

# Serene Speed

*Corvette's new convertible offers performance without punishment—from the laws of physics, anyway*

by Pete Lyons



**Y**ou know how, in many open sports cars, when you get up to 130 mph or so the air blast is tugging at your designer sunglasses and snatching away your head wear and snarling your date's long blonde locks—or yours—and generally making the most distracting ruckus? Don't you hate that?

Chevrolet's 1998 Corvette convertible is your kind of open sports car.

Not only can it boost you up to 130 mph or so PDQ, it lets you concentrate on enjoying the experience. For whatever reasons—inspired work at the CAD/CAM terminal or endless time in the wind tunnel or pure blind stylistic luck—at speed, the opened-up cockpit is a place of uncommon calm and quiet. So much so that Chevrolet sees no need to offer any back draft screen.

Maybe it's a matter of genetics. In the beginning, all Corvettes were roadsters. It wasn't until Model Year Eleven, 1963, after 68,817 open fiberglass bodies had been pulled from the molds, that the first Corvette coupe came along. For another six years roadsters kept on outnumbering coupes, generally at between 62 and 65 percent of annual output.

True, the tide did turn. Roadster production plunged precipitously in both relative and absolute terms every year from 1969 through 1975. In 1975, out of 38,467 cars built, only 4629 were ragtops—12 percent, even though they were cheaper than coupes.

Chevy then quit making open Corvettes for 10 whole years.

Yet when the Corvette roadster came back in 1986, it immediately scored 21 percent of total output, despite a price premium of some \$5,000. The next year the percentage soared to 35, and it looked as if Chevrolet had reopened an old gold mine. However, fast-forwarding to the final year of the C4, 1996, we see 4369 convertibles out of the total Corvette production of 21,536, which is barely over 20 percent.

However confusing the fossil record may be, Chevy has put the Corvette's original roadster genetics back in control. Never mind that the fifth-generation model appeared first as a coupe. The all-new C5 platform was initially designed as a roadster, with a frame yielding the required beam strength and torsional stiffness without any superstructure. In this sense, the coupe's roof is an extra.

Now that convertible production has begun, the stout steel chassis for the two models writhe around the sinuous Bowling Green, Ky., assembly line nose-to-tail. The only difference appears at the station where a big basket handle is welded on behind the cockpit. That car will be born as a coupe. The next frame along may receive instead a pedestal at the center rear of the cockpit. That's to mount the latch for the rear-hinged body panel, or tonneau, as Chevy calls it, which will cover the folded top.

Otherwise, the two models are virtually

identical mechanically. Even their standard curb weights come out so close as to make no difference: 3245 pounds for the coupe, 3246 for the convertible (which is 114 pounds lighter than the previous edition). As for aerodynamics, top up, the convertible rates a drag coefficient of 0.32, a good number in itself and not much of a penalty over the coupe's remarkable 0.29. The manufacturer projects that EPA mileage figures won't differ between the models. Going topless still costs more, though not quite as much as two model years ago. The last drop-top Vette was the 1996 model, which carried a base price of \$45,625, or nearly 21 percent more than that year's coupe at \$37,790; both prices included the destination fee. For 1998, the convertible price tag reads \$44,990, including destination. That's a cut of \$635, but Chevy says that the new model also packs \$1,383 in new standard goodies, so the real value advantage over the 1996 model is \$2,018.

Meanwhile, the coupe's base price has been held at \$38,060 for 1998, so the comparably equipped convertible costs \$6,930 more, or 18.2 percent.

Is it worth it?

Are blondes more fun? It's a question of attitude. All we can say is that anyone drawn to the C5 convertible will find a well-designed and constructed cloth-top Corvette.

Making it convert is a manual operation, but an easy one. If starting with the top up,



first swing open the same pair of headliner latches that clamps the coupe's sunroof. Now get out, and lift both front and rear edges of the ragtop a few inches. Next, find the latch button hidden under the front of the tonneau, and pivot the cover up and back. At this point, if the side windows are up they will automatically lower themselves part way. Fold the top down into its bay, close the tonneau, and drive off.

Raising the top is a simple reversal of those steps, but it is now that you may notice that there are no rear latches to be secured. The articulation geometry of the five aluminum top bows is such that clamping down the front edge exerts sufficient pressure on the back edge to seal it against the soft strip that arcs around the rear deck. This latter item also eliminates the unsightly rub marks that often developed there in C4 convertible paint.

Either operation requires more physical effort than does a powered top, but not by much. And you do have to get in and out—only drivers with backbones like Slinkys will be able to do the job from inside. But you don't have to fiddle with a separate soft cover for the folded top.

The top itself has an interior liner (black in all cases, regardless of the three exterior colors), and the generously sized, rigid backlight is heated glass. Up, the top takes a scant 0.2 inches off the coupe's official headroom measurement, and for some reason, it adds 0.1 to declared legroom.

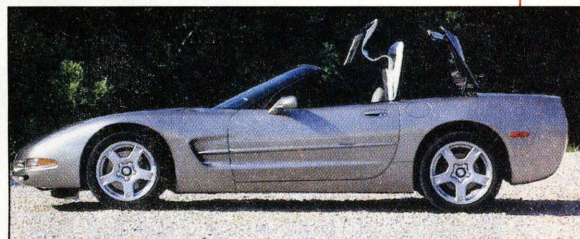
Top up, the convertible provides 13.9 cubic feet of trunk volume. That's not much more than half the coupe's 24.8, but it's over twice the figure for the old C4 ragtop, and Chevrolet claims that it also beats any of the open two-seaters it considers direct competition: chiefly, the BMW Z3, Mercedes SLK and Porsche Boxster, though the more expensive Jaguar XK8 and Mercedes 500SL are cited too. Lowered, the top reduces available volume to 11.2 cubic feet, still generous in the segment and enough for two golf bags.

All cargo is easily accessible through the first Corvette trunk lid (as distinct from hatchbacks) since 1962. The lid is separate from the tonneau, but both cover the one cargo space. Small and/or soft items, such as jackets or purses, can be stowed in there and retrieved from inside the cockpit through the shallow gap under the front of the tonneau.

From a styling point of view, while the



**Designed from the outset as a convertible with a rigid chassis, the Corvette has an easily used manual folding roof, a hard tonneau with molded vestigial head fairings, and what Chevy calls a "waterfall" between the seats (below) that evokes the original 1953 model.**



tonneau's vestigial head fairings are non-functional, they combine with other sculptural accents to eliminate the chopped-off, brickish appearance of the previous convertible's afterbody, and they make the open C5 look more like a finished, independent design.

Also, Chevrolet is proud of what it calls "the waterfall"—a bowed panel between the seatbacks that is supposed to recall the much narrower strip of bodywork there on the first-generation Corvette.

Convertibles can be ordered with all appropriate options that are available for coupes, such as manual six-speed transmission, three-way adjustable F45 shocks or stiffer Z51 suspension, and the new, bronze-tone wheels. Made by Speedline of genuine magnesium, a set saves a total of eight pounds in unsprung weight, but costs \$3,500.

Since all convertibles are 1998 models, they all incorporate the C5's second-year technical improvements. These include measures to quiet the engine accessory drive, fuel pump and body-generated wind rush, plus the elimination of a buzz in the manual transmission shifter. Engineers also retuned the exhaust system for "more

music, less noise." The widely noted problem with door-glass sealing at high speed is said to have been addressed, too.

Other changes involve greater steering caster angle to enhance tracking, recalibration of the Real Time Damping (F45) system for better wheel control, improved seatback recliner and seat-belt mechanisms, faster heater warmup, and—ta-dah—an engine air filter life monitor. Automatic transmissions get a second-gear select mode

for smoother starts on slick surfaces.

Two new exterior tints—Light Pewter Metallic and Purple Pearl Metallic—bring Corvette paint choices to eight. Light Oak joins black as the interior color choice. Convertible tops come in black or tan cloth, or in white vinyl. No hard top is offered or planned, by the way.

How does the new Corvette convertible work on the road? Well enough that a C5 enthusiast's choice can be made between it and the coupe solely on what kind of roof is preferred—not because of any significant dynamic differences. With the cloth top erected and the windows up, there seems to be little more interior noise at typical interstate speeds than in the coupe. Chassis stiffness is such that it takes a severe bump to generate any hint of cowl shake—a lot of very popular roadsters quiver much more.

But not a lot of them can give you the rocket ride that this one can. And you get it without all that distracting ruckus that so often spoils the serenity of the speed experience. You don't even have to worry about losing your race-team cap.

Your license? That might be another story. ■