

CHEVELLE 396 SS

Take your brave pills before you set forth in this one.



ROAD TEST has been accused of everything from "being in the pay of Chrysler" through "favoring foreign cars" to being "little old ladies from Pasadena who believe all cars should be equipped with governors" by irate readers who don't appreciate the editorial attitude we express toward the Pontiac GTO class of automobile.

Being not guilty on any of the counts but rather only concerned that whatever abilities to build better cars for driving pleasure and necessity Detroit possesses should be utilized for the full benefit of the consumer, we feel that in building the high-performance (meaning high-powered) intermediates, the manufacturers are short-changing us.

As enthusiasts, people who have spent years in competition and driving for fun, we would like to see some good chassis engineering brought to bear on the Chevelle 396, Pontiac GTO, Buick Skylark GS and Olds 442 instead of the perpetration of a snow job on the public through advertising and propaganda while continuing to fob off 1936-type cars with unlimited-displacement engines.

Let's take the Chevelle 396SS.

Last year the car was announced as a limited production model, presumably built only for drag strip competition. Acceptance caused more than the original number to be produced and it was set up as a regular production option for 1966 (RPO L-34), made part of the line and a considerable ad campaign worked up to get it to the public generally.

And here's the crime. As long as you are selling these cars to the informed enthusiast for a special purpose, fine. When you run full page ads in color in newspapers and magazines indicating that the 396-SS is just any businessman's virility pill, you've placed it in another classification entirely. The enthusiast presumably knows enough to correct the car's faults or how to handle them. Joe Average may know where the sparkplugs are and has no special driving skill.

Viewed in this light, the 396SS, as it is being huckstered, is definitely the dirty end of the stick.

The initial batch of cars (1965) were strictly an engine-swap concept which could have been engineered by your 18 year old neighborhood hot rod addict. This year, a bundle has been spent on restyling and fixing-up and precious few dollars on mechanical changes — most of which fall far short of the mark.

The flaws aren't in the 396 cubic inch engine (obtainable in either 320 or 360 horsepower ratings), the four-speed transmissions (normal or close-ratio gearing), the multiplicity of final drive ratios or even the wheels (six-inch base) and tires (7.75 x 14). But in that horse-latitude region where 1936 chassis design has been frozen by some asinine directive that every GM car must ride like a Cadillac, regardless.

Although the ads tell us that the Chevelle 396 is a flat-cornering wonder, we have not been able to discover an example which fits that description. Our favorite hot rod magazine also assured us that the



Acceleration potential of 360 horsepower 396 is tremendous, but is limited by poor traction of stock model. Limited slip differential helps, but even in this car so equipped, wheelspin is excessive.

car has "30% heavier-than-normal front and rear coil springs, larger-valved, shocks, 15/16-inch front sway bar and neat things like front ball joints that are shot-peened to frustrate the development of cracks." We can't vouch for the shot-peening, but if the other assets are present in the stock Chevelle 396SS, then Chevy's AMA Specifications don't reveal it and we can't detect them.

You can bury the front end of this handsome machine at even moderate speed on a moderate curve. The rear end bottoms on almost the slightest dip and it understeers so badly that the term "handling" can hardly be applied.

This is with the regular suspension.

There is an optional heavy duty suspension which will give you some help. It cures these problems by about 30%, which leaves 70% to go. No, you don't have to have the extra-cost options to make the car driveable, but what's the point in having all the power in the world if you can't drive the car in any more of a sporting manner than your rich uncle can in his Chrysler Imperial?

It isn't up to ROAD TEST to give advice to the world's most efficient corporation and the world's largest engineering group, but nobody on the staff would own a Chevelle without substantially better shock absorbers than those available from Chevy. And, they aren't about to get this suspension to work without strengthening the frame. Many 1965 Chevelle 396s have been in the shop for frame crack welding, usually discovered when the enthusiast has it on the rack to change the exhaust system.

Brakes, if you can call the stock units that, are nowhere — if the potential top speed of this car is taken into account. Even the generally-laudatory hot rod magazine mentioned earlier pointed out that they are useless when wet and that a cleverly-devised water shield actually succeeds in holding water inside the brake drums where it can keep brakes wet for

a long period.

Oh, yes, there's a cure, and it's a pretty satisfactory one, but why in the name of Louis Chevrolet, isn't it standard, so that Joe Average, who believes those full-color ads, will get it automatically? We mean metallic brake linings, of course, whose fade and water resistance is infinitely superior to the compressed rags which Chevrolet fits in production.

Even with the metallics, the 396 isn't going to set any international records for deceleration. About 23 feet per second/per second from 60 mph is all we can get because of rear end lock-up. This is considerably less than the Dodge Charger (26 ft./sec.²). If the two cars were hurtling toward the same object 150 feet away at the same time, the Charger wouldn't hit it, but the Chevelle would go 15 feet through it. This might give you a clue as to why this group of little old ladies from Pasadena who favor foreign cars

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Braking capability is also limited by rear end suspension and weight transfer during deceleration. Metallic brakes proved to have good fade resistance, but car required 165 feet for panic stop from 60 mph at rate of 23 ft./sec.². Deviation from straight line was not excessive.

and are in the pay of Chrysler can't become too thrilled about this "spirited new model from Chevy designed for those who LIKE to drive."

If it was impossible to make these cars any better than they are, we wouldn't be quite so derogatory. But the fact that police departments can buy Chevies and Oldsmobiles and Fords and so on which have got some stopping and handling power to match the acceleration and top speed potential, makes it abundantly clear that the factories could do better for the guy who does LIKE to drive. Even if the masses wouldn't cotton to the harsh ride now necessary to get stability, it is not impossible to make a better handling, safer car in this configuration at no more extra cost than you pay for styling changes.

From the practical ownership aspect, the Chevelle 396SS, particularly the 360 horsepower model, should be a pretty good investment. The prospects for high resale value in the next two or three years are excellent. It will cost more for fuel — on a good day you can get 12 mpg — but you should not expect any additional repair or maintenance problems with normal driving.

Drag racing is something else, and regardless of the fact that the SS is being pushed as something for everyone, certainly a high percentage of those sold will go to people who want to at least try it at the strip. This will get you in deeper right off. The 396SS has lots of engine, but it still takes some chassis work and a lot of rear rubber to make it turn anything exceptional in the quarter-mile. The amount of wheelspin (on a car equipped with Positraction) caused by a regular out-of-the-chute start can be seen in the accompanying photos.

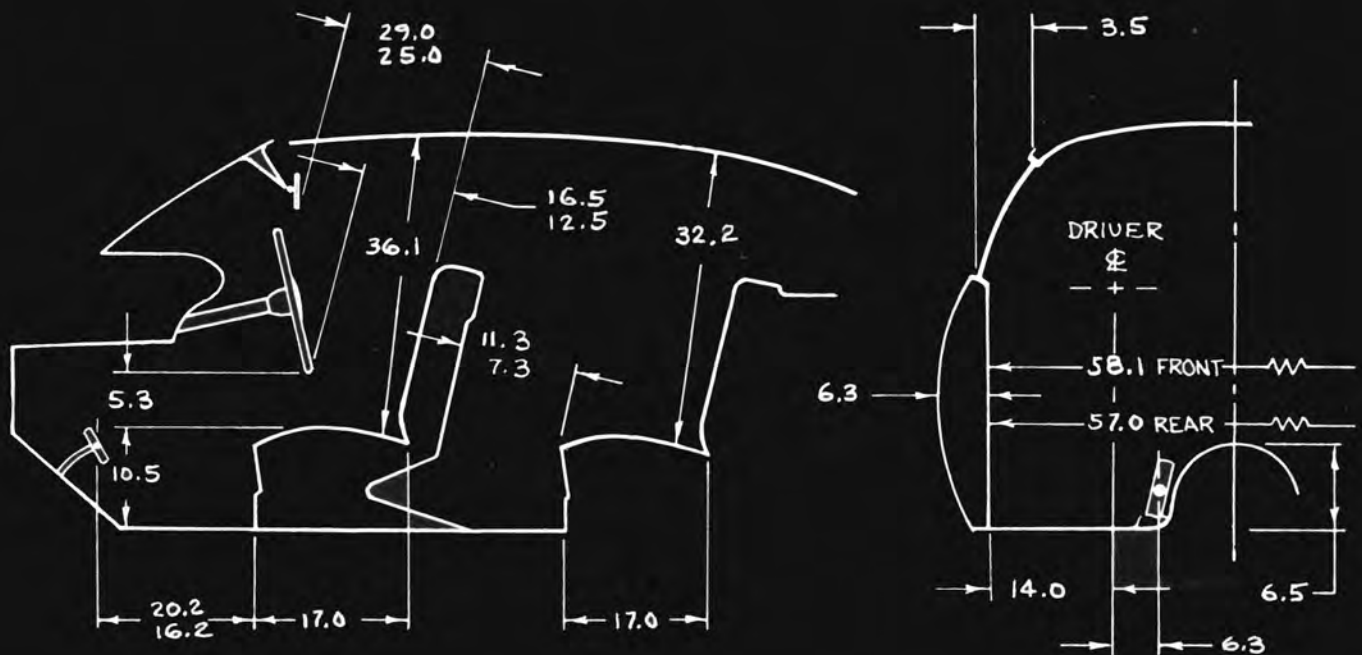
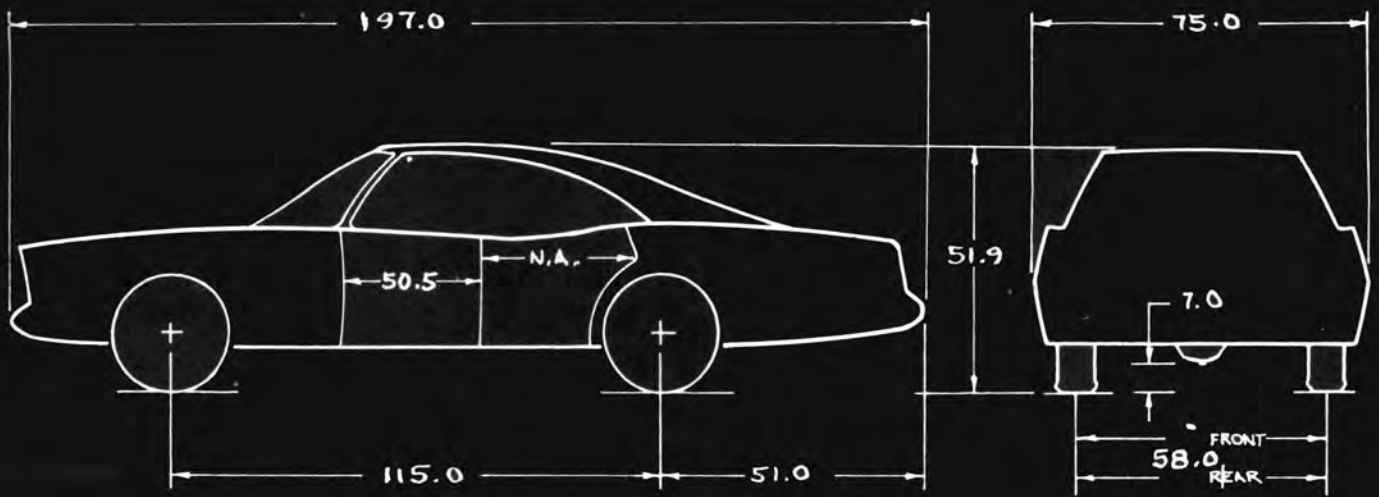
Because of its size, styling and other appeals, the Chevelle will probably be bought by a number of ROAD TEST readers. Our only advice is to buy one from a dealer who understands the need for optional equipment, such as Harry Mann Chevrolet in Los Angeles, whose experience with Corvettes has made them performance conscious. Then treat it with respect.



Position of brake and accelerator pedals is not conducive to hard driving. Shift lever action is quick, positive.



Bucket seats in SS offer better support than previous design. Head room is ample for over-six-footer.



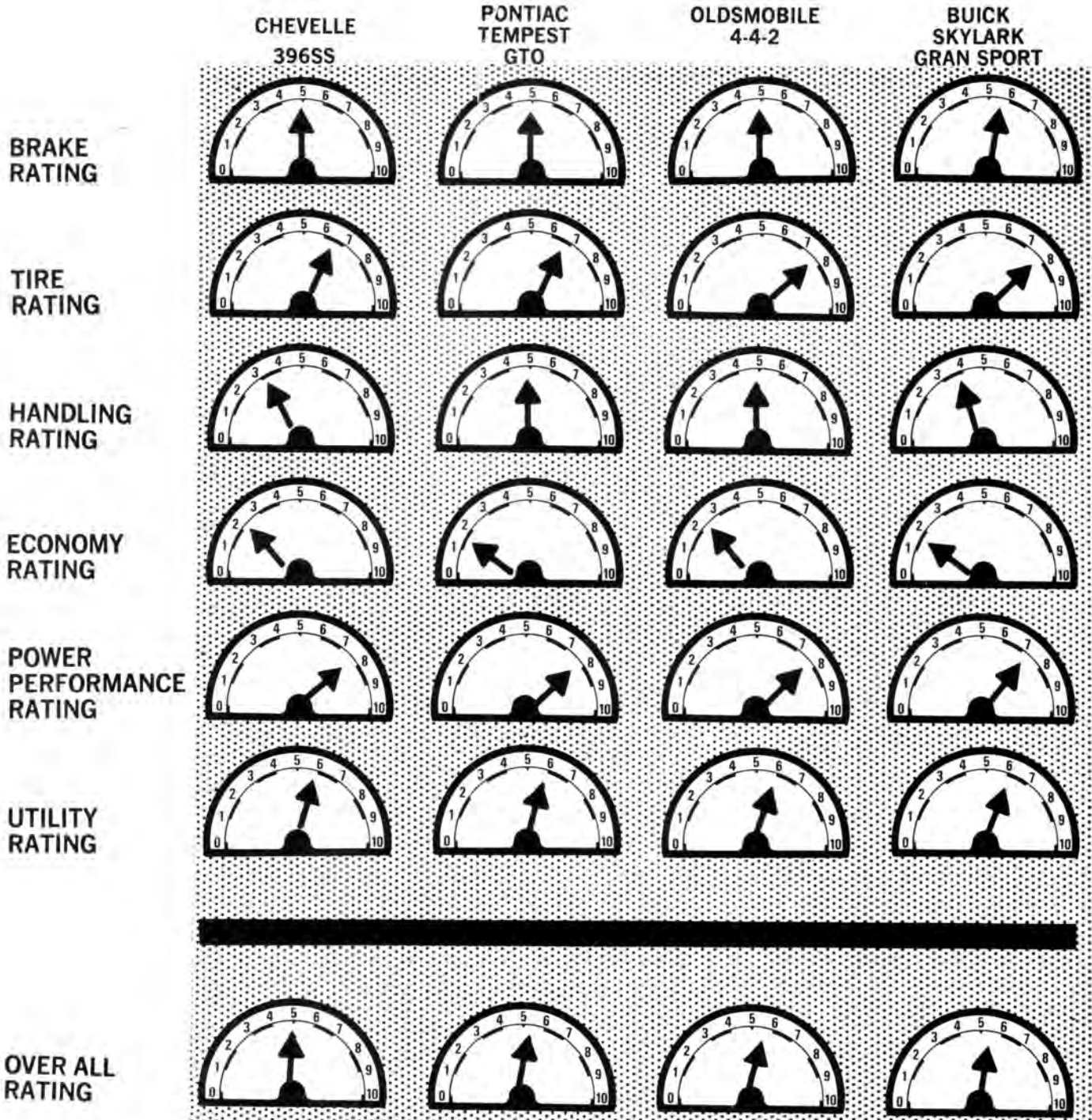
GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS

Curb weight	3841
Weight dist.	56/44
Brake type	drum
Swept area, sq. in.	268.6
Tire size	7.75 x 14
Steering turns:	
Manual	5.48
Power	3.98
Turning circle	40.3

ENGINE	
Type	90° OHV V-8
Bore	4.094
Stroke	3.76
Disp. cu. in.	396
Comp. ratio	10.25
BHP @ rpm.	360 @ 5200
Torque @ rpm	420 @ 3600
Clutch dia.	11.4

Optional trans.:	
4th	1.00:1
3rd	1.46:1
2nd	1.88:1
1st	2.52:1
Automatic:	
Drive	
Drive	1.00:1
Low	1.76:1

HOW THEY COMPARE



* SEE PAGE 3 FOR EXPLANATION OF ROAD TEST RATINGS.