

What's it really like out there ?

PART TWO

By Gary Witzenburg

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the first installment, our intrepid writer/racer co-drove Rick Hay's Greenwood-bodied IMSA road racing Corvette for the first time at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course near Lexington, Ohio. Hay started the 48-car race in 19th and Witzenburg relieved him after one hour, finally bringing the car in with a left-rear wheel vibration caused by a cracked wheel and two missing lug nuts. Hay continued after repairs and worked his way to as high as eighth before losing the right rear wheel, to the same sort of fatigue problem, and skidding to a stop next to the guardrail . . . out of the race.

My second try at co-driving the 600-hp Hay Corvette came two weeks later at Road Atlanta near Gainesville, Georgia, a challenging and picturesque course cut out of rolling clay hills of Carter Country. There's little room for error there since the track is mostly bordered by tall clay banks that like to eat race cars for breakfast, lunch and dinner when a mistake is made. Like Mid-Ohio, Road Atlanta is 2.5 miles around; but unlike the Ohio track, it has few really tight corners.

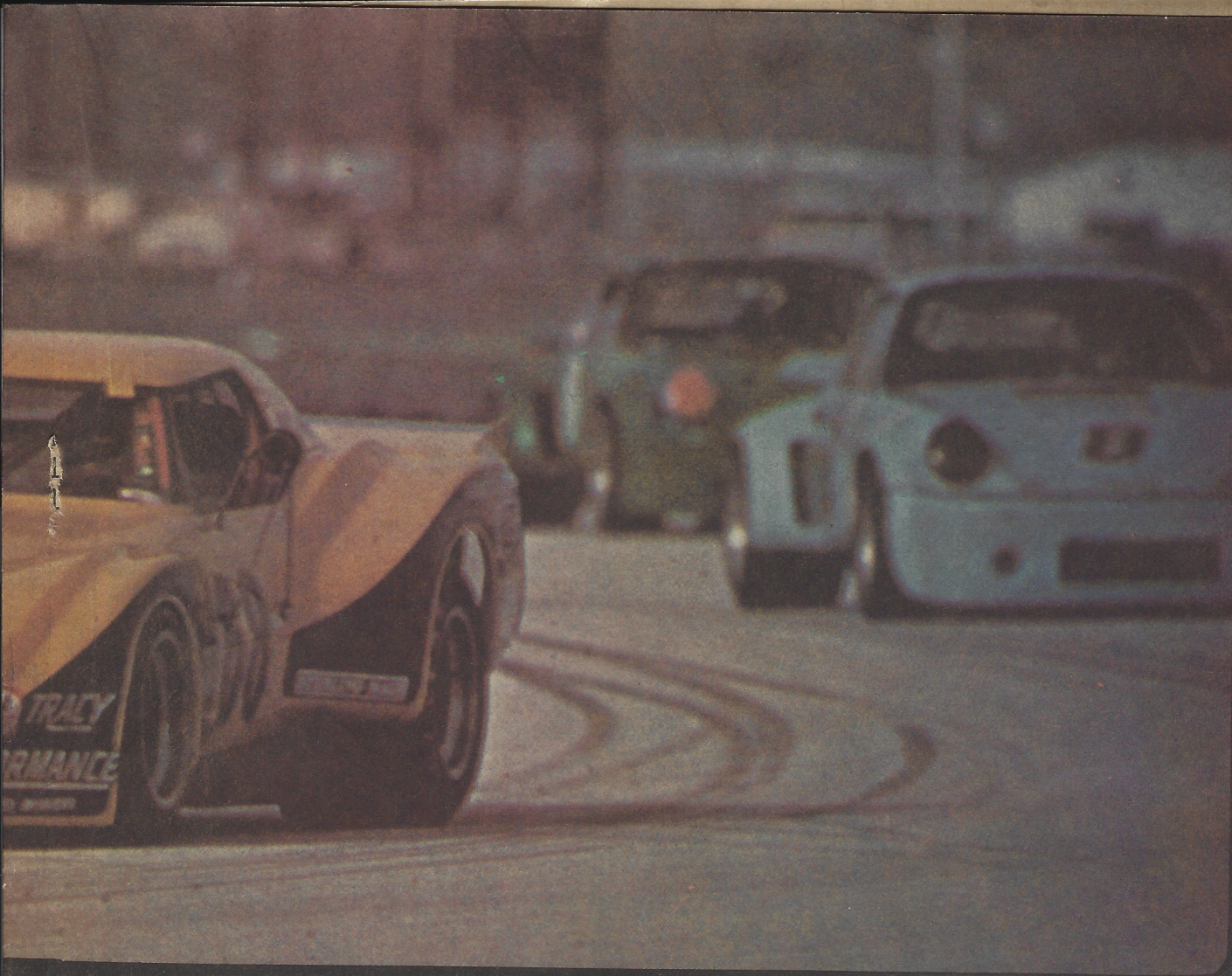


Photo by Bob Fischer

The long start/finish straight leads to a fast uphill right-hander, which opens into a left jog at the hill's crest, followed by a quick right known as Turn Three. The exit of Three is a sweeping left, and then there's the challenge of a fast, scary downhill plunge to the right. The track makes an "S" at the bottom of this hill, which makes hard braking for the slow, uphill, left-hand Turn Five a tricky proposition.

Once slowed, downshifted and drifted through Five, you get a "short rest" at which point the course unwinds in a straight line over a couple of small rises. Here the 600-hp Corvette gets up to 120 or more but then you have to brake hard again and grab the next-lower gear for Turn Six, a medium-fast, slightly-banked 90-degree right and the track's slowest corner.

Accelerating out of Seven in second gear, you find yourself on Road Atlanta's very long back "straight," which is really a series of ups and downs that ends in a blind, steep, downhill right-hand bend. The first hill-crest makes the car go "light" and you lose a little rear-wheel traction at about 90. The second hill is approached at about 165 in the Corvette. At that speed, it's the hairiest part of the course. The road disappears from beneath you and by the time you

feel your wheels in touch with pavement again, you've moved from far-right to far-left without turning the steering wheel. The downhill plunge then continues with the track still curving slightly right before it jogs back left in the valley and starts uphill again. At the top of that hill is another fast blind right-hander (Turn 11) under a spectator bridge, and then you're streaking steeply downhill again toward the last fast right-hand turn leading back onto the start/finish straight. Most Road Atlanta races are won and lost through this final series of hills and curves.

Having never driven Atlanta before, my first task would be to learn the course. Friday is Press Day, when competitors practice for free if they agree to give demonstration rides to journalists during the lunch break. Earlier in the season I had taken such a ride in a very competitive Porsche Carrera, and now here I was driving the course for the first time with some trusting writer sitting on the floor and hanging onto the roll bar beside me. To make it worse, Dic Van der Feen, the IMSA PR guy, was cracking jokes about my driving and asking the writer assigned to my car if his insurance was paid up. I explained to the writer that I didn't know the course, but he said, "That's okay." Had I

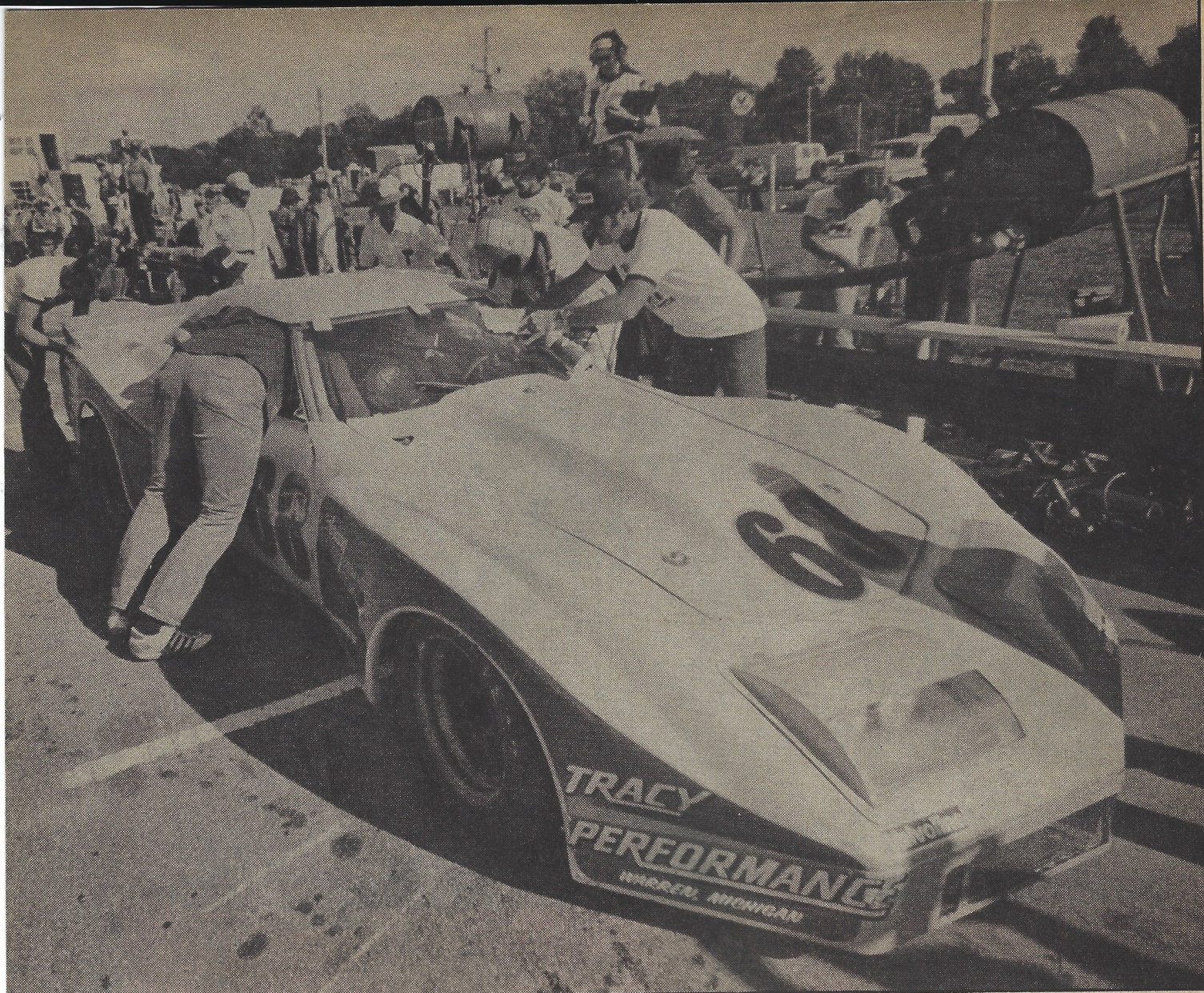


Photo by Bob Fischer

been in his position, I would have said, "Thanks but no thanks" and gotten out.

Surprisingly or should I say fortunately, the press rides went okay (except that my fourth passenger and I ran out of gas halfway around and had to hitch a ride back. I noticed while practicing, I was still having trouble with the difficult left/right Turn Three combination and was a bit intimidated by the 165-mph downhill curve at the end of the back straight. That hill has destroyed a number of Corvettes over the years, and I couldn't help easing off the throttle just a tad before the crest and giving the brakes a quick test at the bottom—to make sure they were still there. As you might imagine, this was hurting my lap times by about two seconds compared to Rick's.

The car was cornering better than it had at Mid-Ohio thanks to a brand new set of Sterling magnesium racing wheels that were wider at the front (13") and slightly narrower at the rear (15") than Rick's old steel wheels. The change gave us a better front-to-rear traction balance, doing away with most of the annoying front-end understeer that had caused us problems on the tighter Mid-Ohio course. Unfortunately, however, the brakes were bad as

"Everything's fine," Rick yelled. "Just take it easy and finish." While those encouraging words were given, the crewmen check over the Corvette, refuel it and clean the windshield. The valve in the overhead fueling rig that gave Rick problems is seen to the right of the picture. The valve is part of the hose coupling attached to the 55-gallon fuel drum.

ever, meaning we had to get on them much sooner than most people did going into the turns.

With intermittent brake trouble and a sticking throttle during the qualifying session, Rick managed to place us only 21st in the 41-car field. But once those problems were solved and the race began, he was moving quickly through the pack. The car was running perfectly, handling well and would have been even more competitive with a good set of racing brakes. Brakes are of major importance on a road racing course because the better they are, the farther you can go at full throttle before having to use them. If you brake sooner than someone you're racing with, he can drive right by you as you approach a turn even though you've out accelerated him down the straight. It's frustrating. But good racing brakes cost a *ton* of money, and at that time Rick just

couldn't afford a set for his car.

As it turned out though, the Georgia heat and humidity became our biggest enemy. With that monster 454 engine set back a foot in the Corvette's chassis, the heat coming through the thin firewall on a hot day is incredible. Many drivers use an air hose to blow fresh air on their faces. Additionally, some suck cool water or Gatorade through a tube from a floor-mounted plastic bottle. When the heat became too much, we had none of those luxuries. Neither of us had

"The road disappears from beneath you and by the time you feel your wheels in touch with pavement again, you've moved from far-right to far-left without turning the steering wheel."

been seriously affected by heat in a race car before, so we foolishly thought we wouldn't need that sort of relief.

The plan, as at Mid-Ohio, was for me to relieve Rick after the first hour and then hand the car back to him at the two-hour mark. Since the Corvette can go for more than an hour without refueling, it would allow us to finish with only two time-consuming pit stops if things went well. Things didn't go well. Rick came in exhausted after only 50 minutes, and I ran only about 45 minutes before starting to experience cold chills from dehydration.

(Continued on page 52)

Rick "puts it" to a Carrera at a tight right-hander.

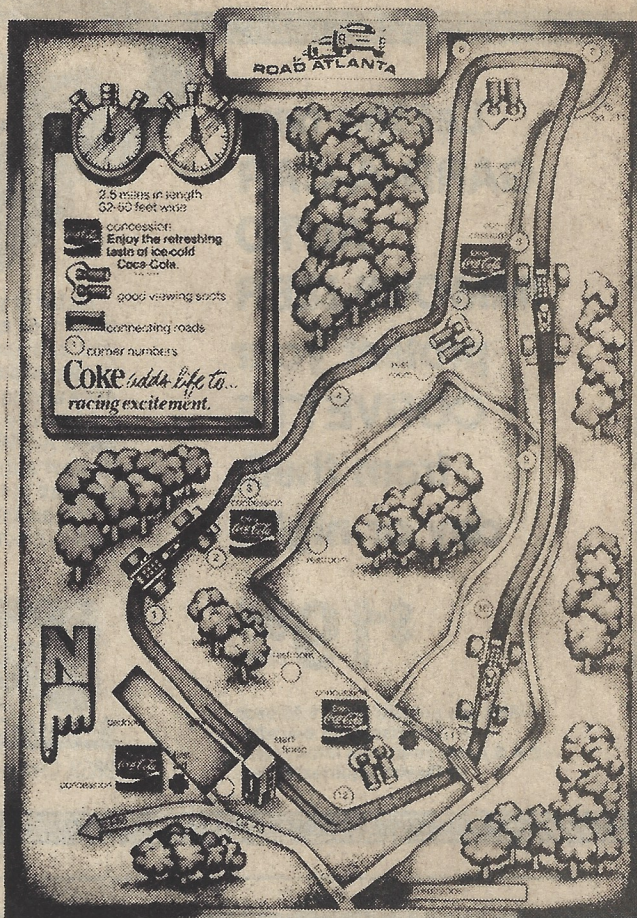
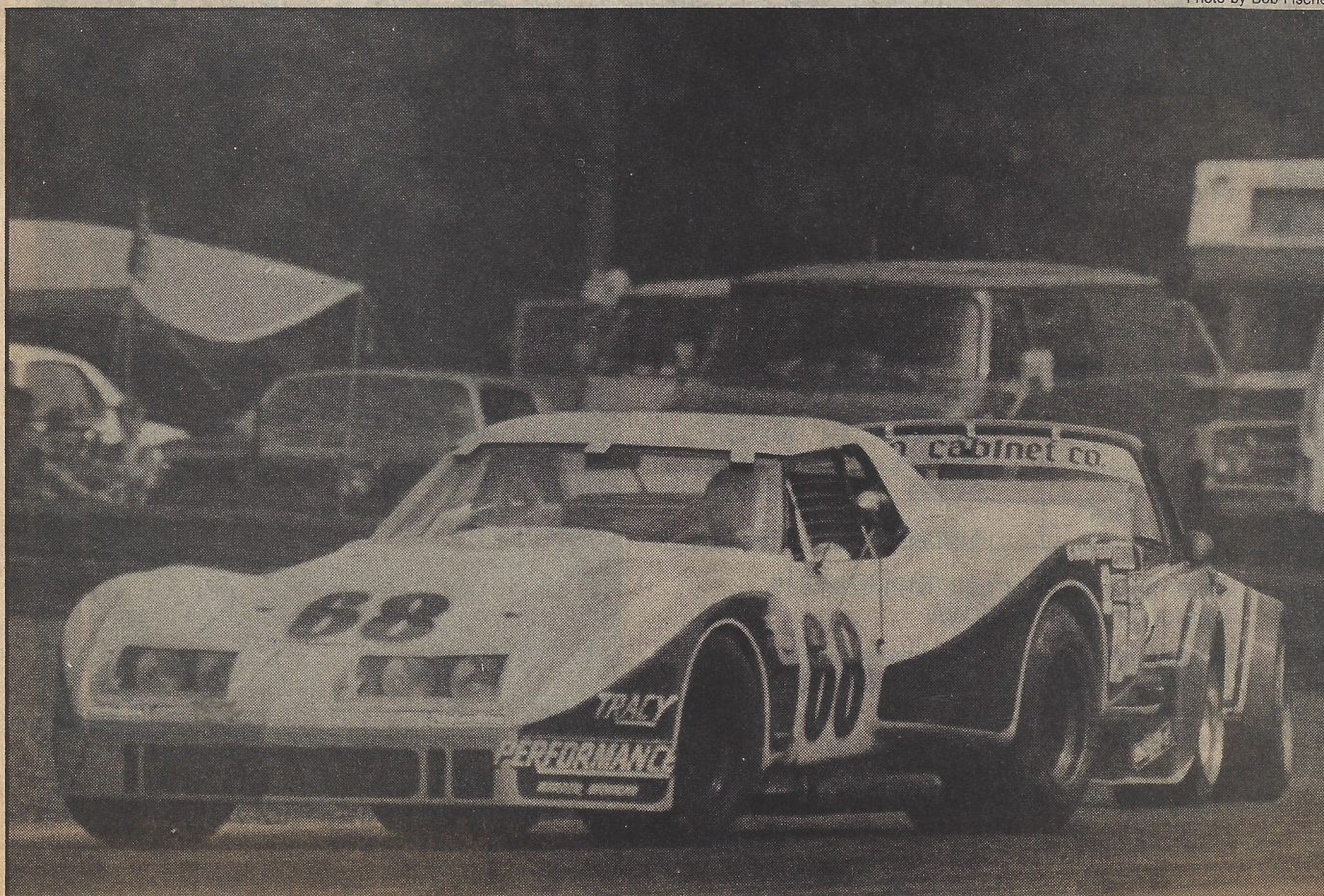
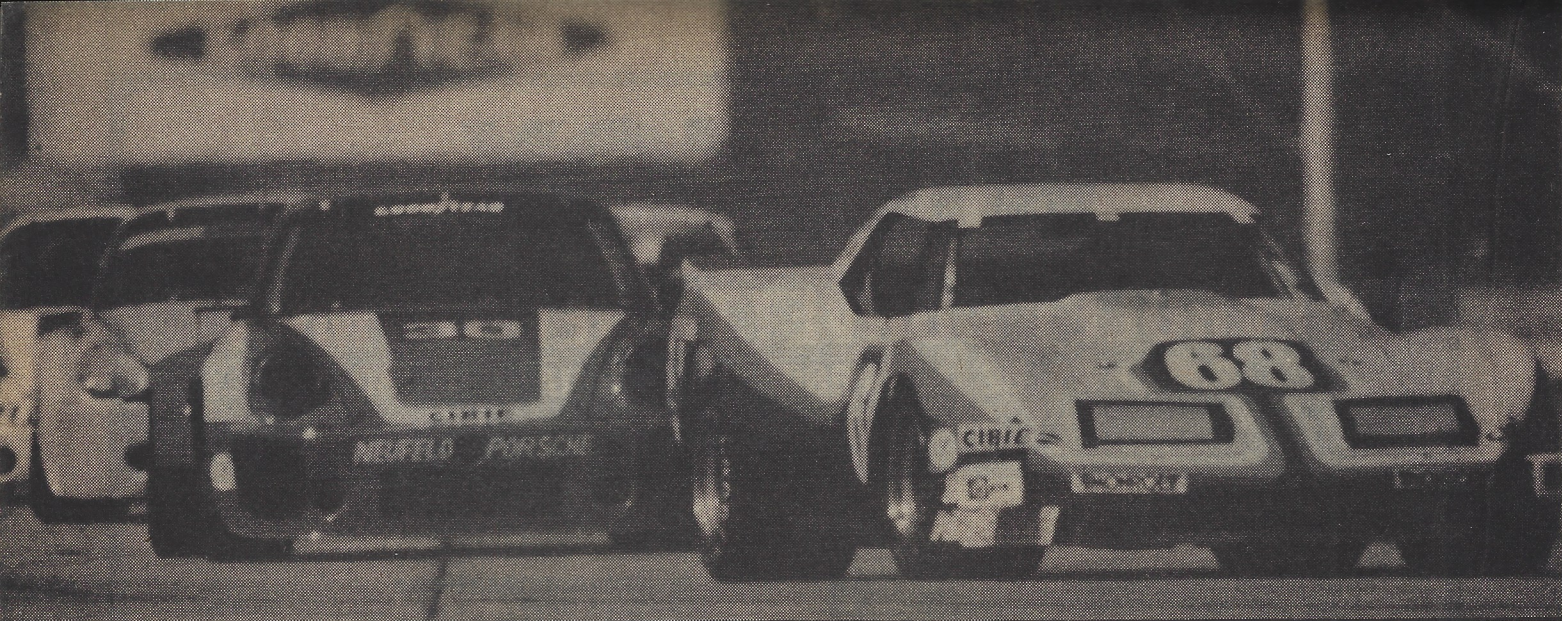
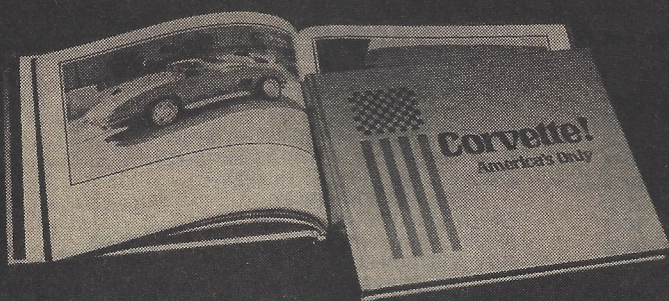


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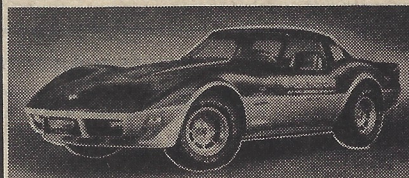
(Continued from page 37)

Just as I was about to give up and head for the pits, however, our friend and arch-rival Phil Currin came up behind me in his small block Corvette. With more power, I could stay ahead of him on the straights, but he was gaining about two seconds a lap on me due to better brakes and handling, not to mention a lot more Corvette and Road Atlanta racing experience. Forgetting my fatigue for the moment, I decided to hold him off for a lap or two.

I did keep ahead of Currin for another lap, but it was obvious that I was holding him up and would have to let him by. Arriving at that tricky left/right Turn Three maneuver with

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Phil hard on my tail, we came up behind a slower Porsche—who seemed to be moving to the left to let us through. But just as I started to go by, the Porsche zagged right across my bow toward the apex, and I had to nail the brakes to avoid broadsiding him. Meanwhile, Phil was in the process of passing me on the right.

Phil's black Corvette roared by, all four wheels in the grass to avoid me as I was avoiding the Porsche. Phil's Corvette just scraped my right-front fender with his left rear tire and he cleared the nose of my car only to T-bone the errant Porsche crossing our paths from the left which he obviously hadn't seen. As both of them careened off the track ahead of me, I found first gear and took off. It was a low-speed accident and caused little damage to either car. The incident gave me a chance to gain some ground before Phil could get going in the right direction again.

I did a couple of more laps before Currin re-appeared in my mirror and the cold chills were back, too. I decided then and there that I'd better call it a day and checked into the pits. By this time Rick was rarin' to go

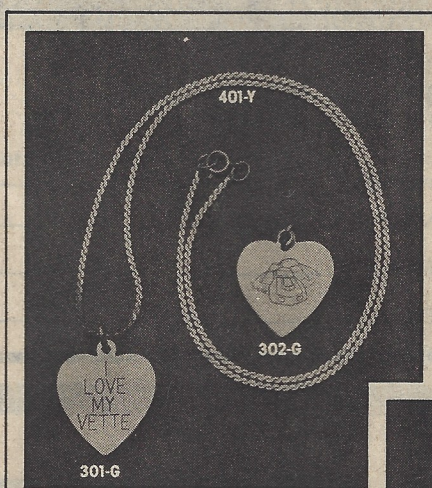
again, and off he went—only to return a few laps later with the car acting like it was running out of gas. Apparently, a valve jammed shut in the overhead fueling rig and little fuel had gotten into the car during the previous stop. This crew got him back under-way with a full tank of gas to finish the last 70 minutes or so.

Once out of the car, I nearly collapsed from exhaustion. Someone handed me a huge cup of Coke and then an equally large one

of lemonade, both of which I downed in about ten seconds flat. Still thirsty, I started dipping cups of ice-water out of the cooler. It took about two gallons of liquid to quench my thirst, probably because in one hour of hard work and heavy sweating, my body had completely emptied itself of water. I had to sit for a half-hour or so before my head was back to normal. Next time, I decided, I would have a fresh-air vent and a drinking bottle with tube in the car.

By that time, Al Holbert's Monza was leading the race, we were run-

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ning 10th a couple of laps behind. He was turning consistent 1:31's around the 2.5-mile course, compared to Rick's 1:34's and my 1:36's. We weren't too far off the pace. And best of all, the car was still running and handling well. If Rick could stay out for

the rest of the race, we could probably pick up a few more positions before it was over.

But with about 20 minutes to go, the yellow and blue Corvette came roaring back into the pits. The left-front tire was chunking, causing a high-

speed vibration. On top of that, Rick was tired and needed relief once again. Slipping the Nomex hood and helmet back on as quickly as possible, I jumped into the car and strapped in while the crew was attending to the bad tire. "Everything's

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"Rick came in exhausted after only 50 minutes, and I ran only about 45 minutes before starting to experience cold chills from dehydration."

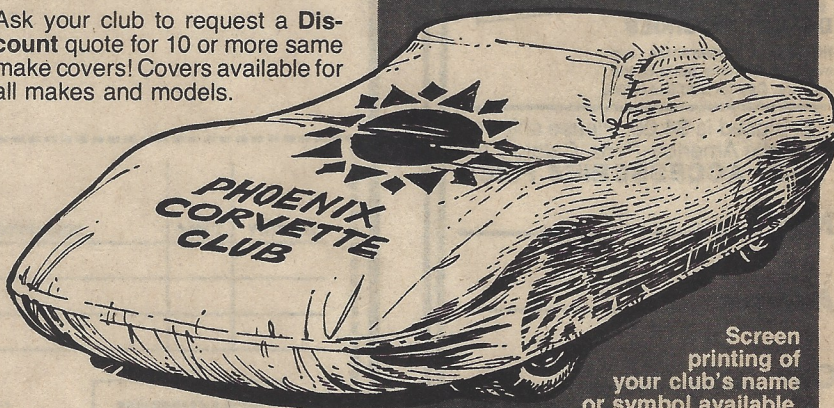
fine," Rick yelled in my ear. "Just take it easy and finish!" The wheel was so hot from the heavy braking that it had welded itself to the hub. It took a lot of grunting and pounding to get it off. Sitting in the hot cockpit, fired up and ready to go, it seemed like hours before the new wheel and tire went on. Down went the jack at least, and off I went down the long pit lane onto the

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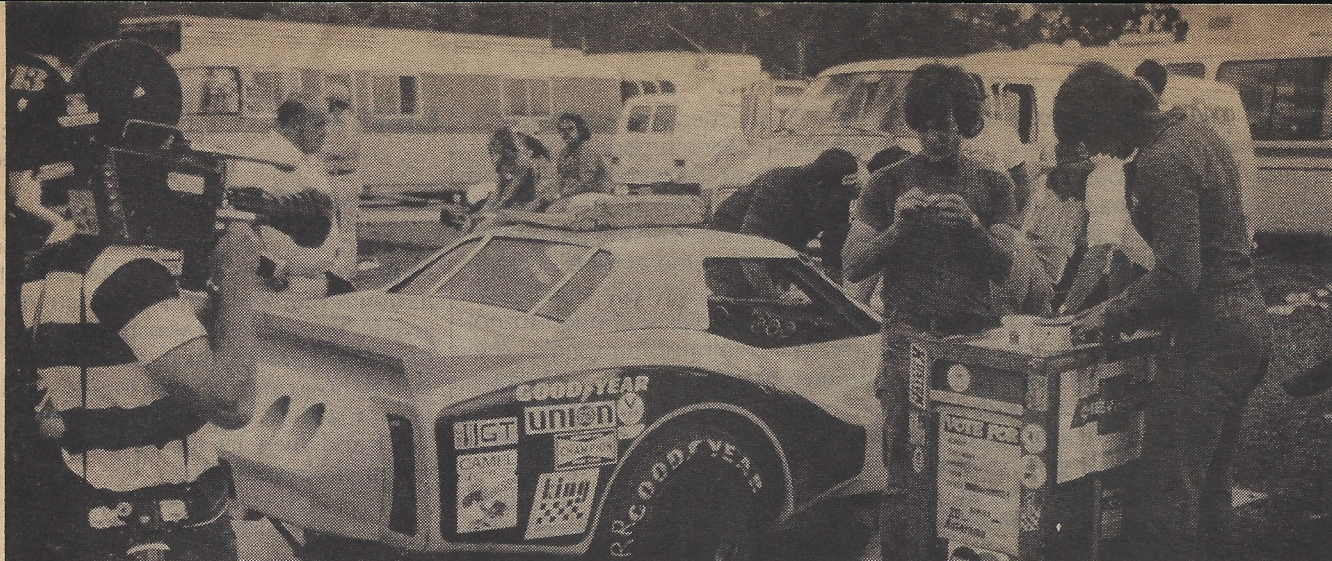


Photo by Gary Witzenburg

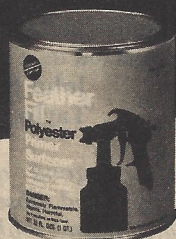
There are never-ending details that must be attended to. Here the crew puts finishing touches to the engine while a cameraman films the labors for a presentation on local TV. A nice touch for all Corvette owners who might work on their Corvettes is to consider rolling the Corvette over a plywood floor. It eliminates lost parts. The "RR" on the tire shown indicates that it is for the right rear.

track.

Unfortunately, we had only two 13" mags, so the spare front tire was on one of the old, 10" steel wheels, and it created a handling problem in right-hand corners—which most of them are on a road racing course. But I was rested, confident and much more familiar with the track by now. I felt good for those final few laps before the checkered flag, and just before the end I managed to regain the one posi-

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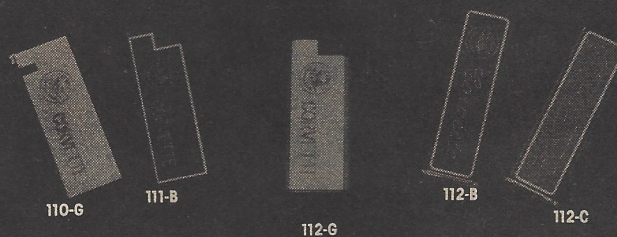
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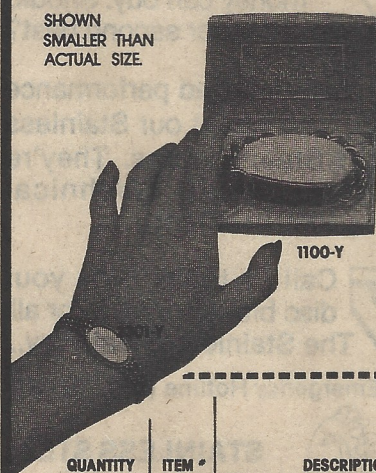
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tion we lost during our last unscheduled stop.

Finishing 10th doesn't sound like much, but it isn't bad in that tough IMSA GT field. It also brings some decent prize money to take home, and it's better than 31 other people did that day. Iron-man Currin somehow managed another excellent solo drive to finish sixth. He was the highest-placing Corvette driver. We were second best "in class." I apologized to Phil after the race for getting in his way. He said he was so tired at the time that he could barely remember the incident.

So I finally realized my long-time ambition of driving a good, fast IMSA car in professional competition. I had done it twice on two different tracks, managed to keep it on the pavement, hadn't blown up the engine or done anything else supremely stupid, and went at least quickly enough to not disgrace myself in the process. I've learned one thing for sure... it takes a lot more than two races to become an expert Corvette driver, but I feel confident of being able to do at least as well—maybe better—the next time should such a fantastic opportunity once again come my way.

LETTERS

(Continued from page 9)

so far as to try and contact the International Kart Federation listed in the article, but my letter was returned as having a wrong address. So my question is: how can you work me up with Gary's article and the kart racing story and then let me down with a wrong address? Help!

Spense Stevenson
San Francisco, CA

And that we did. The addresses of the two kart associations were incorrectly listed and should have been the following:

INTERNATIONAL KART
FEDERATION
416 South Grand
Covina, CA 91724

WORLD KART ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 2548
North Canton, OH 44720

Sorry about that.—Ed.

DOES IT OR NOT

Dear K/T,

Your article on the Corvette-Mulsanne (December 1978 issue) was interesting. The engine compartment caught my eye in particular. You mentioned the car was equipped with fuel injection, but the OVAL air cleaner appears to be the type used on tri-power carburetored cars such as the Dodge six packs and the hi-performance, tri-power equipped Thunderbirds of the early 1960's. To my knowledge, all tri-power Corvettes had TRIANGULAR-shaped air cleaners, didn't they? So what is it: fuel injected or a tri-power?

John Sangregorio
Taylor, MI

That's a good question and an equally good observation. I reread the article and looked at the original photo through a magnifying glass. My conclusion? I agree with you, it very definitely looks like a tri-power set-up, especially with the apparent fuel line leading to where three carburetors would normally rest. So our best guess is that these photos were taken when the Mulsanne Corvette was equipped with 3-2's. Like we said, good observation, John—Ed.

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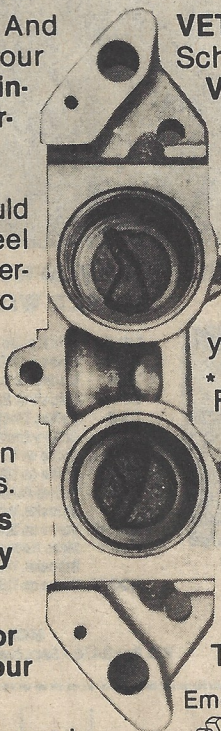
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VETTE, Jan. 78 by Marty Schorr, *editor*.

VETTE VUES, Sept. 77 by Bill Locke, *tech editor*.

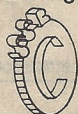
VETTE POWER, June 77 by Sal Zaino, *tech editor*.

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