

**1999 CORVETTE!** TRACK TESTING THE NEW HARDTOP

# Vette

AMERICA'S FAVORITE CORVETTE MAGAZINE

## WHICH ONE'S BEST?

FIVE-GENERATION ROAD TEST



**DURABLE BRAKES:  
STAINLESS-STEEL SLEEVING**

**NET SEARCH: BEST VETTE SITES ON THE INTERNET**  
**BUYER'S GUIDE: HIGH-PERFORMANCE BIG-BLOCK CAMS**

DISPLAY UNTIL 09/28/98

OCTOBER 1998

USA \$3.99 CAN \$4.50



**PRIMEDIA**  
The Authoritative Source

# DISTINCT

## Comparing the attributes of each generation Corvette.

By Richard A. Lentiniello  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON SHIRO

Strike up a conversation with a seasoned Corvette owner who has just purchased the newest iteration of our favorite sports car, and he won't be at a loss for words when describing the C5's high-tech engineering and exotic car performance. Without a doubt, you'll hear him say, "It's the best Vette I ever owned."

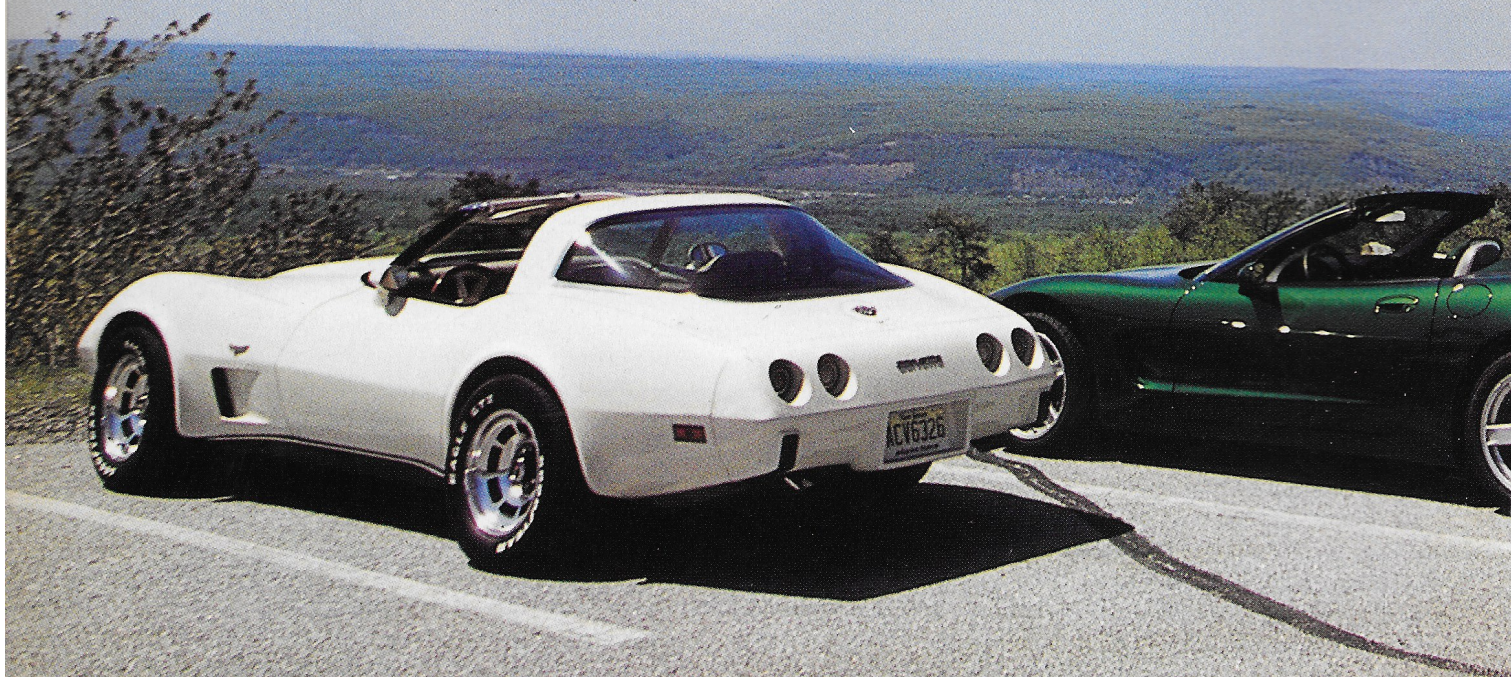
Of course, owners of fourth-generation late-models will tell you how superior their cars handle and look. Stingray owners, be they of chrome or rubber bumper models, say their cars possess real Corvette styling, thanks to its shark-inspired Bill Mitchell design. Hard-core Corvette aficionados say it's a midyear, or no year, if you want to experience the thrill of Corvette ownership to the fullest. And vintage fanatics say their solid-axle cars have more character and charm than all the other generation Corvettes put together, and then some. So, who's right?

Trying to determine which Corvette is the best is as difficult as naming the finest impressionist. Is

it Monet or Van Gogh? The better architect, Louis Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright; the prettier woman, Carol Alt or Cindy Crawford. It's not easy, and there's no clear-cut answer. Judging design and aesthetics is utterly subjective. Same with cars. Everyone has his or her own taste and desires when it comes to choosing a particular car. Exterior shape, interior comfort, inspiring handling, heart-pounding power, or all of the above.

With Corvettes, the selection process is even harder. There are 11 distinct exterior designs to choose from, not to mention more than a hundred different engine combinations. Add all the different ulterior motives for buying a Corvette, be it a weekend cruiser, concours exhibitor, autocrosser or drag racer, investment asset, or just basic everyday transportation, and it's nearly impossible to say which model is the best.

To discover the true characteristics of each Corvette model, we decided to road test one of each generation, together, on the same day, on the same



# THE CHOICES

roads, with the same drivers, to make as true an evaluation as possible. The subject of our test included seven distinct categories: styling, character, ride quality, handling, ergonomics, performance and desirability. But instead of having us tell you the good and bad points of each car, we've decided to let your fellow Corvette owners and Vette readers do the reporting, providing us with a more insightful enthusiast's view. Each owner was given about 45 minutes driving time behind the wheel of each car except their own, since we didn't want favoritism to wrongly affect the outcome of each evaluation. After each portion of the road test, we stopped for about a half-hour to let the participants make notes on the car they had just driven. Drivers switched cars and we were off again.

So how did we choose the five cars you see here? Well, it wasn't easy.

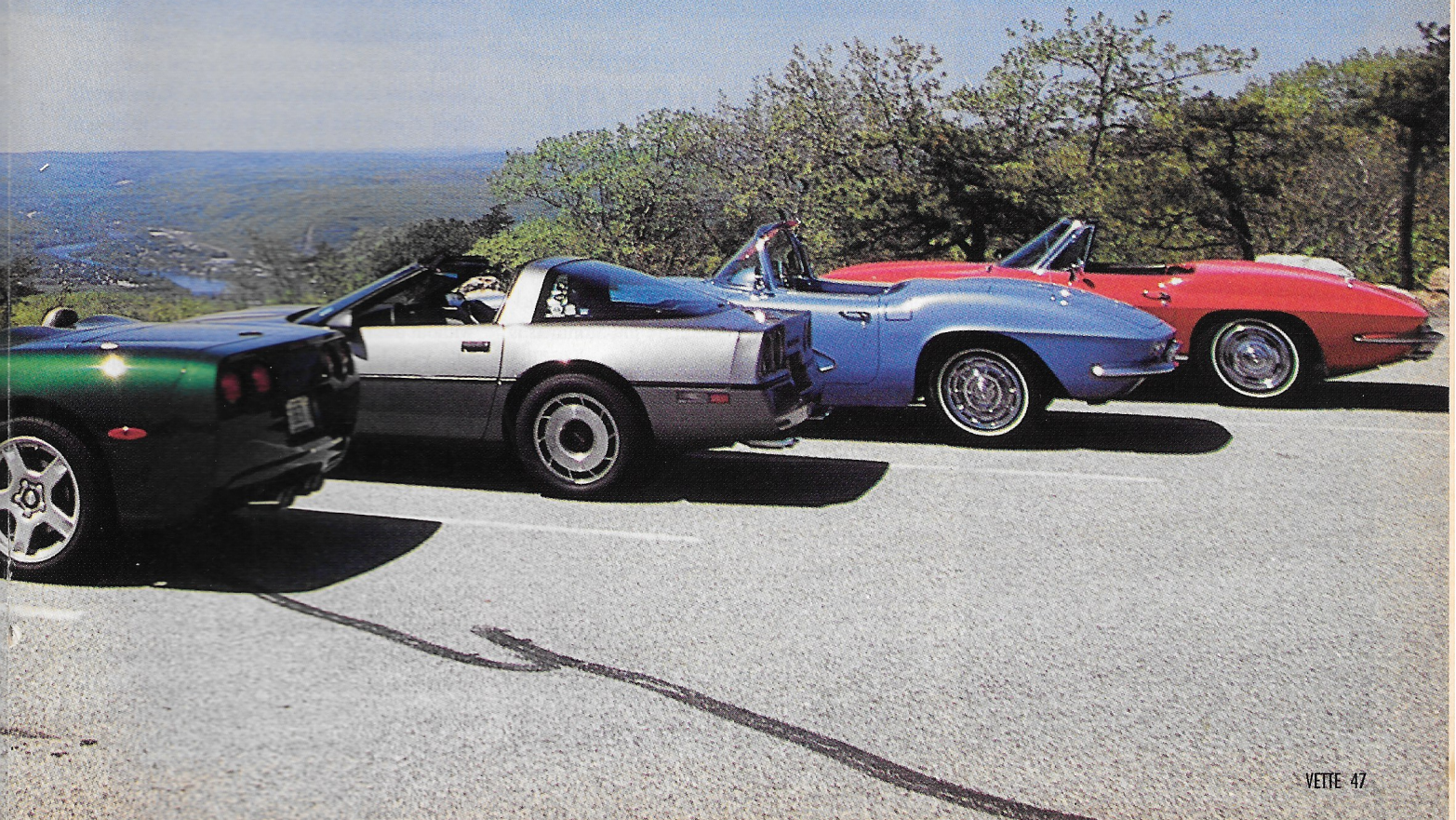
Trying to keep the playing field level was very difficult, since so many different variables are involved, not only with the cars but the owners as

well. The cars had to be completely stock base models, or close to it, small-blocks, 4-speeds, convertibles and be driven on a regular basis. The owners had to be able to take a weekday off from work and agree to let four other people drive their Corvette. Because Corvette owners aren't too receptive to the idea of a stranger driving their beloved dream machines, we decided to contact our local Corvette club for some help. The camaraderie among club members is such that it would make switching cars stress-free.

Thanks to the diligent efforts of Kathie Summers of the Natural Glass Corvette Association of northern New Jersey, we were able to assemble the group you see here. Kathie located the right cars with willing owners, thus meeting all of our guidelines. Unfortunately, having had to postpone the road tour three times due to rain, the owner of the '61 car, Tom Weber, couldn't make it on our rescheduled day. Kathie's husband, Jim, who drives a '65 convertible, became Tom's designated hitter.

To ensure that our team of drivers would be subjected to a variety of roads to better judge the cars' all-around attributes, we traveled to bucolic Sussex County, in the far northwest corner of New Jersey. Under the direction of Vette photographer and back road driving enthusiast Don Spiro, we drove the entire day on desolate country roads teeming with long straights, tight corners, lazy hill climbs, twisty esses and fast downhill. Past farms and streams, cornfields and cow pastures, this area of New Jersey has abundant beauty, not to mention some of the finest, most challenging roads in the entire country.

And what a challenge it was for our five road warriors. It was a day that opened a lot of eyes, not only to examine firsthand the virtues, both pro and con, of the other four Corvettes, but to be made aware of their own car's shortcomings. In the end, everyone had newfound appreciation for the other generations. And here's what each driver had to say.





A masterpiece of vintage Corvette design, this Jewel Blue '61 is one of only 855 cars ordered in this attractive color.



## THE COMPARISON

1961

### Owner: Tom Weber

Although road test substitute Jim Summers is pictured, owner Tom Weber told us that "I've never become sleepy behind the wheel. It's surprising how well such an old design of automotive engineering performs." Everything is original, including its 283/245-hp, 4-speed, and 3.70 gears. The Cherry Bomb mufflers are the only non-stock items. Driven about 2,500 miles a year, Tom said, "It requires a love of driving, especially on winding roads. And it's unique and beautiful."

### Eric Linkov:

The classic Corvette, conjuring up those warm, "Happy Days" images of rock 'n' roll, cruising to the malt shop and racing on back roads. The ideal

American sports car, big, full of swoops, curves and lots of chrome. Its rumbling V8 announces its presence with an attitude. Ride quality is an oxymoron; it pitches, bounces and jolts its occupants like a bronco. As speeds increase, the handling and ride comfort deteriorated completely. More suited to a leisurely cruise down main street than back roads. It handles like a truck, heavy and difficult to maneuver, with extreme understeer. To conserve the brakes due to fade, constant downshifting is required. The gauges are difficult to see at a quick glance, and the large steering wheel digs into your thighs. And the firm seats provide no lateral support. Performance is respectable, but on rough pavement axle hop limited acceleration. For cruising down Memory Lane, this is the car to have, but it's far too exhausting to drive on back roads and long trips.

### John Liebe:

I had trouble maneuvering to get behind the large, fixed steering wheel. Once there, however, there was plenty of room. The four unassisted drum brakes didn't give one a lot of confidence in being able to stop. But once I began to get the feel of it, I really enjoyed driving this car. The seat height and door design allow you to easily rest your left arm on the door while driving. The acceleration is better than my '78, and with enough anticipation and downshifting, it's possible to get around curves at sufficient speed to be fun. Unfortunately, one has to lean forward significantly in order to downshift; a few hours of this would be tiring. I wouldn't want to drive this in city traffic. But it's clearly a classic sports car—no doubt about it.

### Scott Ressler:

Fun, fun, fun to drive! You really have to work if you want to drive all-out. It's a great-looking car, but on the road you feel everything. As for its handling ... what handling? I couldn't rest my left arm out the window because it needed two hands on the wheel at all times. In simple terms, it was a "Holy s—, hold on!" driving experience. As for power, it certainly has the Corvette get up and go, and it really kicks in at the top end. But in the braking department it needs some help. The clutch is heavy and without a tilt wheel, it's a little tough to enter and exit. You also sit higher than the others, while the dash-mounted rearview mirror takes getting used to. I'd love to have one—but after a C5.

### Kathie Summers:

A classic car with strong lines. It says "Corvette" to anyone who sees it! I was too busy trying to keep control of the car to pay attention to the ride quality. It handled better than I thought. I was expecting a monster. I knew the curves were going to be the challenge. Medium curves were fine at 45 mph, iffy at 50, and I chickened out at about 54! Not designed for people with short legs. I had to stuff three jackets behind me to depress the clutch. Firm

#### SCOREBOARD

	EL	JL	SR	KS
Styling	5	4	5	4
Character	5	4	5	5
Ride quality	1	2	3	3
Handling	1	3	2	2
Ergonomics	1	2	2	3
Performance	3	4	4	3
Desirability	3	4	4	3

seats make you sit high, which is great for resting my left arm on the door. Gauges are basic and uncluttered. Sloppy shifter and manual brakes left little to be desired. It had strong pickup in all gears, with a great-sounding exhaust. The wind buffeting was less than I anticipated. This is a car that you must drive—no wimpy operators!

## 1967

### Owner: Eric Linkov

Owning a Corvette has been on Eric's mind ever since he attended the Motorama in 1954 as an 8-year-old. After owning several midyear coupes, he decided to try a convertible, and hasn't regretted it one day. With its 327/350, this matching-numbers M-21 4-speed with 4.11s gets driven about 4,000 miles each year. "A unique, classic design of grace and power, with performance that keeps it competitive with a newer car," Eric stated proudly.

### John Liebe:

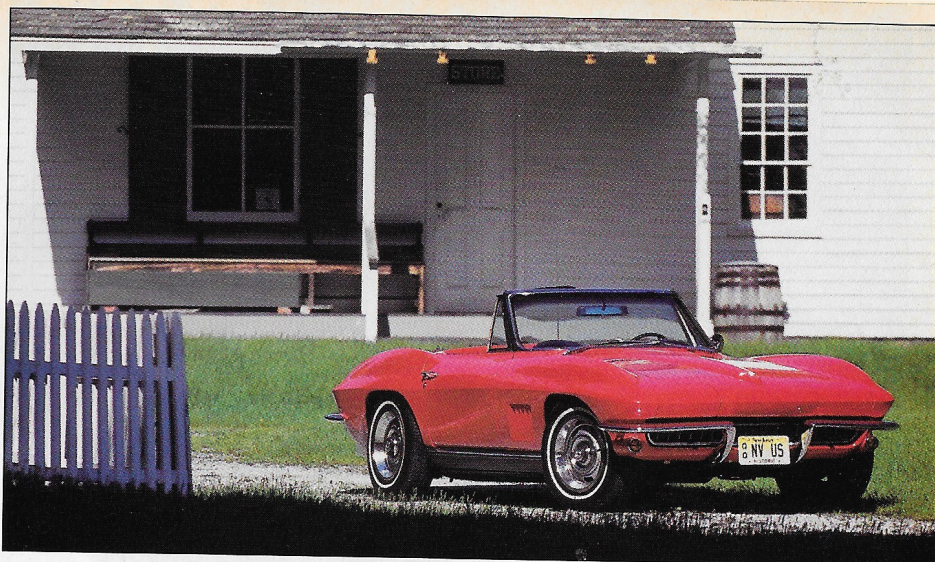
More like a real sports car. This was certainly easier to get into than the '61. And the instrument panel is probably the prettiest of the group. Acceleration is there with good torque, and the exhaust sounds great. Over bumpy roads, the handling was a little iffy, skipping over the tops of the bumps and sliding somewhat—probably could be helped with some suspension modifications. All in all, it was an easier drive than the '61 and just as much fun.

### Scott Ressler:

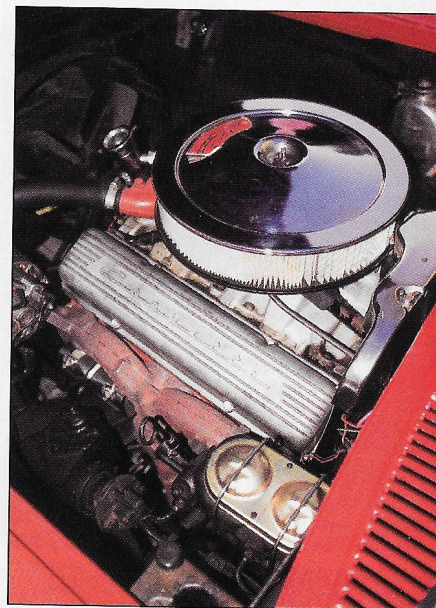
A real eye-catcher; I love the vent slots in the fenders. As for its character, it's a '67—what else is there to say! On the road, you feel all the bumps, regardless of the speed you're traveling. Far better than the solid-axle cars. But it, too, required both hands on the steering wheel; it can get away from you. It gets up and goes in a hurry. All power. Needs a little help with the brakes, however. It's easy to get in and out of, but more support is needed in the seats. The best of the midyears, and probably all the Corvettes for driveability.

### Kathie Summers:

Best styling. Nothing turns heads like a midyear. This one shouts "Corvette." I missed the security of a tight seat belt. A typical stiff sports car ride. The power steering felt a bit sloppy at times, but the brakes were great. And downshifting for curves was enough to keep control. Tons of power in this one. I climbed the highway to High Point in fourth gear with no trouble at all. A very short throw on the shifter, the clutch about average. This is the easiest Vette to get into. The seats were a bit too soft and low, but dash and instruments are clean and accessible. Wind buffeting was acceptable. Overall, what's not to love!



The epitome of the Sting Ray era, the unadorned '67 body offers a clean, no-nonsense look that is very delectable.



### Jim Summers:

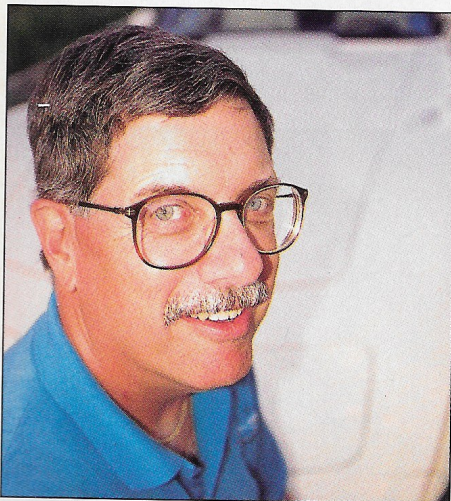
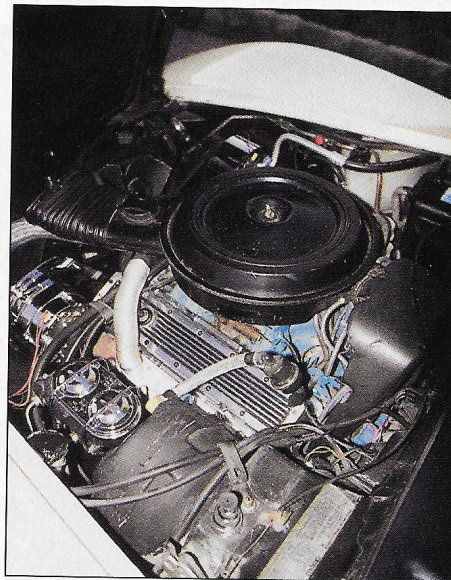
Love the style. A very good top-down cruiser, but low driving position means you can't rest your elbow out the window. The ride quality is stiff, but well controlled. Corners flat and doesn't plow into turns. A tight car that handles very well for a car with narrow tires; needs more rubber. Real good pickup and braking. Short-throw shifter hard to get used to. The seats lack support, although it's easy getting in and out. Instruments are easy to read. Storage space is lacking. Its 350-hp engine offers lots of power and, in my view, it's the best engine choice. The ultimate classic Corvette.

	SCOREBOARD			
	JL	SR	KS	JS
Styling	3	5	5	5
Character	4	5	5	4
Ride quality	2	3	3	4
Handling	3	3	3	3
Ergonomics	3	4	4	3
Performance	4	5	5	4
Desirability	3	5	5	5





A highly aggressive, flowing shape is the hallmark of the later Stingrays, especially in fastback form like this '78.



## 1978

### Owner: John Leibe

Without any prior interest in Corvettes, a "For Sale" sign posted in the window of this '78 4-speed on the owner's lawn got John's attention, thinking, "It would be fun to drive." Although stock, its non-original engine was worn, so John replaced it with a 265-horse 350 crate engine. He swapped the 3.70s for 3.08s, since he averages 12,000 highway miles a year. Now, with 130,000 on it, John said, "I haven't regretted buying it for a single instant."

### Eric Linkov:

I don't get that visceral feeling from this style as I do with the others. The shape definitely says Corvette, but the overall effect is bland, and not just from the color. Similar to a midyear, the ride quality is heavier, more solid; firm, but not harsh. It felt less twitchy, more stable and smoother, no doubt due to its reduced performance and wider tires. Interior is very cramped, gauges are easy to read and controls accessible. The T-top bar was distracting and intrusive, while the laid-back seats cause the

#### SCOREBOARD

	EL	SR	KS	JS
Styling	2	4	2	2
Character	2	2	3	3
Ride quality	3	3	2	3
Handling	3	3	3	3
Ergonomics	1	2	2	2
Performance	2	2	3	2
Desirability	1	2	2	2

hood bulge and fenders to limit visibility. It has the distinct V8 rumble, but not the power to go with it. Definitely meant for sitting back and cruising at moderate speeds, enjoying the sights rather than pushing the edge. It's pleasant, but not what I'm looking for in a sports car because it's not an aggressive performer and doesn't have outstanding looks. Where the midyear draws attention from its looks, this Stingray just gets by.

### Scott Ressler:

Love the lines and high front fenders. Character-wise, there's nothing special, maybe the 8-track tape player. It rides better than both older cars, but still needs some help. Handling has also been improved, but not where the C4 is. At least you don't always need two hands on the wheel. No get up and go at all; needs a lot of help with the power. Unsupportive seats are very uncomfortable and non-adjusting. Overall interior feels very cramped. Nice exterior styling, but needs more power and comfortable seats.

### Kathie Summers:

Would have given it a 3 in styling if it were a convertible; the T-top isn't enough for me. The long sloping hood and driver placement always gave me the impression of driving from the backseat. Now I remember why we sold our '73. I don't like the backward slant of the seats, which required two jackets behind me to be comfortable. Handling-wise I had fun with this car. Its steering is tight and clutch firm. Brakes were a bit touchy. Power was sufficient for curvy roads, but I had to downshift to get more "boost" for the straights. The instrument cluster was obscured, and the wind buffeting was the most noticeable of all the cars. I don't think I'll own a Stingray again.

### Jim Summers:

Classic Coke-bottle shape and long sloping hood don't do much for me. The rear part of the hood is too high. Speedometer and tachometer faces have too much glare during the day, and the gauges in the center console are hard to read. Seats aren't much better than midyear seats; too flat with no support. It corners fast and flat, and handles well, although not impressive for a sports car-good for a family car. A confident ride, but not inspiring. Not overly impressed with its performance. Engine lacks grunt. Too tame for my style.

## 1984

### Owner: Scott Ressler

Bone stock with 76,000 miles on it, this C4 was Scott's daily driver for nearly two years. It's even been driven in several 6-inch-plus snowstorms

without ever getting stuck. Built with the 205-hp Cross-Fire engine, 4+3 transmission, Z51 suspension and 3.07 gear, Scott relishes its road manners despite the fact it lacks big horsepower. On the road, he told us he just "Points the nose, hits the gas and it goes—nothing like hitting corners at 60 mph-plus."

### Eric Linkov:

The C4 exudes power and aggressiveness. Its distinctive style combines classic Corvette looks with modern clean lines, with all the usual Corvette foibles such as water leaks, body flex, rattles, squeaks, and difficult entry and exit. With its Z51 suspension, I found it road-firm but comfortable, even with poor road conditions. Its stiff suspension suited the twisting roads. The steering is positive, making it easy to place the car. The shifter is well placed, as is the clutch, but has a long, stiff throw. Digital dash is difficult to read quickly. Footwell space is limited, the seats firm and supportive but very narrow. A pleasure to drive hard; fast pickup and capable of high-speed cruising into the triple digits without worrying about going airborne. An affordable alternative to the C5; a modern Corvette for everyday use. A real driver's car.

### John Leibe

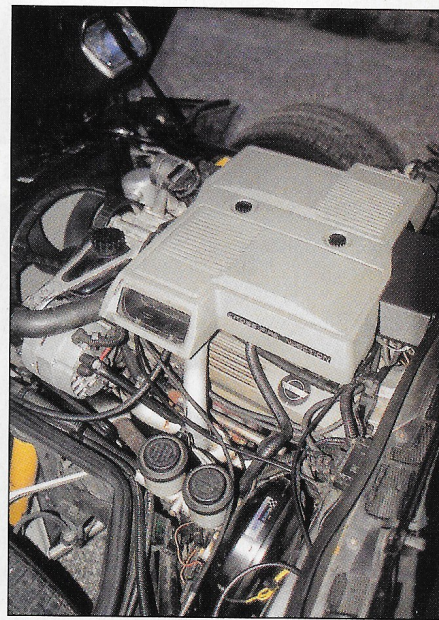
The first Corvette I ever drove was an '84. I know the reputation it has, but I sure enjoyed the drive. Compared to the '78, the seats provide much more support, the exhaust note is deep and loud, and the acceleration is obvious. But there were some downsides: my left foot kept getting hung up on the left wall of the footwell—I had to consciously think to aim more to the right on the clutch; the shifter seemed to have a much longer throw than the Hurst shifter in my '78; and the digital instruments were extremely difficult to read on a sunny day with the top off. More exciting than my '78, but I would probably turn down an even trade, and upgrade my Stingray's performance and exhaust instead.

### Kathie Summers:

The styling of the C4 started looking like too many other cars for my liking. Extremely firm suspension gave it a bouncy ride, especially on rough roads. Lots of rattles with the top off. But at high speed on smooth roads it was great! It's excellent at taking curves at speed. Decent power, but required more downshifting than most of the others. Brakes and rumbly exhaust were fine. Very tight shifter, but the 1-3 and 2-4 gear positions are too close for my liking. Didn't care for the instruments, but bar speedo and tach are okay. Very comfortable seats lock you in place. Steering wheel is a nice size and feel. Rearview mirror distracting to see all the vertical defrosting coils. Because of its "sandwich" syndrome, I don't think I'd ever own one.

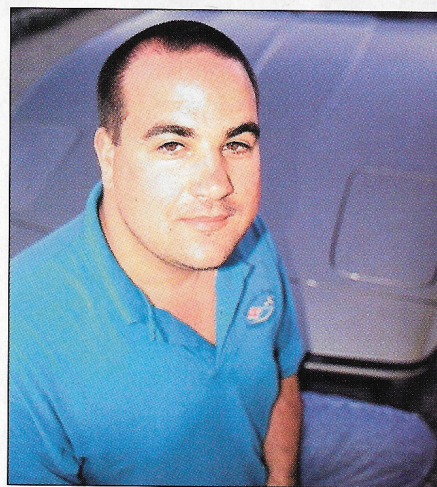


Late-model exotica at a very affordable price lends the contemporarily styled '84 an appeal that's hard to match.



### Jim Summers:

Not my type of style. Low and wide stance looks menacing, and its long sloping hood and four round taillights are all very Corvette, but the large sill makes entry tricky. It's very easy to drive. On smooth roads, the ride is good and I liked the firm feel, but not on very rough roads. If there are rough spots on curves, it causes the car to break loose. Very good handling. It feels confident on twisty roads, steering is quick and precise. Large tires gripped very well. Performance not bad, but could use a little more torque. Great seats; comfortable and hold you in place; however, they're too low and hard to get in and out. Shifter is a little too high to reach. The small, fat steering wheel felt great. The digital instruments don't belong in a sports car; they're hard to read at speed. Feels like you could drive it all day. A very enjoyable, comfortable car.

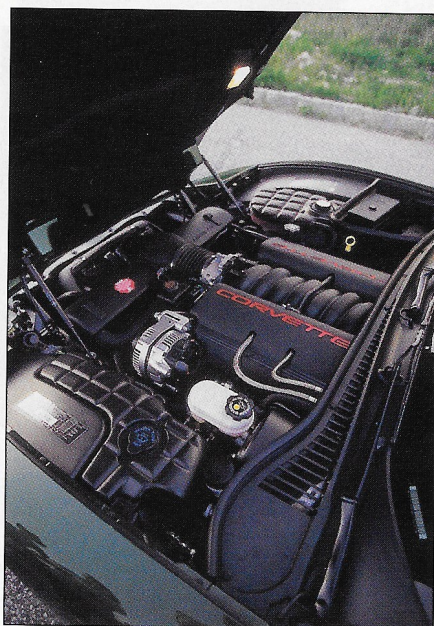


#### SCOREBOARD

	EL	JL	KS	JS
Styling	4	4	2	2
Character	3	3	2	4
Ride quality	4	4	2	4
Handling	4	4	2	5
Ergonomics	2	1	3	4
Performance	5	4	3	3
Desirability	5	4	2	3



Smooth in appearance and refined in execution, the new '98 convertible provides stunning all-around performance.



1998

### Owner: Kathie Summers

"This car kicks ass," states Kathie, a hard-core Corvette fanatic. With husband Jim, they took delivery at the National Corvette Museum, then drove top-down all the way back to New Jersey. "It is so easy to drive, I would be bored if it wasn't a 6-speed," she told us. "It has more power than I'll ever use and very secure braking." Although it features the base suspension, the exhaust has been upgraded to a B&B Tri-Flow with crossover pipe to better its sound.

### Eric Linkov:

An engineering triumph. Rear cries out for a revamped design, although it's somewhat tolerable in the convertible when the top is down. Its character is its lack of specific distinction; no "oh, wow!" as with older Vettes. Ride quality is matchless, extremely stable and quiet, handles all road surfaces smoothly, more like a firm-riding sedan

than a sports car. Handling is superb, brakes smooth and positive without excess effort, the steering just right without feeling sloppy. Seating is excellent, controls accessible and very roomy. Gauges easy to read, short-throw gear shift well placed. Wind control improved, although the seat belt vibrates annoyingly from the wind. The light clutch grabs quickly, the shifting positive. Docile at low speeds, the acceleration is neck-snapping, reminiscent of midyears with 4.11s. Its capabilities far exceed the driver's opportunity to utilize them, which is a reverse of previous Corvettes. The only thing missing is the nostalgia factor and, for that, the only cure is time.

### John Leibe

After the '84, I drove the C5 convertible. What a thrill! To me this is one of the most beautiful cars I've seen. I try to ignore the large ass on it. It was noticeably more comfortable than the C4, clearly more powerful and smoother riding. The only drawback I could come up with is that it is almost too good—in some ways, it doesn't feel like a "real" sports car. But I would buy one in an instant—as a supplement to my '78—if I had the cash.

### Scott Ressler

A great-looking car. Exterior lines are smooth; love the big rear end. There are no squeaks, rattles or other annoying sounds. The exhaust is too quiet, needs more sound. It rides very smooth, solid and tight. You don't think you're in a Vette at first, until the power kicks in ... then you know. The power is great; it pulls in all gears. The clutch and shifter are easy to use. It handles the corners very well, but not the same as the C4 with Z51. Great brakes! It also has easy access and everything's right where it belongs, although the cup holders are too small. Love the dash layout and analog gauges, and the lack of wind buffeting. A Corvette I could drive every day. I want one!

### Jim Summers:

Looks like one mean mother. Great rear and side styling, but too much like a Firebird from the front. Has a nice low, wide stance. Love the "waterfall" and sculptured area on rear deck lid and oval taillights. Headlights when raised look dumb. You feel confident it can take all you can dish out. It has a firm but not jarring ride. No body lean or shake, very good in the corners. It does what you ask of it. Due to their stiff side-walls, the Run Flats don't have as much grip as regular tires. Engine has lots of guts; the brakes are good. Six-speed is a joy to use. Great seating and easy-to-read gauges. Liked ease of entry. Gives you the advantages of a sports car without the drawbacks.

#### SCOREBOARD

	EL	JL	SR	JS
Styling	3	4	5	3
Character	2	3	4	4
Ride quality	5	5	5	5
Handling	5	5	4	4
Ergonomics	5	4	5	5
Performance	5	5	5	5
Desirability	5	5	5	4



## Conclusion

Without question the '61 solid axle has the most character and a highly endorsed sense of style, while its road manners aren't for the faint of heart. If you desire a classic sports car in which to go weekend cruising, this is clearly the one. Equally classy is the '67 midyear, whose celebrated shape, respectable handling and exciting performance makes it a Vette crowd favorite. What more can one say? Suffering from '70s engineering practices, the '78 Stingray will make no friends in the performance arena, but with a few carefully chosen mods and after-market parts, a sensational performer can be easily unleashed.

Early late-models like this '84 offer excellent value for the dollar. Their affordable price tags, coupled with outstanding cornering ability and entertaining acceleration, place them in an attainable league in which few other competitors can successfully compete. Then there's the new Corvette. Misunderstood at first, it converts naysayers with just one quick blast behind the wheel. An amazing machine in every category. True to Chevrolet's words, "It's the best Vette yet."

But as we stated earlier, there are no winners, no losers, only the enlightenment of a newfound appreciation for the unique characteristics of each generation Corvette. Ideally, every Corvette collection should have one of each.

### SCOREBOARD

	'61	'67	'78	'84	'98
<b>Styling</b>	18	18	10	12	15
<b>Character</b>	19	18	10	12	13
<b>Ride quality</b>	9	12	11	14	20
<b>Handling</b>	8	12	12	16	18
<b>Ergonomics</b>	8	14	7	10	19
<b>Performance</b>	14	18	9	15	20
<b>Desirability</b>	14	18	7	14	19
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>	90	110	66	93	124

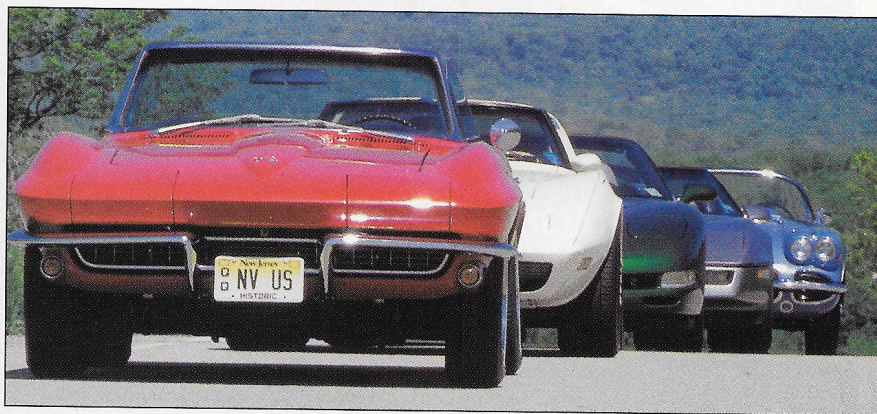


## RIDING SHOTGUN

Fellow club member Ron Rivers, owner of a 1995 convertible, was our tour guest. Ron's views from the other side of the cabin provide us with an opposing perspective that's nearly as important as what it's like behind the wheel, since most Corvette owners enjoy the Vette experience with a companion at their side. Here are Ron's thoughts and shotgun scoreboard.



Corvette country ... the winding roads of New Jersey's Sussex County.



All different, all unique, all pure Corvette ... we'll take one of each.

## 1961

The 1961 is, in a word, a blast. Yes, even as a passenger, it does take some holding on when the driver puts in through its paces. I had my hands tightly gripped on the "chicken bar" the whole ride!

## 1967

The '67 midyear is probably one of the most desirable years out there. There's just something about these Sting Rays that says, "Take me." Offers lots of interior room. Not perfect, yet I loved everything about it.

## 1978

Much more a passenger car than the earlier Sting Ray. The seats, though still short on padding

and lateral support, are more comfortable. Legroom is a little scarce. Performance lacking. Coke bottle design a real eye-catcher.

## 1984

One of the most comfortable as far as seating; however, the legroom and floor room are less than adequate. Getting in and out of a C4 is a feat of its own, even as a passenger. The infamous sill makes it hard to hop in and out.

## 1998

Seating is excellent, leg and foot room very adequate. Ride is firm but not harsh, and the handling is superb. View out the front is better than the '78 and '84, and getting in and out is much improved over the C4. One solid car. ☺