

DESPITE ITS SO-CALLED "ANTI-RACING" POLICY, GM IS MAKING HUGE STRIDES FORWARD IN THE HIGH-PERFORMANCE FIELD.

Editor's Note:

This article is the first in a series that will discuss the major automotive manufacturers' contributions to the high-performance field. In the following months we'll bring you the best of Ford and MoPar!

By Roger Huntington

More than five years ago the General Motors front office issued an order to their divisions to get out of auto racing and to stop promoting speed and racing victories in their advertising. Nobody knows exactly why they did this, right at a time when Ford and Chrysler were getting hotter in racing. Probably it was to appease safety critics and head off the Washington trust-busters who were looking for a good reason to bust up GM into little pieces.

Whatever it was, it scared car fans who favor GM products. They foresaw GM cars going down in performance when Fords and MoPars were going up. They feared no more racing

victories for GM cars, no exciting youth models in the showrooms, no progressive performance development of engines and chassis. In effect, they feared that GM wouldn't have a competitive super car!

Well, we're here to say none of it happened. The various GM divisions settled on a clever middle-of-the-road policy on racing and performance development that let them stay cool and stay hot at the same time. Moderation with progress. GM cars are still right in there punching in every performance area, but without making big waves that the GM front office doesn't want. The no-racing policy doesn't please everybody, but it has accomplished what the GM people wanted (kept Washington off their necks) while maintaining brisk sales in the youth market.

Let's take a look at what's good about GM.

For instance, you don't have to look very far to find important performance developments that have

come out of GM even in these last five years when they've been officially out of racing. GM was the first corporation to go out on a limb and tool up their own four-speed manual transmission (the Muncie) after everybody had been using the overstressed Warner T-10 for years. Today the Muncie four-speed represents perhaps the best compromise between strength, size and weight in the world. It's up to 50 pounds lighter than the other American four-speeds, and it will take 500 hp without trouble. And, speaking of high-performance transmissions, the GM Turbo-Hydramatic three-speed torque converter is inherently better for strong engines because all forward shifts are made by having a plate clutch pick up the load from an overrunning clutch. There is no need to synchronize the action of two friction clutches to prevent excessive slip on shifts. GM engineers knew this when they designed the thing. The GM Turbo-Hydro trans requires less beefing and modifying to take a given amount of power, and it's inherently more reliable. Evidence of this is the fast way it's overtaking the MoPar TorqueFlite in the hot rod field.

In the chassis area GM fans can point to a number of important firsts. Of course the Chevy Corvette is in a class by itself. Its independent rear suspension is the most sophisticated system on any American production car, and its handling and cornering are on a par with the most expensive sports cars in the world. The late Corvette also led with four-wheel disc brakes. Few cars in the world of this size and weight can stop any quicker. Like we said, the 'Vette is just in a class by itself. Ford and Chrysler don't offer anything even remotely resembling it. It's the quickest, fastest, best-handling, best-braking production car offered in the whole industry. Maybe its price puts it out of reach of the bulk of the youth market; but we've got to give credit where it's due.

And not just the Corvette. GM pioneered with front-wheel drive on the Toronado. This layout has lots of

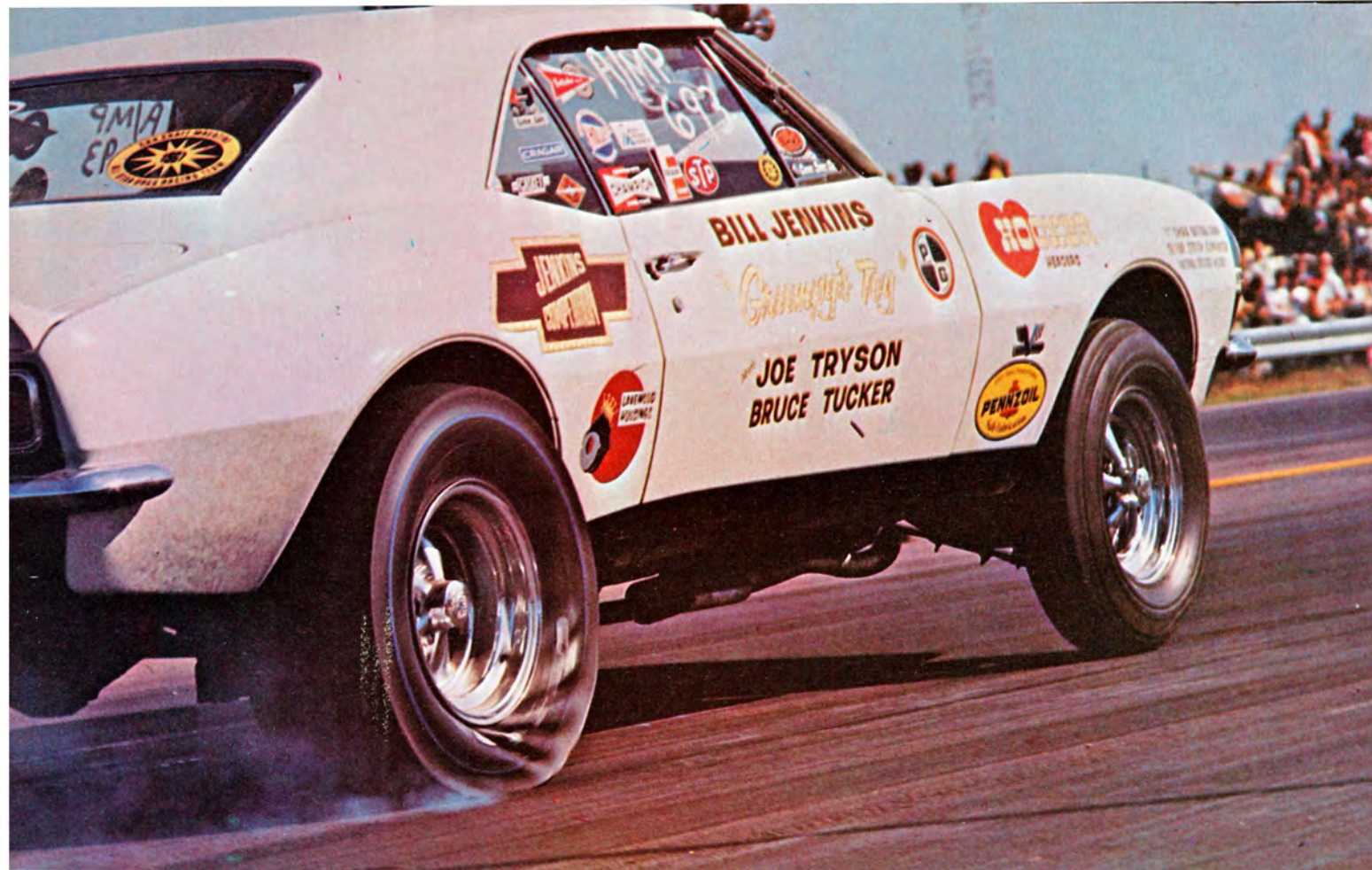
PERFORMANCE



The L-78 version of the 396 engine is used in this dragster. Aluminum heads on the 427 engine designate the powerful L-88 powerplant and now a ZL-1 engine — all aluminum — is Chevy's new bid for supercar supremacy. Over 600 hp with an engine that weighs in the area of 500 pounds.

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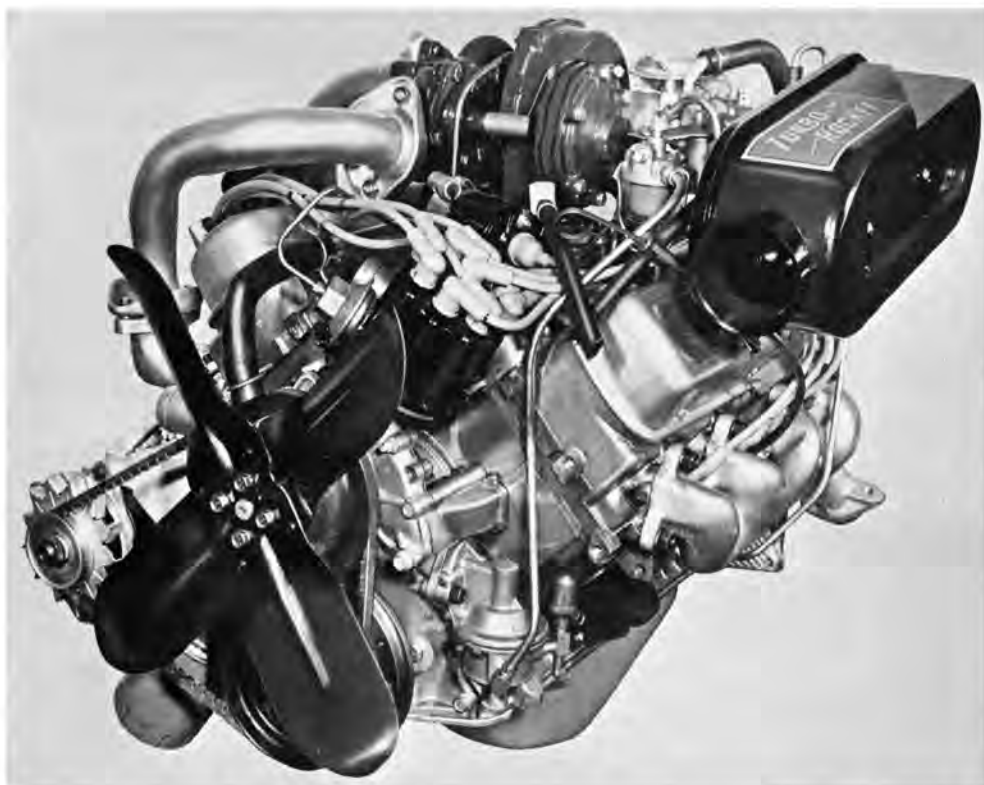
performance advantages—better traction, high cornering power, basic understeer for tremendous stability in a crosswind and quick steering response. GM's front-drive cars are also priced out of the youth market, but let's give that credit. It took a lot of vision to risk millions tooling for this radical development. GM is quicker than anybody to take those kind of risks. And this is what brings progress.

There's a more obscure chassis development that we shouldn't overlook. That's the rear anti-roll torsion bar used as standard equipment on the Olds 4-4-2 (and optional on late Chevilles). By increasing the "roll stiffness" of the rear suspension, the rear tires are made to work harder in a turn and the steering has a lighter, more neutral feel. The front end doesn't want to plow and "push" so much in the turns. Some engineers don't like rear anti-roll bars because the car is more skittish in a crosswind. But drive a 4-4-2 and see if you don't like this new feel. It's a GM first in modern performance cars.

GM hasn't been lax in engine design in these last few years either. There are many examples we could mention of technical developments that led the way in making super performance practical on the street. Like the famous Rochester Quadrajet four-barrel carburetor. Tiny primary venturis and huge secondaries, with the secondaries controlled by an air valve that tilts open under pressure to prevent over-carburetion at low speed. Result: good gas mileage and response when cruising, with tremendous breathing when you want full power. And no flat spots in the middle! It's perhaps the best compromise between performance and economy in the industry. The Quadrajet is standard on practically all of the big-inch GM V-8's today. It has the potential for six-cylinder gas mileage at one end and 400 hp at the other, with a tip of the toe!

And speaking of breathing, Pontiac was first with a "Ram Air" induction system for the street, in 1966. Functional hood scoops feeding cool ram air to a sealed air box around a Tri-Power carburetion system. It's good for anywhere from 10 to 30 extra horses on a warm day, due to a higher air density and a small amount of ram effect. And it's history now that this Pontiac "invention" started a stampede. You can now order some type of ram air system on most of the industry's high-performance '69 models. GM took this trick off the strip and put it on the street.

Chevrolet's late 396/427 "semi-hemi" engine is a more important performance development than most car fans realize. This is basically an attempt to combine some of the high breathing potential of a true hemi engine with the simple, low-cost wedge layout. It's done by putting the valves on ball-joint rockers and tilting them in two planes, giving a somewhat rounded combustion chamber without the expensive double rocker shafts.



Chevrolet's 396/427 "semi-hemi" has unique combustion chamber with tilted, staggered valves that may set pattern for the industry. It combines advantages of hemi and wedge layouts. High power in small, light engine. This is the big-port high-performance version with forged pistons.

High performance in a lightweight, compact, low-cost engine package! It could be the pattern of many future engines. Ford copied it on their new 429-cubic-inch "stagger-valve" Thunderbird engine.

Here are just a few more miscellaneous GM performance firsts in the last few years: overhead camshaft on the Pontiac Six, allowing up to 7000 rpm on a bread-and-butter street engine; turbo-superchargers for some Chevy and Olds compact engines in the early '60's, for more power from a smaller package; sophisticated Tri-Power system for the late Corvette 427 that opens the end carbs gradually between 2000 and 4000 rpm by vacuum, for

good flexibility with high top-end power; Oldsmobile's new rear axle that is perhaps the best strength/weight compromise in the industry.

Now let's talk about racing. GM has been officially out of racing for five years, but we think the GM divisions have done a remarkable job of staying abreast of the industry within this restriction. Look at the evidence:

The 14-year-old Chevrolet small-block V-8 (265 to 350 cubes) is still the engine to beat in almost all classes of racing that call for a medium-size production-based engine, either stock or modified. This would include drag racing in both stock and modified classes, Bonneville straightaway racing,

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Oldsmobile refined Ram Air concept by using air scoops in grille or under front bumper, feeding to carb air box through flexible tubes. This gets more ram pressure than hood scoops. Up to 20 extra horses around 100 mph.

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sprint racing on oval tracks, motorboat racing and lower-class sports car racers for road racing. It even looks like the small Chevy may do a pretty good job at Indianapolis this year, now that the pushrod displacement has been raised to 320 cubes. Chevy small-block domination is especially apparent on the drag strips. The lower stock classes are practically a parade of early Chevrolets, mostly of the '55-'57 vintage, due to conservative factory horsepower ratings and the fact that this engine has always put out more power than it had any right to in relation to its size. And in the modified classes that call for displacements under 350-cubic-inches you will find about four out of five trophies going to modified Chevys. The engines are light, compact, easy to work on, parts are cheap, reliability good and any backyard mechanic can get wild performance

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In the last two years the big 427 Chevy semi-engine has been coming on strong. It apparently has almost as much breathing potential as the late Chrysler hemi, and nearly as much as the exotic overhead-cam 427 Ford. You see more and more big Chevys in funny cars and all-out competition jobs, running on superchargers and nitro fuels. Some of the quickest funny cars in the country have 427 Chevy engines with the big-port Corvette heads, running ETs well down in the 7's at 190 mph or so. There apparently is little horsepower difference between this engine and the full-hemi MoPar and Ford engines.

Even more remarkable is how the 427 Chevy engine has taken over the exotic Can-Am sports racers. These cars cost around \$30,000 each, and

the guys aren't trying to save pennies on engines. But they need light engines because the complete cars only weigh around 1500 pounds. And there's no limit on displacement, so they want big engines. Chevrolet grabbed this market by making up 50 hand-built 427 engines with aluminum blocks and heads last winter. They weighed only a little over 500 lbs. (less than an iron 327) and put out 550 to 600 horses on pump gas with one four-barrel carb. Most all the Can-Am guys grabbed them, and they completely dominated the '68 season. Fantastic performance with excellent reliability.

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racing or the hottest kind of street performance. And now a big step farther this year: A new "ZL-1" option for the Corvette, with aluminum block as well as heads and with the heads completely re-designed with bigger ports, exhaust valves, and opened-up combustion chambers that improve breathing up to 12 per cent. This is essentially the '68 Can-Am engine, but with an extra 20 to 30 horses from the improved breathing. The thing might cost as much as \$2500 extra in a Corvette, but here is certainly the most sophisticated high-performance engine available to the public anywhere in the world today.

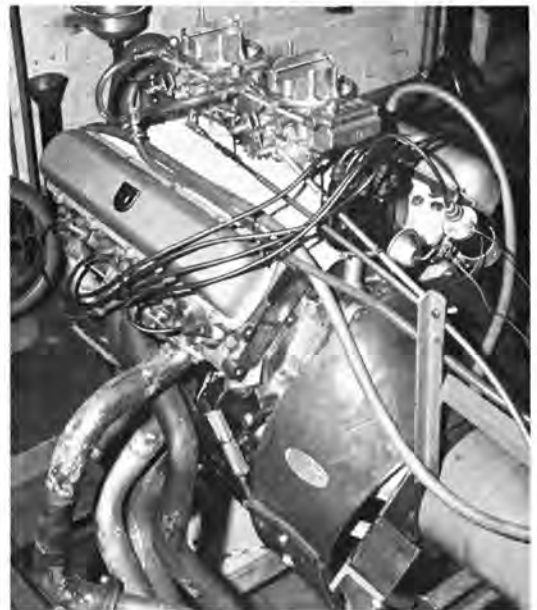
These are the kind of things GM has been doing when they are officially out of racing. Like we said, they have found a clever pattern of behind-the-scenes development, with hot engines put in the hands of the right people, a minimum of loud advertising and a maximum of letting the product *speak for itself on the racetrack.*

Chevrolet has also done big things in Trans-Am sedan racing with the Camaro. The maximum displacement allowed here is 305 cubes, so Chevy engineers put a 283 crank in a 327 block to get 302 cubes, added a few goodies like big-port Corvette heads, big Holley carb, aluminum manifold and a hot solid lifter cam and put that with heavy-duty suspension, disc brakes and a four-speed transmission to make the popular "Z-28" Camaro package. They had to build 1000 of these cars in the '67 model year to qualify for Trans-Am "production" racing, but the package became so popular that today it's one of our top supercars, with sales of over 5000 units a year. It's like a junior Corvette for \$1500 less. And it *did* do well on the racetrack. It dominated in fact. Penske's Z-28, with Mark Donohue driving, won no less than 10 of the 13 Trans-Am races in the recent '68 season. And this against the exotic tunnel-port 302 Mustang that was developed at a cost of thousands of dollars specifically for this circuit. How's that for in racing when you're out of racing??

And not just Chevrolet. The Olds 4-4-2 with Ram Air has been doing very well in the upper Stock classes on



Pontiac pioneered with "Ram Air" system for the '65 GTO. First system used hood scoop feeding cold air to foam-sealed air box around Tri-Power carbs. Picture shows Tri-Power Ram Air system on GTO, with '67 Ram Air Quadrajet setup alongside. Good for 10 to 30 extra horses!



Oldsmobile has charged back into the performance field with their relatively new 350 and 400-cubic-inch engines. The small-block engine is capable of 500 hp at present, and as more speed equipment becomes available it should be a real drag racing threat.

the drag strips, against the best equivalent models from Ford and MoPar. And one class down their hot "W-31" package for the 350 Cutlass with Ram Air, big-port heads and hot hydraulic cam has been winning consistently. Same with the Pontiac GTO and Firebird Ram Air combinations. Conservative horsepower ratings and solid basic design, with a sharp choice of factory

speed equipment, are the secrets. GM can do it as well as anybody.

Up to now we've been talking strictly about racing. But we all agree that racetrack victories won't sell cars if you don't offer the youth market models that will get out and do the job. A lot of guys have been saying that GM products are falling behind in this area, since the anti-racing policy.



Of course everyone remembers the '57 Chevy. This represents one of Chevy's first big moves into performance with the famous "270" hp small block Chevy engine. Now the 327 inch and 350-inch engines supercede the original design with some fantastic performance characteristics.

Especially after the front office edict in 1966 that banned multiple carburetion on street machines, and limited cubic inches to 400 in all A-body compacts (Chevelle, F-85, Tempest, etc.). Admittedly these are definitely handicaps, especially now that Dodge and Plymouth are going to multiple carburetion on some of their hot street jobs, and after Ford went to the 428-cubic-inch Cobra Jet engine in the Mustang and Fairlane. (And now we see that Plymouth is offering the big 440 engine in the Barracuda!)

But the GM offerings are not that far behind on the street. You just have to order the right optional engine and gear combination. For example the Ram Air GTO's and Olds 4-4-2's with 4.33 gears are wild street performers. These cars are now available with heavy-duty TurboHydraMatic trans, which will make them even tougher to handle. Remember that for several years the GM divisions were alone in offering optional axle ratios over 3.90, which gave them a certain advantage in street performance over equivalent Ford and MoPar models with their standard 3.50 and 3.23 gears. But starting in this '69 model year the other companies are taking a hint from GM, and offering a broad selection of factory-installed ratios. Things will be a little tougher for the GM guys now, but we feel they can hold their own.

Chevrolet again deserves special mention here. Of course the 427 Corvette Tri-Power (435 hp), with a weight of only around 3300 pounds, is generally acknowledged to be the hottest American production car including the 428 Cobra Jet Mustang and MoPar Street Hemis. But if you can't spend \$5000 for a car, Chevrolet has more to offer. Forget the standard Chevelle 396 and Camaro SS with 350-inch engine. In fact you don't find what you need on the regular order blanks. The secret is the L-78 option on the 396 block, available as a "special order" option in Chevelles and Camaros. It uses the big-port Corvette heads, big-port aluminum manifold with 780 cfm Holley, solid lifter cam, streamlined headers, all the goodies. Chevrolet advertises 375 hp on it, but it didn't take NHRA officials long to factor this to 425 horses for the stock classes. And that's still conservative! This is a wild engine, and yet smooth and flexible enough for the street. And the price of \$600 is not too rough for the young guys. "L-78" Chevelles and Camaros are the way to go if you want to stay right up with the hot dogs.

Well, we could go on and on, but you get the idea. GM fans don't have to take any negative attitude about the outlook in today's or tomorrow's racing and performance picture. You can bet that the big boys in the GM front office won't take a big licking anywhere. They're just going to play it cool while they're doing their hot development under the table!



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