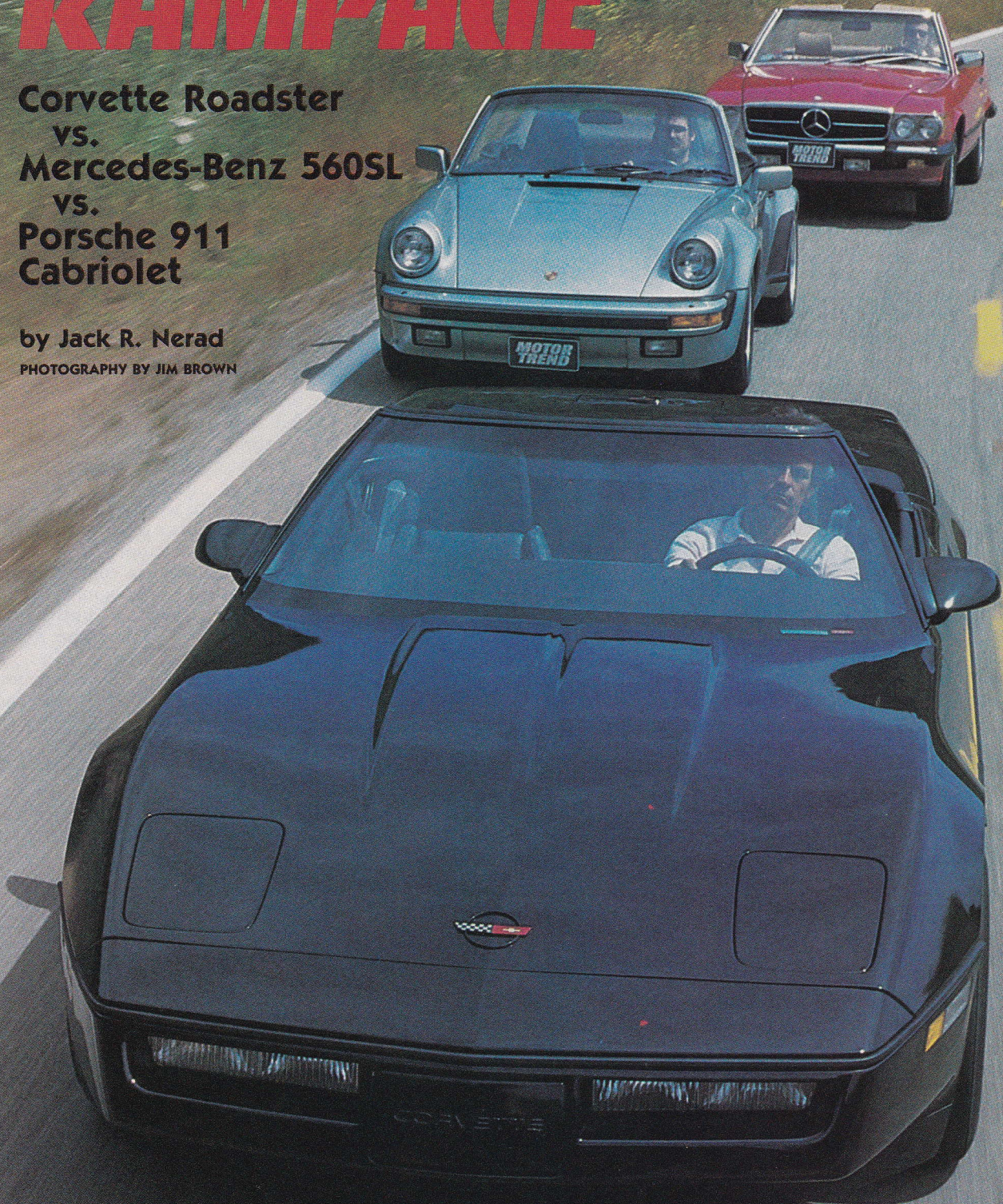


RAGTOP RAMPAGE

Corvette Roadster
vs.
Mercedes-Benz 560SL
vs.
Porsche 911
Cabriolet

by Jack R. Nerad
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM BROWN



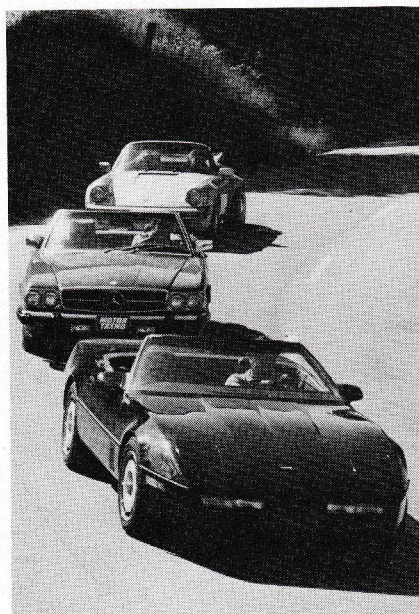
Our route was a carefully selected mix of freeways, city streets, and curvy two-lanes

They made us come back. We didn't want to, but they made us. Several days blitzing through the California countryside in three of the fastest convertibles in America just whetted our appetite for more. Frankly, we *never* wanted to come back; we just wanted to keep driving forever.

Consider for a moment our itinerary: Leave our Sunset Boulevard offices suitably ensconced in three dream vehicles—jet black Corvette Roadster, crystal green Porsche 911 Cabriolet, and shocking red Mercedes-Benz 560SL. Speed intrepidly toward a lunchtime rendezvous at Cholame where James Dean met his untimely end. Spend the rest of the afternoon whipping through some of central California's most scenic backroads, often at speeds double the official National Limit. Stop for the night only when we've reached the Monterey Plaza, a charming new hotel on the windswept shore of Monterey Bay. Dinner of fresh seafood and old wine at the Whaling Station.

The next day, 12 hours of flat-out fun on Route 1, everyone's favorite American road. With a southern section of the highway closed due to a landslide, there's little traffic to contend with. Light lunch awaits at the Rocky Point, under pines overlooking the Pacific several hundred feet below. Back on the road for an afternoon of "my car can beat your car." Final high-speed (120 mph) scamper back to Monterey in fading afternoon sun. Pose with the cars on the deck of the Plaza and flirt with the pretty girls they attract. Dinner of vino and pasta at Hammerhead's.

Third day, light breakfast prepares us for day behind the wheel. Spirited drive through the meadows and forests of California's interior under a brilliant summer sun. After a short stint on the freeway, a quick lunch at the Old Oak Inn. Leaving the freeway, a flat-out flog east and then south through orchards and oilfields. The freeway beckons, but 100 mph-plus on the two-lanes is much too appealing to forego. Late afternoon sees us descend on the Grapevine as the sun descends beyond the mountains to our right. Hard to believe we're going home already.



With three days of driving like this, three days in literal automotive heaven, can you possibly blame us if we didn't want to return home?

Of course, there was method to our madness. We weren't twisting and turning our way through two thirds of California for the simple joy of abusing our company American Express cards. No, we could think of no better way to compare and contrast these vehicles than in head-to-head competition over the highways and byways we like to call home. Our route was a carefully selected mix of freeways, city streets, and, our favorites, the curvy two-lanes that stretch throughout the Golden State. Each car was driven *hard* in a completely safe and sane manner. And we're also quite willing to admit much of this safe-and-sane driving was done considerably in excess of the federal speed standard, which, with any luck, will soon be changed.

When we got back to civilization, as Los Angeles is so loosely termed, we sent the three challengers through our test mill—dragstrip, skidpad, and braking. By the time it was over, we felt we had a thorough knowledge of all three, which enabled us to do an excellent job of compare and contrast.

But before we get to the comparison portion, let's say a word about all three cars. In virtually every comparison article, you're confronted with verbiage that goes something like: "This is a comparison, but there are no real losers. All these cars are winners."

Most often, that's just so much puffery, but in this case—really,

TECH DATA

Porsche 911 Cabriolet

POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Rear engine, rear drive
Engine configuration.....H.O.6, SOHC, aircooled
Displacement.....3164 cc (193.1 cu in.)
Max. power (SAE net).....200 hp @ 5900 rpm
Max. torque (SAE net).....185 lb-ft @ 4800 rpm
Transmission.....5-sp. man.
Final drive ratio.....3.88:1

CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/independent
Brakes, f/r.....Disc/disc
Steering.....Rack and pinion
Wheels.....15 x 6.0 in. front,
15 x 7.0 in. rear
Tires.....185/70VR15 front,
215/60VR15 rear

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2273 mm (89.5 in.)
Overall length.....4290 mm (168.9 in.)
Curb weight.....1300 kg (2866 lb)
Fuel capacity.....85.2 L (22.5 gal)

BASE PRICE.....\$38,750
PRICE AS TESTED.....\$53,711

Corvette Roadster

POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Front engine, rear drive
Engine configuration.....V-8, OHV, aluminum heads,
cast iron block
Displacement.....5735 cc (350.0 cu in.)
Max. power (SAE net).....230 hp @ 4000 rpm
Max. torque (SAE net).....330 lb-ft @ 3200 rpm
Transmission.....4-sp. man., O/D on top 3 gears
Final drive ratio.....3.07:1

CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/independent
Brakes, f/r.....Disc/disc (ABS)
Steering.....Power rack and pinion
Wheels.....16 x 9.5 in., cast alloy
Tires.....255/50VR16

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2443 mm (96.2 in.)
Overall length.....4483 mm (176.5 in.)
Curb weight.....1487 kg (3278 lb)
Fuel capacity.....75.7 L (20.0 gal)

BASE PRICE.....\$32,955
PRICE AS TESTED.....\$35,226

Mercedes-Benz 560SL

POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Front engine, rear drive
Engine configuration.....V-8, SOHC
Displacement.....5547 cc (338.5 cu in.)
Max. power (SAE net).....227 hp @ 4750 rpm
Max. torque (SAE net).....279 lb-ft @ 3250 rpm
Transmission.....4-sp. auto.
Final drive ratio.....2.47:1

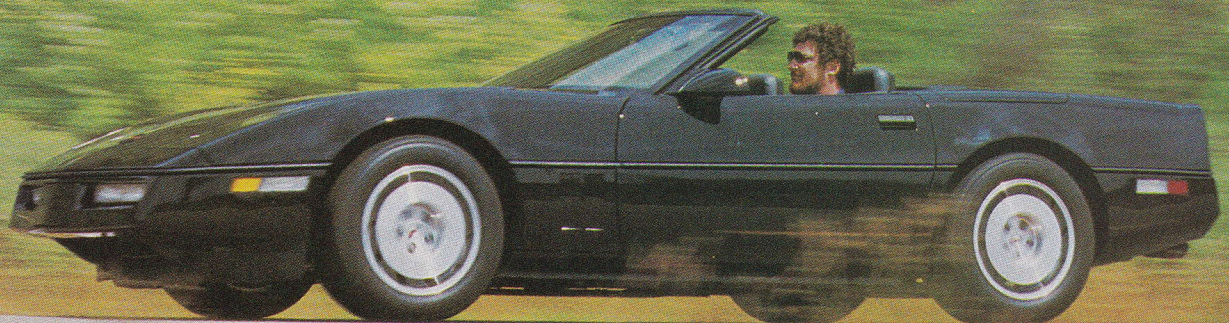
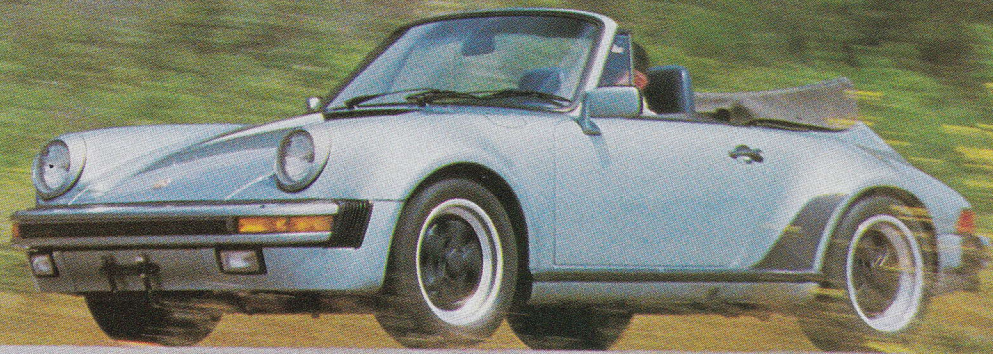
CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/independent
Brakes, f/r.....Disc/disc (ABS)
Steering.....Recirculating ball,
power assist
Wheels.....15 x 7.0 in., cast alloy
Tires.....205/65VR15

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2455 mm (96.7 in.)
Overall length.....4580 mm (180.3 in.)
Curb weight.....1715 kg (3780 lb)
Fuel capacity.....85.2 L (22.5 gal)

BASE PRICE.....\$53,300
PRICE AS TESTED.....\$54,600



The 911 shape is as well known as the Coke bottle

folks—it's true. If any one of these cars were to suddenly appear in your driveway, it would be a windfall tantamount to winning the New Jersey Lottery. These aren't good cars; these are great cars. And the opportunity to drive them fast on challenging roads is an experience not to be missed. We wish you could have been with us.

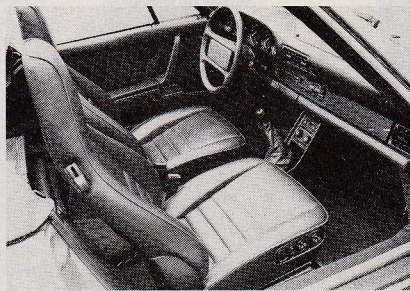
Porsche 911 Cabriolet

The Porsche 911 needs no introduction; it's been around in one form or another for two decades. Of course, it's amazing for *any* car model to live more than 20 years. What's even more amazing about the 911 is the fact that it remains on the leading edge of production performance machinery despite its advanced age.

Let's run a few numbers by you. The 911's 3164cc 6-cylinder engine is air-cooled and mounted in the rear. (You don't know this, right?) In 1986 trim, the engine produces 200 hp at 5900 rpm and 185 lb-ft of torque at 4800 rpm. Fuel injection is the induc-

tion system of choice. Lubrication is dry sump with separate oil tank and thermostatically controlled oil cooling. Power is channeled to the rear wheels via a 5-speed manual transmission.

Front suspension is a MacPherson strut arrangement, while the rear is independent using semi-trailing arms. Torsion bars do the work of springs all around. The 911 uses 185/70VR15 front tires on 15 x 6.0-in. alloy rims and 215/60VR15 rear tires on 15 x 7.0-in. alloys. Steering is rack and pinion. Vented disc brakes are



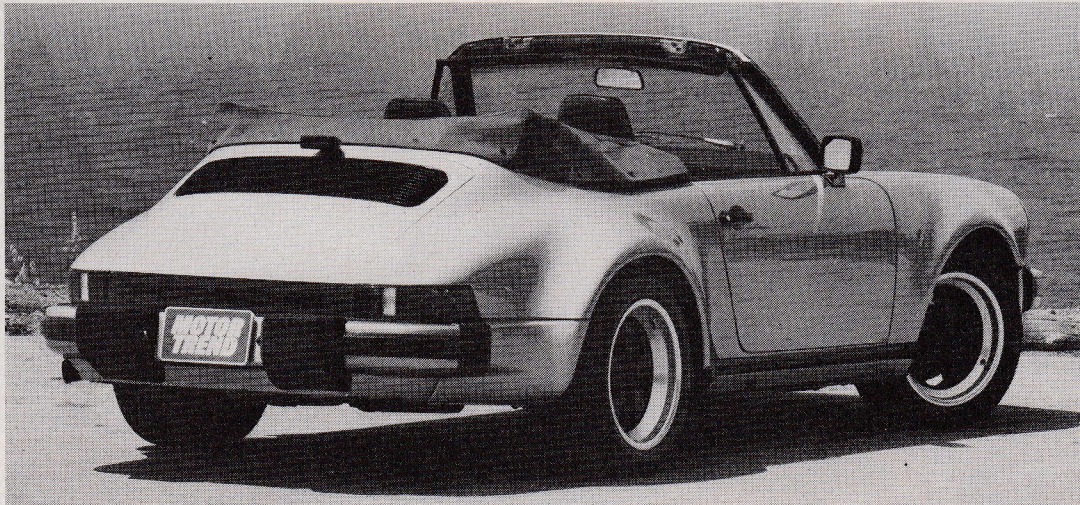
fitted, 11.1 in. in front and 11.4 in. in the rear.

The 911 shape is as well known as the Coke bottle, but pictures just don't do justice to its voluptuous handformed curves. With flares to accommodate wheels and tires wider than the designers could have imagined 20 years ago, this car is much prettier now than it was then.

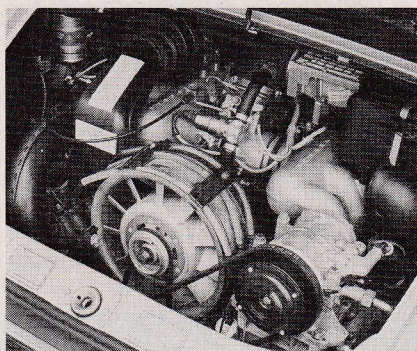
The interior... well, the interior takes some figuring out. Let's begin with the ignition lock that lies to the left of the steering wheel, no doubt cheering those 10% of the southpaw persuasion. The other 90% of the population have to fumble with the keys.

Heating and ventilation controls? After three days, I think I figured out the ones on the dash where separate knobs are used for the heater/vent and air conditioning. I'm still trying to grasp (figuratively and literally) the controls clustered around the handbrake.

The electric convertible top mechanism was a true mechanical marvel. The manual top in another Porsche



Seemingly as old as the hills, the 911 still excites pulses with its timeless design, powerful 200-hp six, and price. The new electric top works well, but the tonneau was ill-fitting.



Capable of pushing the 911 to 60 mph in 6.61 sec, Porsche's air-cooled six has become a refined and smooth powerplant.



The 560SL is the automotive equivalent of the "handsome older man"

Cabrio we tried was something less than perfection.

Mercedes-Benz 560SL

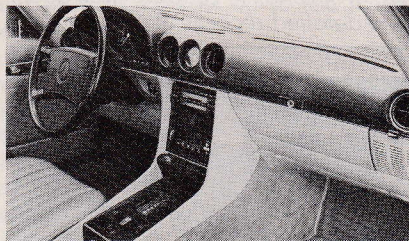
If the Porsche 911 is a perennial favorite, the Mercedes-Benz (your favorite number here) SL isn't far behind. In its 14th season, the 2-seater has adopted the 560SL nomenclature reflecting its new 5547cc single overhead cam aluminum V-8 engine. This is definitely happy news underhood. The big V-8 (338.5 cu in.) cranks out 227 hp at 4750 rpm and 279 lb-ft of torque at 3250 rpm. That's 46% more horsepower than was previously available in the 380SL.

A mechanical/electronic fuel injection setup is used along with breakerless ignition. The rear wheels are powered through a 4-speed automatic that encourages driver participation.

The front suspension uses double control arms, coil springs, gas-filled shocks, and an anti-roll bar with anti-dive geometry. The rear suspension, also independent, uses semi-trailing arms, coil springs, gas-filled shocks, and an anti-roll bar. *Koppelachse* (an-

ti-squat torque compensation to you) has been built in as a response to the new motor's added torque. Tires are 205/65VR15s fitted to 15 x 7.0-in. alloy wheels. Steering is power recirculating ball. The 4-wheel power disc brakes (vented fronts) incorporate Bosch anti-lock hardware.

The exterior reminds us of the days before stylists took up residence at wind tunnels. For 1986, an airdam was added to reduce front-end lift 17%. Aside from that, this is the automotive equivalent of a "handsome older man." It's graying at the temples but still looks good.



The interior of the Mercedes is dominated by a steering wheel seemingly large enough to pilot the *Titanic*. Gauges are attractive and complete, and the automatic temperature control is so simple even we were immediately able to deduce how it worked.

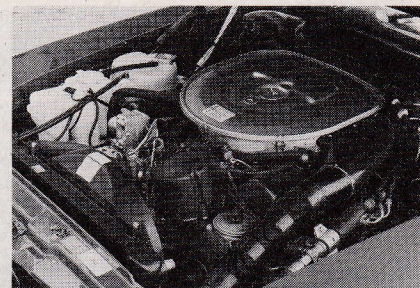
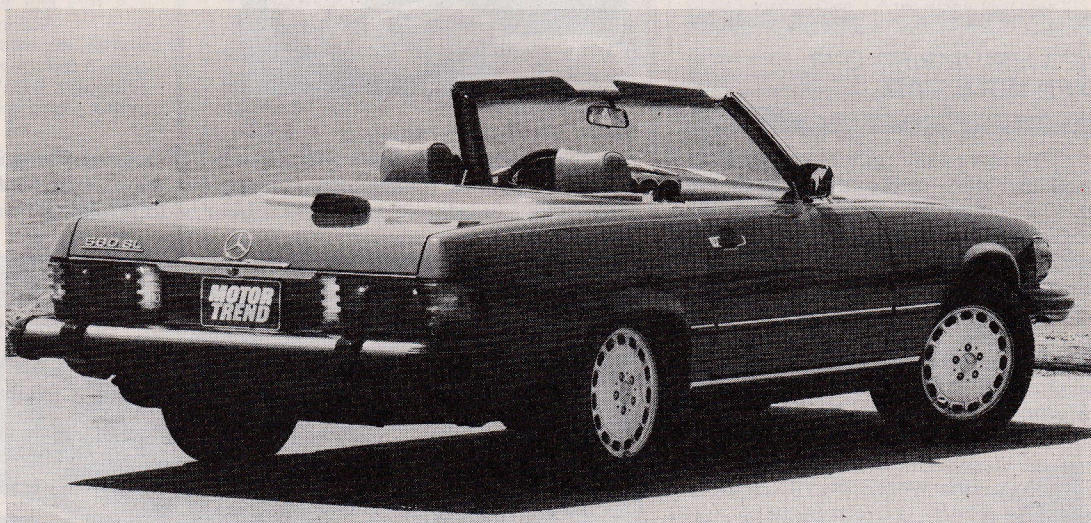
Intuition isn't good enough on the manual convertible top (a steel hardtop is also part of the deal), but once you know the drill, it works fine. One might think that at \$50,000-plus, the 560SL would have an automatic top, but nooooo.

Corvette Roadster

All the early Corvettes were Roadsters. Now, after a 10-year hiatus, the Vette ragtop is back.

Obviously, the Roadster shares much with the front engine coupe, including the venerable 5733cc pushrod V-8. Perhaps pushrods aren't the wave of the future, but with tuned port fuel injection, the engine lets loose with 230 hp at 4000 rpm and a whopping 330 lb-ft of torque at a leisurely 3200 rpm. The Roadster en-

The flagship of topless luxury motoring, the 560SL offers the traditional M-B high-rent interior, but the top is only a manual unit. Definitely a car for those who have made it.



A booming 227-hp V-8 puts the 560SL on the edge of performance-car status, but it was the slowest of the three.

All the early Vettes were Roadsters; now, after a 10-year hiatus, it's back

gines are all equipped with the new, trick aluminum heads, which not only weigh 40 lb less than their cast iron counterparts but also up the compression ratio from 9:1 to 9.5:1. Standard trans on the ragtop is the 4-speed overdrive automatic, but our test car was equipped with the no-cost optional 4-speed manual with overdrive available on the top three gears. In essence, you have seven speeds at your beck and call.

The Vette's suspension is unusual, to say the least. Unequal-length upper and lower A-arms are used up front in conjunction with a transverse plastic monoleaf spring and tube shocks. In the rear, there's another monoleaf spring plus trailing and transverse links and, of course, tube shocks. In addition, more than a dozen braces and stiffeners have been added to enable the convertible version to reach (and in some cases exceed) the rigidity of the coupe.

The convertible rolls on unidirectional P255/50VR16 tires mounted on 16 x 9.5-in. alloy wheels. Steering is power rack and pinion, and the vented front and rear disc brakes in-

corporate Bosch ABS II.

We've always had the feeling the current Corvette's shape was attractive but not quite exciting enough. The convertible version takes care of that. Top-up or top-down, this is a great-looking car.

Its interior is equipped with multi-adjustable seats studded with side bolsters and internal air bladders. The LED dash takes a lot of heat, but delivers the information, and, subjectively, I like it. (Other staffers don't share my enthusiasm.)

All of us had nothing but praise for the convertible top arrangement.



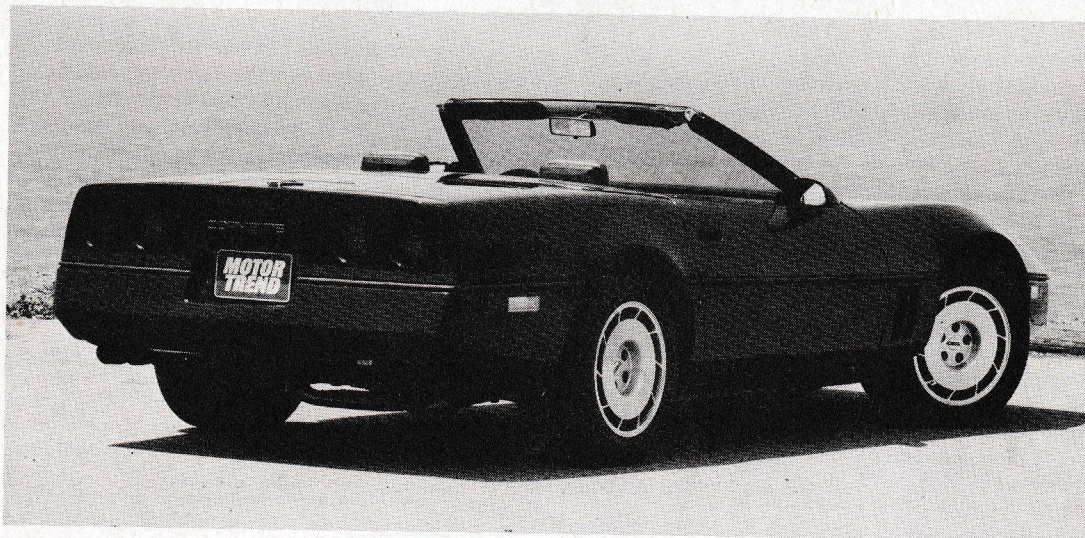
Manual operation is easy, and the top stows under a flush-fitting fiberglass tonneau, the equal of which we haven't seen since the Corvette Roadster was discontinued in 1975.

Performance Ratings

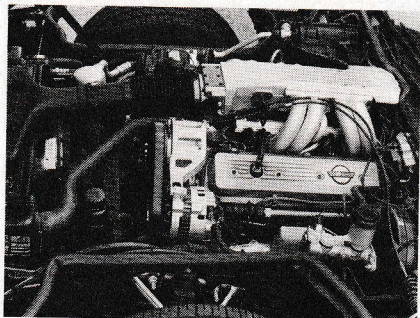
Fine, you know the players. Now, you'd probably like to know how they did. First, let's look at the objective performance data obtained at our friendly neighborhood test track. As you can see by the accompanying chart, the 911 Cabrio was fastest from 0-60 and through the quarter mile, but its edge on the other two was miniscule. All three cars are fast—0-60 in just over 6.5 sec, quarter-mile ETs in the 15-sec-flat range, and top speeds in excess of 135 mph.

Braking tests turned up a significant edge for the Corvette. With its ABS, the Vette halted from 60 mph in just 128 ft, substantially better than the Porsche (134 ft) and Mercedes (136 ft). The 30-0 marks backed up the Vette's superiority.

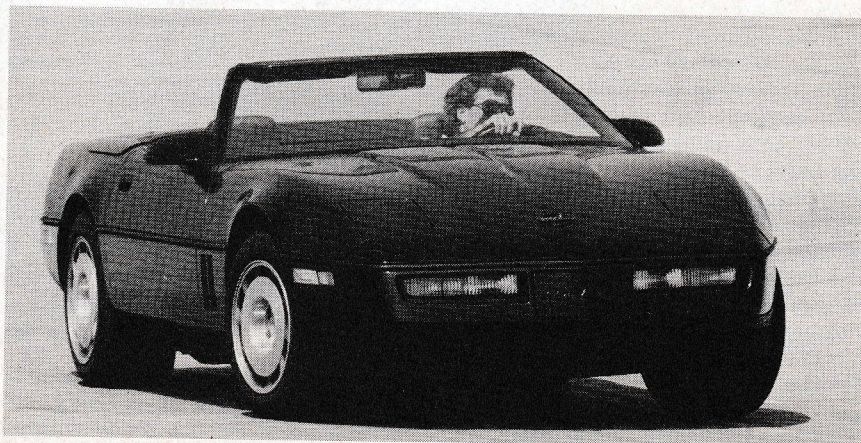
On the skidpad, the Corvette won out over the Porsche by a whisker-



The best-looking Vette yet, and a great tourer on the interstate as well as back roads. The manual top is a delight to operate and stows in a nifty, flush-fitting fashion.



Massive amounts of torque at a moment's notice is the strength of the Vette's 230-hp V-8. The easiest of the three to drive.



If any of these cars appeared in your driveway, it would be a windfall

thin margin (0.90 g to 0.89 g) while it beat the 560SL and its narrower tires by quite a bit. Overall, we'd call the Vette the performance winner, although a case could be made for the 911 Cabriolet in sheer speed. We also must admit that we were pleasantly surprised by the performance of the Mercedes 560SL given that it's aimed at a slightly different audience. This is a car that can play in the performance big leagues.

Subjective Ratings

Okay, you've heard that opinions are like noses—everybody's got one. Well, after three full days of behind-the-wheel duty, each of us was ready to reveal our opinions to all because it was behind the wheel where the Corvette really pulled away from the other two. In three key categories—powertrain, overall handling, and dollar value—Chevy's finest was a consensus winner. A single 2nd place vote prevented it from being the consensus choice in styling/design as well. The Mercedes placed well where you would expect it to place well—1st in quality control, comfort/convenience, chassis stiffness, and luggage space/accessibility. And the 911 Cabriolet, though well liked by all, didn't score an outright win in any category.

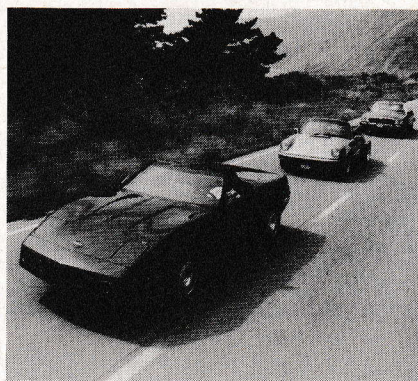
Let's eavesdrop on a few key comments. In styling/design, Henry Thomas probably summed it up best when he said, "The Vette body was meant to be a convertible." Greg Brown liked the Porsche, calling it "the 'classic' of the three."

It was Mike Brockman who caught the group's mood on quality control, saying "Mercedes is synonymous with the words." Overall, the 911 was no slouch in quality either though there were a few niggling details that were slightly amiss—the tonneau fit and some interior touches among them. Everything in the Corvette seemed screwed together well, and the car was relatively rattle-free, but the competition was just too much.

In comfort and convenience, the 560SL took another win largely on the basis of its ride quality and quiet elegance. None of us was too enamored of its flat leather seats for spirited driving, though. Several also felt the Porsche seats needed more lateral support, and one called the interior "an ergonomic nightmare." The Vette scored a strong 2nd with praise for the seats "once you were able to get in them."

In handling and powertrain, the

Corvette ran away and hid from its two competitors. If the Corvette was just a shade better than the Porsche on the skidpad, it was much easier than the Porsche to drive fast in most situations, and we'd attribute this almost as much to its flexible powerband as to its excellent roadholding. The Vette simply has torque and horsepower on tap everywhere on the rev band, while the Porsche's power is concentrated up north of 5000 rpm. The Porsche might dive into corners



with as much aplomb as the Corvette, but the Vette would nearly always leave it in its wake accelerating out.

The Mercedes, on the other hand, didn't lack much in horsepower. Its softer suspension and relatively narrower tires doomed its ability to stay with the Vette.

In top-down hammer-down mode, we also found wind-buffeting a real problem in the 911 Cabriolet. Its shape seemed to suck wind into the cockpit, and it felt ready to hang it up at about 120 mph, while both the Vette and the Merc at that speed seemed to have a bit left.

In chassis stiffness (not suspension stiffness), the Mercedes was the winner. It's a tight, tight box—no shakes or rattles. With its new braces, the Vette turned in a creditable score, and the Porsche fared well, too. These aren't rattletraps like a few chopped convertibles we could name.

Thomas the Droll summed up the luggage space category with, "If it has a trunk, it wins." The Merc did and did. The Porsche has a vestigial trunk up front, which can keep a briefcase and some soft bags out of sight. In the Vette, anything bigger than a breadbox must be stored under the folded top.

Finally, in the most important category of all—dollar value, where you put up your hard-earned change—the Corvette was the unanimous choice. If it hadn't been, there would have been something wrong—it won both in performance (in a close race with the 911) and in the subjective categories, plus it's the least expensive, by far. As to the other two rowdy rag-tops, well, we certainly wouldn't complain if either were to spend long periods in our garage. In this field, all the cars are winners. We're just glad we had a chance to play with them for a while. Mr

Performance Comparison

	0-60 (sec)	¼ Mile (sec)	60-0 (ft)	30-0 (ft)	Skidpad (g)
Corvette Roadster	6.68	15.22	128	30	0.90
Porsche 911 Cabriolet	6.61	14.99	136	34	0.89
Mercedes-Benz 560SL	6.81	15.37	136	34	0.80

Scoring

	Corvette Roadster	Porsche 911 Cabriolet	Mercedes- Benz
Styling/design	11	9	4
Quality control	5	8	11
Comfort/convenience	7	5	12
Overall handling	12	8	4
Powertrain	12	4	8
Chassis stiffness	8	7	9
Luggage space	4	8	12
Dollar value	12	6	6
Total	71	55	66

Points awarded by four testers on a 3-2-1 scale, 3 being highest.
Maximum points available to high-ranking vehicle in each category is 12.