



KING of the Open Road

ROAD RACERS PREFER CORVETTES FOR THE SILVER STATE CHALLENGE

BY FRANK BOHANAN

At the Silver State Classic Challenge open road race event held this past September, there were 124 vehicles entered and 50 of them were Corvettes. The majority of them were concentrated in the speed classes above 120 mph. That's pretty darn impressive, over 40 percent of the field being one type of car. In the 135-mph class, seven of eight cars entered were 'Vettes. The fastest 'Vette averaged 171.83.

The event is conducted on a 90-mile stretch of Nevada Highway 318, north of Ely. The road is closed down for the event, and there are numerous safety check points as well as air support and medical personnel ready to go. Thankfully, their services have rarely been needed. The safety record of these events is outstanding, and it's not by chance. Every vehicle receives a very thorough technical inspection before it is even allowed to run. The faster classes naturally require progressively more safety equipment in order to compete. Drivers also have to meet specific requirements. The lowest speeds require little more than a signed statement relative to your medical condition, while higher speeds require evidence of having graduated an approved driving school and/or other on-track experience consistent with the speeds to be run. Those with no formal experience can take a special driving school at the Derek Daly facility at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. With very few exceptions, first timers can't run at higher speeds unless they can demonstrate sufficient experience and/or training. Drivers in the unlimited class must demonstrate considerable experience at higher



The day before the actual running of the Silver State race there is a car show at a local school field where you can walk around and see most of the cars that will run. There is also the chance to go through tech inspection for those who had not already done so. Here we see the examples from latest three generations of Corvette represented.

speeds, since vehicles in this class have averaged 200-plus mph over 90 miles. The event actually holds the Guinness Book of World Records title for the highest recorded speed (207.7801 mph) on a public road. These events are extremely well run and really do provide an atmosphere you won't easily find elsewhere.

We won't go into much more detail about the event itself, since you can look it up on the Internet at www.silverstateclassic.com. We will, however, discuss the rules a bit more. There are 15 classes with different "target" speeds from 95 mph to 180 mph, which you try to match as closely as possible for your average speed. There's also an unlimited class where you just try to go faster than everyone. How your vehicle must be equipped is based on your "tech" speed; this is the fastest speed you can go without being caught/disqualified (they use random radar to check). For example, if you choose a target speed of 135 mph, you could have a tech speed of up to 165 mph that you could run. Only the unlimited tech speed is

higher than this.

All vehicles must first meet in a staging area, from which they will then drive in single file to the grid area just before the course. Once the road has been thoroughly inspected and declared safe to run on, cars will be let loose one at a time, with the spacing between vehicles varying based upon the speed class. When it's your turn to go, you will drive up to the start line where you will be stopped and a team of inspectors will give you, your navigator (if you have one) and your car the final once over. Once you've been cleared, you can then drive up to the line and prepare for your start.

Once you leave the line, you quickly settle into the pace you set for yourself to try to match your target speed (unless, of course, you're running unlimited). There are a lot of opinions on how to get as close as possible to the theoretically correct time/speed. Some involve the use of portable GPS units or similar electronic aids, while others simply involve a stopwatch and keeping track of mile markers. Many entrants use a time chart that tells

where you need to be on the course at a given elapsed time to cross the finish line at the proper time to exactly average the target speed. You have to have some sort of strategy to even come close to your target. How fast you think you go through the slower portions of the course is a major factor. You have to balance out the slow portions with fast portions to try to hit the average.

For example, it takes exactly 40 minutes to run the 90-mile course at a 135-mph average speed, theoretically making it a bit easier to stay on track time wise. Believe it or not, some people have this down to where they only miss the target speed by thousandths of a second! The winner in the 130-mph class at the 2008 Silver State event was only off by 0.0057 sec./0.0003 mph after 90 miles! Incredible!!! Even the winner of the 170-mph class was only off by about 0.1 sec/0.001 mph. Even if you don't worry about trying to match your target speed so precisely, the race is a great way to see an extremely interesting and diverse



TOP: While not as common, C3 and older Corvettes have been known to run in these events. This '79 model ran in the 125-mph class and had a recorded top speed of 151 mph.

LEFT: This Greenwood-inspired '92 ZR-1 averaged 171.8342 and had a "high Trap" speed that topped out at 177 mph, running in the 170-mph class. Very interesting body/aero kit.

RIGHT: To say many, if not most, of the entrant in the Silver State race are both creative and entertaining in their pursuit of speed would be an understatement. Note the rear cooling setup.

gathering of vehicles that are actually driven; and driven hard. No concours trailer queens here! At these speeds, you'll also find out pretty quickly if there's anything wrong with your car relative to things like cooling capacity, vibrations, aerodynamic balance, handling and so forth

So why does Corvette have such a dominant presence? Well, there are a few reasons. One we all pretty much already know: it's hard to beat a late model Corvette in terms of performance value for the dollar. There isn't really any competition when you look at new cars priced similarly to the base C6

or a new Z06. With the new ZR1, only the Viper ACR is a valid challenger, and it doesn't come close in terms of refinement and daily driveability. Nissan GTR? Maybe, but it's not exactly a true, lightweight sports car like a 'Vette is, and you won't get one anywhere near sticker. Not for a while, anyway. Start talking about picking up something a few years old and the value equation really gets interesting in terms of the level of performance you can get for the dollar. Combine that with the plethora of speed parts available, plus the relative ease of modification, and it's no wonder Corvettes are such a

popular choice, not only here, but also at track days and in many other forms of racing.

Corvettes also have another unfair advantage by virtue of the rules for the Silver State race. Due to their composite body structure, newer (C4 and up) closed-body Corvettes are not required to have a roll bar installed until they will run with an unlimited tech speed. Up to the 165-mph tech speed, only a removable harness bar is required. You can just bolt in your bar and your safety harnesses for the race, and then take them out when the car is returned to street duty. Most other vehicles cannot



TOP LEFT: The interior of the fastest car was clearly all business. It was pretty similar to a road race car in terms of the roll cage. Note the fire extinguisher nozzles and the take-off wheel. Okay, okay, it's not a Corvette. This '96 Camaro averaged 198.3427 mph over the 90-mile course and had a 203-mph high trap speed.

TOP RIGHT: While most of the cars run with a driver and a navigator, the driver of the fastest car did just fine without the added "ballast." Running solo would seem to be his normal driving mode.

BOTTOM: All vehicles first meet in a pre-staging area where there's a place to buy some snacks and some water,

etc. A truck even comes by with unleaded racing gas in 104 and 111 octane flavors at \$8-plus per gallon for those who need it. After staging, the cars are led to the pre-grid area in the order they will go down the course. That's when you can get a last chance to look everything over and enjoy the scenery both on and off the pavement. The whole event is pretty much over by lunch time on Sunday.

do this, so running them at higher speeds means more of a commitment in terms of modification.

A basically stock vehicle can go out and run safely at very high speeds with little more than a harness bar and maybe a few anchor bolts for the crotch belts. The car has the power, the aero, the handling and even the tires to get up to these lofty speeds and stay there without any real cause for concern. True, as you get into the really high speed classes, you

probably will want to look at things like extra cooling capability and heat shielding, etc., but you may not have to, depending upon how fast you want to go. And it's certainly not a bad idea to add extra safety equipment as well; you just may not have to. Once you go for unlimited tech, you're required to add race-level safety equipment anyway, but it's pretty amazing that you can go up to 160 mph or so for a half hour-plus in a more or less stock Corvette. And you

can do it relatively safely, comfortably and then turn around and get 25 or so mpg on the drive home. If that doesn't put Corvette in the running for the "King of the Road" title, I'm not sure what would. Factor in cost, and the 'Vette should have a lock on it. Either way, the Corvette will likely remain the most popular vehicle at the Silver State Classic Challenge (and its sister event, the Nevada Open Road Challenge, held in May) for a long time to come. ■