

story and photos by David Price

The Z/28 Camaro Lives!

All the good Z/28 pieces, combined with the special M40 high-stall automatic, make the Z/28 more driveable and more consistent.

CALIFORNIA'S ORTEGA HIGHWAY twists its way up from the coastal village of San Juan Capistrano, passes through the valley around Elsinore and snakes across two ranges of the San Bernardino mountains, before dropping 5000 feet in fifteen miles to the desert floor near Palm Springs; it's 140 miles of some of the best mountain driving in this country. We chose this old highway to find out just what the 1972 version of Chevrolet's Z28 Camaro was all about.

Our journey began about mid-afternoon after finishing some work at Orange County Raceway. The Z28 was pretty straightforward except for the special M40 high-stall Turbo Hydra-matic. Heading into the mountains, it soon became apparent that almost none of the natives used this road, preferring to stick to the multitude of Interstates in the area. The car quickly lent itself to speed as our confidence in both the vehicle and the road conditions increased. Soon we were averaging 60-80 mph through all but the tightest corners and hitting 100-120 on the straights. Without traffic to bother us, the overwhelming sensation was one of confidence in the capabilities of the car. We could use every



bit of the power throbbing out of the 350 CID motor because the disc brakes would haul us down to cornering speed time after time without excessive fade or fuss. The Z28 suspension was brilliantly up to the job and cornering power seemed limited only by the performance of the F60-15 Goodyears. Settling into the rapid pace, we began to open up to the sensations involved in driving continuously at such speeds. The G-forces come first: you sink deeper and deeper into the buckets as the revs climb with a slight snap of the head at the shifts, only to be thrown forward into the belts as you nail the brakes and then pitched right or left as the car negotiates a tight corner. Then comes the fantastic sensation of speed. At 100+ mph in tight quarters, the rocks, road signs and bushes leap at you like a movie run at triple speed. You and the car seem to be the only stationary parts of the universe as the world around blurs past you. Your concentration goes max as road information is received, acted upon and forgotten in an instant. We ended our drive with an indicated 132 mph, 6800 rpm blast down four miles of desert straight-away. *It was beautiful!*

What kind of car does it take to make a driver feel confident under such acceleration, braking and cornering? In this case, a vehicle originally bred to win the SCCA's Trans Am championship. When the Z28 came out in 1967, it was often referred to as a race car in street clothing; it was the scrappiest, meanest thing around in the five-liter bracket. The Chevrolet T/A effort has long since faded, however, and the 1972 Z car has grown into a suave production GT machine which still reflects much of its racing heritage.

Today's RPO Z28 option begins with a special engine, Chevy's 350-cube, 255-horse, solid-lifter V8. Starting with the basic 350 block, the motor builders at Chevrolet add extruded aluminum pistons, special heads, big valves, a high-lift, long-duration cam, a Holley double pumper, heavy duty starter, radiator and engine mounts, mechanical lifters and a flex fan. Your run-of-the-mill Detroit iron it ain't. Our test car was also equipped with GM's trick M40 Turbo Hydra-matic, basically the stock three-speed with a high-stall converter. The rest of the driveline is beefed up with heavy universals and axles. Pos-

traction is included in the package. The rear axle ratio is 3.73:1, unchanged from the days of the legendary 302. A 4.10 rear is optional.

The Z28 suspension is made up of stock springs, heavy duty front and rear shocks, special tread widths of 61.7" in front and 60.4" in back, fore and aft stabilizer bars, special five-spoke, 15x7 inch "mag" wheels and F60-15 Goodyear Polyglas tires. The brakes are standard Camaro practice with power-assisted 11" vented cast iron discs up front and 9.5" drums in the rear. Our car was fitted with Camaro's custom cloth/vinyl interior, a green and black affair which looked luxurious and felt great, especially on cold mornings. The special instrumentation, standard on the Z car, included a tach, water temperature gauge, ammeter and clock stuffed into holes punched into the standard dash. Why Chevrolet decided that a clock was more important than an oil pressure gauge in this arrangement, we will probably never know. A word about the driving position: both Camaro and

hand grip in just between the spokes. It is a joy to use, and Chevy's version even comes with padding.

Other options on our Z28 included the Rally Sport package (strictly a dress up group with special bumpers, grille, parking lights, etc.), spoilers front and rear, tilt steering wheel, variable-ratio power steering, tinted glass all around, console, and AM radio. Naturally, a fully-optioned Z car does not come cheap. The basic Camaro sport coupe starts at \$2879. The Z28 option goes for another \$786.75, more than double the package price when the car was introduced, but remember that you now get many items in the package that were originally "required options." The only other really steep item is the M40 Turbo Hydramatic at \$306.25. That's already four grand and when you toss in all the other extras on this car the total comes to \$4666.80. That's a lot of bread, but the Z28 is definitely a lot of car.

In straight line performance, the Z28, and every other muscle car, has suffered

est shifting production automatic we have ever driven. But, the M40 shifted at 5700 and we found better results at 6200. This transmission, with its high stall converter, takes some getting used to because until the revs come up it is very reluctant to launch the car. On a normal start everything sort of spins a lot as the car gradually gets underway. But, when you nail the M40, it hooks up like a racing automatic; the punch comes in right now and the shifts jolt the whole car.

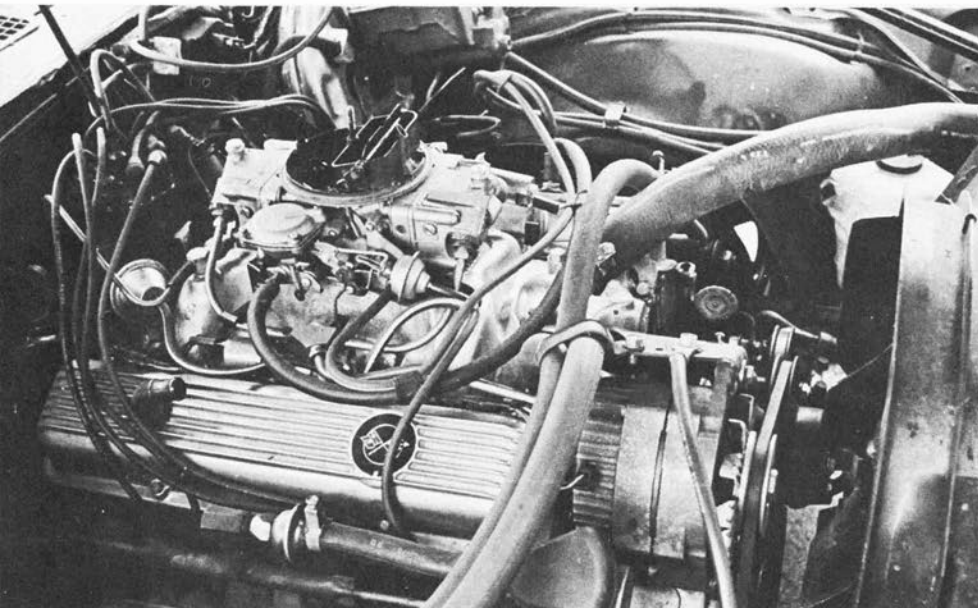
In the deceleration department, we were pleased but not elated. Camaro's disc/drum combination has good control, good fade resistance and no peculiarities. But, it's a long way from the eyeball bulging, 1G braking that Camaro's now-defunct four wheel disc option used to offer.

If the present Z28 has retained anything of its original intent, it has to be in the suspension area. With heavy shocks, stabilizer bars front and rear, big wheels and tires, the '72 suspension handles the Z28's 3,532 pounds brilliantly. Anything from sweepers to hairpins can be negotiated at very hairy angles of drift without loss of control or composure. It lets you take a lot of chances, and make a lot of mistakes, without wrecking the car. When it comes to avoiding accidents, this kind of suspension can mean the difference between just missing, or ploughing straight in, and that's very reassuring.

Living with this car on a day-to-day basis has a few unpleasant side effects, and you should be aware of them before purchasing one. Meeting the smog requirements often turns high performance engines into ill-behaved bears, and the Z28 is no exception. The car was difficult to start on cold mornings and would not stand for anything more than miniscule throttle applications during warm-up. If the driver gets anxious, the engine immediately stalls. After the motor is hot and happy, however, you face another problem: getting it stopped. In the week we spent with the Z car, we never once clicked the key to "off" without the engine running on for at least three seconds. It was often much longer, and such carrying on can be both detrimental to the equipment and embarrassing. The worst thing, however, was an occasional, loud backfire occurring up to fifteen seconds after the engine had stopped. Naturally every eye within ten square blocks turns in your direction when this happens, an annoyance to be sure. Otherwise the Z28 ran well, and if you can stand its starting and stopping quirks, it's a dynamite car.

When you put all of this together, the Z28 comes out a winner. In terms of *balanced* high performance, the combination of equipment in this car is tough to beat at any price. Someone recently named Chevrolet's 350 Camaro one of the ten best production cars in the world, and the Z28 is the model we like best. Admittedly, the scrappy, no-torque, high-revving, hard-running feel of the first few Z cars is gone, a victim of new styling, smog regs, and changing racing rules. But in its place, Chevrolet has come up with a quiet, refined vehicle which is still capable of just about anything most drivers can demand from it. It's nice to know that those twin stripes and that Z28 emblem still stand for genuine high performance. ■

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ABOVE—The 255 horsepower 350-inch Z/28 engine carries special pistons, solid lifters, big-valve heads, Holley D-P quad, aluminum valve covers, viscous fan drive, heavy duty mounts, radiator, and starter, air pump for emissions.

Firebird share what has to be the finest driving position in any American production car. The driver is seated in a slightly reclining position bringing his feet within easy reach of the pedals while keeping his shoulders back far enough to give the arms an almost straight out approach to the wheel. It's comfortable and gives you the feeling that the various pedals, levers and switches which make the vehicle respond are firmly under your control. The final touch in this beautifully functional interior is Camaro's sport steering wheel. Patterned on the four-spoke "horizontal X" design first introduced by Porsche in its 911 models, this wheel is the most functional, comfortable design we have encountered. With your hands at the standard "10 and 2" positions, both tach and speedo are clearly visible, a wheel spoke rests just below each hand and rotating the wheel in either direction brings the second

from the federal emissions regulations. The original car ran solidly in the mid-14's straight off of the showroom floor, and with some tweaking the high-13's were well within sight. In 1970½ the Camaro got a new body style, the Z car got a bigger motor, and it also picked up a lot more weight. To meet emissions standards, the new motor retained the exhaust system air pump, but added a lot of other plumbing trickery. For '72 the compression ratio was chopped to 9.0:1 and the Z28 slowed down another notch. Now don't get the idea that the car is a complete stone, because it will still outrun 97 per cent of the world's automobiles. Our passes down the quarter mile at OCIR were all in the 14.7-14.9 bracket with a trap speed of about 100 mph. The best run of the series, a 14.74 at 100.52 mph, was made with the tires low, the air cleaner off, and the Turbo shifted manually. This is not to knock the M40. It is the tight-