

SWEET SPOT

Every car enthusiast should surely own a Corvette at some point. Its bang for the buck is hard to beat, offering exhilarating power and performance at a very reasonable price—considering the number of times it's been successfully pitted against the likes of Ferrari in comparison tests—and it delivers the fuel mileage of an economical midsize sedan.

The first decisions in choosing a favorite Corvette are simultaneously the easiest and the hardest. Coupe or convertible? Manual or automatic? What is your budget, and how fast do you want to go? Track time? And, only a bit more subjectively, is there a pecking order in your neck of the woods?

We'd go for a manual, which with the Corvette is a win-win, delivering slightly higher fuel mileage than the automatic. But to each their own.

The coupe/convertible decision is tough with a

lot of cars: with a Jaguar, Aston Martin, Porsche 911 or many others, the sleek styling of the coupe is hard to beat. But there's no substitute for top-down fun. Most convertibles add significant weight to the car—often hundreds of pounds—partly from the mechanisms, but mostly from extra structure needed for body rigidity. In the Corvette, conceived to be either from the get-go, the weight penalty is just 13 pounds on the standard car, and surprisingly a 22-pound advantage with the convertible in the Grand Sport.

On paper, we'd have a hard time deciding this one; but having driven the GS Convertible for a week, we'd almost surely go ragtop. If you're after a Z06 or ZR1, those are coupe-only. Anybody would love a ZR1 (with or without track use, but especially with), and anybody would love a Z06, but they're pricey.

But good news.

JOE SAGE



REASONABLE MIDDLE GROUND

Enter the Corvette Grand Sport. It has panache, power and a great price. A Z06 starts more than \$25,000 higher than a base Corvette, and the ZR1 more than \$62k higher (more than double the base model's price). But for just \$5000 more on the convertible (or under \$6k more on the coupe), you can have the Grand Sport. The engine is the same, the horsepower is the same, the weight is actually a bit higher. Yet the Grand Sport shaves a quarter second off the base Corvette's zero-to-60 time. Handling is enhanced, it tricks out some style points, and it adds several amenities.

The Grand Sport has wide-body styling (including specific front fenders with integrated Grand Sport badges), a wider track, racing-bred suspension, wider wheels and tires, revised suspension including shocks, stabilizer bars and springs. There are specific gear ratios on manual transmission models and a specific rear axle ratio on automatic-equipped models.

Skidpad performance is an impressive 1g. GS coupes with a manual transmission are uniquely outfitted for track events, too, with a dry-sump oiling system, differential cooler and rear-mounted battery. Magnetic Ride Control is available and manual-transmission models include Goodyear F1 Supercar Gen 2 tires. Eighteen-inch front and 19-inch rear wheels, in painted finish or optional chrome, carry the rubber. Tires are 275/35ZR18 in front and 325/30ZR19 at the rear.

Put it all together, and the Grand Sport approaches the Z06, but it also does a couple of things the Z cars can't: the coupe includes a removable roof (Z06 has a fixed roof), and it's also available as a convertible (not so the Z06 or ZR1). And if an automatic transmission is your preference, the Grand Sport's paddle-shift six-speed again gives you an advantage over the Z06 or ZR1, which have only a manual available.

OUR WEEK WITH THE GRAND SPORT

This Jetstream Blue Metallic Tintcoat beauty arrived at our offices just after your correspondent's own blue convertible had been trashed by hail. We fell for it immediately (who says you can't find love on the rebound?).

PERFORMANCE AND HANDLING: The GS has a good roar when you start it, not so much when you drive it. The engine is smooth and quiet, delivering less V8 rumble than we'd expect. Nice for the neighbors, we suppose. Its low center of gravity delivers exceptionally flat cornering. You feel the width and shallow walls of the high-performance tires, but that's normal and ultimately desirable. Especially at low speeds, we feel some roll and yaw. By the second day, we're used to its particular tracking and firmness. It has a great stance and it holds its lane beautifully. We expect to feel wheel hop, but don't. We enjoyed carving sweeping turns. Very accurate, very strong. We found the first few gears in the automatic quick to 3rd but with hesitation and gaps. We change from D to S, which helps. We vow to use the paddle shifters. Push either paddle for up, or pull for a down-shift. To exit this mode, press both paddles. Bartlett Lake Road gave us a great test drive, with lots of twisties, hills, and at the time lots of sand in the road from recent storms and flash flooding. The car handled all of it



superbly, sandy patches included. We had a nice sporty ride. Not underpowered not overpowered.

CONVERTIBLE TOP: Fully 25 percent of our logbook notes are about the convertible top, and mostly it's a series of annoyances—motions to release the handle at the top of the windshield frame, having to yank *really* hard to secure when closing—and so on. We only have a week; when the car is yours, you will figure things out better, they'll become second nature, and/or you can ignore them. One thing that would be hard to ignore in Arizona, though, is the top's release handle: on a 93-degree day, it is red hot—you'll seriously want to keep a glove handy. Or just leave the top down. As you expect with a small top, it goes down pretty fast, in about 15 seconds. It takes about 19 seconds for the power cycle to bring the top up, plus latch yanking time.

BODY: We like the body-colored with Corvette V logo between the seats. Neat with the top up; super neat when the top is down. A hump on the trunk that generates forward from the third brake light is a great style feature (on the coupe, it blends into the rear glass). The low nose is vulnerable, a downside for just about any driveway or drainage trough in metro Phoenix, even at low speed. We learn to back it into the garage, to clear the curb. The Corvette loves an open road, but hates a driveway.

FEATURES AND AMENITIES: Seats are electric for forward and up/down, but the seat back has a manual latch. We visited the manual more than with most cars, but maybe we were just more interested. But as with most GM vehicles, you quickly realize there are a number of personalization settings you can set and forget, and they work really well. Heads-up display is always a nice feature. This has a digital representation of an analog tach, digital speed readout, turn signals and a quick glimpse of audio settings without looking down. It's hard to see the nav screen with the sun out and the top down. Push button start, keyless access and locks are a bit different from most, but you'll learn. We have to set the mirrors again, every time we get in; we never find the way to get their positions into memory, but are sure you can. The side windows are one-touch down but you have to hold the switch to bring them up, another minor inconvenience with the convertible top.

AUDIO: The car arrived with presets we didn't care for, but audio quality seemed subpar. We dialed in some better tunes and did some adjustments. For new presets, we had to seek through hundreds of stations one by one, typically enough. We located an automatic volume control off/on; we tried that while parked, top up, and it made no noticeable difference. We figured it's valuable with the top down at different speeds, so we left it on. We worked with bass-treble-midrange (and fader, even though it's a 2-seater). We really didn't achieve any audible difference, to our trained ear. If it had a great engine sound to listen to, that'd be one thing, but it doesn't. The audio is plenty loud with the top down, though murky. We turned the midrange down a bit—a little sharper, a little better.

PECKING ORDER: We become aware of our fellow travelers. A red Corvette, a Honda S2000 and a Porsche Cayman all seem simpatico. We are oddly contested by big American sedans and little Japanese SUVs. But on the open road, it's all thumbs up—literally—from motorcycles, pickups with boats, Jeeps, sports cars, other Corvettes. We don't recall ever getting this many thumbs and waves in an expensive European roadster.

FOR QUITE A FEW DOLLARS LESS

If you want a juiced up Corvette for just a few thousand dollars more than the base model, and especially if you want a convertible, or removable hard top, and/or an automatic—the Grand Sport solves every problem and saves you an easy 25 grand over the Z06. Even if you want the manual, and a coupe—an easy 25 grand. Compare the basics in the chart at the right, and compare in depth at www.chevrolet.com. Unless you have money to burn, an insatiable lust for one of the Z 'Vettes, or an ego that can't bear to see a ZR1 next to you at the stoplight and you don't have one—you owe it to yourself to look into the Corvette Grand Sport.

We made a point of one last drive before the car was picked up, just a quick one. We put the top down, had it on sport setting, started to head to the office on surface streets—couldn't resist the freeway ramp—couldn't resist blowing past the office exit—a little more freeway time, a little more top-down time, a little more boulevard time, and we definitely took the long way home. ■

CORVETTE COMPARISONS

CORVETTE COUPE

Engine.....	6.2 Liter V8
Horsepower.....	430 hp
Weight.....	3208 lb
0-to-60.....	4.2 sec
EPA Hwy (manual; auto = -1).....	26 MPG
Base price.....	\$48,950

CORVETTE CONVERTIBLE

Engine.....	6.2 Liter V8
Horsepower.....	430 hp
Weight.....	3221 lb
0-to-60.....	4.2 sec
EPA Hwy (manual; auto = -1).....	26 MPG
Base price.....	\$53,600

CORVETTE GRAND SPORT COUPE

Engine.....	6.2 Liter V8
Horsepower.....	430 hp
Weight.....	3311 lb
0-to-60.....	3.95 sec
EPA Hwy (manual; auto = -1).....	26 MPG
Base price.....	\$54,790

CORVETTE GRAND SPORT CONVERTIBLE

Engine.....	6.2 Liter V8
Horsepower.....	430 hp
Weight.....	3289 lb
0-to-60.....	3.95 sec
EPA Hwy (manual; auto = -1).....	26 MPG
Base price.....	\$58,600

CORVETTE Z06

Engine.....	7.0 Liter V8
Horsepower.....	505 hp
Weight.....	3175 lb
0-to-60.....	3.7 sec
EPA Hwy (manual).....	24 MPG
Base price.....	\$74,305

CORVETTE ZR1

Engine.....	6.2 Liter Supercharged V8
Horsepower.....	638 hp
Weight.....	3175 lb
0-to-60.....	3.4 sec
EPA Hwy (manual).....	20 MPG
Base price.....	\$111,100

OUR TEST GRAND SPORT CONVERTIBLE

Base price.....	\$58,600
4LT Premium Equip. Group: Leather, Bose, XM, head-up display, upgraded steering wheel, seats, power, memory, power top, remote and more.....	\$9,700
GSport Heritage Package: Two-tone leather seats w/ logos, fender stripe.....	\$1,195
Nav package with audio upgrade.....	\$1,795
Paddle shift automatic.....	\$1,250
Exhaust: dual mode performance.....	\$1,195
Jetstream Blue Metallic Tintcoat.....	\$850
Pedal covers, automatic trans.....	\$270
Destinatia charge.....	\$950
TOTAL STICKER.....	\$75,805