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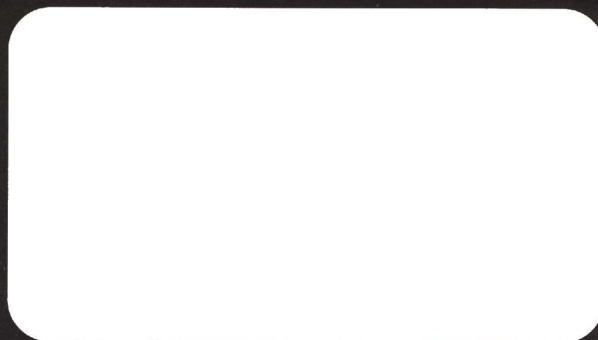
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FIREPOWER

'99 vs. '69
VETTE
SHOOTOUT

FORD vs.
DODGE
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1969. Other than Neil Armstrong's historic walk on the moon and New York's "Miracle Mets," things were tough in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. We were a country still reeling from the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and inaugurated a president who would be the first in history to resign in disgrace. Vietnam was raging, and the Beetles were preparing to break up. But, man, did we have cars.

The daring new Mako Shark-inspired

Vette was just a year old at the time and still about the hottest hunk of American iron (and fiberglass) on the street. GM's big-block V-8 had grown from 396 cubic inches to 427 back in '66, garnering the affectionate nickname "Rat Motor." It was available in several states of tune, but the coolest of the cool for '69 (aside from the nearly unobtainable L88) had to be the L71, rated at 435 gross horsepower and packing three—count 'em, three—two-barrel carburetors. Order us up Three Deuces on a fat block. To go, please.

Fast forward 30 years. Nixon is dead, Vietnam is long over, and the Vette lives. And in C5 form, it may be living better than ever. Chevrolet hinted at several versions of the C5 straight from the get go, and now we have them: the fastback with removable roof, which premiered in '97; the roadster, helping the entire line garner *Motor Trend's* Car of the Year for 1998; and now, something new again: the "hardtop" coupe. The Nassau Blue Metallic example pictured here is one of the first ones off the preproduction line, and

YESTERDAY & TODAY: '99 CORVETTE HARDTOP VS. '69 427 TRI-POWER



we drove it across the country so it could burn rubber alongside this beautifully preserved, 42,000-mile Cortez Silver '69 427 automatic. We were getting a taste of this newest Corvette during four days at the wheel, driving our featured beast 2400 miles from its Indianapolis press introduction to our West Coast base.

Something seemed wrong with the traffic headed west on I-40 coming from Flagstaff and going toward Kingman, Arizona. Despite terrific weather, unlimited visibility, and a 75-mph speed limit, the vehicles we shared the highway with seemed painted in place on the horizon's canvas. But while those cars, pickups, and motorhomes were laboring up the moun-

tain grades, our hardtop Vette sucked up asphalt like a terrain-following cruise missile on afterburner.

A bit of background on this higher-performance Corvette. Chevrolet's brass had let it slip that a super lightweight, ultra-stripped-down, lower-priced club racer was in the works. But in reality, that's only sort of what we got. Chevy's original concept didn't make a handbrake U-turn; let's just say there was a hard lane change in direction. Although marketing and engineering folks were reluctant to discuss the late changes in specifications, what started out in the original business plan as a much lower-cost, bare-bones version of America's favorite V-8 two-

seater has morphed into a slightly more expensive weekend racer's weapon of choice.

So what happened? Better than five years ago, Corvette market planners were conservative about how many could reasonably be sold. Keep in mind that, at the time, Corvette sales were softening, and other powerful competitors like the Toyota Supra Turbo, Porsche 911, and Nissan 300ZX were also faltering badly in the marketplace. A lower-budget version of the C5 was seen as insurance that the Bowling Green, Kentucky, assembly line (which builds only Corvettes) would continue to crank.

Today, every single Corvette is spoken

DOES THE NEWEST VETTE LIVE UP TO THE LEGEND?/by Jack Keebler and Matt Stone

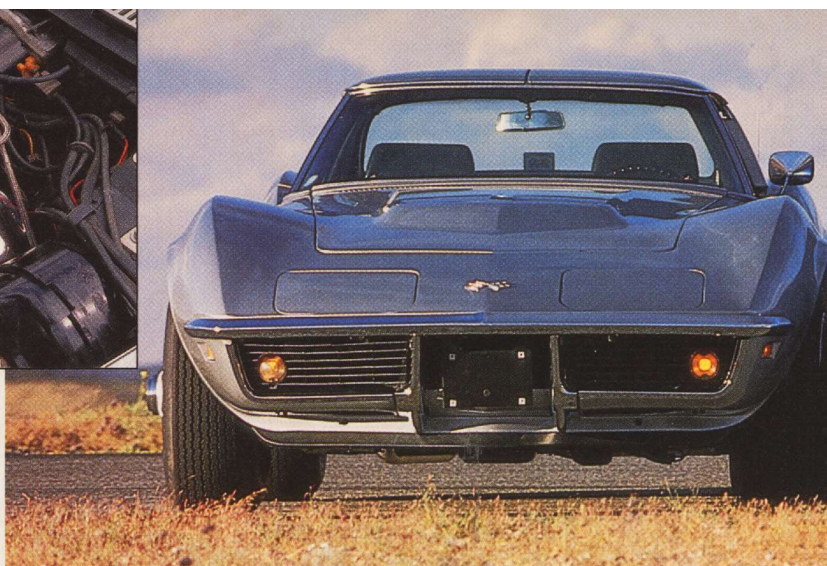




for before it leaves the factory door. So GM financial people asked why they were doing a cheap version of the car that would only squeeze their profit margin. So in a heartbeat, the plan changed. But never say "never": Insiders tell us that, if sales should someday slacken, a lower-budget Corvette could be done quite easily.

The L88 Corvette of '67-'69 was "done quite easily," too, though probably with a lot less thought—or second thought. Just take the basic Vette, stuff in a tire-melting, essentially race-spec 500-horse-plus 427, remove everything that saps power or adds weight, and head for the strip. While this gorgeous 427, owned by Corvette collector M.J. Winer, was not of L88 spec, it is one of approximately 250 427cid 3x2s to be equipped with the Turbo-Hydramatic transmission—packing exactly half the gear ratios of the new car's six-speed manual. Other options on our Yesterday Corvette are power windows, steering, and brakes, Positraction rearend, upgraded suspension, AM/FM radio, and the much heralded, but always ignored, Speed Warning Indicator.

Chevy officials were unwilling to go into exact pricing on the newest variation, allowing only that it will be "the lightest, quickest, least-expensive version of the



car." Corvette Chief Engineer Dave Hill describes it: "The hardtop answers the need that's been expressed for a simpler, more fundamental Corvette. But it's one with even more of the performance attributes than the others. And it's the stiffest Corvette of all—12 percent more rigid than the coupe. It's the lightest Corvette [by about 79 pounds] because there's less hardware and glass area. It's also going to be the lowest-priced Corvette of the entire family. But it's no 'stripper.'"

Standard on all '99 Corvettes are four-wheel disc brakes with anti-lock and traction control, electronic throttle control, and run-flat "Extended Mobility" tires with electronic tire-pressure sensing, air conditioning, leather seating, power door locks, power windows, heated power mirrors, remote keyless entry, theft-deterrent system, cruise control, and AM/FM stereo with cassette player.

No question, a big chunk of the new car's appeal is its engine. The 5.7-liter LS1 V-8 with 345 horsepower at 5600 rpm and 350 pound-feet of torque is the one and only engine offered in all three ver-

sions of the car. Not exactly the raging, ground-pounder 427, but probably as powerful given today's more realistic "net" horsepower ratings. And it's way more fuel efficient and environmentally correct.

Our acceleration tests found no difference to 60 mph between this supposedly lighter hardtop and a coupe we tested in our May issue—both took 4.8 seconds. And the quarter-mile times and speed were actually better for the coupe, which ran a 13.2 seconds at 109.3 mph versus the hardtop's 13.3/108.6. But we can attest that today's Vettes run quicker once they've accumulated about 3000 miles, thus the hardtop may be quicker when fully broken in.

On the way across Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico, we obtained some incredible fuel mileage, even at a sustained 70 to 75 mph. We never saw less than 28 mpg on a fill. And got a high of 32.5 mpg on one long, fast, mostly downhill swoop across Arizona. Try that with three two-barrel carbs.

Because Winer's ultra-low-mile, all-original Vette came with the caveat of "no hard testing," we used it mostly to gain a





feel for how the vintage 427s drove. Fortunately, our forebears had tested a 427 3x2-barrel Corvette in the March '68 issue. Though it was a four-speed/roadster as opposed to our subject '69 automatic coupe, we suspected that test would provide an insight into its mighty, big-block muscle. Well, guess what: Today's heavier, unleaded-gassed, airbagged version would have kicked its fiberglass fanny. The editors of the day achieved a traction-limited 0-60 time of 6.3 seconds in the '68 tester, and ran the quarter mile in 14.1 at 103 mph. Now, that's rolling for sure, no matter the age or era. But in pure terms, the new car just flat outruns the old one, legend and lore be damned.

On the highway, at the border between Nevada and California is a fruit and vegetables inspection pavillion that looks almost exactly like the customs crossings at the international border between Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Canada. And as we eased into a white-striped lane, I steered myself mentally to provide carefully worded responses to virtually any question asked by the huge, badged officer looming outside his booth. But imagine

my absolute surprise when he said, "Hang on, there, what are you doing driving this car? You're not C. Van Tune."

My son's jaw dropped open, and I was speechless. How did the inspection station officer know that last statement would have any relevance at all to me? And how would he know if I was or wasn't Van Tune? Had MT alerted California state officials that I was on my way? But wait, I was wearing a blue Motor Trend golf shirt with the magazine logo and the MT calipers stitched in white thread. Also, the Los Angeles staff is almost dizzy from high-speed trips to Las Vegas Motor Speedway and more than a couple brain-frying runs through the nearby desert in sport/utes. So perhaps this Nevada station regularly intercepts our editors. But amazingly, this clever guy's next question was almost as impressively insightful.

"Isn't this the new Corvette hardtop?"

Turns out he's also an avid MT reader. I guess I just needed to be reminded that serious car enthusiasts come in all shapes and sizes. And there are even a few who wear badges.

Under the fiberglass skin of its fixed roof, the hardtop's integral all-steel frame is essentially identical to that of the hatchback coupe. But Mike Neal, a Corvette engineer in charge of suspension development, tells us the attached fiberglass roof does bring a large measure of additional overall stiffness to the vehicle.

Chevrolet first offered a fixed-roof Corvette with the '63 split-window Sting Ray. And while this new roof profile is obviously not quite as interesting, it does share the coupe's subtle roof-center declination that's carried quietly into the rear window glass. However, the hardtop will not be the Corvette with the highest top speed. That honor still goes to the hatchback coupe with the lowest drag coefficient of the two-seater trio at 0.29.

Backing up our subjective impression, the blue devil wove through our 600-foot slalom with the quickest Corvette pass we've ever recorded, at 68.1 mph. That's significantly better than the Z51-equipped coupe we recently tested (at 66.2 mph). Along with certain colors, some options aren't available on the hardtop. But Chevrolet's remarkable stability-control system is. This "Active Handling" system electronically recognizes potentially dangerous oversteer or understeer situations, cuts throttle, and selectively



applies all four calipers independently to help the driver maintain control. It's impressive and a safety/handling enhancement well worth considering.

Hardtop versions of the car come with the racing-style Z51 suspension only. Chevrolet claims this firmly sprung and damped arrangement is designed specifi-

cally for "appropriate, sanctioned competitions, or for the driver who desires the ultimate in handling." Usually we'd offer warnings to avoid this type of suspension if you don't intend to drive regularly on a racetrack. But as we drove from Indianapolis back to our Los Angeles office, we found very few road surfaces this car didn't like.

It's in the handling department where 30 years of progress in terms of tire, suspension, and chassis design development really shows. The Mako Vette was pretty exotic for its day: only the expensive,

REASONS TO RIDE

My almost-16-year-old son and I made the 2400-mile trip in the Vette hardtop from Indianapolis to Los Angeles. Both of us will remember this fast-paced odyssey for the rest of our lives.

Other dads, hearing about it beforehand, would get all misty-eyed or go loud and enthusiastic about road trips they took with their sons. Oddly, most women, with the notable exceptions of my wife and my Detroit colleague, just didn't seem to get it. Why would any-

one ever want to drive a car—even a Corvette, *especially* a Corvette—across the United States instead of flying?

I did it so I could watch my normally late-sleeping boy spring from the bed at 6 a.m. in Clinton, Oklahoma, as if he'd been hit with 5000 volts, ready to begin another mile-munching day,

...so we could stop at a little souvenir shop near Conway, Texas, to buy "Don't Mess with Texas" and "Route 66" T-shirts,

...so we could talk and grin about

TECH DATA

CORVETTE 427 ROADSTER

(as tested March '68)

GENERAL/POWERTRAIN

Drivetrain layout	Front engine, rear drive
Airbag	None
Engine type	90-degree V-8, liquid cooled, cast-iron block and aluminum heads
Bore x stroke, in./mm	4.25x3.76/107.9x95.5
Displacement, ci/cc	427/6997
Compression ratio	11.0:1
Valve gear	OHV, 2 valves/cyl.
Fuel/induction system	Three 2-barrel Holley carburetors
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE gross	435 @ 5800
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE gross	460 @ 4000
Horsepower/liter	62.4
Redline, rpm	6500
Transmission type	4-speed manual
Axle ratio	3.55:1
Final-drive ratio	3.55:1
Recommended fuel	Premium leaded

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in./mm	98.0/2489
Track, f/r, in./mm	58.3/59.0/1480/1499
Length, in./mm	182.1/4625
Width, in./mm	69.2/1757
Height, in./mm	47.8/1214
Base curb weight, lb	3425
Fuel capacity, gal	20.0
Weight/power ratio, lb/hp	7.9

CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r	Upper and lower control arms, coil springs/independent with lower control arms, transverse-mounted leaf spring
Steering type	Recirculating ball, manual
Ratio	20.2:1
Turning circle, ft	39.9
Brakes, f/r	Vented disc/vented disc
Wheels, in. f/r	15x7.0, steel disc
Tires, f/r	F70x15, bias ply

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration, sec	
0-30 mph	2.7
0-45 mph	4.0
0-60 mph	6.3
0-75 mph	8.3
Standing quarter mile, sec/mph	14.1/103.0
Braking, 60-0 mph, ft	119

PRICE

Base price	\$4320
Price as tested	\$5542
Estimated current value	\$33,000-\$35,000

imported brands packed features such as independent suspension and four-wheel disc brakes. The '69 Corvette was an aggressive handler, too, but even then, the nose would go light at speed, the steering lacked road feel, and the whole car felt darty when the pavement got rough. Push it too hard into a corner, and the initial understeer can morph into a big spin of oversteer with anything but perfect throttle control. And the '69's rock-hard bias-ply tires on narrow 15-inch wheels look positively dainty today. But the brakes feel remarkably good, and body roll is commendably low, even by current standards.

We've had lots of positive things to say about the C5 Corvette's big, circular analog gauges with their vivid white calibration and the handy digital driver information screen. And, frankly, we see no reason to change a single thing. But Chevrolet has added an optional head-up

display system for '99 that projects vehicle speed to 175 mph, an analog sweep tachometer with shift light, and turn signal indicators on the inside of the windshield. The driver can also put bar graph displays for oil pressure, coolant temperature, or fuel level onto the glass. But here again, the head-up system isn't available on the hardtop. No harm there, as we tend to view these systems as little more than gimmicks, and turn them off.

The interior of the vintage Vette also feels positively racy, but in a completely different fashion from the '99's. It's leaner, narrower, but more cossetting. The deeply dished, thin-rimmed, three-spoked steering wheel is uncomfortably narrow to handle, and through it you peer into a large 160-mph speedo and 7000-rpm tach. The other gauges are to the right, as are the heater controls, radio, and super-cool fiber-optic monitoring system for head- and taillight operations.



blue 345-horsepower
Corvettes and driving
fast with some Navajo
teenagers at a gas sta-
tion outside Tuba City,
Arizona,

...so he could watch me
stare down and chase off a
would-be spy photographer with
a digital camera at the edge of the
Grand Canyon who was trying to pop a
shot of our Vette's abbreviated rear
glass and long deck,

...so he could lean over the side of



Hoover Dam and slowly
take in one of the engineer-
ing marvels of the 20th
century, a miracle way
before NASA was sending
men to the moon.

...so he could see movie
star Martin Sheen cruising
beside us up the Pacific Coast High-
way near Malibu as the sun was setting.

And most important, I made the trip
because when will I ever again get my
son's undivided attention for four whole
days?
—J.K.

Styling? The new Vette is commanding,
standing imposingly on its low-profile
rubber, with broad shoulders and a big,
muscular butt. But the silver shark is the
most captivating. The curves and Coke-
bottle waistline are stretched so tightly
over the frame, its skin fairly pings when
you touch it. So while we're impressed by
the looks of the new car, we simply drool
over the old one.

Then there's That Sound. During the
mid- and late '70s, most cars—even
Corvettes—issued forth an impotent,
metallic fizz from their catalyzed, fake
dual exhaust systems. But the pre-cat,
3x2 427 makes a sharp, slightly cammy,
almost manic "plup-plup-plup" that lets
you know there's horsepower nearby.
Slamming your foot into all three carbs is
the automotive equivalent of opening an
entire six-pack of beer simultaneously
and pouring it into your mouth—nothing
but rowdy, bad-boy fun, and to hell with

manners. Fortunately, today's engineers
have made a spectacular recovery, and
the new Vette has good chops, too; a
reedy intake roar, and deeper, smoother
sounds coming from the centrally
mounted, four-tip exhaust system.

So which is better? Which should you
buy? Which is really the Corvette for a
drive across the country—or a trip to the
burger joint? There's little question that,
if your needs include any sort of real-
world driving—a little club racing—the
new Vette is the way to fly, literally and
figuratively. It out-accelerates, out-
brakes, and handily out-handles the leg-
endary Mako Sharks, offering carefree
driveability and palpable gas mileage—
as it should, given 30 years of technolog-
ical and design progress. But for stylin',
you've got to love the tidy shape and 427
cache of the '69. Pull out those T-tops on
a sunny day, romp on the gas, and let the
three deuces talk to you. The classic Vette



spews nostalgia from every pore and still
honks when you're in the mood. Ideally,
you'd buy one of each.

The '99 hardtop coupe is a neat piece.
It's lighter, a better handler, and should be
cheaper than the already fabulous fast-
back C5. It is not the package we antici-
pated, but it's a good one, and will find
favor with those who don't care for wind or
sun in their hair and who just want the
best-handling Vette variant available
today. The Corvette is still a loud-and-
clear definition of American style, two-
seater muscle—just as it was in '69. **MT**

TECH DATA

'99 CORVETTE HARDTOP

GENERAL/POWERTRAIN

Drivetrain layout	Front engine, rear drive
Airbag	Dual
Engine type	90-degree V-8, liquid cooled, cast aluminum block and heads
Bore x stroke, in./mm	3.90x3.62/99.0x92.0
Displacement, ci/cc	346/56.7
Compression ratio	10.1:1
Valve gear	OHV, 2 valves/cyl.
Fuel/induction system	Sequential multipoint EFI
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE net	345 @ 5600
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE net	350 @ 4400
Horsepower/liter	60.8
Redline, rpm	6000
Transmission type	6-speed manual
Axle ratio	3.42:1
Final-drive ratio	1.71:1
Recommended fuel	Premium unleaded

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in./mm	104.5/2655
Track, f/r, in./mm	62.0/62.1/1575/1575
Length, in./mm	179.7/456
Width, in./mm	73.6/1870
Height, in./mm	47.9/1217
Base curb weight, lb.	3153/1430
Fuel capacity, gal	19.1
Weight/power ratio, lb/hp	9.1

CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r	Upper and lower control arms, transverse-mounted leaf spring, anti-roll bar/ upper and lower control arms, transverse- transverse-mounted leaf spring, anti-roll bar
Steering type	Rack and pinion, power assist
Ratio	16.1:1
Turns, lock to lock	2.3
Turning circle, ft.	40.0
Brakes, f/r	Vented disc/vented disc, ABS
Wheels, in. f/r	17x8.5/18x9.5 cast aluminum
Tires, f/r	P245/45ZR17/P275/40ZR18

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration, sec	
0-30 mph	2.0
0-40 mph	2.8
0-50 mph	3.7
0-60 mph	4.8
0-70 mph	6.1
0-80 mph	7.8
Standing quarter mile, sec/mph	13.3/108.6
Braking, 60-0 mph, ft.	116
Lateral acceleration, g	0.90
Speed through 600-ft slalom, mph	68.1
EPA fuel economy, mpg, city/hwy.	18/28 (est.)

PRICE

Base price	\$39,900 (est)
Price as tested	\$39,900 (est)

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