

FLAT-OUT *Continued*

into the red zone, and its torque convertor was slipping under the pressure of an unyielding right leg. The Corvette's time was within striking distance.

The Corvette engineer, still cool and collected in his three-piece suit, had simplified the contest to three contradictory engineering curves. First, he knew power output falls with rising engine temperature. Secondly, the length of the run determined how hot—and therefore how powerful—the engine would be as it passed through the traps. And thirdly, there was a minimum acceleration distance necessary to achieve terminal speed.

By trial and error, the Corvette engineer/human computer found the one starting point that optimized all the curves. It was worth 132.2 mph and no more.

If the Corvette is a whoosh through the traps, then the truck is a boom. Its prow smites the wind and the shock wave rumbles over the horizon like an earthquake. By the time the red and chrome blur was in focus, you could see Michael Jordan or Patrick Bedard or Terry Cook—we all took turns—jaw clenched, every muscle taut, wishing this beast faster and faster. Twin heat waves billowed out the tall stacks while a miniature blast furnace growled under the hood. And when it passed, there was the momentary silence of a hurricane's eye, followed quickly by a roiling wake that ruffled our hair and scattered our scorecards. The timer punched out a 118.8-mph average.

The big guns seized most of the excite-

ment, but there were other worthy accomplishments. The two-liter king was the Porsche 924, piercing the air with barely a ruffle at 118.2 mph. With its tiny motor peaked at 6300 rpm, the Porsche proved an aerodynamic point. A low drag body (C_d in this case is 0.36) is a wonderful way to wrap 110 horsepower.

The Mazda never seemed to work up a sweat. Its rotary motor felt equally content humming along at seven grand or three grand. Fuel-economy priorities have geared this car so tall that it's faster in fourth than fifth. The wind stopped the Cosmo at a two-way average of 111.6 mph, only 0.1 mph below the Thunderbird.

There's no distinguishing valve-cover insignia for the Thunderbird motor anymore. Pay extra and you get just another blue 400-cubic inch powerplant from Ford's Engine and Foundry Division. It could just as well fit in a Mark or an LTD with its two-barrel carburetor and polite idle. But given enough road, it too will probably go 111.7 mph in still air.

In the Chevrolet camp, the top spot was pretty well pinned down, but the never-say-die PR man had his eye on number three as well. The Monza Spyder offered a clean shape powered by a two-barrel, 305-cubic inch version of the small-block motor and the tallest gear on the lot. It had to pull through an automatic transmission so acceleration was soft, but it could easily clock the century mark in second.

A year of development has been good to this car. Carburetor calibrations are richer

in 1978 for a little more power. The restyled front end has but a single slit opening instead of last year's narrow row of louvers. This aerodynamic improvement alone is supposedly worth two mph in top speed. Together, all of these aids added up to 119.5 mph. This left the Monza well behind the Trans Am, and yet comfortably at the top of the second echelon, which also contained the Little Red Truck and the Porsche 924.

Except for the ill-fated Kelmark GT, there was but one car that had to struggle for its 110-mph badge and that was the Saab Turbo. The two-liter engine under its hood is very much like the Porsche 924's—a crossflow, single-overhead-cam, in-line four. But the Saab packed today's super deterrent—a turbocharger—and we hoped it would more than make up for the tall bathtub body. Still, the plum prototype (production cars will land here in January 1978) barely edged over 110 mph with a 0.3-mph margin.

Saab's turbocharger philosophy didn't take our Double-the-Double-Nickel Run-offs into consideration. Their engineers picked an exhaust-pressure-controlled waste gate to fatten up the mid-range for around-town driving. The torque curve peaks early and stays flat to the redline, so the Saab isn't like most turbo cars, where thrust climbs right to the rev limit. Still, the Saab had other strengths.

The next event was 110-55 mph braking, and this proved to be rougher than top speed for some of the cars. Keep in mind



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