

Chevrolet Corvette



America's only sports car, but that doesn't excuse everything.

• As it rolls into its thirteenth model year, the Corvette is unquestionably one of America's longest-running new-car hits, right up there with the Checker Marathon as a senior citizen of automobiledom. Thirteen years, that is, if you're just looking skin-deep. If you prefer to put aside the decorator fiberglass on the basis that the chassis, not the body, is really the heart of the Corvette, well, lessee, that was new in 1963 at the launch of the Sting Ray. So the Corvette is really in its eighteenth year.

And selling better than ever, it turns out. General Motors has always been shrewd at marketing, and with the Corvette it has a section of the new-car business all to itself. There's not another two-passenger sports car built in America. Sports-car buyers have to choose a Corvette, a foreign car, or nothing, and enough of them opt for the Corvette every year to keep the one assembly plant running at full speed. Of course this tidy little monopoly—what

else could you call the business of making America's only sports car?—takes some of the urgency out of designing new Corvettes. There's not much incentive to tool up a modern sports car, or even maintain the performance that made the old one famous, if every year's batch will be a sellout anyway. So, although General Motors has made radical changes in all its other cars since 1977—downsized them, made them more efficient and more responsive to the driver; in fact, GM now makes full six-passenger cars that take up less pavement than this two-seater—the Corvette team is still dithering with the same problems that concerned it in 1972. And still taking the easy way out.

Question: Do we design a genuine, power-producing dual exhaust or just slide by with a single? *Answer:* Give them the sucker single; they won't know the difference anyway.

Question: Do we certify a performance engine for California or just stick in the

305 chuffer out of a Biscayne? *Answer:* Stick it to them.

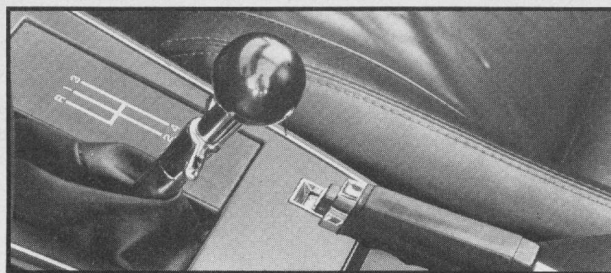
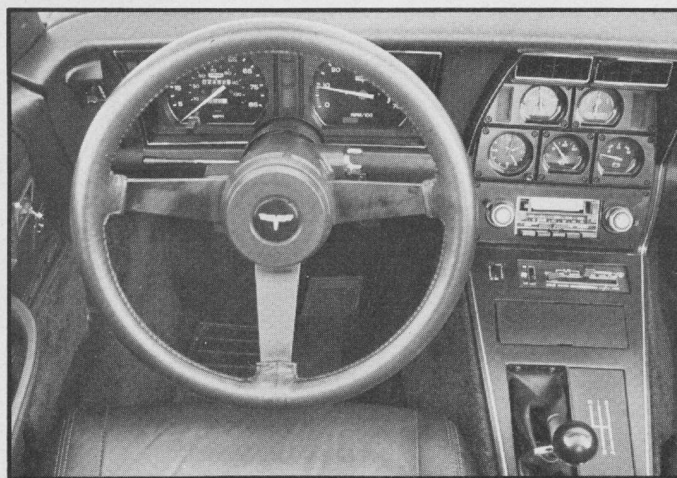
Question: Do we go to the trouble of certifying four-speed transmissions for the optional engine and for California when automatics are so much easier?

Answer: Naw, we sell all the cars we can make now.

As a result of this attitude, all Corvettes have single exhaust systems terminating in "sporty" twin tailpipes. The only powertrain available in California is a five-liter V-8 with automatic, and the only four-speed available anywhere comes with the 49-state base engine (code L48). The optional L82 (rated at 230 horsepower, up from the L48's 190) is available with automatic only. All of this change in emphasis back at GM naturally results in a new kind of buyer out in the U.S.A. that's supposed to be seen from a Chevrolet. Ten years ago the typical Corvette spent Saturday morning with its hood up, the engine getting a fine tune for the street racing

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

Continued



that would inevitably follow. Now the typical Corvette rolls up at the country club on Saturday morning, driven by a guy with white shoes and a white belt.

And yet. And yet, the Corvette still manages to stay interesting, in part because it is such a throwback to the Sixties. Run it up in second gear, let off, and you hear honest-to-God exhaust burble, a semi-big American V-8 kind of chuckling to itself. No new car makes that sound anymore. And the chrome four-speed lever pokes up through the console, offering you those man-sized synchro detents found only in big American transmissions. Foreign cars always snicked up through the gears; American cars demanded muscle—macho—and the Corvette still takes a hefty push. Everything about it feels like big machinery, like American iron of old.

Model year 1980 is an interesting time for the Corvette too, in that the engineering department went to a fair amount of trouble to build some new efficiency into the old clunker. They actually made 238 pounds disappear. Probably this was done to avoid embarrassment: the old Corvette is not scheduled for replacement until 1983 now; the way downsizing is going these days,

if it hadn't been put on a diet it could well have been the heaviest car on the Chevrolet lot by that time.

All this weight wasn't easy—or cheap—to remove, either. The energy-absorbing bumpers are made of fiberglass now, which is a pretty good trick. The hood and door panels were lightened, and weight was eliminated from the lift-off roof panels by introducing tiny, low-density glass beads into the fiberglass. The method here is to displace heavy resin with light glass, thus ending up with a composite that is lighter than the previous mixture. Glass also received attention in other areas: the windshield and door windows were reduced in thickness. Beyond all this, the frame has been lightened, the differential and its attachments have been redesigned and cast in aluminum instead of iron, the intake manifold on the L48 engine has been changed to aluminum, and the 5.0-liter California engine has exhaust manifolds made of stainless steel rather than the usual (heavy) iron.

In theory, a weight loss approaching 7 percent (which is about what the 1980 Corvette's shrinkage amounts to) should have a noticeable effect on performance and economy. But in practice,

well, you know what they say about "mileage may vary, depending . . ." Comparing this test's sample with other Corvettes tested in the past several years shows no significant increase in acceleration or braking. But at least there is no deterioration in either of these categories, and this has to be viewed as real progress, given the general decline in Corvette performance in the last ten years.

There does, however, seem to be a modest improvement in road manners. Steering response is accurate and predictable now, vastly better than in the test cars we drove just a few years ago, and the handling seems of a very high order. For evaluation, we made a couple of hard charges through a section of twisty mountain road just north of Los Angeles. Right off, the optional Goodyear Eagle GT P255/60R tires earned high marks—first, for producing conspicuously high cornering forces for a street tire, and, second, for being blessedly gradual in breakaway. Our sentiments about the tires apply equally to the Corvette itself. It's a very predictable car if you give it the right inputs, and it's very quick through the bends, particularly if they are smooth. Even the

CORVETTE

mildest sort of corduroy surface sets up torsional vibrations in the chassis and a patter in the wheels that, although they may not actually reduce cornering limits very much, tend to discourage exploring them. The car simply creaks, groans, and protests too much to make the pursuit enjoyable.

Our final mountain-road observation is that the standard L48 suffers from an energy crisis of its own. Even with 238 less pounds to haul around, this engine won't pump up much adrenaline. Full throttle is rated no sweat for women and children, but if your Pekingese complains too much, the California five-liter with its mandatory automatic is guaranteed to be even more soothing.

That the word "soothing" should even come up in a conversation about Corvettes should tell you something about the confusion that's settling about this marque. While the weight-reduction efforts were certainly a thoughtful and expensive approach to improving performance, the rest of the car shows little awareness of the Corvette's performance heritage. A speedometer as big as a pie plate seems a little silly now that it carries digits to only 85 mph. The same can be said of the similarly sized tachometer, redlined at 5200 rpm, although the low redline seems more reasonable once you lift the hood to expose the benign-blue motor topped by a black-painted air cleaner. There's nothing in the engine room to say "Corvette" anymore. Gone is the chrome. Gone are the cast-aluminum rocker covers. Except for the radio shielding over the spark-plug wires, which is now done in black plastic instead of bright metal, you could just as well be looking at the powerplant of an El Camino.

Instead of high-revving vitality, the Corvette seems to be dealing with other worries now. As you unlock the driver's door, don't stop turning the key when the door will open; twist it *hard* right until it won't go any farther. Otherwise the burglar alarm will light off when you open the door and cause all sorts of embarrassment. And when you try to start the engine, make sure you push the clutch pedal down *hard* against the floor. Otherwise an idiot switch will block the starter. Strangely, however, not every danger has been compensated. There is nothing to prevent your suitcase from flying forward out of the luggage area and folding up your seat every time you apply the brakes—nothing, that is, except for a piece of pack-



As always, the Corvette's cockpit is a bit tight in the shoulders, but now there is no shortage of lumbar support.



Continued



COUNTERPOINT

• You've got to give Corvette engineers credit for their staying power. Year after year they come back from budget meetings with the same old car and a whole new bunch of government regulations to meet. This season brings the usual mix of good and bad news. The L82 four-speed is gone for 1980, but there are a few nice touches to make up for the loss. Good-year's finally discovered how to build a fat tire that works; the new, fully integrated spoilers cut a cleaner hole in the wind; and a significant number of pounds have been pared from the chassis. So the old girl feels noticeably more nimble than we left her last year.

The only problem is that Corvette gas mileage still teeters on the brink of gas-guzzlerism, which as it turns out is only a problem if you're General Motors. If you're a car freak, the guzzler tax is a godsend. This little stickler is the one and only thing that made GM's money men realize that they really will need a new Corvette in the foreseeable future.

—Don Sherman

When you get right down to it, the Corvette really isn't a very good car. It's not put together very well; the quality of materials would embarrass any Japanese econobox; it squeaks, creaks, and moans; the suspension is thrown into a dither when asked to corner on anything other than a billiard table; and even in a straight line a rough surface comes crashing through the underpinnings in a most distressing, and loud, manner. The steering,

although quick, is not at all precise. There's more, but you must be as bored with this annual litany as I am. What isn't boring is driving this aging anachronism. Despite the deserved vilification the car gets around the office, it's the first to disappear from the parking lot at the end of the day, regardless of the motorcars of more technical sophistication that are available. I drive it and I'm infuriated by all the things wrong with it, and thoroughly entertained.

—Mike Knepper

Another year, another Corvette. Almost can't tell the new ones without a program these days. Oh, I know that the serious-minded engineers in charge of Corvette development have shaved off some weight, smoothed out the airflow, tweaked this, and tuned that. But it still feels like the same old car to me.

Which is not all bad, mind you. In fact, there's still something to be said for the old warhorse. For one thing, it's still faster than all but a few of today's new cars. Nail down the throttle and it'll go quickly enough to stir up some corpuscles. And it still packs a distinctively Amurrican brand of bad-ass driving fun. There's some rumble left in the cleaner-than-clean exhaust, the shift linkage will give you tendonitis, and it jumps and darts and twitches as if possessed when you try to drive it like a sports car. And of course the Vette still looks, well, low-down and mean. All of which is why I like the Corvette just the way it is. But it's also why I'll welcome its successor with open arms.

—Rich Ceppos

horse technology called a tie-down strap that you are supposed to use to lash down your cargo. A seatback latch from any one of the cheaper Chevrolets would work just fine here.

Hauling room has always been a problem with the Corvette. For years there was no glove compartment—that was finally remedied a few seasons back—and now we have another example of Corvette confusion: the glove compartment in the test car was completely filled by a rack for eight-track tape cartridges. The car, unfortunately, was equipped with a cassette player.

To all of this add seats that have too much lumbar support and instrument lenses that mirror your pant legs. And then what do you have? Exactly the same thing as always: America's only sports car. Since this alone seems to be enough to guarantee commercial success, there is probably little point in belaboring the Corvette's shortcomings. Suffice it to say that this is a "different" kind of American car. While the differences aren't always in the direction we think they should be, we're nonetheless convinced that the new-car market is a brighter place because of the Corvette.

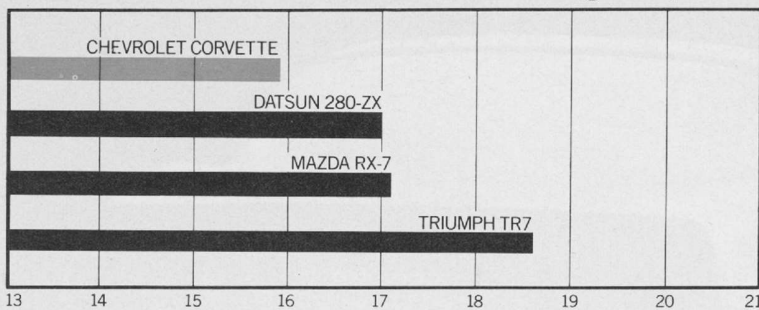
You can take that as an endorsement. Sort of.

—Patrick Bedard

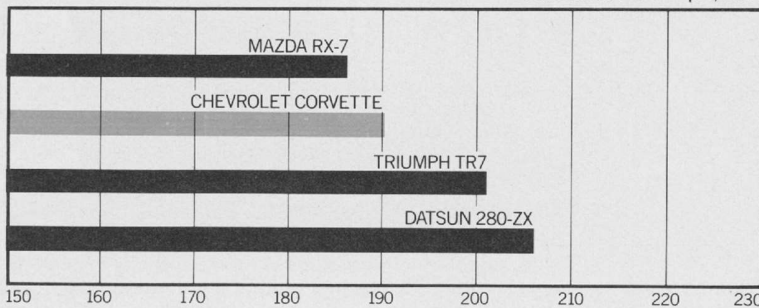


CORVETTE

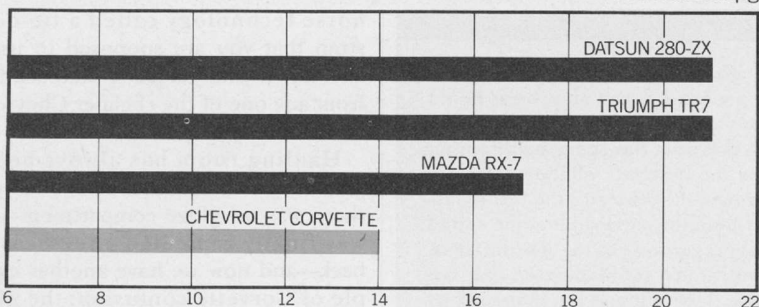
ACCELERATION standing 1/4 mile, seconds



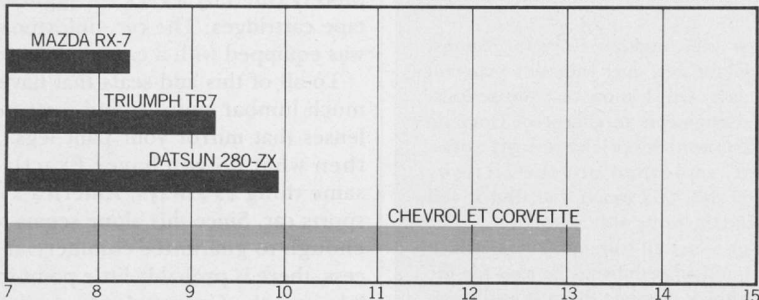
BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



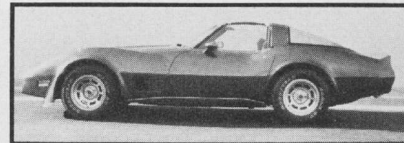
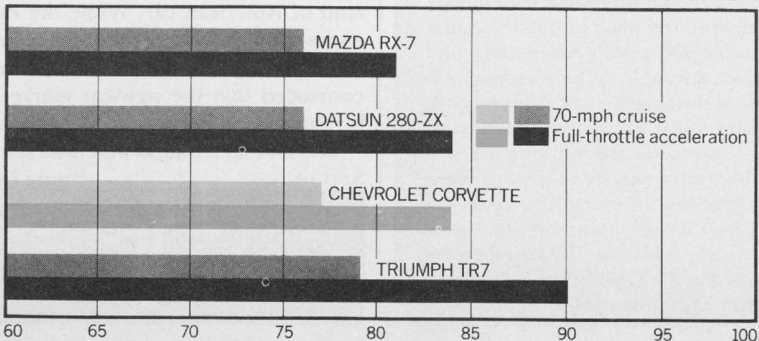
FUEL ECONOMY EPA estimated mpg



CURRENT BASE PRICE dollars x 1000



INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL dBA



CHEVROLET CORVETTE

Manufacturer: Chevrolet Motor Division
General Motors Corporation
Warren, Michigan 48090

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger, 2-door convertible

Price as tested: \$14,477

Options on test car: base Chevrolet Corvette, \$13,140; 255/60R-15 white-letter tires, \$426; aluminum wheels, \$407; AM/FM-stereo/cassette radio, \$168; power door locks, \$140; rear-window defogger, \$109; power antenna, \$56; dual rear speakers, \$31.

ENGINE

Type: V-8, water-cooled, cast-iron block and heads, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke: 4.00 x 3.48 in, 102 x 88mm
Displacement: 350 cu in, 5730cc
Compression ratio: 8.2:1
Carburetion: 1x4-bbl Rochester Quadrajet
Valve gear: pushrods, overhead valves, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net): 190 bhp @ 4400 rpm
Torque (SAE net): 280 lbs-ft @ 2400 rpm
Redline: 5200 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission: 4-speed
Final-drive ratio: 3.07:1
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed
I 2.88 8.5 44 mph (5200 rpm)
II 1.91 12.9 67 mph (5200 rpm)
III 1.33 18.5 92 mph (5000 rpm)
IV 1.00 24.6 123 mph (5000 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase: 98.0 in
Track, F/R: 58.7/59.5 in
Length: 185.3 in
Width: 69.0 in
Height: 48.1 in
Ground clearance: 4.1 in
Curb weight: 3330 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R: 48.9/51.1 %
Fuel capacity: 24.0 gal
Oil capacity: 4.6 qt
Water capacity: 21.6 qt

SUSPENSION

F: independent, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: independent; 1 fixed-length half-shaft, 1 trailing link, and 1 lateral link per side; transverse leaf spring

STEERING

Type: recirculating ball, power-assisted
Turns lock-to-lock: 3.5
Turning circle curb-to-curb: 40.4 ft

BRAKES

F: 11.8-in dia vented disc
R: 11.8-in dia vented disc
Power assist: vacuum

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size: 8.0 x 15 in
Wheel type: cast aluminum
Tire make and size: Goodyear Eagle GT, P255/60R-15

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle: 56 dBA
Full-throttle acceleration: 84 dBA
70-mph cruising: 77 dBA
70-mph coasting: 76 dBA

PERFORMANCE

Zero to
30 mph: 2.7 seconds
40 mph: 4.0 seconds
50 mph: 5.8 seconds
60 mph: 7.6 seconds
70 mph: 10.3 seconds
80 mph: 13.2 seconds
90 mph: 16.9 seconds
100 mph: 22.2 seconds
Standing 1/4-mile: 15.9 sec @ 88 mph
Top speed: 123 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph: 190 ft
EPA estimated fuel economy: 14 mpg

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