

Track Test: YENKO STINGER

BY STEVE SMITH

A Chevy dealer takes 100 Corvair Corsas, soups up the engine, suspension and brakes, and hopes to blow off all comers in the SCCA's competitive D Production sports car racing class. Can it be done? Our man Smith takes the Stinger to the race track to find out.



It took Don Yenko to turn the Corvair into a racing car. Who is Don Yenko? The first time I saw him was some years ago at a sports car race on an airport in Montgomery, N.Y. It was the last lap of the big production car event. Bob Johnson was leading Yenko, both were driving Corvettes. The final turn was a serpentine series of esses marked by about 2000 haybales. Yenko really wanted to win—he'd swapped the lead with Johnson some 26 times—but his brakes were fading fast. Johnson braked for the final turn; Yenko couldn't. Undaunted, Yenko rammed the wall of bales, scattering hay and demolishing the front of his car; then planted his right foot foursquare on the accelerator and pushed a mountain of shredded fiberglass and straw the last few hundred feet to the finish line, only to lose the race by inches. Yenko had the determination to win. Now if only he had the *judgment*. . . .

Yenko went on to win many races and two National Championships with his Corvettes, but by the end of 1965, his car was clearly outclassed by the lighter, Ford-powered products of Shelby American. Yenko, a Chevrolet dealer in Canonsburg, Pa., kept pestering General Motors for something more competitive. General Motors was out of racing, or so they said, and no help was forthcoming, so Yenko decided to build his own car—based on the Corvair—and, in the process, do for the Corvair what Porsche did for the Volkswagen: create a true dual-purpose Grand Touring car.

Yenko approached the Sports Car Club of America with his idea. The SCCA said the Corvair was a sedan, not a sports car. Yenko wanted to build and race sports cars, so he offered to take the back seats out of the Corvair, improve the engine, brakes and suspension, and call it the Yenko Stinger. Fine, said the SCCA, now

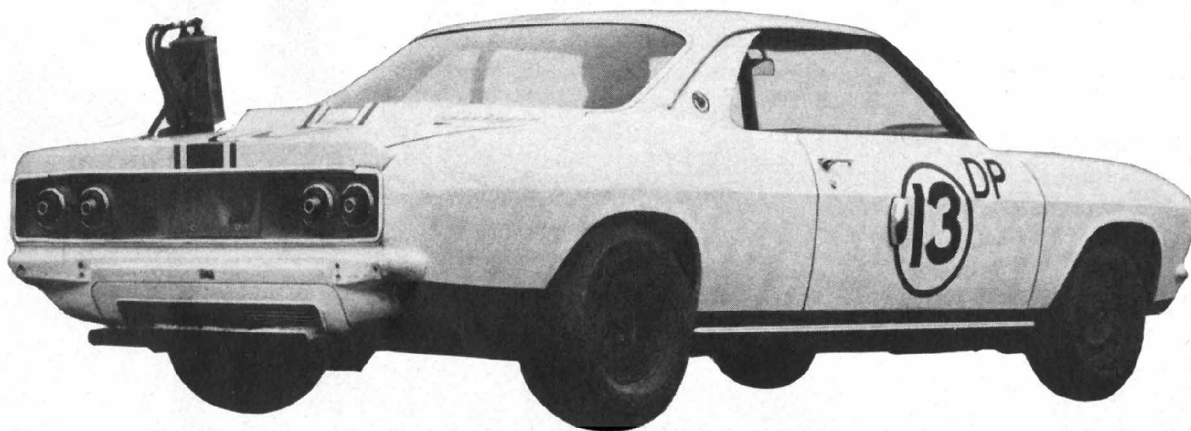
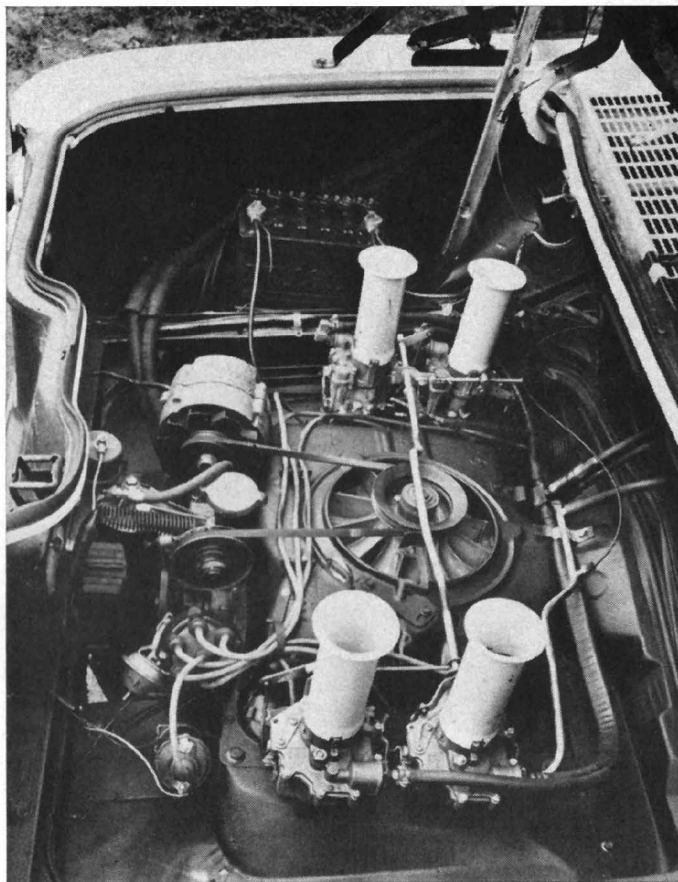


you just show us 100 Yenko Stingers by the end of the year and we'll consider recognizing it as a sports car. (One hundred cars is the SCCA's minimum production requirement.) This was like the end of November. Yenko, determined as ever to win, went in hock up to his ears, begged, borrowed or—who knows?—stole 100 white Corvair Corsa models, and remanufactured them to Stinger specifications—all within a month.

A man from the SCCA came around and was led out to a frozen, snowy field behind Yenko's Chevy agency at 575 West Pike Street in Canonsburg. He tramped up and down row after row of silent Stingers. "I count only 96," he said at last. Yenko was at the breaking point. "We already sold four," he said tersely. The man from the SCCA jotted down their serial numbers and went away. Yenko and company bit their collective fingernails for nine days. A telegram arrived. "THIS

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Continued



Donna Mae Mims takes her job as public relations officer for Yenko seriously; is seldom seen without "BE A SWINGER IN A STINGER" button. Engine compartment of race car is sanitary; note fan belt retainer. Huge oil cooler is mounted on rear fender. Note fiberglass rear deck lid with spoiler lip and cooling scoops, modified rear quarter pillar.

WILL CONFIRM YENKO STINGER RECOGNIZED 1966 PRODUCTION CATEGORY CLASS D." Jubilation!—tempered with incredulity. Class D? SCCA production cars are grouped into classes according to their potential lap times, and the Corvair, even souped-up, couldn't have much of a chance in class D against cars like the race-prepared Triumph TR-4A, which has won class D the last four years in a row. Too late to turn back now. Yenko went to work on a 220-horsepower Stinger in Stage III racing trim while his salesmen drummed up interest in the 160-hp Stage I and 175-hp Stage II street machines.

As mentioned, nobody had ever been able to turn the Corvair into a racer. For a couple of years after its introduction in the fall of '59, the Corvair was raced as a sedan with mixed luck—mostly bad. It has rallied successfully, and the engine was reliable in drag racing, but it tended to overheat in road races, particularly the

turbocharged version (which was designed to operate at full throttle only in short bursts). The Corvairs that had raced on road circuits were never as fast as class D sports cars—maybe as fast as class E, more likely class F. So when I heard that the Stinger was going to tackle the highly competitive class D, I remembered Yenko bulldozing haybales over the finish line at Montgomery, and I was skeptical. I had forgotten Yenko's fierce determination to win against overwhelming odds.

Given the opportunity to road test a Stage II street Stinger or track test a Stage III racing version, I opted for the latter out of pure curiosity. After all, it's no great trick to turn the Corvair into an acceptable "sports car," as John Fitch's Sprint Corvair conversion has proved. So I made arrangements to drive the Stinger in which Russell MacGrotty had just completed the Daytona 24-hour Daytona Continental (Continued on page 98)

race. The only mechanical failure had been a broken throttle rod; that should say something about its reliability as a racing car, but don't ask me how they did it—I don't know. And don't ask Yenko; he can't understand why nobody else has had any luck racing Corvairs, unless—maybe—they aren't as careful in preparation as Yenko obviously is.

Nelson Ledges, a short but tricky 1.1-mile road course a couple of hours from the Canonsburg Stinger "factory," was chosen as the test site. I arrived late, cold and wet. It was a gray, drizzling day. The race car fired up easily and settled down to a muttering idle. It was decked out in a white body, blue hood and stripes, taped-up lights, and a not-very-reassuring number "13" on its flanks. It looked awful big. It is: over two feet longer than either a Cobra or a TR-4A, a foot wider than the Triumph, and even wider than the Corvette—by half-an-inch.

And it looked tough. Standard Stinger trim includes a modified rear pillar and a fiberglass engine lid with cooling scoops and an aerodynamic spoiler that really works. The rear wheels have 7-inch rims and mount Firestone Indy tires; Firestone GP tires are used at the front. The vent panes, door windows and handles, rear side windows and winders had all been removed. The car's race-worthy appearance was topped off by a giant Harrison oil cooler propped up over the rear fender—it looked illegal as all get-out, but nobody's been able to find anything in the rulebook against it. The dash was stock Corvair Corsa, with the addition of Stewart-Warner oil pressure and oil temperature gauges.

The stock seats had been replaced by competition buckets that fit so tight that there was a certain suction effect trying to get out. With the telescopic steering wheel in a comfortable position for my arms, the wheel rim was making a dent in my right kneecap, and my helmet was solidly in contact with the roof. It wouldn't do. There was no equipment on hand to lower the seat bracket, so Yenko's mechanics removed it and installed a stock Corvair "bucket" seat, which had nothing like the side support of the competition seat, but sat low enough to keep me from being battered unconscious on the roof.

I tugged on my driving suit, cinched up the USAF-type 3-inch-wide seatbelt as tight as it would go, and eased onto the race track. The exhaust note is a noisy combi-

nation of the Corvair's famous growl and a NASCAR stocker's blatting racket. The clutch felt good, but it was obvious that the stock gear ratios weren't going to be perfect—there's a "touring car" gap between second and third gear, an unfortunate compromise on a racing car. Happily, the power curve is strong from 4000 rpm on up to about 6500. I was told to keep it under 6000 rpm during the test.

The first thing I noticed about the car was how quickly it responded to even the smallest steering input—it tracks instantly and exactly where it's aimed. I had been worried about the Stinger's driving position; you sit so far forward that I figured you couldn't feel the rear end starting to slide—like the pre-war Auto Union Grand Prix cars that everybody said were so impossible to drive. I soon found out that the Stinger was different.

The track got slicker and the fat tires started to aquaplane all over the lot. Any attempt to accelerate, brake or change direction while splashing through the puddles would get the car out of shape. At first, the front end would plow in a wet turn, then the rear would let go, and the car would lash around. The throttle stuck partially open coming out of one turn, and the rear wheels locked going into the next. Finally, it ran out of gas just when I needed power, and I looped it unceremoniously.

Donna Mae Mims went off to get some gas. Donna Mae ("Think Pink") Mims is Yenko's kittenish and controversial press officer, and a lady race driver of no mean repute. By the time she got back, the track was drying off.

Finally, the tires developed their ferocious bite. In handling, the competition Stinger is somewhere between a racing sedan and a Porsche 904. To get the maximum out of the car, it has to be tossed into each corner with as much bravery and gusto as the driver can muster, then steered on the throttle. I was surprised at both the tenacity of the tires' grip on everything but rough, undulating surfaces, and the ability to provoke power oversteer. It felt a lot more like a *designed* racing car than a production car *prepared* for racing.

There was only one characteristic of the Stinger I didn't like. It had vacuum-operated power brakes (an option) installed for comfortable long-distance racing. It may be a personal prejudice, but I found the pedal too sensitive for adequate

controllability. Moreover, there is a maddening lag in the system, and also a general lack of feel.

Consequently, I didn't use the brakes much, and the best lap time recorded was a 1:01. At that speed I felt extremely comfortable, with none of that dry sensation in my mouth that starts when I'm really trying. A really good production car driver could have done several seconds better, once the mud and water had been cleared off the track. One of the Stinger prototypes lapped in 56.9—I'm sure our test car was stronger than that, and there's still plenty of room for improvement within the SCCA rules. The track record for D Production cars is 58 seconds, so the Stinger ought to have it made at Nelson Ledges.

Just how the car will fare elsewhere is a matter of no small conjecture. The Triumph-racing crowd is particularly shaken, and the competition is expected to get pretty heated. Handling is the Stinger's long suit; there is simply too much bulk to push through the air faster than about 120 mph and still be geared for good acceleration.

The most astounding feature of the competition Stinger is its price. The street machines, the \$3278.53 Stage I, and the \$3722.98 Stage II, are reasonable enough. The \$4287.57 base price of the Stage III includes modified cylinder heads, polished and shot-peened crank and rods, Forgedtrue high-compression pistons, racing cam and valve train, baffled oil pan, dual brake system with pressure bias adjustment, lightened flywheel, modified fan and fan belt retainer, select-fit main bearings, Magnaflex and Zyglo inspection, and thorough balancing.

A wide range of racing options is available; we would recommend the following as a starting point: larger capacity carbs (\$79.00), racing brake drums and metallic linings (\$99.45), reworked limited-slip differential (\$39.95 exchange), reworked oil pump (\$40.00), roll bar (\$134.00), a pair of 7-inch reinforced wheels (\$35.00 each), competition bucket seat (\$60.00), USAF-type seat belt (\$15.55) and shoulder harness (\$15.55).

There are few classes in racing today where you can buy a top-notch competitive car off the shelf for \$4781.07, ready to go. And how many manufacturers will race-prepare the car for their customers and then show up at the races with spares and technical assistance? We predict a trophy-filled season for Stinger owners. **cjd**