

So What's a Yenko?

Chevy knew that building the “Yenko S/C” 427 Nova at the factory was pushing the limits of a sub-framed, unibody car—and the limits of liability



Photo: Mecum Auctions

A quintet of Don Yenko's fire-breathing machines

Few car dealers have made an impact on the sports car world like Don Yenko. After turning his family's small Chevrolet dealership into a “High Performance Parts Center” in the mid-1950s, Don Yenko became not only an accomplished racer, but also built some of the most desirable muscle cars.

As an SCCA racer in the 1960s, Yenko saw what Shelby was doing with Ford, and he set out to do the same with Chevrolet. A road racer at heart, all of Yenko's cars were engineered as a complete package.

His first effort from “Yenko Sportscars, Inc.” was a batch of 100 specially modified “Yenko Stinger” Corvairs in 1966. Yenko's goal was to get the Stinger accepted into SCCA E Production racing. When classified by the SCCA as a D Production car, Yenko was undeterred, and his Stingers went on to defeat the Triumph TR4s that had previously dominated the class. Yenko's ads proclaimed you could “Be a Swinger in a Stinger!”

When Ralph Nader killed the Corvaire, Yenko turned his attention to other Chevrolets. Here are the cars that originated at 575 West Pike Street in Canonsburg, PA:

1967 “YENKO/SC” CAMARO

In 1967, Yenko converted small block Camaros to L72 Corvette 427-ci/425-hp engines in-house. Later, when the 396 was available from the factory, Yenko ordered L78 396-ci/375-hp, 4-speed Camaros and swapped in L72 427-ci/425-hp Corvette short blocks, using the identical top end from the existing L78 engines. A few cars were sent to Dick Harrell's race shop in St. Louis for this work. All were equipped with a fiberglass Corvette-style “Stinger” hood, 4.10 rear axle ratio, and heavy-duty suspension. Any number of performance options could be installed by Yenko, including traction bars and even Corvette side pipes. The generally accepted production number for 1967 SYC Camaros is approximately 100 cars.

1968 “YENKO/SC” CAMARO

As with the late 1967 version, L78 396 Camaros were delivered from GM and Yenko transplanted the L72 427 short block. The first two or three cars were standard issue, but the remaining cars were ordered under Central Office Production Order (COPO) #9737 “Yenko Sportscar Conversion Package,” which included suspension and cooling upgrades, plus a 140-mph speedometer. The 1968 hood was fiberglass with twin scoops

very similar to a 1967 Shelby GT350/GT500, all cars were equipped with 4-speed transmissions, and Yenko fitted Pontiac Rally II mag wheels as standard equipment. While rumors abound over some 1968 SYC cars having the L72 427 installed by Chevrolet, a documented example has never surfaced. As with all Yenkos, there is much debate over production numbers, but 1968 was the lowest production year for the SYC Camaro, with approximately 65 cars produced.

1969 “YENKO/SC” CAMARO

By far the most popular and copied of all the Yenko Camaros, the 1969 version had one major change from prior years. Realizing demand far outstripped his ability to convert more cars in-house, Yenko used his pull with GM to have the factory build a limited run of L72 427-ci/425-hp cars under COPO #9561. These were “double COPO” cars, also equipped with the COPO #9737 Sportscar Conversion Package. Once at Yenko Chevrolet, the cars received special Yenko striping, “sYc” decals on the headrests, and exterior badges. That year—1969—was the highest production year, with 171 4-speed cars and 30 TH400 automatic cars produced, for a total of 201 cars.

Values of the 1967–1969 Yenko Camaros, in spite of production numbers, are surprisingly close for all three variations. The 1969, being not only factory built but also the most popular body style, levels the values of this “high” production year with the lower production earlier versions.

Plan on spending \$300,000–\$400,000 for a good #2+ condition documented example of any Yenko Camaro.

1969 "YENKO/SC" CHEVELLE

Chevrolet installed the L72 427 into a limited run of 1969 Chevelle hard tops for Yenko under COPO #9562. With similar appearance packages and the same #9737 package as the Yenko Camaro, the Yenko Chevelle was another well-engineered Supercar. Overlooked in the shadows of Yenko Camaros for many years, Yenko Chevilles have recently come into their own. The accepted production figure is a total of 99 cars.

Current values of Yenko Chevilles are very similar to the Yenko Camaros, and have been hovering in the \$300,000–\$400,000 range for "no stories" examples.

1969 "YENKO/SC" 427 NOVA

The ultimate Yenko muscle car. Don Yenko later described his 427 Nova as "a beast, an almost lethal car we probably shouldn't have produced." As with the 1967 and 1968 Camaros, the 427 Nova left the factory as a 396-equipped car, later converted to an L72 427-ci engine at Yenko. As one would expect, Yenko stripes, badges, and details were added. Chevrolet knew that building this car at the factory was not only pushing the limits of a lightweight, sub-framed, unibody car, but also the limits of product liability, hence the Yenko-installed engine rather than a COPO order. With a 4.10 gear ratio and 425 hp on tap, this was a dangerous proposition to all but the most experienced drivers. The generally accepted production number for the 427 Nova is roughly 30 cars, again subject to much debate.

As one would expect from the most deadly Yenko, you

have to pay more to scare yourself more. Current values are in the \$800,000 range for this grocery getter on steroids.

1970 "YENKO/SC" NOVA "DEUCE"

Seeing how difficult it was becoming for his customers to insure 427-powered cars, Yenko decided to build a small block hot rod. Chevrolet built Yenko a run of base Novas with the LT-1 350-ci/360-hp Corvette engine under COPO #9010, coupled with the #9737 Sportscar package. With 360 hp and 380 ft-lbs of torque in such a light car, they are great performers. Dressed up in traditional Yenko garb, with Yenko decals, striping, Magnum 500 wheels, and emblems, the Deuce has all the looks of its predecessors. With a production run of roughly 120 cars, they are also rare.

Deuce values have taken a big leap recently, rising from the \$60,000–\$70,000 range a few years ago to recent sales reported over \$150,000. While they will never have the street cred of the 427 cars, they are a great starter Yenko. Just don't expect prices to escalate too quickly from the current level. I don't see the Deuce market staying this close to the big block cars in the long run.

As important as it is with any collector car, proper due diligence is essential with a Yenko. Clones, replicas, forgeries, and very questionable cars abound. Forget about owning any of them, unless you need another fakey-doo to sit next to the Hemi 'Cuda clone in your garage.

With no factory support for documentation, verified original paperwork is a necessity. Many Yenko cars, having always been valuable, have been rebodied and otherwise brought back from the dead, and unscrupulous sellers fail to share these details. The good news is that web sites like the one the Yenko Sportscar Club maintains at www.yenko.net, or Ed Cunneen's www.copo.com, contain lists of known VINs and other details on individual cars. If you want an American original, the cars of Don Yenko are as legendary as any muscle car ever to hit the streets.♦

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