This comes under the heading of making photographs lie, or at least exaggerate in order to stress a point. The "boulevard" Corvette is shown just after cresting an abrupt rise while cornering near the limit. It really got "caught out." The heavy duty equipped model on the right, which certainly does corner more flatly, is shown at about the same place, but coming the other way. Long, flat turns are just its dish.

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DUAL-PURPOSE SPORTS CARS FOR 1959

CORVETTE

ALONE amongst sports cars, Corvette sticks to the Detroit habit of annual changes. Though far from all-new, the '59 models incorporate some interesting innovations; so much so that we opted for a comparison test of old and new at GM's Milford, Michigan Proving Grounds. Though but two Corvettes were sampled, we came away with a headful of contrasting thoughts, for they were as different as night from day. The white one sported all the '59 body and interior changes on a strictly boulevard '58 chassis—normal suspension, three-speed box (we drove off in reverse at first) and the single-quad equipped 283 cu in V-8 engine. It was, in fact, a mobile display car for itinerant journalists. The other machine was a choice item indeed. Though camouflaged by the older body—washboard hood panel and chrome trim strips on the trunk—it had all the chassis mods for '59, which included a four-speed box, Posi-traction rear and a "works-built" full-house power plant. Just our meat, and no wonder; it's Zora Arkus-Duntov's own company car, a natural test bed for new ideas.

One of them fills a long-felt need. To better control the movement of the relatively heavy rigid rear axle, radius rods have been fitted to it above each rear spring. Running forward to the boxed frame, they are merely shortened versions of the Panhard rod which will be standard on '59 Chevy passenger cars. Thus relieved of a burdensome additional duty, the rear shock absorbers are now mounted straight up and down and are recalibrated. Result: a slightly softer ride and noticeably less rear-end steering on irregular surfaces.

Two changes permit still faster shifts than ever on the excellent all-synchro four-speed transmission. Clutch pedal travel, normally 6.4 in, may be reduced to 4.5 by rearranging part of the clutch linkage. And to avoid getting lost in the reverse gate when snapping off a downshift from third to second, the spring-loaded detent has given way to what the GM people call a "positive-action reverse inhibitor for 4-speed transmission." Translated into everyday mechanical lingo, this means a T-handled positive lock mounted on the shift lever which you pull up with two fingers as you shift the lever over with the palm of your hand into the reverse gate.

The above changes, all very nice ones, are all standard items. The biggest news and the best is going to start out as an option. This is in the brake department where Moraine sintered metallic lining pads will now be available on any Corvette, with or without the heavy duty suspension, and, we suspect, eventually on any Chevrolet at all. Like the Bendix cerametallic linings, these attack the brake fade problem from the fade resistance angle rather than from the heat dissipation point of view, as Buick does with their now-bonded aluminum cast iron drums. But Moraine engineers have achieved, after more than a year of testing by Mauri Rose, what could not be done with the cerametallic pads; namely, keeping the drums from wearing out before the pads, and avoiding brake-grab when the stoppers are still cold.

Another problem with the "Not for road use" Bendix binders was that once the drums were scored, which was generally pretty darn soon, the braking was apt to be erratic. It was just enough to make the Corvettes twitch a bit at the ends of the long straights. Mr. Duntov says that despite this roughness, these cerametallic set-ups could last through *two* Sebrings in a row. Indeed, while we were in his office, he received a call from an owner-driver on the Pacific Coast who has just finished his second consecutive season on the same set of drums and shoes.

On the H-D brake kit, thirty-six pounds are eliminated by knocking out the air duct to the rear brakes. The front scoop now directs air to the front brakes, which were somewhat blanketed by the body panels that were widened last year. "Elephant ears" now cope with such problems at the rear.

For testing purposes we were again allowed to run riot on the Ride Road. This is a twisting, narrow road that every last one of us would be delighted to have in his backyard. Our first run was in a much modified Impala; but more about that some other time.

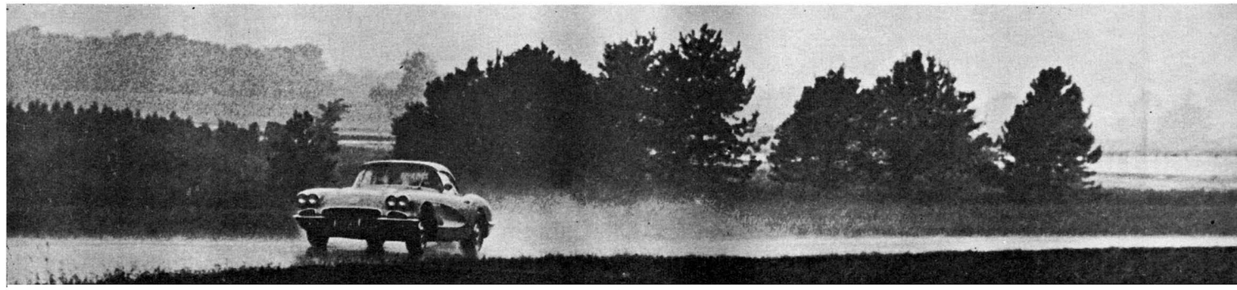
Next sample was the '59 bodied, '58 chassis boulevard sports car style of Corvette, the white one in the photos. Briefly, even with the mild, mild engine, wheelspin was a real problem on smooth blacktop starts. One more frictionful surfaces, wheel hop replaced wheelspin. There's a wide gap between first and second gear ratios, but with such a mild engine, the Corvette pulls easily in second from very low revs. At the west end of our little race course is a bend of about 600 feet radius. It goes around and around, about 225° in fact, but at the end there are some rather mean dips and rises. Staying in second for this one, we found that the car rolls considerably and that occasionally it would "run out of gas." The float chamber was being tilted too much. When leaving the dip we came down to earth in a solid fashion. The suspension bottomed out with a thud, but remarkably the Corvette held to its course, though displaced sideways a bit.

The other car was Duntov's Gray Ghost, and an impressive machine it was. The clutch was set up for short travel, correspondingly the pedal forces are slightly increased. Combined with the more forceful response of the 290 hp mill to the throttle, the whole set-up has a much more purposeful, taut feel. We had only made two passes before a torrent of rain deluged us, but the improvement in handling was eye-opening. It was much more level when cornering, had quicker steering, and it had consistent response to the throttle no matter what the attitude of the car.

The latter is most important in a car this powerful, for once the back end has started to "hang out," much if not most of the steering is done with the throttle rather than the wheel. Even in the rain this H-D Corvette showed remarkable stability. Some credit should go to the Firestone SS170 tires, but only some. They grip exceedingly well up to a point, but when you press on still harder it's almost like driving on ice. These were not the latest 170-T's mentioned elsewhere in this issue, incidentally.

The sintered metallic brakes on this car were strikingly unobtrusive. It was only after a dozen laps of our "circuit" that the constant spray of water chilled them enough that they became a bit touchy. Strictly a temperature effect, as inorganic linings do not absorb water.

Despite the commendable lightness of control, the Corvette, even in racing trim, seems to be an awful lot of automobile to jockey around a narrow road circuit at racing speeds. Despite its shortcomings, it is, as we said last year, hard to beat on the basis of performance per dollar of original investment. Though tire wear will keep running costs up, the "extensive use" of American parts should more than offset this. And if you are buying a Corvette with the intention of racing it, it is naturally cheaper to get it with the full factory-installed kit of racing gear than to try to bring a lesser car up to racing specs yourself. *sfw*



Photos by Dick Spare and Ted Fredley

Even when the rain started pouring down, Duntov's Gray Ghost stuck firmly to the road. Perhaps it just knows its own way round the Proving Grounds.

External changes for '59 are strictly customizing-type work. Washboard on hood, streaks on trunk are gone. Good riddance.