

SCI

ROAD TEST:



Chevrolet Corvette



Here the author takes a long, fast turn at 60 mph. Note that the rear dips more than front, giving car an understeer effect. Stiffer shocks and springs on the back end would add stability on bends.

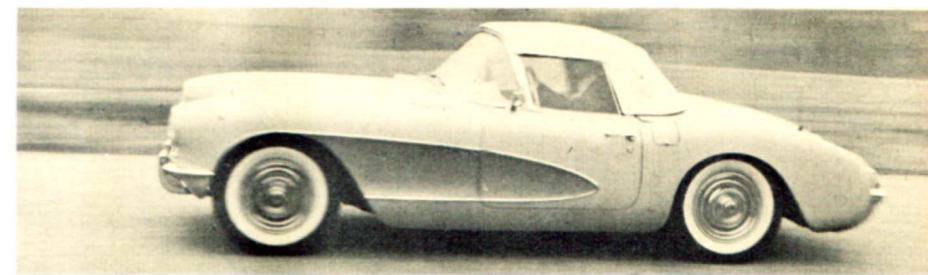
By KARL LUDVIGSEN

CHANCES are that by the time you read this the '56 Corvette will have made a profound impression on the whole sports car world, and after having had one under me for a couple of days I will be the last to be surprised. This very early production model showed a willingness and ability to be driven fast and hard under almost all conditions and demonstrated an even greater potential for competitive use. In my opinion, the Corvette as it stands is fully as much a dual-purpose machine as the



Although automatically raised and lowered, the top's back window has to be pulled down by hand. This is no problem since the well fitted top clamps down quickly sans fuss.

Photos by Don Typond



Cruising at 85, the Corvette produces wind noise over top. However, at such speeds there's bound to be wind disturbance on any car.



The Halibrand type knock-offs look like the McCoy, but are actually wheel discs. The real thing is being planned as possible optional equipment.

stock Jaguar, Triumph, or Austin-Healey. Without qualification, General Motors is now building a sports car.

Unfortunately, at this writing accurate information both on the Corvette itself and on their future plans is not available, and the air is rife with rumor. SCI's test car was chassis #1002, and was obtained from the Chevrolet Motor Division through the combined efforts of Shelly Spindel and Alvin Schwartz Chevrolet of Brooklyn, N. Y. Finished in two-tone turquoise with a matching hard top and a white convertible top, it was a real traffic-stopper, and was specifically destined to make a New York TV appearance. As such, it had the full range of options, including white-walls, the hard top, power windows, radio, heater and windshield washer. To our joy it had the close-ratio stick shift, but less happily had the higher, 3.27:1 rear end ratio. It was, all in all, a lot of car and I regret that at this time Chevrolet was not ready to discuss prices. There is little question, though, that it is to be competitive with the Thunderbird.

Now that the "dual-purpose" claim has been made, it should be backed up. Those accustomed to GM products may tend to take the creature comforts for granted, but any owner of an older Corvette will readily testify that those cars could be uninhabitable at times. Much effort has been expended to rectify this, and it has paid off in full.

Entry and exit over the wide sill on the passenger side is easy, for a sports car, but as the driver slides under the steering wheel he becomes aware of one of the car's few major faults. While it is handsome, and provided with more than enough finger ribbing, the wheel is too close to the driver and is non-adjustable. Ex-Jag drivers may find the position natural, but I personally felt that more arm room would be useful, particularly for competition. You also sit close enough to the door for the integral arm rest to be in the way.

The seats themselves are very handsome, and very deceptive. They look like a true bucket type, and the seat bottoms are comfortable enough, but the backs are bolt upright and provide no lateral support for the torso. Adjustment of rake and a more definite "bucket" would improve

them greatly and would obviate a certain amount of fatigue that now occurs. Fore-and-aft adjustment is not extensive, there being just enough room for a six-footer. Leg room is excellent; the left foot can roam about under the suspended pedals, and the brake and throttle are well-placed for heel-and-toe downshifting.

Headroom is also at the bare minimum for six feet of height, with slightly more room under the soft top. In general, the Corvette has very little interior room for such a large car, and it seems that neither GM nor Ford have yet completely solved the sports car seating problem.

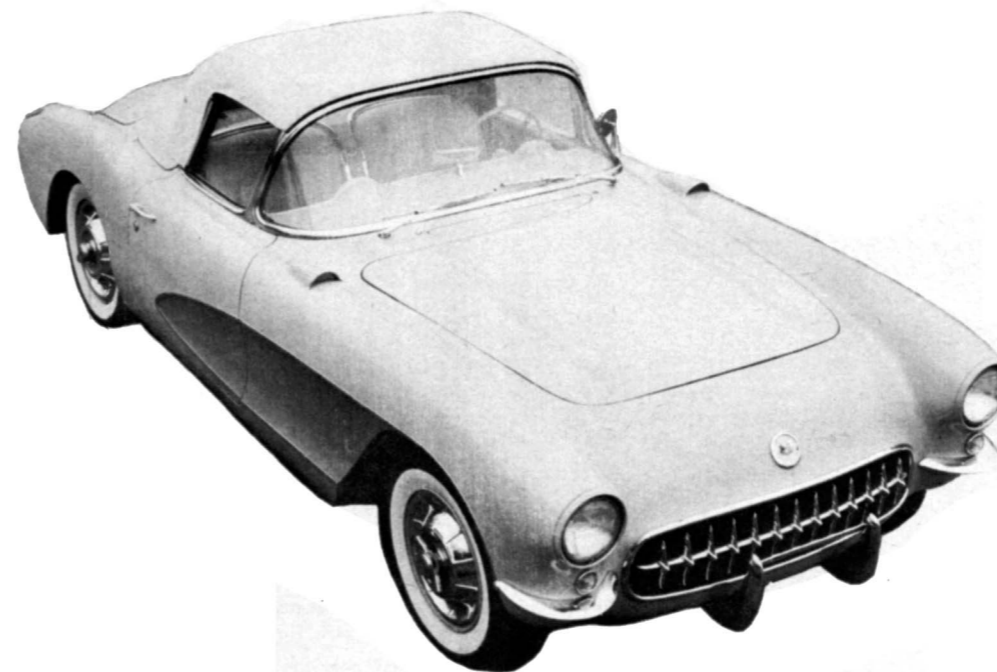
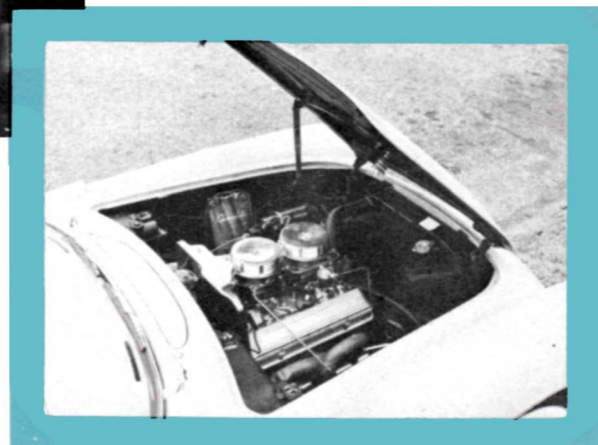
Driving the Corvette with the top down is very pleasant, the windshield giving good protection to the top and side. You sit high enough to rest your elbow comfortably on the door, if so inclined. The power windows are handy and reliable, but the power-operated top qualifies as the most fascinating mechanism I have seen on any car. The lid rises, the top emerges, and the lid closes again as the control button is pressed. You must then pull down and clamp the back window section by hand, and close two front latches. It's all very easy, and the finished product is attractive and tight. It can be stowed away just as simply.

The hard top is also easy to install, having two clamps at the front and three bolts and two locating dowels at the rear. It is well finished and padded, and provides unobstructed vision. Light and easy to transport, the top's main fault is arbitrary sealing at the sides of the rear deck.

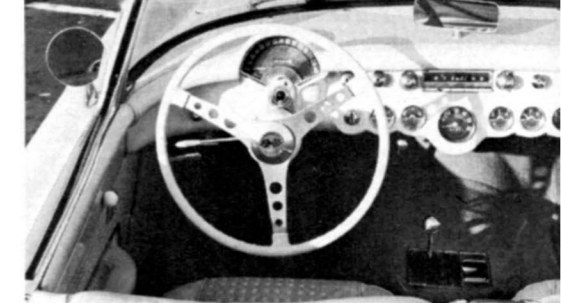
Instrument panel layout is identical to last year's cars, and has many of the same faults. All the secondary instruments, including the tachometer, are very difficult to read



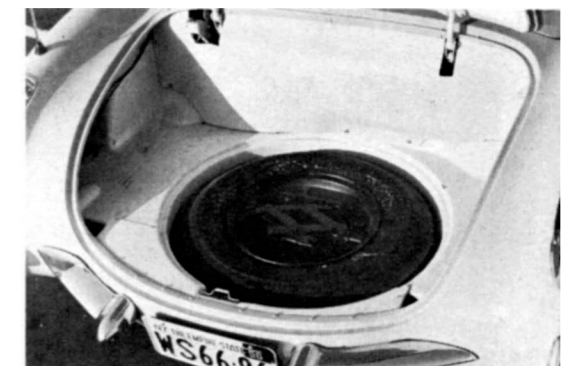
Twin four-barrel carburetors squat on power plant ready to help deliver 225 bhp at 5200 rpm. At low speeds, only rear carburetor functions. **BELOW**—Hood raises from rear, reducing possible lifting at high speed. Engine compartment is more accessible for shop work.



View shows sleekness of new Corvette. Except for phony air-scoops and knock-off type discs, the car is functional in design.



Instruments are well balanced for eye-appeal, but not practical. Reading them at any speed over forty is difficult. Note simple design of steering wheel.



Small luggage compartment makes long trips restrictive. Jack fits inside spare to conserve space. Larger trunk would destroy line, increase weight.



A lack of bumpers at the rear will make any Corvette driver over-cautious when backing. Exhaust tubes are in for abuse.



Fully automatic, the top slips out of the well after the lid raises. Convenience of automation makes added weight of unit bearable.



Corvette interior is well appointed, with leg room for the six-footers. Wrap-around windshield makes getting in and out a bit awkward.

SPECIFICATIONS CHEVROLET CORVETTE

ENGINE
 Cylinders V8
 Bore and stroke 3.75 in x 3.00 in (95 mm x 76 mm)
 Displacement 265 cu in (4340 cc)
 Compression ration ..9.25:1
 Max. horsepower 225 bhp @ 5200 rpm
 Max. torque 270 lb ft @ 3600 rpm
 Max. b.m.e.p. 154 psi

CHASSIS
 Wheelbase 102 in
 Front track 57 in
 Rear track 59 in
 Curb weight 2980 lbs
 Front/rear distribution 52/48
 Test weight 3250 lbs
 Turns lock to lock..... 3.6
 Gear ratios:

<i>Gear</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Optional</i>
3rd	3.55	3.27
2nd	4.65	4.28
1st	7.84	7.22
Rev	7.84	7.22

 Tire size 6.70 x 15
 Brake lining area 158.0 sq in
 Fuel capacity 17 gal

PERFORMANCE

TEST CONDITIONS
 40°F, light wind, dry concrete surface at sea level.

SPEEDS IN GEARS

<i>Gear</i>	<i>True mph</i>	<i>(Car) mph</i>
1st	64	(60)
2nd	108	(102)
3rd	118.5	(110)
Best run	120.0	

ACCELERATION

<i>Range</i>	<i>Time, Seconds</i>	<i>Gears Used</i>
0-30	3.4	1st
0-40	4.6	"
0-50	6.0	"
0-60	7.5	"
0-70	10.0	1st, 2nd
0-80	12.5	" "
0-90	15.8	" "
0-100	19.3	" "
50-70	4.5	2nd
50-70	5.8	3rd
60-80	4.7	2nd
60-80	7.0	3rd
Standing 1/4 mile....	15.9	1st, 2nd
Speed at end of quarter	91 mph	

FUEL CONSUMPTION
 Hard driving 12 mpg (tank mileage)

at the bottom of the dash, even if you can take your eyes from the road long enough to find them. The speedometer is well-placed, but quick correlation between the numerals and the divisions is impossible, as they are on different planes. Dial lighting is very good, with rheostat control, and the interior lights are perfect for rallying, being placed under the cowl.

Other interior shortcomings are the dearth of storage space, save for the between-seat compartment, and a conflict between the heater and the passenger's feet. The view forward is very impressive, and clever psychologically. The hood bulges, long fender lines, and cowl vents (which, incidentally, can easily be made functional for dry climates) combine to give an impression of great forcefulness. Vision over this snout is adequate, but not outstanding. The heater and defroster are well up to their jobs,

and the only other irritant might be a very awkward and stiff interior door control.

In spite of numerous open car details, the passengers can be kept warm and dry, and can set their own climate at a literal touch of a button. I can imagine no greater contrast than between this and the forced exposure of the gutty old J2 Cadillac Allard, but the fact is that such an Allard in stock trim would be left behind at the quarter by this incredible Corvette! The figures speak eloquently for themselves, and with the lower 3.55:1 ratio things should happen even more rapidly. As a matter of fact, our speedometer was so very slow that it probably was geared for use with that ratio. Also, the engine was nothing like wound out at the top end, and the lower gearing would probably improve top speed by five to seven miles per hour.

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Precision balancing after assembly may have accounted for the clean, smooth running of the engine, and its ability to rev freely to around 5500. For about the first half inch of throttle travel only the rear one of the two four-barrel carburetors is working to prevent overcarburetion at low speeds. When the front quad cuts in the previously unobtrusive exhaust note sharpens and the car starts to move. When backing off at higher speeds there is a not unappealing rap from the duals. Idling is at 1000 rpm when the automatic choke is working and 600 rpm when warm, and the powerplant is tractable enough to lug down to a 12 mph in high.

Featuring special cooling and nine coils instead of the old diaphragm spring, the clutch took a lot of punishment without complaint. It is not easy to get a potent car off the mark with such very high gearing, and this component took the brunt of the effort without signs of heating or slippage. The gearbox wins similar praise for its well-chosen ratios and effective synchromesh. Shifting linkage is smooth and direct, the heavy-knobbed lever being spring-loaded to the right-hand side of the conventional "H" pattern. The synchro can be beaten by a very quick move from first to second, but the movement between the two top gears is impeccable. Synchromesh on low would be a useful boon, but a noiseless downshift can be made by double-clutching.

Due to the high ratios, the standard-shift Corvette is not really at home in town, and Powerglide might be better for urban use. Out on the road, though, as second gear takes over from first at around sixty and keeps the seat in your back 'til over a hundred, you learn what this car was made for. Cruising is effortless at 85 or 90, though with enough wind noise over the soft top to render the radio unintelligible.

It is in the handling department in particular that the Corvette proves itself the only true American production sports car. The steering is far from perfect but it is fast enough to allow right angles to be taken without removing the hands from the wheel, and this virtue will make up for many vices. The latter include an inch and a half of play, beyond which a strong caster action gives the wheel a springy

feel. This little "no-man's-land" in the middle causes some trepidation in tight spots. Once the wheel has been set for a bend, and the car has assumed an initial roll angle, the steering and throttle response are fast and consistent enough to allow very precise control.

Like most American cars this Chevrolet is a very strong understeerer, and requires a lot of helm to keep it on line in a bend. The stock rear end damping is a little weak; too much so to make a full-blooded drift a stable proposition. Cornering speeds and behavior were markedly improved by tire pressure five psi higher than the standard of 25 psi front and 27 psi rear. Raised pressures plus stiffer rear shocks could combine with an already broad track, good weight distribution, and low center of gravity to make the Corvette a real fiend on corners. These criticisms, it will be noted, are minor, and apply equally to many imported machines.

Of course, tire squeal is not entirely absent during these high-speed direction changes, but the car stays in the corner so there can be no real complaints. The Corvette is at its best on a winding open road, and, like the Jaguar, is dramatic but uncomfortable on a twisty back lane. The test car would have been much handier there if the driver had had more arm room and the optional seat belts. He tends to be thrown around more than necessary, but is not as conscious of the car's roll angle as is the passenger.

Brakes are still by far the weakest link, and it must be admitted that they faded almost into oblivion during the performance tests. They recovered very quickly, though, and pulled the heavy car up with a minimum of slewing even when very hot. I sincerely feel that the substitution of harder Moraine linings or some of the foreign competition brands will improve high-temperature durability and perhaps modify the present spongy feel of the pedal. No power booster was fitted, and required pedal pressure was on the high side.

Very sensibly for a high speed car, the hood is hinged from the front, and opens well out of the way. The battery and brake master cylinder are easy to reach, and the small air cleaners ease access to the engine as a whole. Most awkward feature is the shielding for the ignition wiring, necessary to elimi-

nate radio interference in a Fiber-glas body. Wingnuts quickly free these shields and bare the double-breaker distributor and all but the two left front spark plugs, which are tucked in behind the steering box.

The hydraulic system for the top mechanism is powered by a separate electric motor, which allows operation with the engine off and avoids direct absorption of any engine power. Individual motors operate the door windows.

Well finished and fitted, the trunk is usefully large for a sports car. All luggage must be removed to extricate the spare from its wooden-lidded compartment, which also houses the jack. One carrying feature of many imports that is missed in the Corvette is that handy space right behind the seats for coats, hats, lunches and other items that you don't want to store in the trunk. In the Corvette you either live with them or lock them away.

In almost every respect, the 1956 Corvette is a very satisfying car on the highway, and supplements astonishing performance with a high level of road-holding. Even as it stands, power equipment and all, it has become a serious competitor for Jaguar in Production Class C, and this is by no means General Motors' highest goal. In international events this year the car will be equipped with an optional cam providing 250 bhp at the sacrifice of present low-end smoothness. Also on the fire for either this or next year are engine boosts to 275 bhp, extensive use of light alloy in both body and chassis, and the development of suitable disc brakes by GM's Moraine Division.

It seems likely that the standard Corvettes will remain much as they are, with work on the competition versions proceeding simultaneously as has been the case with Jaguar and their C and D models. Another two or three years could probably see a racing Corvette with as many standard parts as the D retains from the Jaguar line, shrouded in advanced coupe bodywork. GM will learn an incalculable amount from these cars, much of which will be passed on to the standard Corvette and to the passenger car. They've already learned quite a lot, as a matter of fact, most of which shows up in the all-around excellence of the 1956 Corvette. #