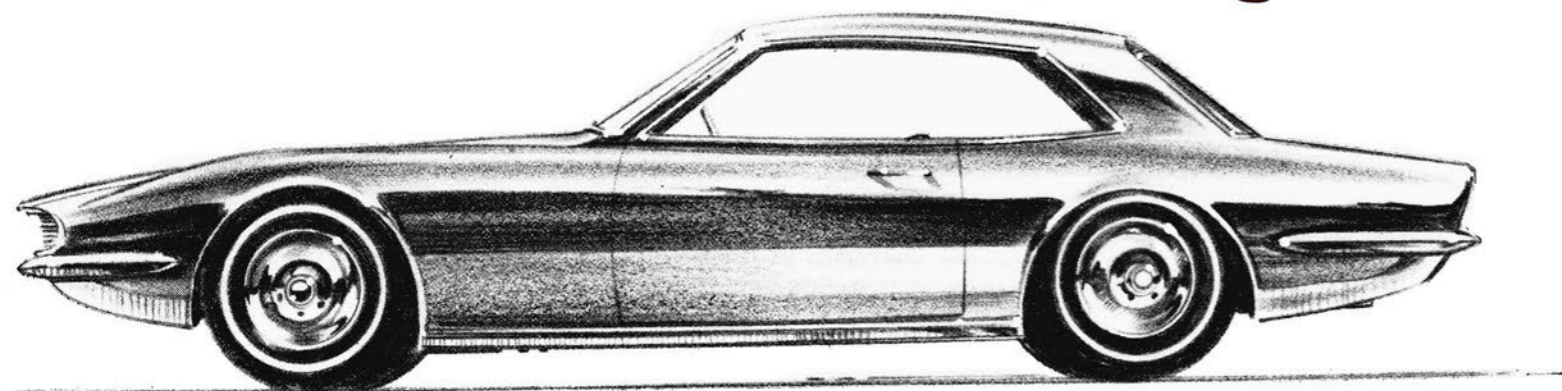


Panther or Reluctant Dragon?



Chevrolet's Entry Takes Shape for the Mustang Sweepstakes

WHEN CHEVROLET Division unveils its new sporty compact car this fall, the one familiarly referred to as the Panther, it probably should be called the Reluctant Dragon. It has been reluctant to arrive, its creators seem reluctant to build it, and the parent division is reluctant to admit its own 2-year delay in recognizing this spectacular segment of the automotive market. But, in the inimitable words of Sen. Everett Dirksen, nothing is so irresistible as an idea whose time has come—and the Mustang idea has indeed arrived.

The car probably won't be called the Panther either, although what it will be called still is unsettled. At one time, it was referred to as the Chevette, a name more in keeping with Chevrolet's method of christening cars. Normally, such absence of even a hint of a name might be considered unusual this late in the process, but in the Panther's case it only serves to emphasize that pre-production work has been conducted at a relatively low level of interest. Apparently it is difficult to become enthused about a new car when it not only is forced by circumstance but also is certain to cripple one or another of existing car lines.

Detroit observers, who make it their business to know what Chevrolet is doing, are emphatic on that point: The Panther is going to "come in right on top of both Chevy II and Corvair, making it only a matter of time before one or the other is killed off." From the front-office point of view, this has been a more important factor to weigh than any other consideration of engineering or production. It is why, in the face of a Mustang stampede, Chevrolet spokesmen have continued to insist that the Corsa is just that type of car. The Monza was an unrecognized trigger in generating the Mustang, of

course, but the restyled Corsa in '65 failed to woo defectors back from the Brand F corral. The only way to go, it has become obvious, is to make a Mustang.

Like the Mustang and the Falcon, the Panther has its origins in the idea that a special body could be built atop the Chevy II "platform." Over the past two years, the Chevy II has been treated to more and more power options until it has reached a peak just short of that of pre-396-cu. in. Corvettes. It has an awesome range of engines—from a 90-bhp/154-cu. in. 4-cyl. to a 350-bhp/327-cu. in. V-8—for such a plain Jane, utilitarian sedan. What better basis, then, for a sporty new compact than this car with such powerplant variety?

It is not so simple, on the other hand, to start with the chassis components and floorpan of a unitized Chevy II as the basis for the Panther. The seating package must be entirely different, as it has to be for a more sporting sort of vehicle, and this immediately eliminates the floorpan which had been the only usable part of the unitized body. Though the wheelbase is shortened from 110 in. to a more Mustang-like 108 in., that in itself is not a serious problem. The high, square box which is the Chevy II package must be cut down at least 4 in. to, at most, Corvair height, which requires trading overall height for legroom. Seats cannot be lowered or moved back enough on the Chevy II floorpan to achieve the needed legroom/headroom. Therefore, the Panther is being built as an all-new unitized body (which incidentally will be known as the F body).

The multi-million dollar investment required to produce a sixth vehicle line (A-body Chevelle, B-body Chevrolet, X-body Chevy II, Z-body Cor-

vair and special body Sting Ray are the others) is staggering, even for a giant of Chevrolet's size. This is why industry observers are so ready to write off one of the present car lines—most probably Corvair. Though Chevy II will be more like the Panther and hence could expect to be discarded, that isn't the way industry market planners work. Their thinking, instead, is to keep a Falcon competitor (Chevy II) in the market at the expense of something which doesn't really have competition—no matter how technically exciting a Corvair might be. Sales of both Chevy II and Corvair, moreover, hardly show any advantage to either.

Adding to the illusion that the Panther would be a special-bodied Chevy II (*à la* Karmann Ghia Volkswagen) has been the engineering prototype vehicles observed under testing. These have been constructed of Chevy II body panels and, in the case of the convertibles, the Chevy II soft-top. Cobbled test cars, however, often are a far cry from the finished production version, which is the case with the Panther.

The car has been termed a carbon copy of the Mustang, which is true enough at a casual glance. Part of the reluctance among those working on the car stems from this fact. Stylists no doubt chafe at being relegated to the role of copiers, rather than innovators. And for good reason: Their contention is that the Monza GT was certainly the more forthright way to go, particularly in styling directions. As it turns out, they have had to produce a GM Mustang: Slightly larger, slightly flossier, slightly more attractive and measuring fractions of an inch more in headroom, legroom and hiproom.

Mustang proportions are shared by the Panther, too, with the long front

hood, short rear deck and the visually close-coupled greenhouse between. The hood tapers downward at a more pronounced angle between Corvette-style front fender "hop-ups" at each side. A simple, open, full-width grille slants rearward under the hood's front lip and contains a single headlamp nestled at each side. The cover rendering hints at disappearing headlights, but such a feature, despite its proliferation this year as the premier styling gimmick, is just too expensive to consider for the Panther's price range.

The doors are extremely wide, to permit easy access to the rear seat, and the beltline is somewhat lower than Mustang's. The latter contributes a rather airy appearance to the greenhouse, something on the order of the Mercedes-Benz 230-SL. Only the 2-door non-fastback hardtop will be built initially, according to the best deductions that can be made at this writing. The convertible, observers report, has been an on-again, off-again proposition and was put off again at such a late date as to preclude its appearance in September. A fastback is, at this writing, an unknown quantity: Nothing yet seen indicates any work toward one (Mustang's was delayed six months, it will be recalled).

Given the competitiveness of the industry, it appears a safe bet that Chevrolet will retain the 230-cu. in. Six, rated at 140 bhp, as the base engine. Use of this engine was restricted to Chevelle with the development of this year's 250-cu. in. Six, but the Panther will give it a new lease on life. Mustang, to meet the horsepower challenge for the base Six on more even terms, can be expected to counter by offering the 240-cu. in. "Big Six" this fall. Then, if Chevrolet follows true to form, the 250-cu. in. Six will be made optional for 1967½ models. There

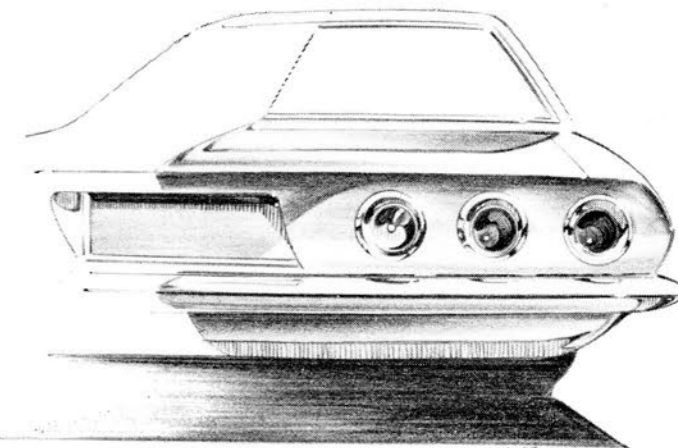
always is the possibility that Chevrolet may have chosen the 194-cu. in., 120-bhp Six as the base engine, but the attractiveness to that course of action lies only in pricing considerations.

Engine options will include, of course, the 283-cu. in. 2- and 4-barrel V-8s, rated at 195 and 220 bhp, respectively, as well as 327-cu. in. V-8s rated 275 bhp with 10.5:1 compression and 4-barrel carburetion and 350 bhp with 11:1 and 4-barrel. This obviously overpowers Mustang (now 271 bhp top), even should Ford retaliate by installing the 390/335 Fairlane GT engine in Mustangs. Ford might well do just that, since it has plans to re-engineer and enlarge the Mustang somewhat to better meet the Panther challenge anyway.

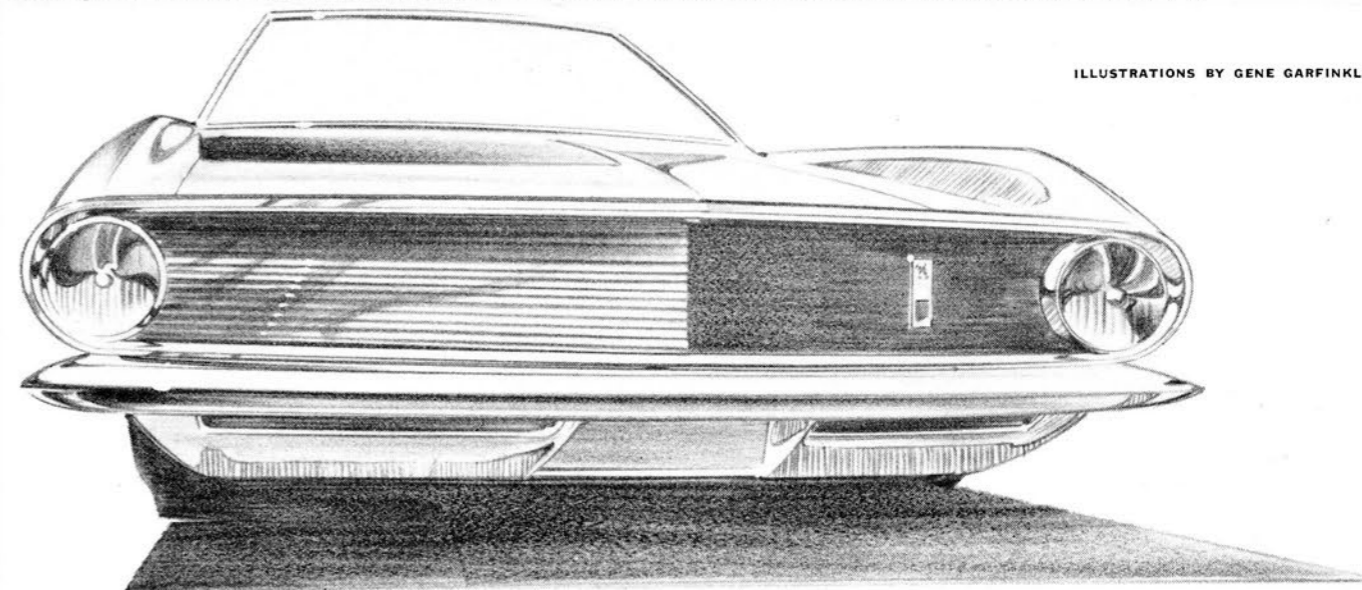
Chevy II underpinnings will be the basis for the Panther, in structure and in suspension. Transmission options will be 3- and 4-speed manual and an automatic—2-speed Powerglide at first, with the 3-speed Turbo Hydramatic coming later. The latter is a necessity to compete with Ford's (and everybody else's) 3-speed automatics.

While rally-type suspension options may be offered, disc brakes are still out of the question for the Panther—Corvette notwithstanding.

Not much detective work is necessary to realize that the 1967 model year will be rare vintage for the enthusiast driver in more ways than the mere arrival of the Panther. As if the battle against Mustang isn't enough, Chevrolet also will have to entice the car buyer's interest away from some other formidable prospects. The most obvious attention stealer will be the Cougar, Lincoln-Mercury Division's blend of Mustang and Thunderbird (which product planners there seem determined to hamper with the name S-77). Plymouth's Barracuda, from available evidence, looks as if it will be extensively refurbished. Less immediately competitive, but nevertheless important factors, will be the all-new Thunderbird and, quite possibly, new Tempests, Olds F-85s and Buick Specials. The latter trio even have an outside chance of boasting overhead camshaft engines—even V-8s—although that may be too much to expect. ■



WHATEVER NAMEPLATE is finally chosen, appearance of Chevrolet's counter-Mustang has been settled. Similar proportions to the '66 Mustang are apparent although interior dimensions will be fractional inches greater. Hardtop may be only model available this fall.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY GENE GARFINKLE