

LINGENFELTER'S LEGACY

Ken Lingenfelter brings a new perspective and renewed enthusiasm to the company founded by legendary tuner John Lingenfelter.

BY BARRY KLUCZYK PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Let's dispel any confusion right up front: Ken Lingenfelter is the new owner of Lingenfelter Performance Engineering (LPE). He is a distant relative of LPE's late founder, John Lingenfelter, who died in 2003, but the familial connection had nothing to do with Ken's acquisition of the Decatur, Indiana company. He was a longtime customer and businessman who felt he could make a difference.

Ken Lingenfelter came along at a good time for LPE. Renowned for world-class engineering and powertrain upgrades, the company was foundering under its previous ownership, a conglomeration of shareholders in Indiana and Tennessee. Although it continued to do fine work, the organization itself needed a change; it needed a new person to take over the helm. Encouraged by John Lingenfelter's brother, Charlie, Ken stepped in and bought LPE in September 2008. He did so through Lingenfelter Assets, an affiliate of his company, Metropolitan Motor Sports.

As President and CEO, Ken Lingenfelter has infused LPE with a sense of renewal—and it is already benefiting from the change in leadership. A number of high-profile projects, including a 9-second street-prepared ZR1, have helped reestablish the company's position in the increasingly crowded world of tuners. A video of one of the ZR1's runs has been a hit on YouTube.

"The thing is, we know there's more capability in that car—the internals of the engine are bone-stock and we're pushing 850 horsepower," says Lingenfelter. "It will go even quicker and we'll prove it."

Recently, we sat down with Lingenfelter at the Michigan facility that serves as his office and home to his collection of 150 cars—about 70 of them Corvettes. We discussed his background, his cars and his plans for LPE.





Most enthusiasts are unfamiliar with you, but you're obviously no stranger to the world of automobiles.

I've always been a car guy—a lifelong car guy. When I was a kid, in the car with my parents, I'd name all the cars on the road.

Your father was in the auto industry, correct?

That's right. He was an executive at General Motors. He worked at Fisher Body and was involved in the launch of the Olds Toronado [the front-drive 1966 model].

Did you want to follow in his footsteps?

Well, there certainly was a lot of car guy stuff in my life pushing me towards it. There was a program called Craftsman's Guild at General Motors, where we would build future models of existing GM cars. It was a big contest with kids who were 11 and 12 years old, all the way up to 16-year-olds. It was a lot of fun and I really had a great time with it.

But you ended up in a different profession.

Yes. I had a pretty successful real estate settlement service company that covered a good part of the country. I sold it in 2003 to a pub-

lic company and stayed with them for the next five years.

Explain your introduction to Lingenfelter Performance Engineering.

I was a customer from years back. John [Lingenfelter] and I knew we were distant relatives, but never got around to figuring out the exact connection. We knew our families were the same and came from the same part of Pennsylvania, but that's about it on the family connection. More importantly, I knew him because he'd built a few cars for me in the early days. I always had a tremen-

JOHN LINGENFELTER BUILT A GREAT BRAND KNOWN FOR ITS ENGINEERING STRENGTH...

dous amount of respect for him and what his shop produced.

How did you get involved professionally with LPE?

Sometime after John's passing, the company became available. I had already sold my company, and it became an opportunity to, as they say, live the dream. So, with the encouragement of John's brother, Charlie, I acquired Lingenfelter Performance Engineering.

What were your plans for the company?

I really wanted to get back to what John's ambitions were all about—specifically, building great engines and cars.

Was there a leadership void to fill at LPE? To be honest, the company hadn't made any headlines for a while.

Well, the tuner world changed quickly after John's passing. I believe I was in the right place at the right time to apply my business experience and help guide the company through some interesting times. I hope I've helped refocus LPE on the things that originally made the company great. We're also having a lot of fun with new projects.

Can you provide us with some examples?

Well, the 9-second ZR1 is an incredible car. We've had a great time with it and the response has been overwhelming. The internals on the engine are stock, you know. It led us to develop a bolt-on intake and pulley system upgrade that easily delivers another 50 horsepower. It's available now and is a direct result of our experience with that car.

Does that signal a shift from the turbo kits for which LPE has been known?

Not at all. Blowers and turbos deliver different performance characteristics that appeal to different customers. But the advances in supercharging lately, particularly with the LS9 [ZR1 engine], have created new opportunities for big power. Superchargers are much more efficient now and we'll take advantage of that.

Not all your recent activities with LPE have centered on Corvettes. You took some modified 2010 Camaros to SEMA last fall, along with a retro-styled muscle car dubbed the Lingenfelter TA based on the new Camaro.

That's right. Corvettes have been and always will be a big part of LPE's plans, but we're exploring many other opportunities. The Trans Am project generated much more interest than we anticipated and, as a result, we're building more of them. We're also doing more Camaros—and we've got a top-performance Lingenfelter Corvette on the drawing board. We hope to release more information on it later this year.

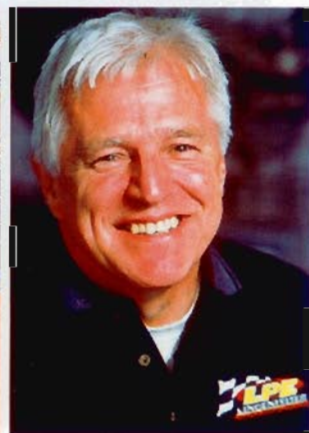
How about going racing?

Yes, we'll enter racing to a limited degree—probably not to the extent John did, but we'll have a presence at the drag strip. We'll also get into road racing, which will be a new venture for LPE.

There are a lot of tuning shops building extremely powerful cars. How does LPE distinguish itself from the pack?

John Lingenfelter built a great brand known for its engineering strength as much as

Left: A ZR1 shares the shop floor with a number of other C6 Corvettes at LPE's Decatur, Indiana facility. Below, left to right: Each engine is blueprinted during build; bigger intercoolers being fitted; the late John Lingenfelter.



the power of its engines. We're all about horsepower, but we want to maintain that hard-earned reputation for excellence.

Considering the continuing economic turbulence, do you have confidence in the high-performance industry?

To be sure, it's a tough market right now,

but I'm confident in our brand and what we bring to our customers. It's still a big market out there, with many, many C5 and C6 owners who want to upgrade their cars. It never ceases to amaze me the number of enthusiasts out there, even if their disposable income has been squeezed recently. So, I'm very optimistic—I really am. We just need to work

through the current economic conditions.

One last thing: LPE was known for years as the place to take a C4 ZR-1 for modifications. Do you still have those customers?

We do! Certainly, there aren't as many as there used to be, but they still come to us with those unique cars. ○

THE COLLECTION

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TALK to Ken Lingenfelter and not discuss his impressive car collection, especially since Corvettes comprise about 70 of the 150-vehicle roster. The range includes everything from a 1953 model to a C6-generation ZR1, with all the major milestone cars on the timeline between them. Notable examples include the only known supercharged 1953 model, the C1 Duntov "test mule" and a mid-year big block previously owned by actor Nicolas Cage.

The collection is housed within the walls of a large, brightly lit industrial building in Brighton, Michigan. It is divided into three sections: European cars, Corvettes and muscle cars. We asked Lingenfelter a few questions about the collection.

When did you start collecting cars?

It was about 20 years ago. It started with XKE Jaguars, and the Corvettes came next.

Have you always had an affinity for Corvettes?

Absolutely—ever since I saw the '63 split-win-

dow Corvette for the first time. That car did it for me, upside down and backwards. I've always identified with Corvettes and almost always have one as a daily driver. In fact, in the summer, my daily driver is a new ZR1. I could get into one of the Lamborghinis or Ferraris [from the collection], but the ZR1 is the car of choice. I really love it.

Corvettes are a large focus of your collection.

About 40 percent of the collection is Corvettes and that's intentional. I've tried to focus on a lot of the important Corvettes.

What was the first Corvette you owned?

It was a white '77 with a brown interior. Of course, it wasn't very powerful, but I had a ball with it and I've owned a Corvette of some type ever since then.

We couldn't help but notice you have several Callaway Corvettes.

Yes. Reeves Callaway is a buddy. I guess we're competitors now, to a certain degree, but we've always been friends and there are several significant Callaway cars in the collection—as well as several significant LPE cars. [In 1988, John Lingenfelter built the engine for the fabled Callaway Sledgehammer.—Ed.]

There's also a C4 Goldstrand roadster and few C5/C6 Specter Werkes/Sports cars here, too, including that blue GTR that was at the SEMA Show last year.

Yes, we collaborated with Specter on that GTR. It's a Z06-based car with LPE's 800-horsepower twin-turbo system. It's a knockout car that never fails to draw attention.

You're a pretty common sight at major auctions. What cars are you looking for?

I'm interested in significant models, concepts, one-offs, etc. When you look at the cars in the collection, they're very rare or noteworthy for a particular reason. That's what I like and that's what I collect.

