

Reskinning the Shark

For the 1978 model year, the third-generation Corvette received its most thorough revamp since debuting ten years prior.

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In a September 15, 1977 press release for the 1978 Corvette, Chevrolet wrote: “The new aerodynamic look is the most extensive change for Corvette in several years. Refinements in comfort, convenience, improved utility and increased operating range add to the appeal of America’s only authentic sports car.” Gone were references to high performance that would have been made during the muscle-car era, replaced with a focus on more practical concerns. Still, the ’78 model did feature some mechanical enhancements—chassis upgrades, minor engine tweaks—to go along with its newly streamlined styling and improved interior, making for a better car all around.

The biggest and most obvious change for the ’78 model year was the incorporation of a fastback roofline, a throwback to the ever-popular second-generation Corvette’s styling. The wraparound rear window was more than three and a half times larger than the small backlight that had been a hallmark of the C3 since its debut as a 1968 model. Interestingly, the fastback design did not lower the Corvette’s coefficient of drag—the spoilers that came on the Pace Car model were needed to accomplish that—but it did result in an increase in cargo capacity and significantly improved access to the storage area.

Cargo space was also enhanced by the switch from a full-size spare to a space-saver one. An embossed warning on the sidewall of the 195/80D15 bias-ply tire made it clear that the spare was for “temporary use only.” Initially, this warning was made even more vehemently by painting the wheel yellow. This practice ended abruptly around April 1978. The story goes that a GM executive was driving a ’78 Pace Car, got a flat tire and had to install the spare. He was none too pleased to be driving driving a Corvette with a yellow rim. Within a week’s time, a change to black spare wheels was made.

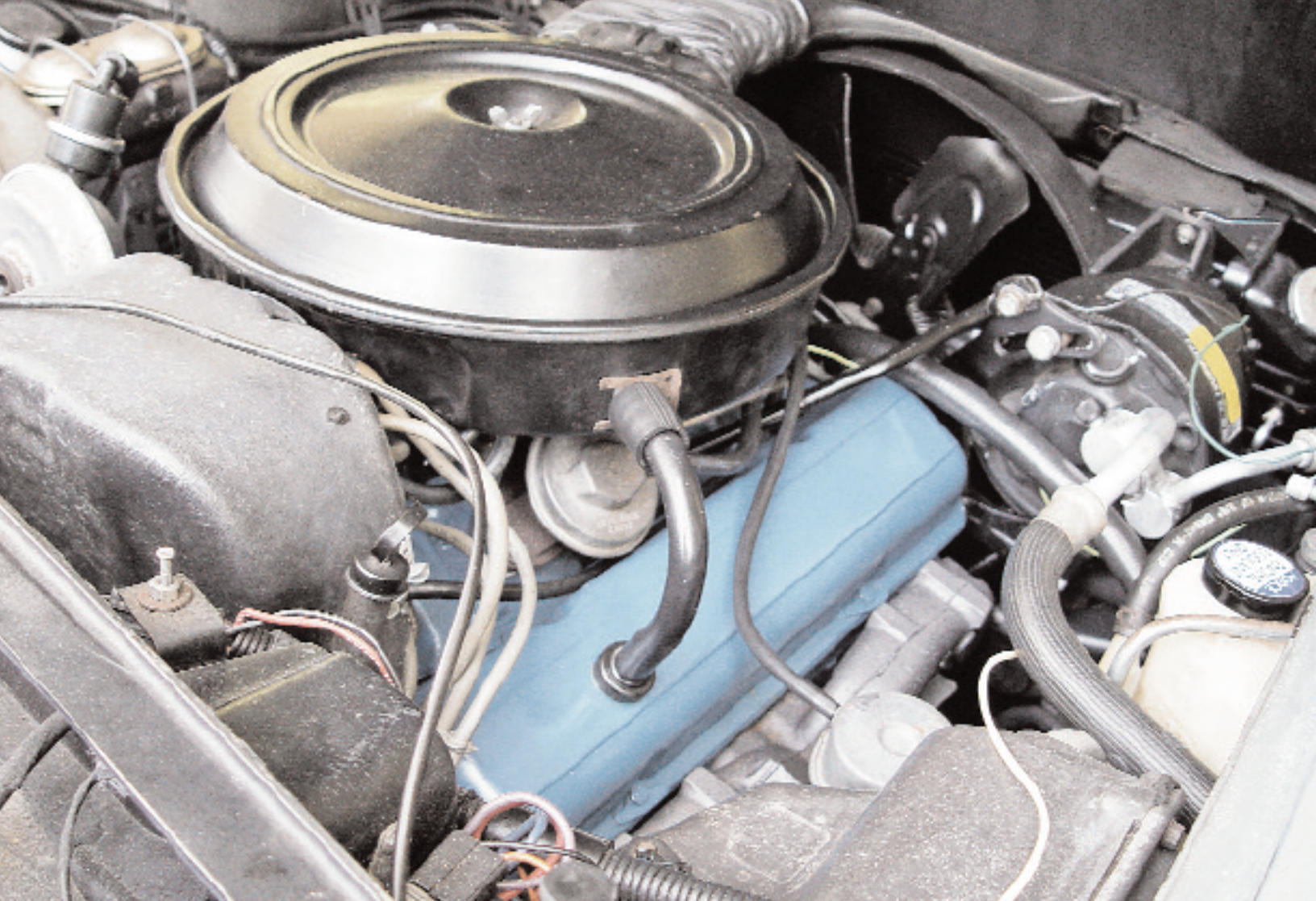
One small design tweak had a big visual effect. Engineers downsized the mufflers, allowing them to be tucked up out of view. This noticeably cleaned up the Corvette’s underbody appearance, especially when seen from behind.

All 1978 Corvettes carried special 25th-anniversary emblems mounted on the nose, gas lid and the horn button. Those feeling more celebratory could order the Silver Anniversary Paint (B2Z) option; 15,283 buyers checked the \$399 box. This two-tone paint scheme accentuated the Corvette’s contours with silver on the upper surface and gray on the lower area. Decals provided a transition between the two colors, while additional decals accented the hood, fender coves and license plate. To get the Silver Anniversary package, however, one had to also order optional \$40 sport mirrors (RPO D35) and a set of \$340 aluminum wheels (RPO YJ8). Nearly 33 percent of all the 46,776 1978 Corvettes built were equipped with this trio of options, including the one on these pages.



Above: 1978 cockpit featured fully redesigned dash. Below: Fastback rear glass created more streamlined appearance. Right: 185-hp L48 V8 engine.





The '78 Corvette featured a number of interior changes, most notably a redesigned instrument panel. The speedometer and tachometer were housed in a large rectangular cluster that matched the shape of the newly introduced glove box; the C3 had debuted without one. The dashboard and center console were changed to make room for new audio-system options, including an 8-track cassette player and CB radio.

The revised dash configuration also allowed owners to access gauge circuitry without a complete dash teardown, which had been required before. Tachometer boards accompanied the introduction of High Energy Ignition (HEI) in the 1975 model year. HEI delivered consistent voltage, but early tach boards were faulty; the fact that the entire dash had to be removed to repair them was a frustration for 1975-77 Corvette owners. The dash pad itself used a new "zero gloss black" finish that reduced windshield glare. Also enhancing driver comfort was the use of better cockpit insulation.

Though slightly up on power compared to the previous model year, '78 small-block V8s remained vestiges of past Corvette

engines. The base L48 engine was rated at 185 horsepower, an increase of five hp, while the optional L82 V8 posted a 10-hp gain to 220. The L82 came standard with a Borg Warner M20 four-speed manual, but an M21 close-ratio gearbox could be ordered as a no-cost option. The L48 came standard with a cast-iron Muncie four-speed manual.

Interestingly, 83 percent of the '78 Corvettes rolled out of the St. Louis assembly plant with an M38 automatic transmission. This preference for automatics, which began in the early '70s, was part of a growing trend whereby customers demanded increased comfort and convenience.

In a bid to reach out to such customers, Chevrolet also installed a larger gas tank on the '78 model, increasing its capacity from 17 to 24 gallons. As a result, the Corvette's cruising range was extended by 60 percent. This change forced Chevy to fit the car with a wider transverse leaf spring (2.5 inches versus 2.25 inches) to compensate for the additional load from the larger fuel tank. Chevy also made the fuel-gauge sending unit accessible from the top of the gas tank, making the repair process much easier than before.

The '78 model year marked the introduction of optional Goodyear Polysteel Radial tires. The P225/70R15 version offered greater flexibility for improved ride quality over the base steel-belted tire. The big news was the P255/60R15 option; it marked the first time a modern, low-profile tire had been offered on a Corvette. With their stiffer sidewalls and wider contact patches, these tires, which wore raised, white "Goodyear GT Radial" lettering, generated significantly more grip. They were so wide that fenders had to be trimmed to provide sufficient clearance. Those wanting to improve roadholding performance still further could order the FE7 Gymkhana suspension option, which included special rear shock absorbers.

In its review of the '78 Corvette, *Car and Driver* wrote, "After a number of recent Corvette editions that prompted us to mourn the steady decline of both performance and quality in this once-proud marque, we can happily report the twenty-fifth example of the Corvette is much improved across the board." The model marked a turning point for the Corvette, making its silver anniversary all the more worth celebrating. ○

