

2005 Chevy Cobalt SS
Epiphany at the Andretti Hairpin
By: David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com

The new Cobalt is built on the proven GM Delta platform, which also is the underpinning of the Saturn Red Line as well as the Opel Astra in Europe. They're certainly getting their money's worth from this production efficiency. Actually, one who studies the style will be reminded of the venerable 1995 Cavalier – they're not breaking much ground here. Yet the Cobalt SS, a product of the GM Performance Division's input, shows that this group of gurus at GM now has real corporate horsepower – they've made a real difference in the cars it touches. The Cobalt SS package includes the 2.0 liter Ecotec, supercharged four cylinder engine with 205 hp and a handy 200 ft lbs of torque. This the same powertrain that we drove and appreciated in the Saturn Red Line Coupe. The suspension is also similar to the Red Line's, offering little innovation with an independent front, twist axle rear with oversized sway bars, tuned shocks, and hydraulic bushings that adapt to driving conditions and vary roll resistance.

The first impression was a bit of a disappointment. We opened the driver's door and had to step back. This is one hefty door that requires care to avoid dinging your parking lot neighbor. Immediately, thoughts of the Red Line's better clamshell four door arrangement came to mind which seems to allay this parking lot awkwardness. However, Chevy wanted a sleeker look to the Cobalt SS, which they've achieved by drawing the lines up in the rear to give the body more rake, updating its Cavalier heritage with an aero look. Climbing in, the second impression was made, in a more forceful way. The bucket seats – nicely trimmed in black and red leather had very little thigh support and simply were too flat to the floor. In discussing this issue with a GM representative he quickly pointed out that there is a sport package available on the Cobalt SS that this car was deprived of. This optional package includes seats very similar to the Red Line's Recaros, and a limited slip transaxle, which we learned later would be a must. Sitting in the parking lot, the huge rear wing in the center of the rear view mirror caught our eye. It unfortunately has been placed directly in the center of the field of view, unlike the Subie STI and Mitsu Evo's wings, which are set high enough to create a visual hole through which to see. On the road, the Cobalt presents a very stiff personality – on the edge of harsh. Ignoring these first impressions, the Cobalt proceeded to gobble miles in a very capable manner, but there did not seem to be a real strength to its personality. The engine, with four valves per cylinder, an aluminum head, performance rods and forged crank, seems almost lazy in its delivery of power, but the pull is there and is very linear through the revs. This is a mid-priced (\$25K) sports coupe that looks pretty good, but breaks no new ground. We didn't push it on the road, as we had a reservation for two at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca for the following day.

This is where things changed, and rapidly. The gurus of the GM Performance Division have tinkered with the mechanicals and suspension on the Cobalt SS and have come up with a car that emerges on the track. First, the Cobalt performed a very nice turn-in at Laguna's Andretti hairpin – normally the bane of plowing street cars. Then the supercharged 4 banger came to life and, after being timid based on low expectations, I

started to push the Cobalt and within a few laps was in giggle mode – staying with much more prestigious company during a press test day. Clearly, it was obvious that any spirited driving would require the limited slip/Recaro option. We struggled to brace ourselves in the seat during lateral acceleration, and the inside tire would spin freely as we departed an apex on boost. At the time of this writing, we admit to a troubling discovery – the Recaro/limited slip option touted by the GM rep at press day in March has yet to appear on the Chevrolet option list. Ouch. However, this car turns, rotates and remains firmly planted on exit – and also impressed several other journalists who took their turn after we heated up the tires. Even the brakes stayed firm during some pretty hard abuse. The GM guys were quick to point out that there was a Cobalt racing team testing their car for Grand-Am Cup competition before the first car was delivered. Later, we spoke with San Francisco Region driver and Cobalt racing team owner Tom Lepper and they were encouraged with how the Cobalt was stacking up to its Grand Am competition. While we were still a bit surprised by this, the drive on the track spoke for itself. It is clear that, with the C6 Corvette, CTS-V, GTO and Cobalt SS on the ground, the GM Performance Division can produce a car that is fun to drive. The final step will be when the platforms and suspensions are modernized (read: independent rear), styling is updated and refinement arrives to go with the performance.