

The 'BEST' Corvette

by JOHN PFANSTIEHL

How do you turn a pleasant social gathering of Corvette enthusiasts into a name-calling, brawling mess? Just ask the question, "What was the best Corvette made?" At risk of offending everyone, I'll humbly offer my thoughts on this, the most controversial of all Corvette topics.

Be forewarned that I believe Corvettes, of all cars, were made to be driven hard and enjoyed, not hidden away from view or use.

It's taken me 20 years of owning Corvettes and driving hundreds of thousands of miles in them to zero

in on what's the ultimate driver. Here's what I've learned. First let's get the easy choices out of the way.

Convertibles. Some things in life can't be explained; they have to be felt. Like a convertible. For me, driving a closed car is like kissing through Saran wrap. My '71 CJK coupe was as wonderful as a car could be, but something was always missing. Take the tops off, take the rear window out — it still didn't feel right. It was like taking half a shower.

Coupe (T-top). If you don't feel the

difference, definitely go with the coupe. It's much safer. During ten years of seeing the worst Corvette wrecks in Connecticut, the only fatality I recall was a person who was thrown out of the car.

It's difficult to choose between the coupe and convertible based solely on styling. They each have such strong points. The coupe lines are great. The tiny top on the convertible is striking, like on the early Auburn boat-tailed roadsters. And the convertible with the hard top installed is considered by some to

have the cleanest lines.

Hard Top: Here's one lesson from experience: If you don't plan on ever using your hard top, sell it! When I bought my present car, that was the first thing I did. Later, when I mentioned this to the previous owner, he thought for a second, and then said he wished he had done that the day he bought the car. He moved the hard top from place to place, stored it, tripped over it, and picked it up for 13 years.

Exterior Color: A few years ago, just for transportation, I bought a red roadster with black interior at Corvettes at Carlisle because my main driver was waiting for the body to be restored. In most respects, this was the poorest Corvette I ever owned. The paint looked like it had been done in a prison training program, the black shoe polish was wearing off the interior. Wrong motor, rusty frame — nothing held up under arms-length inspection. However, it was shiny and it wasn't missing any major pieces. I was shocked by the attention this car generated. The worst car, yet people loved it the most. It was all due to color combination. This effect has been verified by many Corvette dealers. It seems that blues and greens are beautiful but invisible, whites are ho-hum nice, yellow turns a lot of people off and brown can't be sold.

Black is the ultimate to my eye, but ask the man who owned one! If you care about what your car looks like, bring a full time car washer everywhere you go. We're not talking about once-a-day polishing here. As you're wiping off the front end, the rear begins to look dusty and dingy. And if you park in the sun, a half hour is enough to draw heat seeking missiles from miles away. Experience proves red is the best for Corvettes — it fires people up.

Interior: It has to be leather. Again, it's one of those things that can't be explained to those who fail to feel the reason for it. Supple, sensuous leather. Cloth is more comfortable sometimes, but so is a government job. Besides, with leather it is much easier to clean up the beer or the lollipops, whatever.

Color: Personally, I love interiors that have color. Red cars with red interiors, green cars with green interiors. It shows an extra degree of



Larger mirror with map light became available as an option in '73 and experience proves it to be a desirable feature in a driver.

lavishness and professionalism by a car maker when they take the effort to match interior colors to the body colors. That is increasingly rare, especially in foreign cars.

However, Corvette leather interiors only came in black and brown during the years I prefer. Black is the clear choice because it's the most striking. And it looks appropriate in a Corvette roadster. On the utilitarian side, (no small consideration in a driver), black is so easy to keep looking clean. Furthermore, black is beautiful for repairing damage and matching components (ever notice red in-



HI-COMP (1160) has the substantial power necessary in a convertible. Its strong reception and station "scan" are welcome in a touring car. It has a fairly low price and requires only minor filing of the original radio opening.

teriors eventually have a dozen different shades because the plastic pieces age differently than the vinyl or leather?). Also, many replacement GM parts (such as door panels) come through in black, saving the extra trouble, expense and problems necessitated by painting them to a different color.

Big Block vs Small Block. The big blocks in their higher horsepower configurations are capable of putting drivers into adrenaline shock. The lower horsepower versions, while having the low end strength of a grizzly bear, just aren't exciting



ESCORT is essential equipment in a red Corvette. Mount it high up but not behind windshield frame or other metal. Running the power cord behind interior trim pieces is worth the effort.

enough to put up with the nose-heavy handling their bulk creates. Their thirst is not dainty either. On one cross-country trip, my girl friend was driving a 350 '72 roadster (AC,AT) while I was driving a 454 '71 (also AC,AT) — same condition, same speed, same options. However, the big block consistently drank a full 50% more at every watering hole.

Fuel requirements: Most pre-'71 Corvettes require a high octane gas. This is only a minor problem for a weekend warrior, but it's constant aggravation for a person who drives



1970-up cars had speakers mounted in dash pad. A matched pair (such as SONY's) of tweeters in the dash and mid-range speakers in the kick panels provide great sound with no visible alterations. Add an amp and put woofers in the carpeted riser behind the seats for the next level of audio escalation.

over 25,000 miles a year all over the place. Just spend a couple of hours running around rural New Jersey with the needle sagging toward E, on a Sunday afternoon looking for fuel that won't put a fire out, and you'll fully appreciate that this game gets old very fast.

Options: Air conditioning is a must for a driver. It's amazing how many people ask, why would you want AC with a convertible? Even the seldom used Corvettes, and those in colder climates, get taken

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out for summer affairs such as weddings. When your girl friend has spent three hours working on her hair, you had better plan on keeping the top up and windows closed if you know what's good for you. And anyone who wears a suit soon learns how little time it takes to get wilted on even 70 degree days in a Corvette.

When it comes to choosing transmission, few people are on the line. My preference runs towards the automatic, particularly the turbo 400 which is one of the world's greatest transmissions. Automatics are faster off the line, keep engine revs lower, and give much better gas mileage, from my experience. All my turbo 400 equipped cars



The "Dove Pin" and housing on the door jams were added to convertibles in 1972 to improve body flex during driving.

were fully optioned and gave over 20 mpg, more on trips.

After years of looking all over the country, I couldn't find the exact car I wanted with an automatic. I did locate one with a 4-speed. And you do get used to it. If you have to drive in bumper-to-bumper traffic often, or if the clutch has a high pedal pressure, then a standard transmission wouldn't be acceptable for a driver. On the other hand, the four speed is fun occasionally, and it keeps a lot of people from asking if they can borrow the car.

A few other options should be discussed. Side pipes are exciting, and they help gas mileage and power, but after 3 hours on the highway occupants wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Bach and the 'Stones, even after the bottle of Excedrin. While on the subject of music, if it matters at all,

scrap the Delco radio and speakers. Don't suffer with that antiquated performance for the sake of originality. After all, who owns the car—you or posterity?

Power brakes? Power steering? Power windows? Yes, yes, yes. Particularly if the car has disc brakes, wide tires, and you like to talk to people at stop lights.

Now for the good part. Choosing the proper year Corvette takes ex-

perience and intelligence; trying to convince someone *your* choice is the *right* choice probably shows lack of it, but here goes.



Last year for the chrome rear bumpers. If there's a chrome bumper on the back but none on the front, then you know it's a '73. This gives the '73 an individual identity that most other Corvettes lack.

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1953-62: The fun quotient on these cars is as high as it gets! My first Corvette was a 1958. Ah, the chrome, the dash, the styling — they could make even an arrested heart beat full throttle again. But let's face it, as Ray Ziza of Corvette Center in Connecticut says, they drive like antiques. Big steering wheels, rough ride, old fashioned handling, and no creature comforts like air conditioning.

A more somber consideration: after losing friends in crashes over the years, safety becomes a dear subject. '53-'62 Corvettes had a solid steering column which went straight from your heart to the steering box which was located by the frames front-most crossmember. If this steel shaft didn't harpoon you in a frontal hit, the narrow frame located inboard of your leg wouldn't help much in a side crash either. And sitting so high up is a great feeling when sporting down the road, but in a roll over you'd lose more than your hat. When I needed Clearasil, such considerations seemed far-fetched, but after living through a few close

calls, I've come to value having a fighting chance.
'63-'67: These bring back sweet memories of my '63 red/red/red FI roadster powering down the winding roads next to the Hudson River in New York wine country in fall. When I think of the lights bouncing and refracting off the silver cones of the gauges ('63 only), it makes me sad to think that these cars are so pricey that few get driven at night any

more. Almost any one of these cars would be my second choice for the ultimate driver. Nostalgia aside, let's look at the drawbacks:

Fuel: Nearly all require high-octane which is a serious drawback for a true driver.

Safety: It's much better than pre-'63, but collapsible columns didn't come until '67, side guard door beams until years later, and you still sit tall in these cars. Remember, too, that you'll have to do without creature comforts such as tilt wheels, which are real pleasers when trips last several hours.

Styling: I love the look of the mid-years but disregarding my personal safety, I must acknowledge that I truly see '68-73s as more beautifully styled cars. Which brings us to:

'68-'72: This group has some of the most exciting cars ever created, with a wealth of power and luxury options. One of my favorite cars was a '69 triple-black, all-optioned AC roadster. Ask yourself how many of the world's grand touring roadsters had all the normal options along with fully retractable headlights windshield wipers that hide away completely, headlight washers, cockpit mounted fiber optic lamp monitoring systems, speed warning

buzzers, etc. Answer: none!

Corvettes of these years have some significant differences. '69 saw the first availability of tilt/tele steering columns, an option that soon becomes a must. While I prefer the pure "Coke bottle" styling of the '68s and '69s, the flared wheelwells of the '70-up cars is a considerable improvement in paint and splash protection.

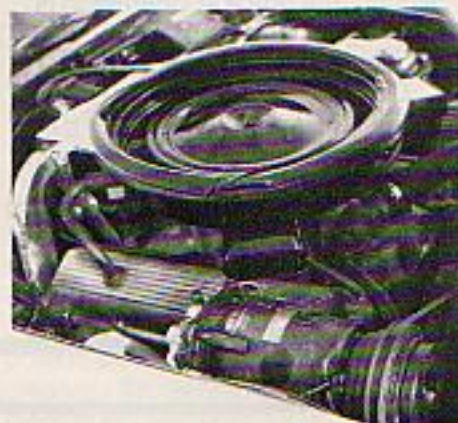
'71-'72: Both have the very desirable quality of running on regular gas. I really like the fiber optics so the '71 has a decided edge. Some people lean towards the '72 because it was the last Corvette with chrome bumpers on both ends, although the value of being "last" escapes me. One drawback to '70, '71, and '72 model years is that they are clones; they all look the same. Only those with a Ph.D. in Corvette identification can tell the difference between these years.

The star of this category, in my mind, is the '72 LT-1 AC roadster. For the pleasure and power of that motor, I would suffer its thirst and the hassle of tracking down good premium fuel stations every few hours of driving. However, since there were only about 50 made, the point is moot. The likelihood of getting one of these for a driver is about the same as Dominos delivering pizzas in a Ferrari GTO. Yet one Corvette model exists that is very close to this LT-1, and, when all things are considered, the trade off of a little horsepower for some sizeable gains may be more than even.



'73 was the first year for the contoured, body-colored impact bumpers. This along with the new hood (stretched to eliminate the windshield wiper door and grate of previous years) made the front end appear much longer.

'73: Over the years, this model has really grown on many Corvette enthusiasts. For one thing, it has an identity, just like the Seville once had. From ten blocks away, a cub scout can spot that a '73 has chrome bumpers on just one end, the only year Corvette which is so easily recognized (except for the split window on the '63 coupe). Not only is the molded, body-colored end clean, it appears much longer than the previous years, and it gives the car a chance if you have to park one end near a blue-haired driver. The power train is a winner, too. A high performance small block which runs on regular fuel is available with AC for the first time. Rubber mounted bodies (first year since '67) are a strong plus, too.



The L-82 was the first high-performance small block that ran on regular fuel and could be optioned with air conditioning. It makes a great combination for a driver.

With a '73, you can have a beautifully styled air conditioned roadster available and a high performance small block motor that runs on regular. Plus, it's a very safe driver, with its massive perimeter frame, collapsible steering column, sideguard door beams, and low seat placement. It has a rubber mounted body and it has the most important luxury options to turn the long miles into pleasurable touring. Make mine a red with black leather, optioned '73 AC L-82 roadster — the best Corvette for a driver.

But what about the later cars?

'74: Last chance for a big block, last chance for regular fuel, too, but that "potato shaped" rear end just doesn't work for me.

'75: Rounded rear end again, and the unappetizing smells of the new catalytic converter assault your senses at every stop.

'76-'82: The front end treatment just kept getting better; those cars have a great look to them. However, they all are out of the running for people who like soft tops.

The 1982 Collector Edition deserves extra-special mention for great taste. Try to name any other car in the world that has four beautifully balanced shades of leather in its interior, tone-on-tone-on-tone-on-tone. The discerning eye can see proof in this car that General Motors was the first motor car company to create a styling studio, just as they were the first to establish a studio devoted to developing exciting and harmonious colors for automobiles.

'84-'87: Simply the best handling, best engineered production car ever available to this planet's inhabitants. The styling is powerful and smooth, but it's a tad understated for my taste. Also, I like a car that appreciates in value even though such older cars do require sacrifices in other areas. However, this new Corvette is so overwhelmingly good that I would trade for one in a second if my driving shifted towards more highway or high-speed cruising.

Are these cars really that good? Last year, a business acquaintance of mine replaced his '84 Corvette with a new Ferrari. He found out that the Corvette clearly handled better and was faster. Also the Corvette's interior is state-of-the-art, as is the rest of the car; the interior of the Ferrari looks like what you would find in a kit car.

I just heard the same sentiments from Bill Bartenstein of Hawaii, former owner of Specialized Investments of Hawaii. Bill has had turbo Porsches, Ferrari's — just about every high ticket ride. However, when he sells his wife's Lamborghini Countach, he'll be back to an all Corvette family again, except for a Corniche convertible for mass transit. Why? Because the Corvettes are the best cars available. Anywhere. At any price.

So there you have it. One experienced, though opinionated, Corvette enthusiast's judgment of the ultimate driver: A '73 L-82 full optioned AC roadster, red with black leather. Next, I think I'll do something easier and less controversial, such as trying to determine what the perfect woman is. ■

CORVETTE

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