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JULY 2006

First Test!

Shelby GT500 vs. Corvette



*Back to the Future:
'68 Shelby GT500KR vs.
Corvette 427, again.*





Back in the Day...

How did the GT500 and the Corvette stack up when the Rolling Stones were sex symbols, not grandfathers?

BY MARK GILLIES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM DREW



Yes, yes, we know—we wouldn't have compared a Corvette with a Mustang in 1968, because the Ford's primary rival was the Chevrolet Camaro. But we thought it would be fun to see how the antecedents of the current Corvette and GT500 shaped up.

The two most charismatic cars from Ford and Chevy have retained much of their '60s DNA. Today, the Corvette is a relatively sophisticated two-place sports car with a honking big V-8 up front, a car that provides lots of performance and style for the money. Back in 1968, the Corvette did the self-same thing. The big difference, one could argue, is that today's car looks a little tame, whereas Bill Mitchell's styling was sexier than anything the Europeans could manage this side of a Lamborghini Miura.

The '68 GT500KR, like the newest GT500, was the ultimate Ford pony car, sporting a big bad V-8 and scoops and spoilers aplenty. Unlike the Corvette, the old car doesn't look that dissimilar from

its modern counterpart, which slavishly apes the '68 Mustang's iconic styling. Then as now, the Ford is a relatively crude device, the KR having a live rear axle compared with the Corvette's independent rear suspension and rear drums as opposed to all-around disc brakes.

Our GT500KR was supplied by Chris and Karen Burkhart, who are the third owners of this 41,000-mile example. The panel work and the interior are totally original, but the Highland Green color has been reapplied and Burkhart has fitted more modern BFGoodrich Radial T/A tires, a hotter cam, and a freer-flowing exhaust in his 28-year ownership.

The KR—for "King of the Road"—was a development of the '68 GT500, with the so-called Cobra Jet 428-cubic-inch engine in place of the Police Interceptor unit. The GT500 was nominally rated at 360 horsepower, whereas the KR was down to 335. "This was done for insurance purposes," says Chris Burkhart. "Everyone knew that was a joke and that the real number was somewhere slightly north of 400 horse-

power, with 440 pound-feet of torque." Compared with a stock '68 Mustang, the GT500 gained a plethora of scoops and vents, a fiberglass hood and trunklid, a front-strut brace, wider rear brake drums and shoes, an 8000-rpm tach, a 140-mph speedometer, and a rollover bar. The heavy-duty Mustang suspension, as well as power brakes and steering, were standard on all GT500s.

Before we tested the car at nearby Milan Dragway, Burkhart was frank about his car's strengths. "It's a green-light car. It's good in a straight line, and that's about it." He's right about the straight-line part. Burkhart advised test driver Dave VanderWerp to leave the selector for the three-speed automatic transmission in D, "put your foot on the brakes, keep the rpm up, and hope for the best." The best was a strong 13.9-second quarter-mile, a 0-to-60 in 5.4 seconds, and a 30-to-50-mph acceleration that's comparable with that of some AMG Mercedes.

VanderWerp came back grinning: "That thing bangs it home, just like you



Vehicle		1968 Corvette	1968 Shelby
base price		\$5537	\$4473
dimensions, in	length	182.1	186.6
	width	69.2	70.9
	height	47.8	51.6
	wheelbase	98.0	108.0
	track, front/rear	58.3/59.0	58.0/58.0
curb weight, pounds		3271	3530
weight distribution, % front/rear		51.0/49.0	56.7/43.3
Best in test.			



Shelby built 933 GT500KR fastbacks, all with the Mustang's luxury interior package. The engine bay features a strut brace.

want for the drag strip. It's a hoot, man," he said, getting into the period lingo. What the numbers fail to convey is the noise the GT500 makes as it blasts down the strip, the V-8 roaring like the soundtrack from *Bullitt*, its progress punctuated by chirps from the tires as the brawny V-8 broke traction in all three gears. On the street, the torque, power, and insane noise dominate the driving experience. This is just as well, because the brakes, handling, and roadholding are pretty hopeless. The car feels clumsy when you start hustling it, in part because it wants to understeer like crazy and in part because the incredibly light steering has almost no feel. It rides quite nicely, but just like modern Mustangs, it never feels as if the front and rear ends are totally in sync. In fact, we

Powertrain		1968 Chevrolet Corvette	1968 Shelby GT500KR	
engine	type	pushrod 16-valve V-8	pushrod 16-valve V-8	
	displacement, cu in (cc)	427 (7000)	428 (7016)	
	power, bhp @ rpm	435 @ 5800	335 @ 5200	
	torque, lb-ft @ rpm	460 @ 4000	440 @ 3400	
	redline, rpm	6500	6000	
drive-line	transmission	4-sp man	3-sp auto	
	driven wheels	rear	rear	
C/D test results	acceleration, seconds	0-60 mph	5.3	5.4
		0-100 mph	12.9	13.4
		¼-mile @ mph	13.8 @ 105	13.9 @ 103
		rolling 5-60 mph	6.7	5.7
	top-gear	30-50 mph	3.4	2.4
		50-70 mph	3.2	3.1
Best in test.			test avg	





were surprised by how the new car has adopted the old car's demeanor: great in a straight line, but a bit wayward when the road starts curving.

Barry Davison's 1968 Corvette coupe is a big-block 427 rated at 435 horsepower and fitted with the L89 aluminum-cylinder-head option and a four-speed manual transmission. Davison, who has a garage full of Corvettes, is only the second owner of this 26,000-mile car. Original owner Dave Sullivan drag-raced it, eventually putting in a 454 engine, replacing the frame, and running elapsed times as low as 10 seconds. "I decided to restore it," Sullivan said, "when the cars started to become valuable." He had the original frame in his garage and entrusted the work to Werner Meier, a former GM engineer who runs Masterworks Automotive Services in the Detroit 'burbs of Madison Heights. The car has been restored to factory standard, down to the skinny Goodyear Speedway bias-ply tires. The tobacco interior is completely original and is a '60s vision in vinyl and plastic.

Meier, who still looks after the car, and Davison took turns running the strip for our tests, in between some carburetion

issues. "The three double-barrel Holleys weren't called triple trouble for nothing," Meier said. In the end, Davison's Vette set the better times, with a stout 13.8-second quarter-mile and a 0-to-60 in 5.3 seconds. Those are fast times for a 1968 car.

The Corvette is much more complete



■ The '68 Vette had less luggage and shoulder room than the '67 version. The radio was a \$172.75 option.

than the Mustang, like the current machine. It feels like a sports car from the moment you sit in it, low down as opposed to high up. The brakes have more power and feedback, the steering has more weight and road feel, and it rides more stiffly over broken pavement. The Corvette demonstrates that handling and roadholding are very different things: Although the Vette generates a feeble 0.65 g on the skidpad, the balance is sweet. You can enter a turn with mild understeer, then use the gas pedal to shift the attitude from neutral behavior to oversteer in a gentle, progressive manner. It simply feels lighter on its feet, a corollary of its 259-fewer pounds. You expect the Corvette to be a rorty beast, but the noticeable Detroit backbeat is muffled compared with the Mustang's. The four-speed manual shifter needs positive efforts but adds to the sports-car experience.

In the same way the new Corvette competes with the best European sports cars for less money, so the '68 car stacked up favorably against its rivals of the time—Porsches, Jaguars, and even Ferraris. The Mustang, on the other hand, feels bigger, heavier, and clumsier, even if its performance and character are just as endearing, a uniquely American take on the sports coupe. Just like today, in fact. ■



Chassis		1968 Chevrolet Corvette	1968 Shelby GT500KR
front suspension		control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar
rear suspension		trailing arm, leaf spring, anti-roll bar	rigid axle, leaf springs
front brakes		vented disc	vented disc
rear brakes		vented disc	drum
tires		Goodyear Speedway Wide Tread, F70-15 Load Range B	BFGoodrich Radial T/A; F: P215/65R-15 95S M+S, R: P225/70R-15 95S M+S
C/D test results	braking, 70-0, feet	255	283
	roadholding, 200-foot skidpad, g	0.65	0.68
Best in test.			test avg