



mag- elle- o- mania

Mag wheels, three L-engines and media-maniacs Root, Kirschenbaum and Oldham test—and steadfastly compare—the three Corvette engine options for '73—simultaneously, yet!

There are certain things that are indisputable about the Corvette. It is America's only sports car and has been for the 20 years of its life. There is a Corvette mystique alive and well in America that somehow makes every Corvette equal to more than the sum of its parts. Despite the fact that the Corvette is old and fatter and quite a bit slower than at any time in its history, it remains, and always has been, America's most exciting car.

Corvettes are exciting, visually as well as when you're behind the wheel. And why not? Even the slowest Corvettes for 1973 can outhandle 99% of the cars on the road and still outaccelerate about 95%. You see, as the Corvette has grown larger and heavier and slower, because of 5 mph bumpers and door beams and choking emission controls, so has every other American car. The Corvette easily retains its supremacy.

Every Corvette is a turn on, even to jaded magazine road testers and writers. There's something about the Corvette that still makes the heart quicken and the blood tingle, even if you've driven every hot car made in the past eight or ten years. When you know you've got a Corvette road test coming up, it's still something very special.

This triple Corvette road test, then, is something special even for us. Special? Think of any one thing that you would like to do. Anything. Make it a real fantasy wish. Being called in suddenly to take Mick Jagger's place at a Stones concert. Twelve cases of Chateau Lafite Rothschild 1947. Throwing the winning touchdown on third and long in the fourth quarter of the Super Bowl. A night with Linda Lovelace. How about being given the keys to eight brand new 1973 Corvettes on two separate occasions and being told, go do your thing?

Not bad, right? That's what happened to us. The first occasion was at Bridgehampton Race Circuit in Bridgehampton, Long Island, some months ago. Even Zora Arkus-Duntov was along to help out in any way he could. On this occasion, we had a chance to wring out the handling on the Bridge's road course.

The second occasion was more recent. After the Bridgehampton go, we immediately decided to do a Corvette and Chevrolet issue and told Chevrolet about it. We decided to test all three engine options that you can buy for '73. Jim Williams, Chevy's Detroit public relations man, and Judy Stropus, Chevy's east coast PR lady, arranged for us to have brand new LB2 and LS4 Vettes. Danny Zack of Briggs Chevrolet in South Amboy, NJ, invited us to look over his fantastic stock of Corvettes and pick anything we wanted. What we wanted was a standard 350 Vette to complete the engine option lineup. He obliged and also loaned us another car that we used to try out some of John Greenwood's handling pieces.

But that story's on page 61.

Have you got the picture now? Two '73 Corvettes from

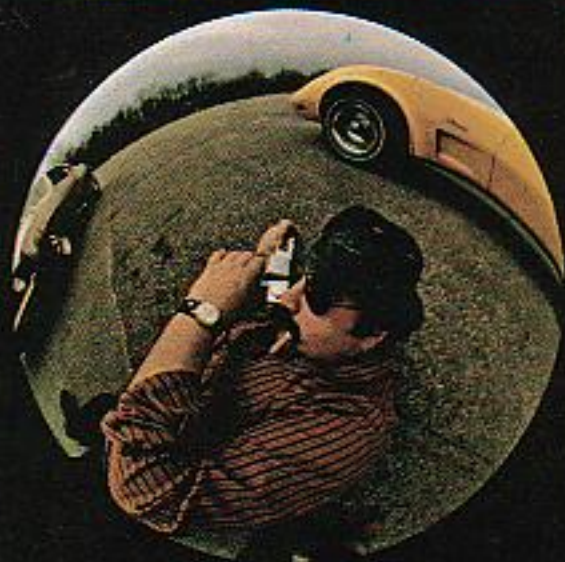






Chevrolet Motor Division and two '73 Corvettes from Briggs Chevrolet. The staff of this magazine had a hard time distinguishing a fantasy from reality for a long time afterward.

It was somewhat of a logistics problem to get all the cars out to Whesthampton, Long Island, where we planned to do the actual quantitative testing. Pete Halsworth,



manager of Suffolk County Raceway, had volunteered the use of his facility and we accepted. The NHRA-sanctioned dragstrip would give us our acceleration times and braking distances and we could use the ride and handling course and the banked oval for fun and games.

Let's pause here to give you a rundown on what each of the test cars had. We'll forget about the one Corvette that had been fitted with the handling goodies. As we said, that's covered in a different part of this issue.

The Corvette that Briggs Chevrolet loaned us had the



Above: Marshall Spiegel, one of our best road racing drivers and constant adviser/contributor to the Magnum Automotive Group. Left: "The best 'Vette yet'? . . . Depends on your criteria. It's not quick anymore, but she sure is fine on the road—a definite handler. Right: Al Root, CARS new Editor and Editorial Director of the Magnum Automotive Group: "Are you dealing with a full deck: You want me to climb this ladder just to take pix?" . . . He did.



standard L48 engine, rated this year at 190 horsepower at 4400 rpm. Torque is rated 270 lbs./ft. at 2800 rpm. The car was Elkhart Green with dark saddle interior. The second car was a bright yellow coupe with the L82 high performance 350 engine, rated 250 horsepower at 5200 rpm and torque pegged at 285 lbs./ft. at 4000 rpm. The third car also yellow with dark saddle interior, was powered by the big guy, the LS4 454 cubic inch powerplant, rated this year at 275 horsepower at 4400 rpm. Torque is 395 lbs./ft. at 2800. The L82's compression ratio was 9.0 to 1. The LS4 has an 8.25 to 1 ratio while the L48 puts an 8.5 squeeze on things. All three engines use hydraulic camshafts and single Rochester Quadrajets on cast iron manifolds. The days of solid-lifter cams, multiple carburetion and high rise aluminum intake manifolds are gone the way of all flesh for the Corvette, although the parts are all still available over the counter. All '73 Corvettes come stock with a ram air hood that ducts cool outside air into the carburetor. This helps in the power department.

All three cars were identical in most other respects. All had power steering, power brakes, power windows, air conditioning, Turbo Hydra-Matic, AM-FM stereo radio, custom leather interior and various other little comfort and convenience items.

The standard 350 had the optional 3.36 performance axle ratio. The L82 had the 3.55 ratio (standard with air) and the 454 had a 3.08 ratio (standard with automatic trans).

All the cars had the normal Corvette standard equipment such as Positraction rear axle, GR70-15 radial tires, removable roof panels, etc. Two of the cars had the standard 8-inch steel rings with cap and trim ring. The car borrowed from Briggs Chevrolet had been fitted with 15 x 7 Cragar S/S mag wheels with the stock radial tires.

If you're looking for a dragstrip demon, forget about any new Corvette. Forget about those halcyon days of 11-second L88 factory cars. Forget about the high tens of a factory ZL1. Forget about the 12s and 13s of well-tuned solid lifter 427 and 454-powered Vettes.

Instead, think of Corvettes for '73 in terms of realistic power that won't smoke the rear tires the entire length of the quarter mile, but will put you briskly from the on-ramp into expressway traffic and out, around and in, when passing on the highway.

As you would expect, the big 454 was the dragstrip acceleration champ. Still, its finest run was only a 14.61 at 98.2 mph, hardly what you'd call awe inspiring. The smaller engines didn't do as well as the 454. The base L48 ran off a brace of 15.20s at 93 mph while the high performance L82 was just ahead at 15.10 at 95.4 mph.

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An interesting note here: notice that the base 350 was just a tenth slower in the quarter mile than the L82 although the trap speed of the L82 was almost 3 mph faster. Probably, if the base engine had been fitted with the same 3.55 gearing as the L82, elapsed times would have been almost identical. Unfortunately, 3.55 gears are not an option with the base L48 engine.

Overall, we were pretty disappointed at the performance of the L82. The option cost \$299 extra and just doesn't deliver much more performance than the base L48! In addition, the L82 idles rougher, gets poorer gas mileage, runs hotter and has much less low end torque, so low speed driving is more uncomfortable. A 4-speed and the L82 would be about the worst combination for city driving of any drivetrain combination offered. The low speed torque, or lack of same, is the reason.

The 454 is just sheer torque. At any rpm, a downshift into the next lower gear and full throttle will nail your spine to the back of your bucket! And it'll keep you there until you lift your rightfoot. All this time,

there's a delicious roar emanating from under the hood. It's a combination of exhaust gas and the open air intake combining to make that street soul music. Naturally, with the long 3.08 rear axle ratio, cruising at any speed just had the big 454 loafing along with no apparent strain even at a steady 100 down the back straight of the New Jersey Turnpike.

Our choice for the all around best performer, however, must go to the base 350 L48 engine. It's really a beautiful combination. The L48 delivers all the acceleration you'll ever need on the road in a steady, forceful manner although it doesn't pin you to the seat as does the 454. In addition, the L48 is quiet, runs cool, idles smoothly and can cruise at 100 all day if you commute in Nevada.

The L48 also has the unique quality of being able to pass up a couple of gas stations before pulling in for a pit stop—something that can't be said for its two cousins. The L48 averaged around 14 mpg at steady 60 mph cruising speeds (lower when the going got rough and we put our foot into it). And that's with the higher numerical 3.36 axle ratio. By contrast the L82 could muster only 10 mpg and the 454's average hovered around 8.5 mpg (ugh!)

Zero-to-60 runs aren't too meaningful anymore. But in the interest of completeness, we'll give them to you. The L48 took 6.8 seconds to reach 60, the L82, 6.7 seconds and the 454, 6.4 seconds.

On side by side runs, the L48 powered car always came off the mark first against the L82. Then, when the L82's cam came on and the engine got on the torque curve, the L82 pulled ahead. Still, all the runs were close. When the 454 was running, it smoked off the line for about 30 feet while the small block car was already gone. No contest, though. The 454 always hauled down and passed the small block, as expected.

On the Bridgehampton road course and over the ride and handling course at Suffolk County Raceway, the base L48 coupe was again our choice. There was enough power on tap for any attitude through any corner. The automatic transmission could be downshifted at will (on all three cars), but the L48 was the best balanced of all three. The L82 had the same balance as the L48 since the two 350 engines weigh almost exactly the same. But if we weren't at the right rpm through a corner, or in wrong gear, the lack of torque made itself felt once again.

The 454 was at a disadvantage, of course. The added weight and bulk made the car noseheavy compared to the small block cars and un-

dersteer was more pronounced. The super torque of the 454 made the car less forgiving, too. If we made a mistake through a corner and applied too much throttle, the rear end was immediately around on us and the car was in a power oversteer condition. Not enough throttle or the wrong gear and the Vette understeered.

Let's point one thing out before we go any further. The Corvette's overall handling is so superior to most other cars that, when we talk about over- or understeer, we're talking about a matter of degrees. Even with the Corvette in an understeering attitude

through a tight corner, it's still handling better than 99% of all other cars on the road.

The 454 is fitted with noticeably stiffer springs, shocks and antiroll stabilizer bars than are the 350 Vettes. The big bars do a nice job of taming the bulk of the 454. They allowed the 454 to corner much flatter than did either of the two small block cars. The stiffer springs and shocks made themselves felt, however, on the ride course and over rough roads at other times during the period we used the car. There is less

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suspension travel available with the stiffer suspension and you simply feel the bumps, in much the same way as you do in a stiffly suspended supercar. The ride isn't so stiff as to be uncomfortable. But when you step out of one of the other cars and into the 454, you know immediately that the suspension components are quite a bit different.

The small block cars had a more supple suspension and soaked up road irregularities with aplomb. There was suspension travel in much the same manner as there is in fine European touring cars. The suspen-

sion travel combined with relatively stiff shocks produced an extremely comfortable yet stable ride. We always felt that we were smashing the road flat and that we could press on regardless no matter what the road surface.

This year, you can order an optional special purpose handling suspension on any Corvette. The option code is Z07 and also includes heavy duty brakes. The package costs \$369 and really isn't worth it unless you're going to do some racing or rallying with your Corvette.

As everyone knows by now, steel belted radial tires were made standard on the Corvette this year.

Previously, only high speed nylon bias-ply tires, size F70-15, were available on the Corvette. Standard size is now GR70-15. The tread width is quite narrow on these tires despite the .70 aspect ratio. As such, dry cornering power is down slightly from last year. However, wet cornering traction is up around 15% and that is most welcome. In addition, the radial construction gives the Vette fastastic transient response—much *much* quicker than it was with the bias tires. As a result, the steering feels a lot quicker even though it really isn't. You also feel that you can do unbelievable things with the car on the road. And you can, providing you don't get overconfident and push too hard—a very easy thing to do in a smooth car like the Corvette.

Speaking of steering, the added bulk of the 454 makes itself felt here too, even with power steering. The steering is much stiffer with the 454 engine, noticeably so.

To get a smooth ride with the steel belted radials, Corvette engineers did a lot of suspension tuning. They made the suspension more compliant in fore and aft movements. They also used softer body mounts to soak up some of the road shock and added sound deadener to quiet the interior.

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The result is *the plushiest riding Corvette yet*. It's quiet inside and truly luxurious, as a grand touring car should be. You don't get fatigued by wind noise anymore and the whole car sounds and is more solid and rattle-free. The whole package is a welcome improvement.

The Corvette still has shortcomings. There's still no trunk. The heating, air conditioning and ventilation controls look and work like they came out of a '54 Nash. The steering wheel is still too close to

some drivers even with the seat all the way back and with the tilt-tele option, and there's still not a good single-belt seat belt system. But like we said, the Corvette as a total concept has always been far more than the sum of its individual parts. The fanatical clientele that buys 30,000 of them a year will attest to that.

And we'll attest to the fact that after 20 years, the Corvette is more than going strong. It's still the epitome of the American motoring experience. 