



AutoWeek

For Week Ending March 10, 1978

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75 Cents

25th Anniversary Vette Test

By Cory Farley

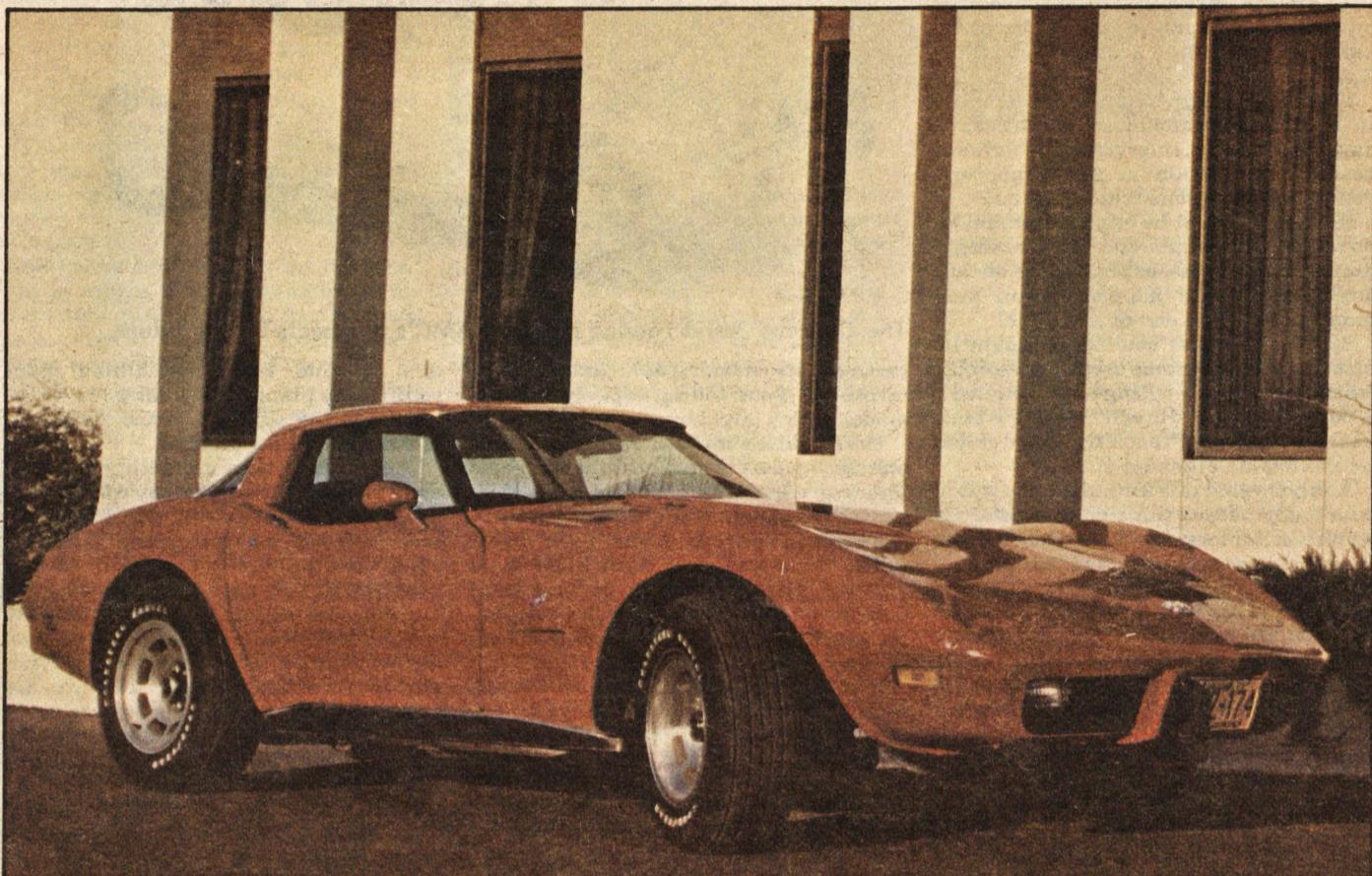
One thing you can't take away from the Corvette: it's a Corvette.

This is—we fondly hope—not the bit of fatuosity it appears. It's easy to look at the bright red L82 in our parking lot and point out all the reasons it shouldn't be permitted to exist, and we'll do that before we're through here. But when you get into the thing and snug the reluctant belt around your waist; when you turn the key and hear the V8 lope into life—no tinny rasp of starter and tickaticka here, but a businesslike grinding and a muted burble as the L82 comes awake—and you shove the hefty shifter up into first gear—not for Corvette a Ladies' Day clink as the box goes through its paces—when, as we say, you do these things, and feel the Corvette respond, it doesn't much matter that it's bigger than a proper station wagon: for a major part of the population, this is Prom Night.

The years wash away. The half-remembered frustration of trying to pry the keys to the four door Fury out of the old man is completely gone: this is a Corvette; this is all that's stood between you and Them all these years.

Well, not exactly. Times change. You, presumably, have changed. The only constant seems to be the Corvette. Now in its 25th year, the venerable Plastic Pachyderm is also in—can it be the 11th year?—with what is essentially the same body style, updated this year with a fastback roofline that has proved to be not that good an idea from an aerodynamic standpoint.

This particular Corvette was pretty much what might be ordered by a driver who wanted to go as fast as a Corvette will go these days. It had the L82 engine option, which is your old pal the 350 but



The Corvette gets a fastback roofline for its 25th birthday. Can it still compete in the high-priced sports car market? Yes—but it's showing its age.

with go-fast gear: bigger valves, forged pistons and rods, a moderate lump-lump cam, four-bolt mains, and so on. It had the FE7 Gymkhana suspension package, which costs only \$41 and greatly helps the smooth-road handling but hurts the ride

and rough-road performance. It had \$340 worth of aluminum wheels, \$95 worth of wires on the back window to melt off the mist, \$40 worth of "sport mirrors." It had \$175 worth of tilt/telescope steering wheel and \$216.32 worth of P255/70R15

tires, which price sort of makes us wonder if they left the standard ones in the trunk rather than give an allowance for them. It had maybe \$75 worth of AM-FM-CB-miracle ingredient XR-22 radio,

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Learning To Race Right



"Everybody wants to race," some racer once said, "but nobody wants to go fast."

That's true enough, perhaps, but maybe the problem is not so much want to as can't. There's a lot of difference between going fast enough to finish well, maybe even to win occasionally, and going fast.

There's at least one man around who makes a living teaching people to cross that line. Find out about him on page 16.

Gary Witzenburg Photo

THIS WEEK

COMPETITION

LENNIE MISSES AGAIN: Lennie Pond saw his hopes for a much deserved home-track win go flat along with a tire. Page 32.

THREE STRAIGHT FOR WARWICK: Brown scores again in Australia. Page 32.

MEXICALI ROADS: Ferro and Smith romp to a win in the Mexicali offroad race. Page 30.

STEWART IN THE RENAULT: John Young Stewart tries his hand at the only operative turbocharged F1 racer. Page 20.

SCHOOL OF HARD LOOKS: Bob Bondurant proves himself an excellent, but demanding, teacher. Page 16.

SLIPPIN' AND SLIDIN': Street racing on ice in Anchorage, Alaska. Page 19.

GENERAL

AMC/PEUGEOT MERGER: Is it on or off? On, most likely. See page 2 for the latest information.

WHERE THE HOT WIND BLOWS: But not into the back seat, since roll-down windows are going the way of the vent wing. Page 3.

A HARE IN THE HAND: Volkswagen is moving closer and closer to the first U.S.-produced Rabbit. Page 3.

PHOENIX TIRE TEST: Some surprises from a little-known tire manufacturer. Page 5.

Silver Anniversary Vette Test

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which nevertheless bumped the sticker price \$638.

This adds up to a lot of money, \$2252.32 for options when you add the \$525 the L82 costs. But it's not a lot of options, really—just 10 items, counting the power windows and every little "Light Group" and "Convenience Group" it owns. The base price of the "Chevrolet 1YZ87 Corvette 2dr. Coupe" is \$9351.89; the bottom line on our car's sticker was \$11,777.21.

Whatever little Chevrolet person or computer makes out the option lists for the press cars did a good job with this one, barring a couple of missteps. One is the radio: \$638 should buy you more than average AM, tinny FM, and incomprehensible CB reception, even if the microphone *does* stick on with a Velcro-type fastener. The other is the Gymkhana suspension, but we'll get to that in a minute.

The Vette's new fastback smacks of an attempt to crank a few more turns out of the aging body. It is not a hatchback, badly though such a feature is needed. Worse, it wants to fly. At highish open road speeds, under 100mph, you can feel it in the turns. At 100 and over, you can feel it everywhere: the car doesn't really want to stick, and the back gets light on even the gentlest undulations.

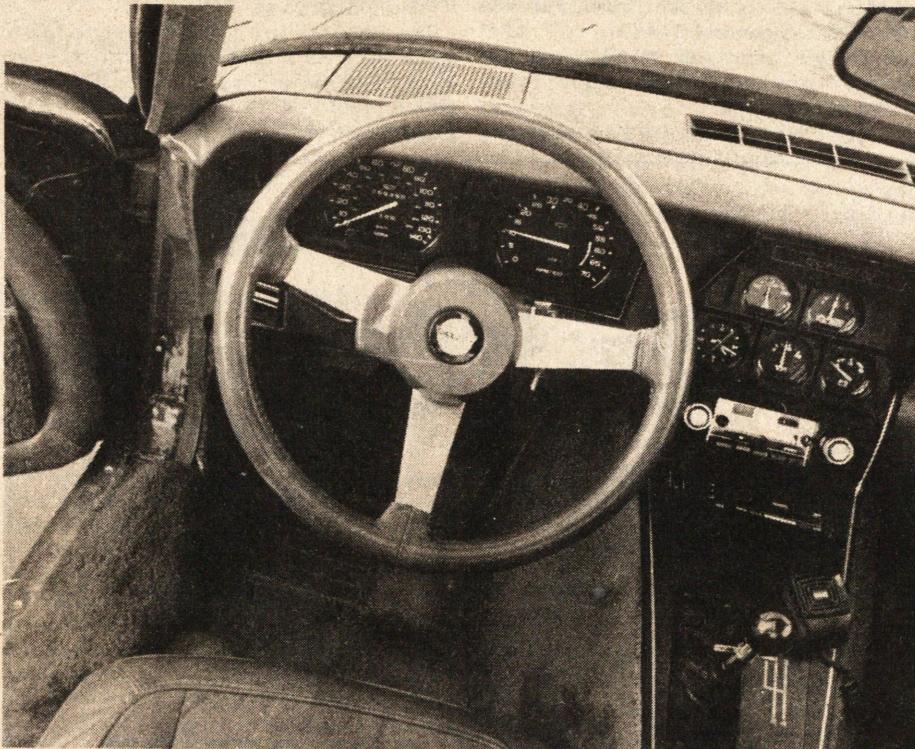
This is bad. Put it on top of the Vette's 1963 suspension, and it gets worse. Throw in a bump or two and the rigid Gymkhana rig, and it gets backwards if you don't watch it.

Therein lie part of the Corvette's problems. That swing axle rear was the cat's pajamas when it was thrown out to the unsuspecting world 15 years ago, but it's got a roll center you can almost walk under. The car will understeer prodigiously when you're hammering down a mountain trying to show some unfortunate passenger how fast you are. Then, just as you get used to that, you come to a freeway onramp and blow into it expecting to scrub off speed on the way around, and sure enough you do: sideways down the slow lane, after the rear suspension jacks itself up. In a high-speed turn, you can feel Disaster looking over your shoulder as the car tiptoes around on its suspension, and a relatively insignificant irregularity in the pavement will upset the stiffly sprung Corvette's tentative alliance with physical realities. Granted, it is faster than most people ever go, but most people don't buy Corvettes and those who do presumably tend to use them.

At least if things really go bogus on you, you'll stand a good chance of catching up with the help of the Corvette's excellent power steering. This and the engine were the high points of the car, and it's hard to understand why every vehicle that rolls out of the factory at GM doesn't have this same steering setup, right down to the vans and pickups. Maybe especial-



But it's still a Corvette: what else made in America looks like this?



The Corvette's interior looks just like everyman's conception of what a sports car's interior should look like. It works pretty well, too.

ly the vans and pickups.

There's almost no play in the wheel. One-quarter inch of deflection at the steering wheel rim moves the front wheels a specified amount. One-quarter inch more moves them some more. Move it back to center and a quarter-inch the other way, and the wheels come back to center and go the other way, precisely the same distance they went with the first movement. "That's what steering is for," you say, and you're right. But that's not what steering *does*, not in most cars and not in any trucks or vans. You can keep your opera windows, Detroit: give us Corvette steering and we'll die happy. And maybe not so soon.

The engine ranks right up there with the steering as a Great Idea of Western Man. Now a ZL1 it ain't, but—guess we have to face it—there is a whole generation of drivers out there who've never heard of, much less experienced, what they used to call in the last half of the last decade a Fast Car. A 15-second quarter mile is as fast as you need to go, always

was. But now there are a bunch of young lawyers who're getting into big money and they don't know you can go any faster. The L82 will run in the 15s until Saudi Arabia runs dry, and for the vast crowd of upper-middle-class, sub-30 drivers who buy Corvettes, that's fast.

Barring a tendency to bog off the line, even with a 3.70 rear, this was the best engine we've seen in many a test car. It's a little soft down low, but even at this altitude (about 5000 feet) it will get to 60 in less than 8.5 seconds. Road performance is impeccable: there always seems to be a little left when you need it, and since first gear is good to nearly 50mph and second to 75, you don't have to do a lot of thrashing around with the lever to find the right combination. In normal traffic and suburban driving, say the range from 20-45mph, the Corvette can be driven almost as though it had an automatic transmission. First gear gets a little busy past 35 or so, and fourth lugs if you fall much below 20, but otherwise you can simply get it rolling in number one and either leave it there until you get home or plunk it into any other gear.

Shifting, for a driver used to compact and subcompact car transmissions, can be awkward at first. For an American four speed it's light and fairly smooth, but you have to remember that those are big hefty gears, in comparison to which the cogs in a Honda or Datsun seem to have been cut out of the lids of orange juice cans. It takes a hefty stick and a strong push to stir the larger mechanical bits in the Chevy trans. The spring-loading between the first-second and third-fourth planes is a little vague, bothersome mainly in a 2-1 downshift, and the whole thing seems to

work much better when you flail it rather than when you baby it. We've noticed this same quirk with other GM transmissions, notably in the Firebird Trans-Am and other cars that invite you to drive hard: just mash on the clutch and hurl the stick in the general direction, and everything will be all right.

Inside, the Corvette is a strange mixture of \$12,000 sports car and \$4000 Chevette. Obviously it has to look like a sports car, or at least what the average young dermatologist thinks a sports car looks like. To that end, Chevrolet has put a large tach and a speedo directly in front of the driver. There is another panel of gauges to the immediate right of the steering column containing the fuel gauge, ammeter, oil pressure gauge, and another one you can't read most of the time because of reflections but which turned out when we shaded it with one hand to be the temperature gauge.

This is an unfortunate gauge to miss if you have to miss one, because Corvettes tend to be boilers in hot weather. We didn't have the opportunity to drive this test car in anything hotter than about 60 degrees, but the last one would perk during the summer and Chevrolet says there have been no cooling changes.

At the base of all this sporty-car instrumentation, though, is the flattest, blackest, plastic-est panel we've ever seen in a \$12,000 automobile, out of which grow the shifter, window switches, and other minor controls. The whole shebang looks as though it came from a toy car. Behind that is a hump made of GM-issue flaccid vinyl, the tattered lips of which serve to surround the handbrake lever.

But this ticky tacky is combined with carpeting that looks like it came right off the floor of the president's office at Exxon and with seats at least partially made of gen-yoo-wine leather. Dead cow is not the most comfortable thing to sit on in either hot or cold weather, so they have fabric inserts to keep your fanny temperate. But leather is leather and it's standard on this Corvette right along with the cop-car plastic trim.

Those seats are all right, too. They're kind of flat for best support, but there's hardly any room to slide around inside a Corvette anyhow so that doesn't matter. They still lack a range of rake adjustment—again, partly a room problem—and they don't really provide good lumbar support for long trips. This is a complaint that baffles us, frankly. Almost any \$4000 import gas-squeezer has better seats than almost any \$8000 American luxury car. Corvette's seats are comfortable enough, but they're nowhere near what they could be.

The driving position likewise is adequate. The tilt/telescope wheel partly solves the old Corvette wheel-in-the-face problem and allowed everyone on the staff to find a position of at least temporary suitability. The large of foot—the Managing Editor wears size 15 Adidas—will have trouble finding a home for their clutch foot when it's off duty, since there's just a narrow space 'twixt clutch and bulkhead and once you worm your foot through, it's hard to extricate when you need it in a hurry. Footroom generally is limited, in fact.

This lack of footroom in such a huge car is one of the minor symptoms of the disease that ultimately must wound the Corvette mortally. It's a great hulking brute: 3500 pounds approx at the curb, 185.2 inches long, 69 inches wide. Fuel mileage in our test ranged from 10-14mpg, with an overall average of barely 12mpg. The doors are nearly a foot thick, and the interior width suffers accordingly. There are literal feet of overhang front and rear. If you could compare the total amount of usable space with the amount wasted by the stylists, they would probably be close to equal. It is a couple of

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More On: L82 VLCC

Continued From Preceding Page
inches wider, just seven inches shorter, and 600 pounds heavier than, for instance, a Volvo 242.

It's not all bad, of course. The finish of the body is as good as you'll find anywhere. People still look at it. People who don't know any more about cars than that you put gas in one end will stop the driver of a Corvette on the street and ask about the car.

But there's no room inside. The thing is almost as heavy as a Camaro, and even the present Camaro is probably an insupportable car by the standards we're all going to have to adopt before the end of the century. There's no trunk at all, just that part under the glass in back, and when you stow the top panels back there, that meager space all but disappears. Even with the top on, putting things into the luggage compartment carries a degree of difficulty rating equal to a backward two-and-a-half with a full twist. A hatchback opening cut around the glass would solve that, but the body creaks and groans now—if it got another hole cut in it it would really flex.

There is a philosophical issue involved with the Corvette, too. Maybe a pair of them. First, perhaps, is the question of why anyone needs to take up as much road space as that for two people. The answer has to be either "Because I want to" or "Because I can," and we won't delve into the possible psychological implications of either of those.

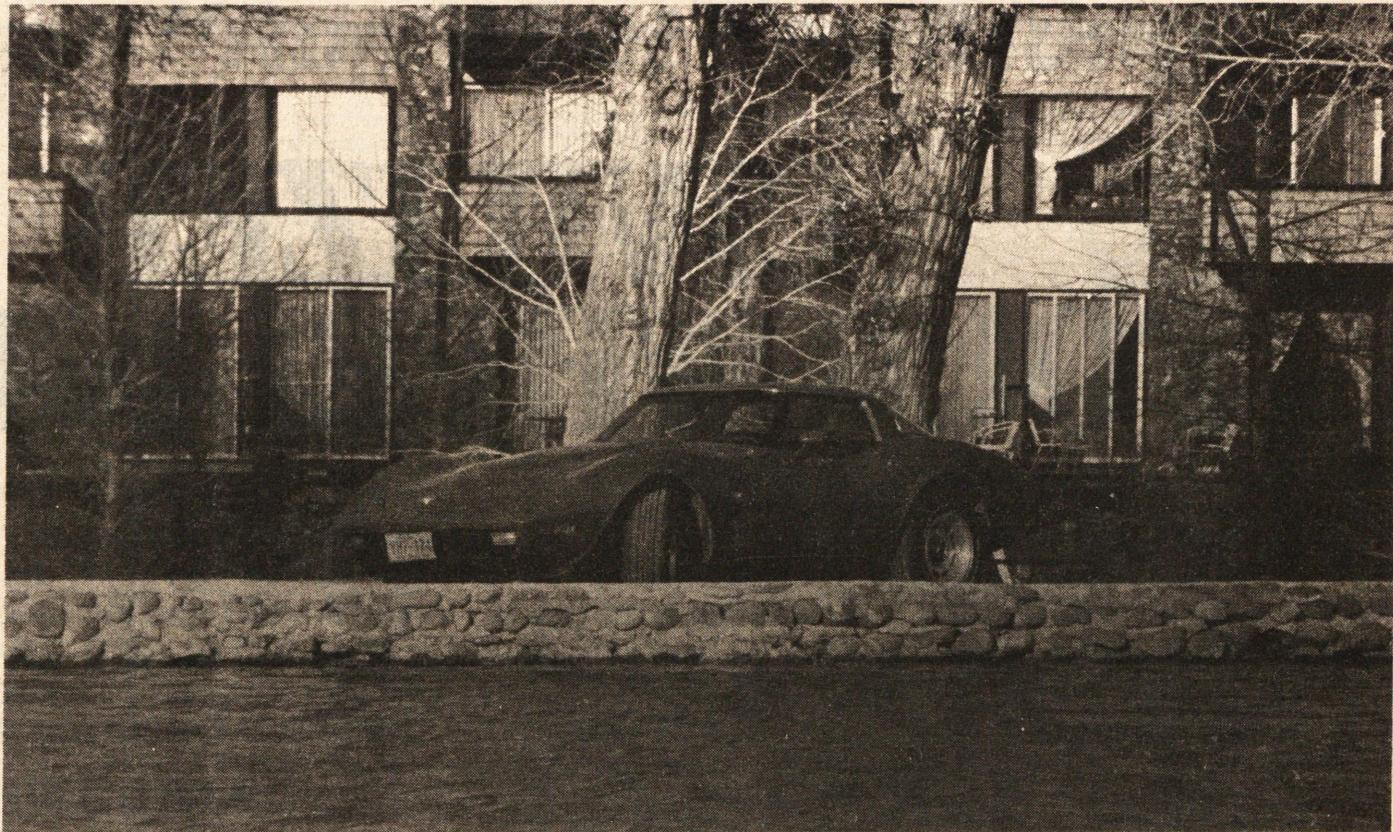
The second is the question of why one buys a sports car and how the Corvette relates to that. How does one apply what might be called the Mini-Cooper Factor?

The Mini-Cooper was the original flat-out car. Early models could be driven flat out almost anywhere, to the accompaniment of great whoops of joy but little outward sign that the driver was behaving in a socially irresponsible fashion. You can do that today with a Honda Civic, a Dodge Colt, maybe an X1/9.

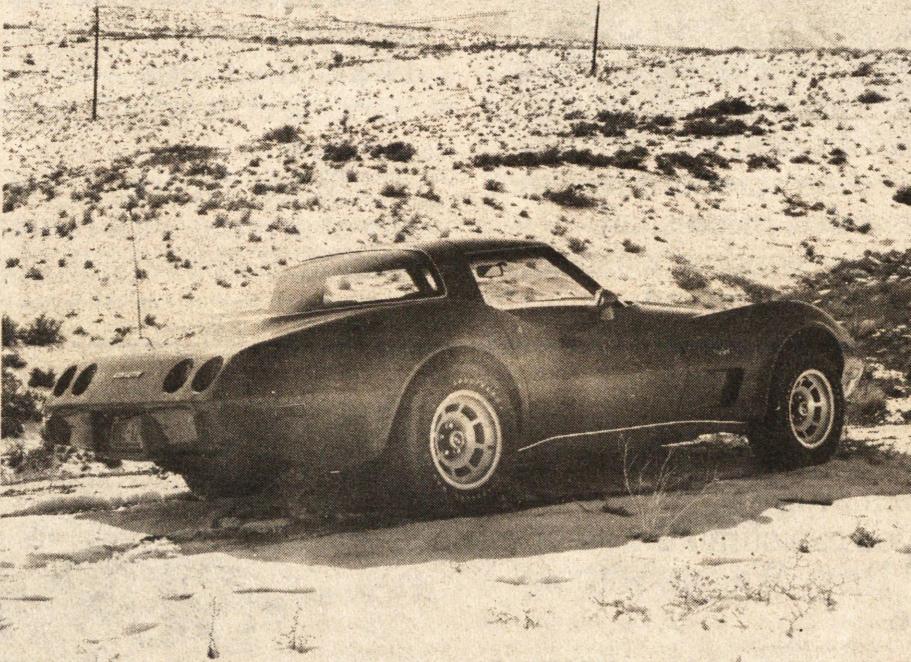
You can't do it in a Corvette, and that takes some of the fun out. You can go faster anywhere in the L82 than you can in a Civic or a Fiat, no problem. But you have to go nine-tenths in those cars to match four tenths in the Corvette, and the fun doesn't start until you're up around eight-tenths. Ask any Showroom Stock racer.

You just can hardly drive a Corvette anywhere near flat out even here in deserted Nevada, and for enthusiasts that compromises the fun of the project. It doesn't really matter that you can be going faster in a Vette without noticing it than you can in a Datsun B210 with your teeth clenched, that's not the point. You can go 600 miles per hour in a 747 and it's no fun at all.

The point is that you can have all the fun you can stand in a lesser car and no one will know but you. You can have just as much fun in a Corvette, but you'll have to tell all the guys in the cellblock about it. But then there's more prestige, in certain



The new fastback body style is functionally no better than the previous notchback. See page 5 for a possible solution.



The Corvette in profile is actually still quite a pretty car. Up close, though, the parts don't seem to blend as well as they do from this distance.

circles, in being seen in a Corvette than in being seen in a Civic, right?

The old argument in favor of the Corvette is generally stated along these lines: "Well, yeah, yeah, that's all true. But where else can you get that much performance for that price...?" With a Trans-Am Firebird available for two-thirds the money with performance so

close that it would take a stopwatch to tell the difference, that starts to leak a little around the seams. But the Trans-Am isn't a two seater, it's not a "sports car," it's not a Corvette.

The Vette is a dinosaur. Its food supply is diminishing and the environment is changing. Chevrolet knows that, of course. There are engineers at Chevrolet who know more about the Corvette's door handles than all the automotive journalists in the world know about the whole

car. But GM's accountants know that the paint is barely dry on the cars in the factory parking lot before they're snapped up. You can hardly hear Mom and Dad haggling over the price of a Chevette radio down at your local dealer for the noise of young trial lawyers signing sticker-price checks for Corvettes.

That's a powerful argument in favor of the Corvette. The engineers know what's wrong with it and they know what to do to fix it. But, as one of them said, "When you're talking in terms of 30,000 sales a year, and you've got people lined up to buy them, it's hard to explain why you should spend a lot of money to change it."

Still, the Corvette will have to change. Best information now is that the change will come in about five years, which will be the 15th or 16th year with the present body style. That the car will be at least 1000, maybe as much as 1500 pounds lighter, seems inevitable. It probably won't have a V8; there is talk of either a turbo V6 or a turbo V4. GM sources say the mid-engine plan is "not impossible." It will be at least as fast as now, maybe faster. It will handle better. It will get better gas mileage by at least half and it almost has to be roomier inside. It will still say Corvette on the side.

It will be, says GM unofficially, a better car in every way. But they're going to have to go some to match the mystique of the current one.

1978 Corvette L82 Specifications

Price: Base, \$9351.89; as tested, \$11,777.21.
Options on test car: L82 engine, \$525; FE7 Gymkhana suspension, \$41; cast aluminum wheels, \$340; P225/70R15 tires, \$216.32; sport mirrors, \$51; rear defogger, \$95; tilt/telescope wheel, \$175; AM/FM/CD stereo radio with power antenna, \$638; power windows, \$130; convenience group, \$52.

ENGINE

Type: OHV watercooled V8
Displacement: 350cid, 5733cc
Bore/Stroke: 4.00x3.48 inches; 101.6x88.4mm
Compression Ratio: 9.0:1
Horsepower: 20 at 5200rpm
Torque: 260 at 3600rpm
Carburetor: One four barrel

DRIVELINE

Type: Front engine and transmission, rear wheel drive
Transmission: Four speed manual, all synchro.
Ratios: 1st-2.43:1; nd-1.61:1; 3rd-1.23:1; 4th-1.00:1.
Final drive ratio, 3.70:1

SUSPENSION

Front: Independent, upper and lower control arms, coil springs, tubular shocks, anti-roll bar
Rear: Independent, axle shafts act as upper control links, lower control links, trailing arms, transverse leaf spring, tubular shocks, anti-roll bar

Wheels: 8x15 alloy (optional)

Tires: P225/70R15 Goodyear Polysteel Radial

STEERING

Type: Recirculating ball
Ratio: 17.6:1, 2.9 turns lock to lock
Turning Circle: 37.0 feet

BRAKES

Front: Vented disc, power assist
Rear: Vented disc, power assist

WEIGHTS, DIMENSIONS, CAPACITIES

Weight: 3490 pounds (curb)
Length: 185.2 inches
Track (F/R): 58.7/59.5 inches
Width: 69.0 inches
Weight Distribution: 48% front, 52% rear

FUEL ECONOMY

Overall average: 11.9mpg; range from 9.4 to 14.1mpg during test period
Fuel tank capacity: 24.0 gallons



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