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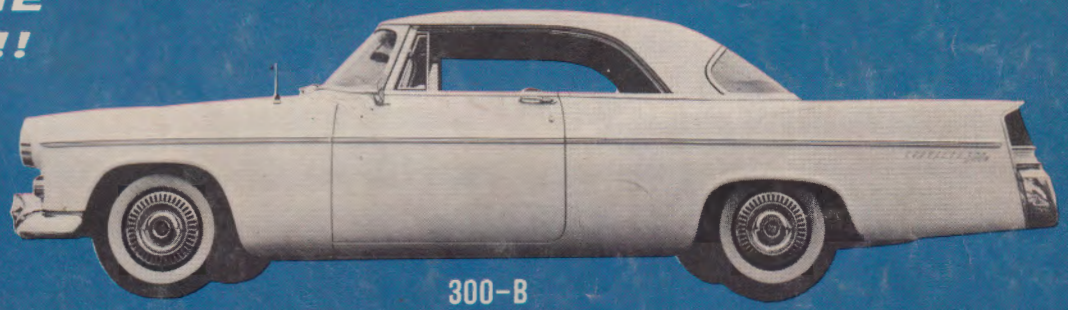
JULY 1956

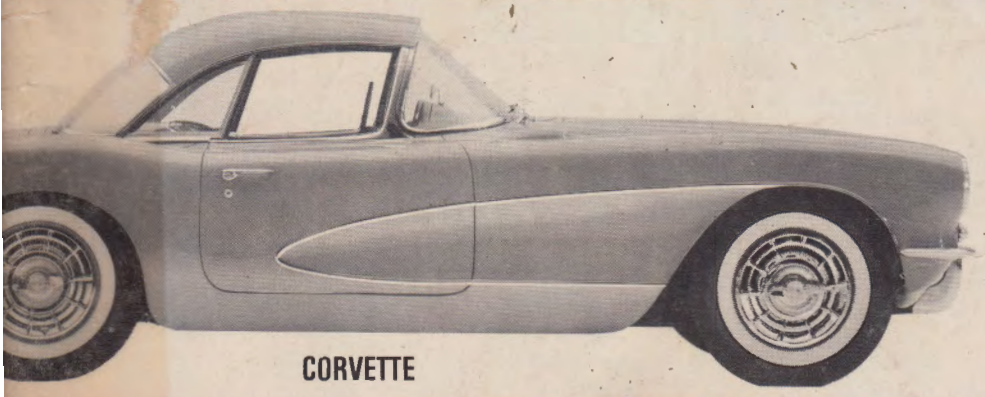
**SPECIAL REPORT: ALL ABOUT HOT ROD FUELS**

GOLDEN HAWK

***LET'S SAVE THE DIRT TRACKS!!***

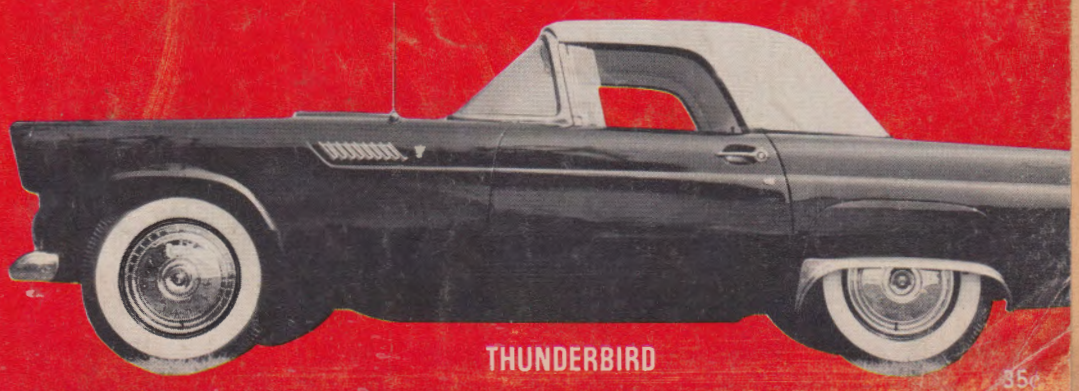


300-B



CORVETTE

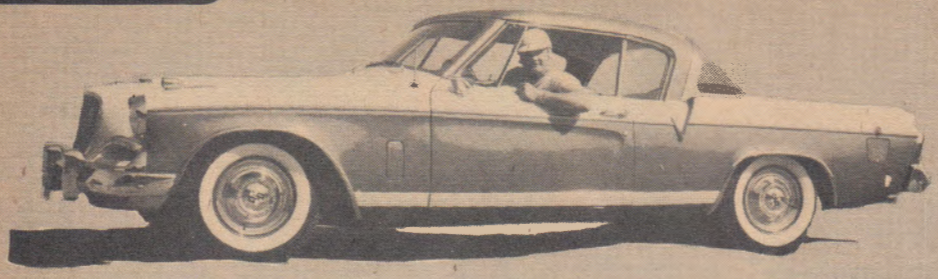
**STOCK CAR RECORDS ARE PHONY**



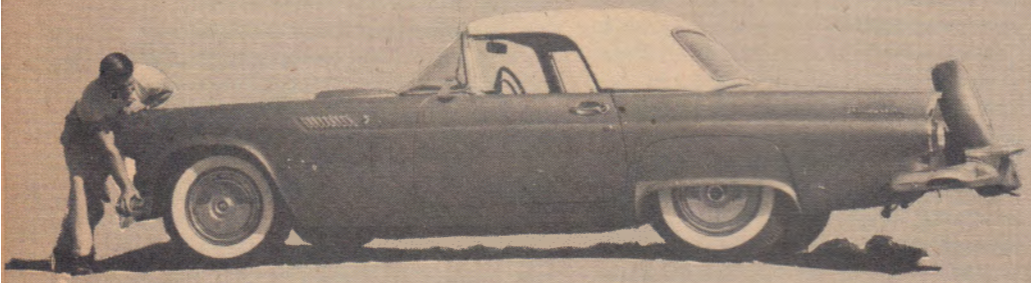
THUNDERBIRD

35¢

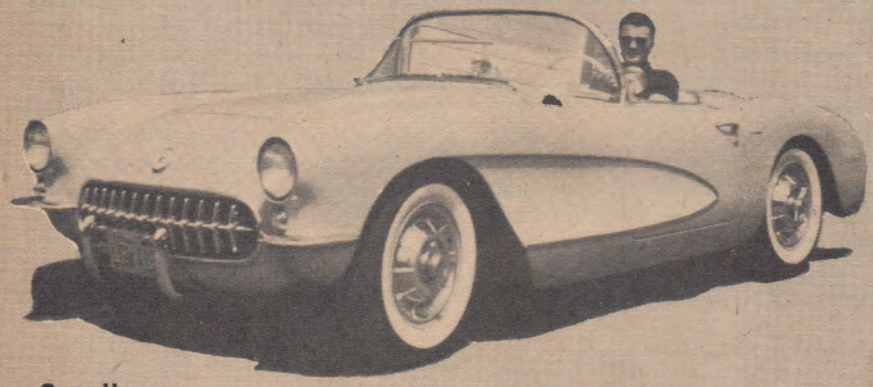
# Jimmy



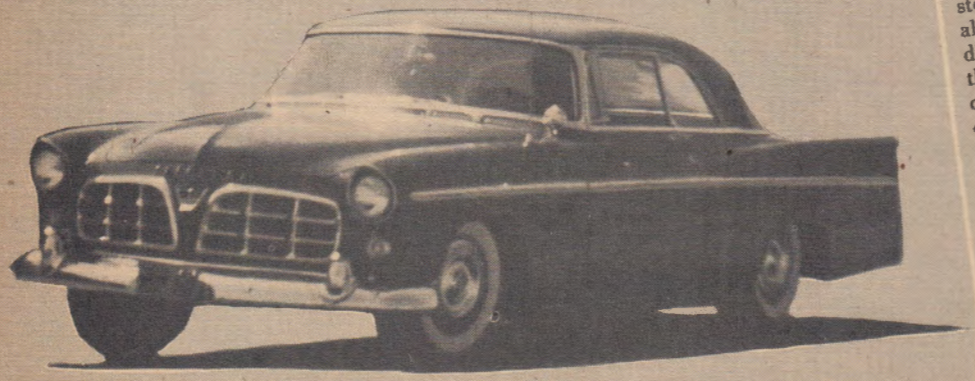
Golden Hawk



Thunderbird



Corvette



Chrysler 300B

**By JIMMY REECE**

TESTING AMERICA'S LEADING sports cars, the Chrysler 300-B, Chevrolet Corvette, Ford Thunderbird and Studebaker Golden Hawk, turned into an interesting assignment for me. Actually, I'm not certain that these can be classed as true sports cars, but I do feel that the Corvette, perhaps, comes the closest to fitting into that bracket. The others are sports-type cars, with the exception of the 300 which I consider more on a passenger car basis but a potent piece of machinery that would be appealing to any sport.

Of the four cars tested, the 300-B appealed more to me personally than the others. In my opinion, it fits all

No one knows as much about Detroit's production cars as the nation's stock car drivers. Day after day, on all kinds of road surfaces and conditions these men put stock cars through grueling trials and tests in competition with one another. In view of these facts, SPEED AGE has arranged for a series of tests of all Detroit cars by the nation's leading stock car drivers. We feel it will assure our readers of the inside story on performance and handling as interpreted by the men best qualified to judge.

This month, Jimmy Reece brings you his EXPERT TEST of the Chrysler 300B, Ford Thunderbird, Chevrolet Corvette and Studebaker Golden Hawk.

# Reece TRACK TESTS AMERICA'S '56 SPORTS CARS

but a few minor points which I consider vital to safe, comfortable driving with added performance. It already has been proven as a potent stock car racing machine and its rich qualities and splendid performance make it an overwhelmingly pleasing passenger car.

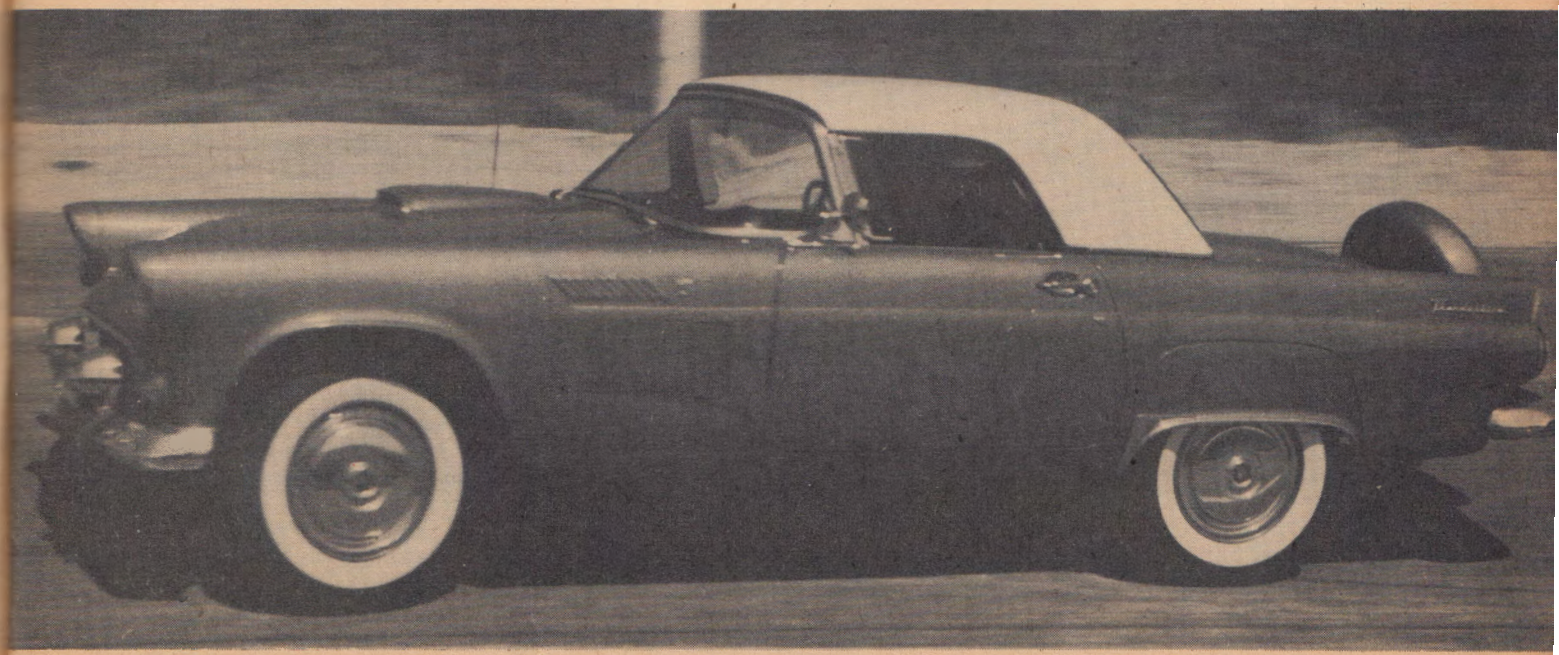
In all cases, I found both appealing and disappointing features about each of the cars tested. In every case, one feature was outstanding over all others such as the Golden Hawk's blazing get-away from a standing start, or the T-Bird's comfortable ride, and I found that, generally, each of these cars would make an owner proud.

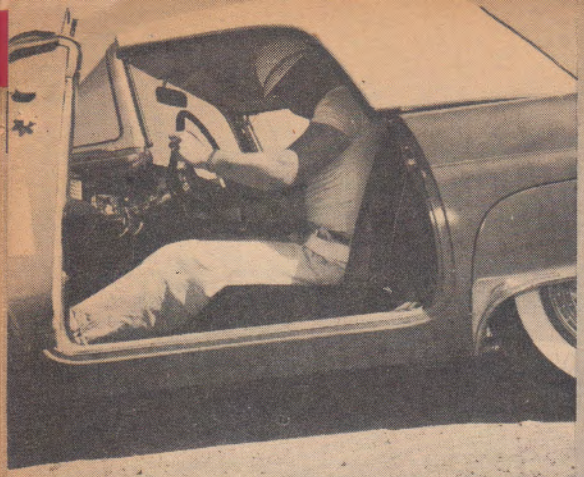
It is difficult to make an accurate comparison between each of the cars tested since the differences varied to extremes in some cases, but we did determine that America's venture into the sports car world has not been a lost cause. Three of the cars tested were equipped with automatic transmissions. The exception was the Hawk which was equipped with a standard stick shift, a more preferable type of transmission over the automatics if you are looking for drag-type acceleration.

For acceleration, we put each of the cars through gruelling runs over the smooth and elaborate drag strip at Long Beach, Calif. We tested them both for acceleration from a standing start through the measured quarter-mile and for zero to 60 mph performance. In each case, the Hawk was by far the fastest, taking off with a neck snapping burst of speed that was impressive, to say the least. The Corvette followed, still fast but a bit slower than the Hawk. Then came the T-Bird, holding slightly better acceleration figures than the 300.

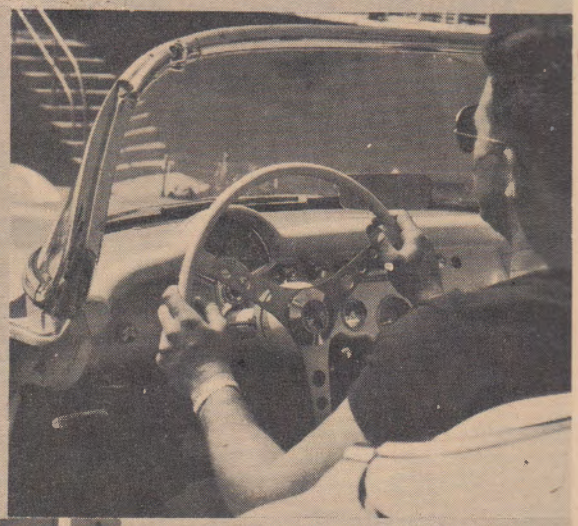
But while the Hawk got top rating for acceleration, it trailed the others in handling and cornering. In this department the 300 heads the list with a firm, stable ride in the corners, with little lean and plenty of assurance that it knows where it is going. Next

**Jimmy Reece in the Thunderbird at speed.**

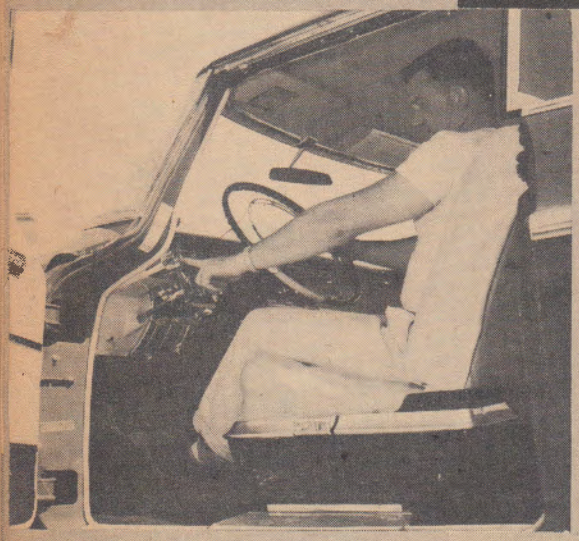




Low canopy of T-Bird is tight fit for brawny Jimmy Reece.



Corvette's seating position gets checked by Jimmy.



Chrysler 300 was Jimmy's choice in the touring car class.

Best designed instrument panel was that of Golden Hawk.

I found the Corvette's handling abilities stable and firm, although a bit too rigid. The Thunderbird had a great tendency to "roll" in tight turns while the Hawk was much too slow on steering and showed a tremendous amount of lean in even moderate corners.

As for styling, I was most impressed with the 300 which is more in the stock pleasure car category. The other three, of the sports-type or sports car lines, are more comparable and the Thunderbird gets my choice here over the Corvette and Hawk, in that order. Interior-wise, the order of ranking them is almost the same. I say almost because the Corvette's instrument panel could definitely stand improvement, while the others were more closely grouped and easy to read without glancing away from the road for too long a period.

Now, let's examine each car more thoroughly.

## STUDEBAKER HAWK

The Hawk, which is the result of the merger between Studebaker and Packard, embraces the Studebaker lines but gets off to a thundering start with a 275 hp Packard-built engine. This virtual bomb for a power plant, encased in a comparatively light chassis, makes for one of the most powerful cars on the road today. Its acceleration figures are startling, but spoiled by the fact that the car's suspension is too soft for good handling and cornering.

On the Long Beach drag strip, it out-performed each of our other three test cars with a trip through the quarter-mile in 17.01 seconds, hitting a speed of better than 85 mph. From zero to 60 mph, which was a bit rough to make because the rear wheels had a strong tendency to break loose from the pavement, the Hawk stopped our watches in 7.80 seconds.

In both acceleration runs, I was hampered by the gear shift lever which, when pushed into second gear, almost comes in contact with the top of the dash panel, making it extremely difficult to shift with speed. But still the car took off like a shot, with lightning-like speed. Torque is a big feature with this rather light chassis and engine that is loaded for bear.

Acceleration of the Hawk could, I believe, be improved through the use of Traction Masters; that is, radius-type rods that connect from the rear end to the frame, preventing the rear springs from rolling up and allowing the rear wheels to break loose when

the tremendous power is applied. Stiffer springs and shocks also would be a help.

On our Mexican Road Race-type testing course, in the hills of Palos Verdes, Calif., the Hawk's tendency to be too slow in the steering department was very much in evidence. Our course covered hills and a straight-away with several horseshoe turns to provide an exacting test for handling and cornering.

On severe turns, there was a tremendous amount of body roll, causing the rear wheel to lift and break traction. On one severe curve, the roll-over was so extensive that it placed a tell-tale black mark almost down to the white sidewall of the tires. This, of course, occurred under extreme conditions but in comparison with the other cars tested, the Golden Hawk did not handle as well. That the steering was too slow was shown by the fact that it was necessary to twist the wheel more than usual in order to hold a tight turn.

Driving characteristics of the Hawk are not at all unimpressive. I was pleased with the instrument panel, which was complete with tachometer and vacuum gauge. The instruments, grouped for easy reading, were dark faced and of the type we use in race cars. All necessary gauges are located directly in front of the driver.

I was impressed with the car's low styling, although it takes a while to get used to, and I bumped my head on the roof in the back seat. But the body lines have an appealing appearance from front to rear. Inside styling also is appealing, although leg room, as in most sports cars, is not over abundant.

Two interior details on the Golden Hawk, in my opinion, could stand improving. One is the angle location of the brake pedal in relation to the clutch. The latter is located in the normal position, but the brake pedal is closer to the floor, making both pedals uneven and confusing.

The other item is seat belts, of the type installed in our test car. One end of the belt is anchored to the floor and passed through the front seat where it is attached to the other end by means of a buckle. The other end, however, is fastened to the door so that, when the belt is hooked over the occupant, it is anchored to the floor in one place and to the door in the other, to hold the door closed in case of an accident. This set-up does not appear to be too useful since doors usually are subject to great strain, causing them to fly open in a severe crash. The belt being hooked to the door may not be much help in that case and the belt itself would be useless.

## CHEVROLET CORVETTE

As for the Corvette, our acceleration tests unearthed these figures: zero to 60 in 8.40 seconds, and a quarter-mile from a standing start in 17.12 seconds. Under tremendous power of acceleration, the rear wheels broke traction but not to a great extent, giving the rear discs more bite for a smooth, fast take-off.

In city driving, the Corvette rides firmly but stiff. I was not too impressed with its riding characteristics in the city; but once on the highway, the stiff suspension and shocking was a great boon to proper handling and cornering at high speeds. The car handled the sharp curves well, holding firmly to the road without a great deal of lean.

Carburetion, by means of two four-throat carburetors, could be improved for competition. In tight turns, the shifting of weight and fuel caused a momentary miss at a time when power was needed. But the engine delivered plenty of punch for smashing get-away down the long chutes. Acceleration was good, too, in city traffic where sometimes it is needed rather badly.

The linkage set up on the Corvette is such that one carburetor is in operation until the throttle is depressed half-way. There is a distinct stop there before the second carb cuts in, giving more power. But in our tests, using half throttle, we ran up to 97 mph as indicated on the speedometer.

The engine of the Corvette seems to be sturdy enough. We wound it as high as 7000 rpm, according to the tachometer, without any noticeable vibration or valve float. And it has a healthy sound, coupled with dual exhausts that give a pleasant rumble of power.

Certainly an attention gatherer, the Corvette's new styling for 1956 is greatly improved over former years. Re-locating of the tail lights, installation of side windows, a new hydraulic top and better workmanship of the

**Black marks in concrete show where Jimmy made repeated turning tests.**

**High speed turns on mountain bend gave Jimmy Reece a good idea of relative handling under these conditions.**

fiberglass body are great improvements. The instrument panel, however, is not at all practical. Each of the important instruments, tachometer and oil gauge, are located on the passenger's side, away from the driver. To read them accurately, I was forced to take my eyes from the road longer than is considered safe. Grouping of all instruments in one location in front of the driver would help a great deal.

Steering is fast, but not fast enough for competition. On our test course, subjecting the car to sharp corners at speed, brake fade was evident but not as severe as in many cars. However, for competition, the car could use bigger brakes. Back to the steering department, I was really impressed by the addition of a new type steering wheel, much on the same order as those used in race cars, with metal spokes and a *racey* look.

Corvette engineers this year have made a few minor changes in the chassis, such as caster degree and suspension rate in the rear. These changes have made a better handling car, with a stable feel. In the tight turns of our test course, for instance, the car tended to drift in the corners. But it was a comfortable and secure drift that left me with complete control of the automobile and I was able to handle it as desired by opening or closing the throttle.

The Corvette engine, producing 225 hp at 5000 rpm, lists a piston displacement of 265 cubic inches. With the exception of the carburetors cutting out slightly on hard turns, it is a smooth operating and highly efficient engine.

Knock-off hubs on all four wheels add to that racing look but I do believe that the fake air scoops mounted on both front fenders could have been put to good use such as to cool the brakes. As for the body itself, although styled nicely and greatly improved over previous models, it had a tendency to rattle, probably from the stiff suspension and shocking. This, however, was not evident on high speed driving.

Transmission on the Corvette seemed healthy enough. It gave me the impression that it would withstand the punishment of rapid acceleration and rather harsh treatment without offering trouble. In many of our cornering and handling tests of the car, I used low gear as a braking power to reduce speed for corners, thus saving the brakes as much as possible. The braking in low gear was

not tremendous but it did help slow the car and was most useful for quick acceleration afterwards. The gear selector, located on the floor between the two seats, is easily accessible and works freely.

In the treacherous turns of our test course, I found that the Corvette maintained good speed and creditable handling abilities adaptable for racing but it was necessary to keep engine rpms up in order to maintain a good racing pace. This was not too difficult to do since good handling characteristics made it unnecessary for me to focus all my attention on fighting the wheel.

## FORD THUNDERBIRD

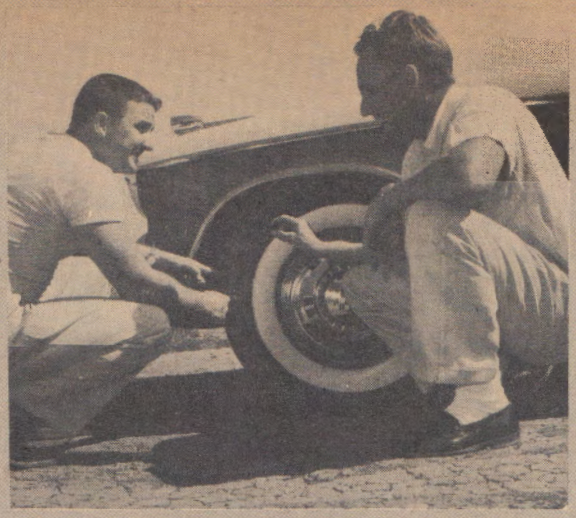
Although the Thunderbird, to me, showed better styling, it impressed me as more of a family-type sports car in comparison with the Corvette. The ride was noticeably softer and more comfortable but excessive lean in tight corners made it seem less secure when it came to handling. As in the case of our Chrysler 300 test car, the T-Bird was equipped with power steering which is difficult to get used to after pulling the wheels of race cars.

On acceleration runs, the Thunderbird was third in comparison with our other test cars. In the quarter-mile run from a standing start, it clipped off the distance in 17.21 seconds, and hit an impressive 8.60 second clocking for the zero to 60 test. Of the several tests we ran for acceleration, we achieved the best figures by shifting from low range to drive at approximately 4000 rpm as indicated by the tachometer. At one time, I did wind the engine as high as 4600 rpm but our figures were not as good.

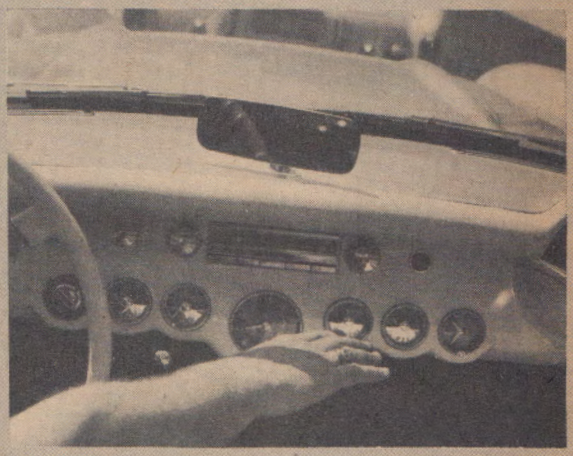
The engine generally is sound and healthy. It is capable of cruising along at 75 or 80 mph without effort or noticeable strain. Increased slightly over last year's model, the '56 Bird offers 225 hp with Fordomatic, listing a piston displacement of 312 cubic inches. Wringing it out over our test course, the power plant responded nicely to throttle punishment with the exception of carburetion which, as in the case of the Hawk and Corvette, caused a slight cut out in extreme turns.

For competition, the Thunderbird is definitely undershocked, and could stand a big improvement in the brake department. Our high speed tests for cornering showed considerable lean in the corners which prevented my

*(Continued on page 96)*



**Tire pressures received special attention to insure proper handling.**



**Corvette cockpit layout is scaled by Jimmy.**

**Golden Hawk's safety belts were commented on by test crew.**

**Jimmy checks 300B's plugs before making runs.**

*(Continued from page 93)*

vergent competitive interests of members of the sponsoring organization and contained only three races.

Ron Pearson continued Volvo's winning string in the sedan races during Saturday's opening event by finishing 13 seconds ahead of Marv Patchem in a Simca Aronde.

The Ladies' Race saw some of the finest driving of the week-end as Pat Sawyer, driving Nick Pastor's modified Triumph TR-2, came within one second of having victory snatched from her by the Lotus Mk 9 driven by Meyera Buchanan, who lost valuable ground when she stopped to close the car door in mid-race.

Only three cars turned out for the races for Formula III and unrestricted category cars, Marion Playan finishing well ahead in his MG-powered Formula Libre entry. ●

## Track Tests

*(Continued from page 23)*

getting back on the throttle immediately without getting into a slide. The rear end felt stable, however, and showed no tendency to jump into an undesired skid. At more moderate speeds, handling was better.

The ride itself on the Thunderbird was more comfortable than with the Hawk or Corvette. It was more on the pleasure car line, with a good seating and steering wheel position for commanding comfort. Inside, I liked the security of the car's safety belt and padded dash which, in the latter's case, was far better than any of the other cars tested. The Corvette, of course, did not have a padded dash but the others did. In comparison, the Thunderbird's padding was thicker and more practical for the purpose for which it is intended.

During rough treatment over our test course, I used the brakes a great deal, and found evidence of brake fade although not quite as much as with the Corvette. Due to the car's tendency to lean hard in the turns, I used more brake on the Thunderbird than on the Corvette, and while the brakes became hot, they did not fade too quickly.

### CHRYSLER 300-B

As for the Chrysler 300-B, I found it to be the best handling car I've ever driven from a dealer's showroom. This is one car that came from the manufacturer with all the goodies a critical driver looks for. With the exception of the power steering, which was *too* quick, it filled just about every factor I look for in an automobile.

While it did not accelerate as quickly as the others, it must be remembered that it packs a great deal more weight. Taking this into consideration, acceleration for the car is plenty rapid. On the drag strip, our figures for the quarter-mile standing start gave us a reading of 17.80 which was attained by starting in low range and shifting into drive at about 45 mph. On the zero to 60 run, made the same way, our watches indicated a 9.10 second clocking.

On the test course, the big 300 handled best of all our test cars. It stayed flat on the tight turns, without lean or body roll, and the rear end felt more secure to me than it did with any of the others. At all times, I was conscious of a perfect feel of control. In addition, it carbureted without a miss where the others had that slight miss just when the power was needed.

In just about every passenger car I've driven, the shocks were too light or unstable for any kind of punishment. Such was not the case with the 300. The chassis was firm and stable, yet the ride was smooth and comfortable. For racing, I would prefer the shocks a bit tighter but they are very suitable for the road.

**COMPARISON OF ACCELERATION**

| | Quarter-Mile Run in Seconds* | 0-60 mph |
|---|---|---|
| Golden Hawk | 17.01 | 7.8 |
| Corvette | 17.12 | 8.4 |
| Thunderbird | 17.21 | 8.6 |
| Chrysler 300-B | 17.80 | 9.1 |

*Standing start

Inside and out, the 300 filled the bill for handling, styling, power, speed and driving comfort. The body lines are sleek, with just the right amount of chrome to set it off. Inside, the seats, all leather, are filled with arm chair comfort. In our test car, seats were controlled by four-way power that made available any type driving position desired.

One of the most impressive features about the 300's interior, to me at least, was the extra long brake pedal. From driving race cars with the foot brake on the left side of the cockpit, I've formed a habit of braking with my left foot without taking my right one away from the throttle. The pedal on the 300 extends on both sides of the steering column where it can be reached easily with the left foot—or the right if desired.

Push button driving was another feature that impressed me greatly, although for a time, I was hunting for

| | CHEVROLET CORVETTE | CHRYSLER 300-B | FORD THUNDERBIRD | STUDEBAKER GOLDEN HAWK |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cylinders | V-8 | V-8 | V-8 | V-8 |
| Bore and stroke | 3.75 x 3.00 | 3.94 x 3.63 | 3.80 x 3.44 | 4.00 x 3.50 |
| Horsepower | 225 | 340 | 225 | 275 |
| Displacement | 265 | 354 | 312 | 352 |
| Compression ratio | 9.3-1 | 9.0-1 | 9.0-1 | 9.5-1 |
| Maximum torque | 270 | NA | 324 | 380 |
| Carburetion | dual 4-barrel | dual 4-barrel | one 4-barrel | one 4-barrel |
| Wheelbase | 102 | 126 | 102 | 120.5 |
| Overall length | 168 | 223 | 185 | 204 |
| Overall width | 71 | 79 | 71 | 70 |
| Overall height | 51 | 58.6 | 52.2 | 56.3 |

the usual stick gear selector on the steering column. But the push button selectors are great—a coming thing I believe, in all Detroit products. With my left arm resting on the arm rest of the door, I could select the gear I wanted, press it with one finger and the car was underway.

Under the hood, a 340 hp V-8 engine, packs a terrific punch. Fed by dual four-throat carburetors, the big powerplant develops tremendous torque. Idling, the engine sounds like a race car, and it rumbled with a pleasant sound that indicated power. Boasting 9.0 to 1 compression, the engine has a high-output full-race cam with mechanical valve lifters and rocker arms. Two oil bath air cleaners on the carburetors greatly increase engine breathing.

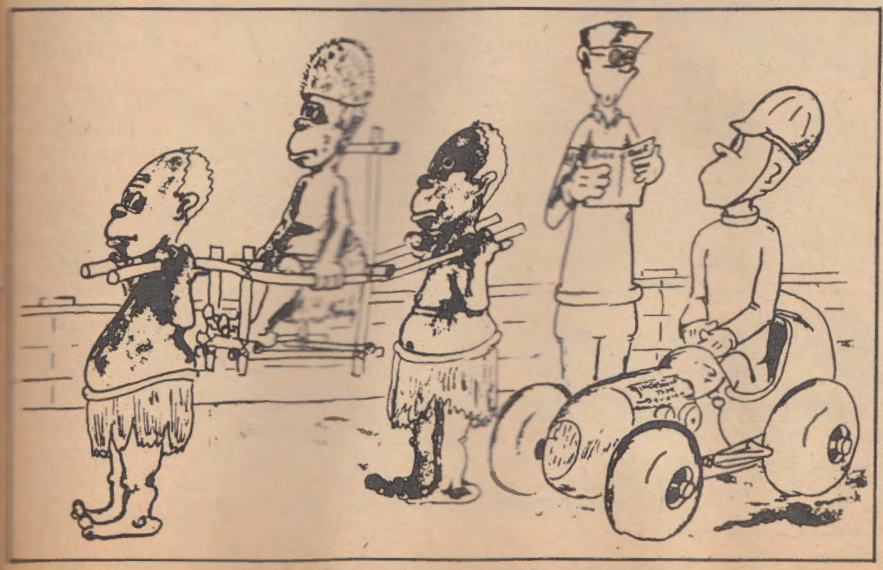
At no time during acceleration runs, did the rear wheels break traction. Get-away was fast and smooth, without the chatter of undershocking or too soft suspension. Long and low, the 300 settled to an even take-off when the power was applied.

I was really surprised with the way the car handled under severe cornering tests, even with power steering. I could feel very little body lean at all, if any, and the engine responded immediately to the slightest touch of the throttle. Although it is big, the 300 maneuvered through hills, S turns and city traffic with all the ease of a smaller car, and all of this in strict comfort.

While I consider the power steering too fast for racing, it was ideal for parking. The 300, in fact, was easier to drop into a parking spot than a smaller car. The steering wheel will turn from lock to lock with pressure from one finger. But for my own purposes, I'd prefer not to have power steering, and I guess most race drivers share this feeling.

In conclusion, I would like to say again, that America's venture into the sports car or sport-type car world has not been a lost cause. Each of the cars tested showed definite features that were outstanding and superior, and they are getting better all the time.

True, we found unappealing features and many that needed improvements for both highway and track conditions. But I think racing of all types in this country, has and will continue to play an important part in the development and manufacture of American automobiles, whether they be sports cars, sports-type cars, or pleasure automobiles. ●



Their letter said African midget champs!