

Best Family Sedan

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

THE TEST CAPRICE set the theme for the entire awards package this year. As equipped for the test, the standard Chevrolet was the best example to date of how close the factory and buyer can come to having one car suit all driving conditions.

The test Caprice was big, inside and out. All the Standards are big these days. The engine was the 427-cid V-8, in 390-bhp tune. It's the same engine used in Corvettes, and it's a good big engine. No noise, and even less temperament than that. With the new three-speed Hydra-Matic transmission, the driver can sit back and drive.

The car came as close to being a performance car in stoplight terms as a big car can get. All the factories have big engines, and make cars in at least three sizes. All the factories offer the big engines in the mid-range cars, and most do it for the smaller cars, too. So the all-out acceleration fan will buy the Intermediate, or the compact or Ponycar, and he'll beat the Standard. The Caprice will come as close to Supercar performance as any of the big cars. The test car had the 3.07:1 final drive, chosen to keep the revs down and the gas tank full for as long as possible. A standing quarter in 15.5 sec. and 0-60 in 7.7 sec. will put the Caprice into contention most times, and at the very worst the car would suffer an honorable defeat.

The award says best family sedan. The Caprice is the top of the Chevrolet line, with extra trim and interior appointments. It's a true six-passenger car, with the width and length needed to hold that many people. The trunk is huge. Suitcase after suitcase disappears inside it. With optional power-adjusted seats and tilt steering wheel, the Caprice fits everybody. We were surprised to learn that it takes 13 warning lights to monitor everything that happens in a passenger car, but at least they're there. The disc front brakes worked, too.

Had this been all the Caprice was, it probably would have been the best of the cars in the group. The Caprice and the Dodge Monaco with 440-cid V-8 were close to even on performance, and the Caprice had better brakes, while the Ford LTD was much slower and festooned with problems like putting switches where the driver couldn't find them.

The Caprice was much more than just a big, powerful car. When the critics talk, they make a point of how similar the various makes are to each other, and how long it's been since there was any major change in such things as suspension.

Innovation isn't always progress. While the complainers carp about the

live rear axle, the engineers (at Chevrolet and elsewhere) have been working to make the live rear axle work, without going to the added cost and complexity of independent rear suspension. Stiffening the springs was the first step. Next came control arms, to keep the axle from moving back and forth or from side to side.

As the engineers learn things, they add options. The handling package used to mean a harder ride in trade for more control. You bought it for handling, or for towing, or for carrying loads too heavy for the regular springs. Now, there are separate packages, depending on what the knowledgeable buyer wants his car to do.

What we wanted was better handling, and the Caprice had it. In the form of an option named F-41, consisting of wider wheels, matched springs and anti-roll bars in front and back. The first drive around the block brings good news. The Caprice goes where it's pointed. For the test, we ran the car through a road-racing training course, sized for sports cars. It did so well that the road-racers

stopped to watch, and decided that because the domestic cars won't handle, the test driver was a man of considerable skill and bravery.

Not so, alas. The Caprice with option F-41, which carries a price tag of \$22.15, is a big, powerful, comfortable family car that becomes a handler when pushed. The rear bar reduces understeer, without changing the handling characteristics, so F-41 is down there working even if the driver doesn't know it's there. In the road test, we made a point of Chevrolet's not making a point of the option. The factory doesn't talk about it. The buyer should. For a family car that goes around corners, the password is F-41.

The Caprice stops, too. With power discs up front and drums at the back,

the first stop from 80 mph showed a deceleration rate of 28 ft./sec./sec., very good. The Caprice, after all, weighs just shy of 5000 pounds. It's a big car, but there's little fade.

The 427 engine offered in the Caprice comes in two versions. Both are very muscular. The hotter of the two develops 390 bhp, while the milder version still puts out a respectable 335. Carburetion is via a four-barrel unit, and the compression ratio is a high 10.25:1. Camshaft timing makes the difference between the two.

Little has been overlooked in the Caprice. There's comfort, more than ample power, good brakes. We suspect that even without the F-41 option the Caprice would be a good car. But with the F-41, it becomes an *important* car.



PHOTO BY DARRYL NOREBERG

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	119	Brakes: Power disc/drum.	
Overall length, in.....	216	dia. x width, F/R.....	11.75/11 x 2
width.....	80	total swept area, sq. in.....	368.4
height.....	54	Engine: V-8	
No. of passengers.....	6	Bore x stroke, in.....	4.25 x 3.76
Price, basic.....	\$3294	Displacement, cu. in.....	427
as tested.....	\$5319	Compression ratio.....	10.25:1
Frame type: Perimeter.		Rated bhp @ rpm.....	390 @ 5400
Front suspension: Short and long arms, coil springs.		Transmission: Three-speed automatic with torque converter.	
Rear suspension: Live axle, coil springs, 3 torque control arms, track bar, anti-roll bar.		Gear ratio 3rd (1.00:1) overall.....	3.07:1
Steering: Integral assist recirculating ball.		2nd (1.48:1).....	4.55:1
overall ratio.....	15.5:1-19.3:1	1st (2.48:1).....	7.61:1
turns, lock to lock.....	3.1	Lb./bhp (test weight).....	12.4
turning circle, ft. curb-curb.....	43.6	Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....	25.2
Curb weight.....	4515	Engine revs/mile (60 mph).....	2385
Tires: Goodyear Polyglas G70-15.		Piston travel, ft./mile.....	1450
		CAR LIFE Wear Index.....	35.7

ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph.....	26.6	Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	6.8
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph.....	57.2	Braking: Maximum deceleration rate	
Top Speed (5000).....	126	ft./sec./sec.....	28
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.....	2.9	No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. intervals) before 20% loss in deceleration rate.....	6
0-40 mph.....	4.3	Control loss: Slight performance.....	very good
0-50 mph.....	5.9	Fuel consumption under test	
0-60 mph.....	7.7	conditions, mpg.....	10.1
0-70 mph.....	9.7	Normal cond., mpg.....	10-12
0-80 mph.....	12.2		
Standing ¼ mile, sec.....	15.5		
Speed at end, mph.....	89.6		

THE BEST CARS OF 1969