

[How John Delorean Impacted The Sports Car World](#)

John Delorean is now best remembered for his failed gull-winged stainless steel car that became a time-travel device in the highly successful "Back to the Future" series of films. He is also associated with shady financial dealings and illegal narcotics operations. A symbol of the 1980s excess, the recently departed Delorean's legacy seems anything but glorious. When one reflects on Delorean, they likely remember footage of him attempting to raise funds for his failing auto company by trying to sell over twenty million dollars in illegal drugs.

A more carefully use at the automotive innovator, however, cements Delorean's status as a true legend in the sports car field. Without the Delorean touch, it is likely that sports car production and history would have taken a different direction than it has.

It was Delorean, who in 1964, helped create the muscle car movement in the United States when he decided the tired Pontiac Tempest could be revived via the insertion of a massive V8 engine. The resultant GTO became, and remains, one of the most beloved muscle cars in history. The GTO, or "goat" as sports car enthusiasts often term it, became a hot-seller for Pontiac and set off a chain of events that led to the muscle car era in the United States.

Delorean was rewarded for his innovative thinking by promotions into the highest ranks of American automobile executives. Despite his success in the industry, he eventually opted to go his own way, leaving the U.S. automakers behind and hoping to subsequently compete with them.

Though Delorean's efforts in Detroit created the muscle car era of high-performance, big-engine sports sedans, his true desire was to take his automotive notions even further. He left Detroit and started his own manufacturing efforts in Northern Ireland, aspiring to build a company that would compete with Detroit's big three. The Delorean Motor Company produced the DMC-12, a brushed stainless steel sports car with a futuristic look and trademark flip-up doors. It was never a major seller and less than 9,000 of the famed Delorean DMC-12s ever hit the streets. Nonetheless, experts credit the "Back to the Future" car as a design inspiration for many makes and models to follow from other manufacturers.

Some have compared Delorean's story with DMC to that of Tucker automobiles. Both were headed by strong individuals with new ideas, both met significant resistance from existing manufacturers, and both introduced aesthetic and mechanical refinements that would later be adopted in the production of future automobiles.

Delorean's business success, including hotel investments and NFL football franchise ownership, was remarkable. His fall from grace, however, was even more amazing. Accusations of financial wrongdoings, allegations of cocaine trafficking, and bankruptcy followed and combined to decimate the Delorean empire.

Delorean announced in 1999 that he hoped to re-enter the sports car industry and hinted that he had plans to produce a fast sports car made primarily of plastic that would cost less than \$20,000 retail. Considering his success three decades earlier with the GTO, Delorean's announcement was met with a great deal of interest. He seemed poised for a comeback. His dream of a readily accessible sports car designed to fit any budget, however, was never realized. Delorean died in 2004.

It may be easy to look at the Delorean story and see only greed, excess and subsequent failure. A closer look at the man who built the DMC-12, however, reveals one of the sports car industry's biggest influences and a man whose legacy should include consideration of his remarkable achievements alongside his very public failings.

About the Author

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