

1959 Chevrolet Corvette: All American Sports Car - From the Archives



Hot Rod

Drew Hardin, TEN Archives

The white Corvette in this press release photo from Chevrolet shows off a couple of the subtle changes Chevy made to the Vette for the '59 model year. The car went through a major styling revision in '58, growing in size and gaining quad headlamps, bigger bumpers, simulated air ducts flanking the grille, hood louvers, and chrome trim on the trunk lid and in the coves. As if sensing they had taken the gingerbread a bit too far, Chevy's stylists removed the trunk lid trim and smoothed the hood for '59, while making a few small revisions to the interior as well.

Ray Brock, *Hot Rod* magazine's technical editor, spent two weeks test driving a fuel-injected '59 and devoted quite a few column inches to the review in the May '59 issue. Right off the bat, in the story's subhead, he called the Vette "rugged, fast and well finished" and said the car "competes with Europe's best at a fraction of the cost." Later in the story he wasn't afraid to name names among the Vette's racing competition. "Since the Corvette is a sports car in the truest sense, the car can be very effectively used in road races. Owners who plan to race their Corvettes can order heavy-duty chassis parts from the factory, which will give the car the necessary improvement in road-ability to outrun such high priced foreign machinery as the Mercedes 300 and Ferrari Grand Turismo coupe."

Brock was a big guy. By his own admission in the story he "leans toward the beefy side with 220 pounds lumped here and there on a six-foot two-inch frame." So as you might imagine, he found the Corvette a snug fit. He likened it, in fact, to putting on a new pair of shoes—"they're tight!" But he also recognized that, like new shoes, the car "showed promise of being much more comfortable after a bit of wearing."

His initial driving impressions were colored by his size versus the Vette's. He felt constricted, with the steering wheel too close despite the seat being moved all the way back. "We had difficulty getting accustomed to the Corvette when it came to corners, mainly because we didn't have enough arm room to swing the wheel back and forth smoothly." But once he got used to the snug quarters, he found the car to be "an agile piece of machinery. It will corner very fast and flat even with the standard suspension parts and, with the four-speed transmission, can be dropped into the proper slot for fast acceleration any time before, during, or after making the corner."

His test car was equipped with the 250hp version of the fuel-injected 283 V-8 and 4.11 gears—but no Posi-traction, equipment he said would have been a "welcome addition" to the drivetrain since he had to feather the throttle to keep the inside wheel from spinning in tight corners.



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The lack of a Posi in the diff also made it tough for Brock to get acceleration figures. He compensated by dropping the air pressure in the right rear tire to 18 pounds while leaving the left rear at 28 and got an average 0-60 time of 7.6 seconds and a quarter-mile e.t. of 15.65 seconds at 92 mph. Traction aids and “a sharp injection specialist” could likely drop the e.t. and add a couple miles per hour to the trap speed, he said.

Why didn't he opt for the top-of-the-line 290-horse fuelie mill? He had sampled a pre-production version a year before and felt this engine “had more than enough power for the average public.” Plus, he said later in the story, the 270- and 290hp versions of the 283, with their “wild cams,” were “a bit too noisy for the average driver.”

Brock was very complimentary about the fuelie engine, mentioning its smoothness several times. He did call it out as an expensive option, considering it only added 5 hp over the same engine equipped with dual quads. He also said it could be “a little temperamental to start after the engine was hot and the car left sitting for an hour or so.”

Yet despite the car's snug confines (and a complaint about how the cockpit had “an overpowering odor of gasoline” after “fast cornering or leaving the car in the hot sun with a full load of fuel”), he came away appreciating the car's sporty nature. “Drive the Corvette and it

doesn't take you long to start feeling like one of the sporty set. The slightly choppy ride, flat cornering, quick acceleration and maneuverability have you imagining that you're Juan Fangio's replacement after a very short time behind the wheel."

Submitted by: Dave Bennett