me. ♦



2008 coupe a/c doesn't tame 600 horsepower



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