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Looking like an exotic sports car from a bygone era, the new Series II Dragon body leaves you breathless with its graceful lines, low-slung feel, and downright sensuous allure.



What you see here is the very first production Stage II Dragon chassis; freshly back from the powdercoater with its newly baked-on silver finish. This particular chassis was ordered by its new owner to accept the Corvette C4 front and rear suspension.



Almost reminiscent of an early E-type Jaguar, the rear three-quarter view of the new Stage II Dragon body is just plain sexy. With 5" of ground clearance, the sleek new car measures only 24" to the point where the door would be and about 39" to the top of the windshield frame. With the ability to fit a 315 series front and 345 series rear tires, you can bet that grip will never be an issue.



Nestled deep in the fabrication shop of Dragon Motor Cars, co-founder John Chestnut was hard at work on some finish grinding on a brand-new Stage II chassis.



An in-the-works Dragon Stage II chassis awaits its suspension mounting points to be installed while secured to the frame jig. The new chassis can be ordered to accept either a '93-and-later Camaro/Firebird front suspension and solid rear axle, or an '88-96 Corvette C4 front and rear

Dragon Motor Cars Kit Car Shop Tour

By Chuck Vranas

Since the dawn of the auto industry, car designers have had their hands busy trying to enhance their products for the different manufacturers for whom they worked. For example, in the early days at Ford, the introduction and evolution of the Model T was certainly significant to the industry, and both designers and engineers were always trying to improve their offerings (from engine refinements, suspension upgrades, interior ergonomics, to reliability, etc.) to the public. Choice of paint was easy, as you could order any color you wanted as long as it was black!

As years passed, designers from all over the world have had their hand at sculpting and creating some of the most remarkable and sensuous lines ever imaginable. The graceful appearance of a 1937 Talbot Lago or that of a 1939 Delahaye Type 165 clearly illustrates the passion that a designer can bring forth from mere lines on a page to alluring reality.

Within any portion of the automotive industry, a single vision can create quite a stir when change is brought into the grand picture, and this is especially true within the kit industry. Automotive aficionado John Chestnut, a longtime fan of early sports cars from the '50s and '60s like the Lister, Cobra, and Jaguar, was looking for a way to quench his desires from within the kit industry and to build a vehicle that he could be comfortable driving. But being that he stands 6 feet 2 inches tall, it was difficult to accommodate his size within many of the offerings in the market. The inability to find a kit that fit, combined with the desire for the stylish flair of the cars that he loved, led him to join up with best friends Paul Carlson and David Childress to create something fresh for the home builder. Enter the Dragon.

The initial thought behind the creation of the Dragon came about when the trio wanted to take the long, graceful design from early sports cars and combine it with an aggressive edge that would lead to building a viewer's adrenalin the more that they looked at the form. Working with renowned mold-maker and fiberglass-composite expert Bill Hough of Norwell, Massachusetts, they were able to bring forth the body of their dreams, mounted in a non-stress manner and included hinged doors, a trunk, and a full-tilt nose.

With chassis dynamics designed and handled by Fred Rosner of Rosner Race Cars, a frame was built utilizing 4-inch tubing to form a perimeter around the driver's compartment, supported by 1.5-inch tubing, 8 inches above the main tubes. This not only created a low-slung chassis with great integrity, it also allowed the occupants to actually sit in the chassis and not above it.

With the ability to plug in numerous transmission combinations as well as the benefits of using the venerable Chevrolet small-block V-8 made for a nearly perfect 50/50 weight distribution and, with the addition of C4 Corvette suspension, the birth of a supercar was well under way. Since the debut of the prototype Dragon roadster back in 2001, the car has been met with a multitude of successes in competition at numerous autocrosses and road courses across the country, including KIT CAR's Run & Gun events in 2001, 2002, and 2003.

Being low slung and with its low center of gravity, the car handles like the slot cars you raced on miniature speedways when you were a kid. Though the crew at Dragon Motor Cars had a hit on their hands, they still wanted to hone their offering, wanting to bring forth an even more refined design that would tug at the heartstrings of a heritage influenced by the early E-type Jaguars and Ferrari 250s.

Thus the Dragon Series II is ready to make its debut with a blistering amount of updates that truly dedicated designers worked long and hard at to create. The intent of the Dragon Motor Cars crew was to allow Series II Dragon homebuilders to purchase a complete donor car to serve as the basis from which their new car would rise. Being that they are great fans of General Motors products, the crew settled on the Camaro/Firebird platform to serve as the main contributor for the project, due to a number of strong performance-related issues as well as the ease of locating a suitable donor.

First and foremost at issue was cost. A 1993 to 1997 complete donor could be had for as little as \$2,000 and, with the performance available from the original car, which weighed close to 3,600 lbs, you can only imagine the acceleration, cornering, and braking that would become available to the new car that should weigh in around 2,100 lbs!

independent suspension at no extra cost.



Sneaking a peek into the driver's compartment area, you can see it is actually quite spacious and the chassis design enables the occupants to sit inside it rather than above it, thus lowering the car's center of gravity (not to mention the added safety benefits thanks to the rails that wrap around the perimeter of the chassis).



Dragon delivers an extremely stout rear subframe on each and every chassis due, in part, to the design of the rigid steel space-frame.



This close-up shows some of the engineering that went into the development of the firewall cowl hoop, which has the exact diameter for use with a stock GM steering column from the late-model Camaro/Firebird donor car.



The freshly completed Stage II chassis has its rearend set up to accept a Corvette C4 independent rear suspension...



...as if it were always meant to be there.



Now that's roomy! Engineered for the utmost in safety for both the driver and passenger, the seating area on the new Stage II chassis not only provides an asphalt-grazing center of gravity, but also plenty of protection as the foot

Without even mentioning the many available aftermarket performance items possible for the Camaro/Firebird, focus for a moment on just what becomes available as you begin to pick your donor clean. Starting with a 350ci V-8, rated at between 275 and 305 hp with available torque in the vicinity of 325 lbs, you will also have a complete fuel injection setup and an engine rated as emissions-legal. You have the choice of a six-speed manual or an automatic transmission, a Posi-traction rearend with a performance rated 3:42 to 1 final drive, a quick-reacting power rack-and-pinion system, and an aluminum radiator with twin electric cooling fans.

To add to the mix, you can also "borrow" the steering column, complete fuel system, pedal assembly, spindles, front and rear disc brakes with five-lug rotors, and gauge cluster, and you are well on your way to having almost everything to plug into your new chassis. The Dragon chassis includes custom-fabricated, tubular upper A-arms, which not only look racy, they also allow full adjustability of the front suspension.

For those customers who want more performance, a C4 Corvette suspension option is also available for no additional charge, allowing the homebuilder to utilize aluminum suspension components as well as a fully independent rearend from a donor 1988 to 1996 C4 Corvette. The all-new perimeter space frame of the Dragon Series II roadster is built to SCCA GT1 specs (therefore both rigid and strong) and weighs in at only 297 lbs. For occupant safety, front and rear crush zones have been incorporated along with proper fuel cell/tank mounts, a driveshaft safety loop, and seat-belt mounting points. T6-6061 aluminum panels are pre-cut and pre-formed for use on all interior panels.

As with the original Dragon, the driver and passenger sit low within the chassis for both safety and the desired low center of gravity. With a large cockpit and expansive foot boxes, even the tallest driver can be made to feel as if he is sitting in the ultimate comfort zone. Finishing touches for the completely new interior are unique to the Series II, with seats that are custom molded to fit the interior. Being that they are seamless and covered in a quilted black vinyl, they bring a rich look and great comfort to passengers. A complete carpet kit is included as well as polished diamond plate inserts, which cover the tops of the floorboards.

Customers also have a choice of two very different dash designs: one that uses the original donor car's design with a new facing (provided with the kit), or a dash similar to a Ferrari 250 for customers who want round-faced gauges. And, since the transmission tunnel is completely removable, the car owner is able to service the clutch arm, shifter, speedometer cable, driveshaft, or transmission from inside the car (sometimes it's the little innovations that speak the greatest volume to true performance-minded individuals).

Last, but not least, the new Dragon Series II body is the result of thousands of hours of designing and hand-shaping that not only continues the heritage started with the Series I, but also succeeds in evoking the passion that was so evident in British and Italian styles of the early '50s and '60s.

The body is a non-stressed lightweight skin that is able to slide over the completed rolling chassis and mounted in about 30 minutes. The nose tilts fully forward, allowing for unlimited access to anything from the engine, suspension, and exhaust. To eliminate the need for immediate paint and bodywork, the new body is available in one of four fiberglass Gel-Coat Finishes (red, blue, yellow, and green). If you decide later to have the car painted, prep work would be a snap!

With many of the innovations brought into the new Series II body, a decision had to be made on whether the car would be made with opening doors. Dragon concluded that, since the car measures only 24 inches from the ground to the point where the door top would be and, due to its design, there is no wide sill to step over to gain entrance to the car, the body would be stronger and easier to mount if there were no doors. And, with a higher framerrail (giving the chassis greater stiffness), there is increased side-impact protection for the cars occupants.

If it sounds like the crew at Dragon Motor Cars has been hard at work to create something truly unique for the kit car owner, you're right. By being able to utilize an endless parts source from an easily obtainable donor car and melding it with a technologically advanced chassis and an alluring body design, the Dragon Series II is poised to pounce on the kit car industry. Watch for the new Dragon Series II roadster to make the rounds starting early this year, and it won't be long before you will be able to check out a finished car right here on the pages of KIT CAR.

wells seem to go on forever.



At this customer's request, a special steering-column support bracket was fabricated to allow him to run a race-style steering shaft for his particular application.



Here we can see the structural integrity that is built into each and every Stage II chassis. This particular front end is set up to accept Corvette C4 independent suspension per the customer's request (at no extra charge).



Built to exact specifications, the mounting points for the front Corvette C4 independent suspension will give the new Series II chassis the ultimate in handling.



A complete turnkey Stage II chassis was back behind the shop waiting for the new body to be lowered on to it. Every possible item from the late-model donor Camaro/Firebird platform is used, right down to the wheels and tires.



There is more than ample room to work on the engine once it is installed. With the new chassis, provisions are made for all of the factory bolt-on items from the donor car, so installation is a snap. Provisions are also in place for you to run the entire fuel system from your donor car, including the fuel tank and lines.



To give a good idea of just how low to the ground the new Series II actually is, John Chestnut poses next to a rolling chassis equipped with stock Corvette C4 rims and tires. Once the chassis is loaded up with all of its performance goodies and occupants, you can bet the car's final height will be even lower than this.

SOURCES

DRAGON MOTOR CARS
 244 Walker Rd., Dept. KC
 P.O. Box 858
 Grantham, NH 03753
 (603) 863-5272
www.dragonmotorcars.com

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