

THE BEST CARS OF 1969

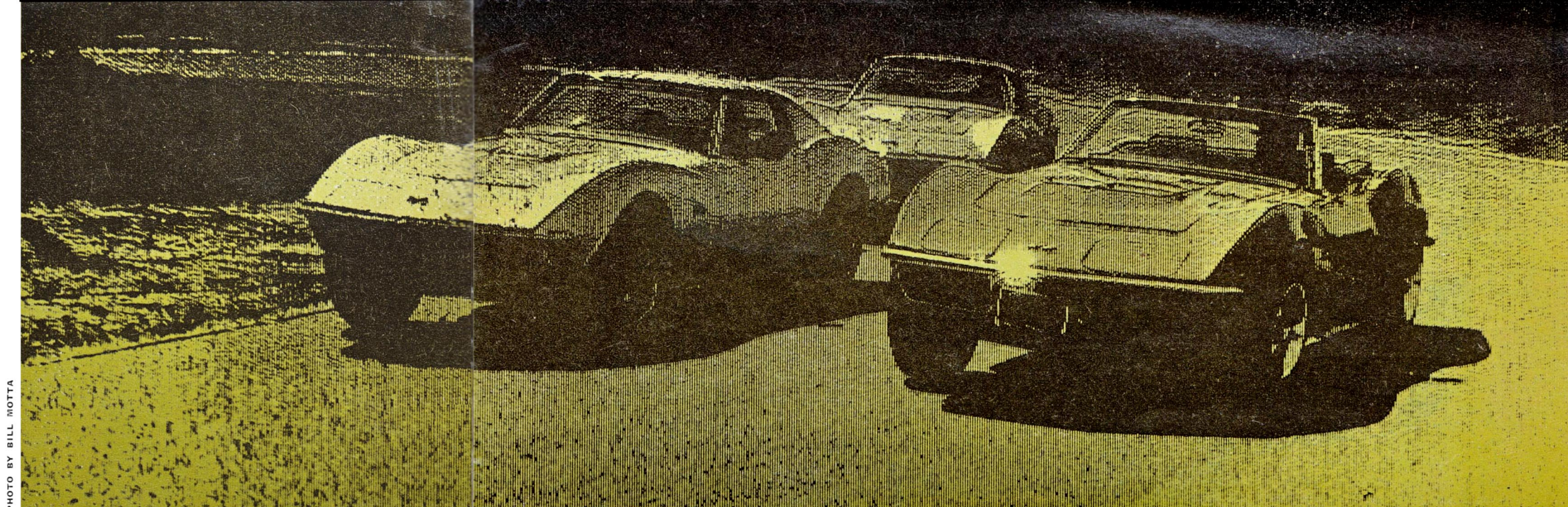


PHOTO BY BILL MOTTA

Best Sportscar

CORVETTE

THE CORVETTE BUYER doesn't get something for nothing. What he gets is the most of several somethings. Whatever the buyer wants in his sports car, Corvette will provide.

When we say Corvette, we mean the breed, not one model. We tried them all this year, from the touring 300-bhp with automatic to Zora Arkus-Duntov's rolling lab, the ferocious ZL-1. It made for a great test, a confusing data panel and an absolute lack of conclusions, except that the Corvette is the best sports car around.

The very diversity of the Corvette makes for confusion. We can't use the standard data panel for it, nor the usual specifications box. Note the box containing the road test results and the more important measurements. The Corvette can't be compressed, so we list the performance range of the eight Corvettes we tested, and give vital statistics for the L71-L89 because it's the most powerful.

When sports cars began, they were performance cars. The working definition, then and now, was a car with racing potential, and with comfort and cost not considered until the car had what it took to be at least a class win-

ner. The Corvette is home free. Ever since the factory put its then-new little V-8 into what was a boulevard sports car, the Corvette has been winning races, with and without factory help.

Sports cars are more refined, now. For every racer there are thousands of drivers who plainly want to enjoy their cars, to feel the machine respond to the man, to feel the wind and hear the engine. Corvette again. The factory is willing to sell racing cars, if the buyer manages to pry the right option numbers loose, but the big market is for the touring car, with the competition potential untapped.

In between are all the people who like to have a go now and then, to feel the tires bite and the engine come alive. Corvette still. The small-block engine comes in three forms, and a fourth version is within reach. Then there's the 427, with four power ratings and long, long lists of cylinder heads, manifolds, and even engine blocks.

Some things are common to all Corvettes. The suspension is independent, front and back. The grip on the road never changes, no matter how rough the going gets, and the cornering pow-

er is equal to the best on the highway, no matter where it's made. The steering is fast. With power assist, it's also light. Even Duntov approves of it on a street car. The standard Chevrolet system wasn't what the car needed, he said, so the Corvette received a system of its very own.

One tester described the Corvette handling as the "most neutral" he had ever experienced. Which translates to little initial understeer and lack of transition to final oversteer. It just hangs on, the front and rear slip angles increasing at the same rate all the way to the limit, with more predictability than even a novice needs to feel like an expert racer.

Disc brakes at all four wheels. Short, straight stops every time, with no fade. Put the import makers in a fix, that did. They have to be very careful now. When they make fun of Detroit, the ads must criticize sedans for not having four-wheel discs.

The driver is well provided for. Corvette seats lean back at a racing car angle and the steering wheel goes back and forth, up and down, until it's where the driver wants it. The gearshift for the manual transmissions

is the lightest and surest of any domestic. The only complaint we had in the 1968 Corvette was limited shoulder room. For 1969, another inch was scooped out of the doors.

There are also some common problems. Corvettes tend to come with things not right, and some dealers don't care. Excepting the passenger car engines, like the 300/350 and 390/427, Corvettes need extra care. A stand-off. So do all sports cars.

What of the others? There are swarms of lesser sports cars on the market. Lesser because they will lose on the straight, and on the turns, and in cockpit comfort. They will be able to shout, as the Corvettes disappear over the horizon, that they are cheaper to buy. Which is perfectly true, and a great comfort it must be.

Once into the Corvette price range, the field thins out. There's some fancy machinery here, some beautifully engineered cars. Small exotic engines, suspensions and placement of the pieces very much like racing cars. At races, these cars win. But the Sports Car Club of America puts nearly every one of these fabled names in a slower class than Corvettes.

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	98	Tires: Firestone, Goodyear or UniRoyal F70-15.
Overall length, in.....	182.1	Brakes: Ventilated discs, front and rear.
width.....	69	dia. x width, F/R.....
height.....	48	11.75 x 1.25/11.25 x 1.25
No. of passengers.....	2	Total swept area, sq. in.....
Price, basic.....	Coupe, \$4781, Convertible \$4438	461.2
as tested.....	\$6673	Engine: V-8.
Frame type: Ladder.		Bore x stroke, in.....
Front suspension: Independent by s.l.a., coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers.		4.25 x 3.76
Rear suspension: Independent, lower control arms and fixed-length axle shafts, transverse multileaf springs, two trailing arms.		Displacement, cu. in.....
Steering: Recirculating ball gear with linkage power assist.		427
		Compression ratio.....
		11:1
		Rated bhp @ rpm.....
		435 @ 5900
		Transmission: Three-speed automatic with torque converter.
		Gear ratio 3rd (1.00:1) overall.....
		3.70:1
		2nd (1.48:1).....
		5.48:1
		1st (2.48:1).....
		9.18:1
		Lb./bhp (test weight).....
		8.8
		Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....
		23.3
		Engine revs/mile (60 mph).....
		2595
		Piston travel, ft./mile.....
		1626
		CAR LIFE Wear Index.....
		42.2

ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph.....	31.6	Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	5.5
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph.....	64.2	Braking: Maximum deceleration rate	
Top Speed (6300).....	141	ft./sec./sec.....	29
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.....	2.9	No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. inter-	
0-40 mph.....	3.9	vals) before 20% loss in deceleration	
0-50 mph.....	5.1	rate.....	8-12%
0-60 mph.....	6.6	Control loss: None.	
0-70 mph.....	8.4	performance.....	excellent
0-80 mph.....	10.4	Fuel consumption under test conditions,	
Standing ¼ mile, sec.....	14.58	mpg.....	n.a.
Speed at end, mph.....	98.57	Normal cond., mpg.....	12.9