Under the Hood, October 2019

I suspect by now that many of you have been on the Chevrolet web site and "practiced" building your own C8. Most of the comments I have heard have been positive about the new C8. Several design features particularly caught my eye. During all my years at my parent's home, my parents drove Chrysler Corp autos for their main car. They might have an old Chevy car for my dad's work car, but the family sedan/wagon was always a Chrysler. On main reason was the transmission shifters. My father was rather opinionated (now where did I get this?) and he couldn't understand why after finally getting away from the floor shift or three on the tree column shift for our manual transmissions that we would still have a column shift for the automatic. In his mind the column shift (or even worse the floor shift automatic) simply wasted useable space. Our 55 Plymouth had a dainty shift lever on the dash. Then we had a succession of Dodges with the push button transmission. Now the C8 is featuring an almost invisible direction selection mechanism, somewhat ala Porsche or even some of the exotics. If you moved the selection device to the dash and ignored the paddle shifters, it would look right at home in a 1955 Plymouth. For years race cars have used small almost square steering wheels. In 2016 Corvette featured a D shaped steering wheel with a flat bottom. The logic is clear in that the flat bottom does provide more leg space under the wheel. However, when you turn the wheel the rounded part of the wheel now starts to interfere with the leg space. For the C8, Corvette now has an almost square wheel with a relatively flat top and bottom, and curved sides. I agree that this looks more like a race car. However, I also remember that the 1964 Chrysler (remember I was raised in a Chrysler family) New Yorker and 300 had a very similar square steering wheel. I suspect there were other Chryslers with the square wheel, but I had personal experience with these two models. Are these two examples of the philosophy that there isn't anything really new in automobile design?

At least initially, all C8s will feature an 8-speed dual clutch automated transmission (DCT) built by Tremec. The initial single clutch transmission (SCT)proved to be very problematic. BMW, Ferrari, Lamborghini and many others started with SCTs. They were known to lurch on takeoff, rev the engine without forward motions, have clunky shifts and in some cases had extreme clutch wear. The internet is full of stories of changing a $5,000 clutch at less than 10,000 miles. One issue with the SCT was that the clutch would slip at the stop light, unless the driver shifted into neutral at every light. The DCT was the next logical step and since it has two clutches, it can leave the transmission in neutral when stopped. All previous Corvettes had a fluid coupling (torque converter) between the engine and transmission, rather than a clutch. This fluid coupling allowed the car to sit at a light without causing undue transmission wear. We would all hope that the new Tremec DCT will be without fault. However, across town Ford is under heavy criticism for the thousands of DCT equipped Ford Focus and Fiesta models that have had major problems. To date, Ford has not issued a recall, but they have extended the warranty of several models. One quote I loved was that "Ford introduced their DCT in 2010 with more problems than an algebra book". We sincerely hope that Tremec has learned from all these earlier problems.

In the late 1980's, both GM and Ford were in talks with Jaguar about acquiring the British car manufacturer. Remember that this was period of extreme consolidation in the auto world. Jaguar's chairman, Sir John Egan, was a former GM-Europe exec and some expected that GM would win the bid, but Ford ultimately bought Jaguar and Land Rover for about $2.4 billion. Many of the Jaguar faithful were not happy with this change as they felt that Jaguar would lose its "soul". Shortly after the sale, I was judging the Jaguar group at an All British Field Meet in Vancouver, B. C. A Jag sedan had the typical leaping cat on the hood, but something wasn't quite right. Upon close inspection, I found a miniature

choke collar around the neck of the leaper with a very small Ford blue oval hanging from the collar. It wasn't hard to guess the owner's feelings. About 9 years later, recently installed Ford president Alan Mullaly (former Boeing exec) sells Jaguar Land Rover to Tata, the Indian car manufacturer, for about $2.3 billion. Including the losses Jaguar Land Rover had incurred in the period of ownership, it was estimated that Ford got about half of their investment back. However, Mullaly's move in selling Jaguar Land Rover, Volvo and Ford's stake in Mazda gave Ford the cash to weather the financial crisis that forced GM and Chrysler into engineered bankruptcies. Jaguar Land Rover just announced a $4.4 billion loss and plans to lay off thousands of employees. I wonder how the Tata executives now feel about their purchase. Although Mullaly has retired from Ford, I suspect the remaining Ford executives are still grateful that they were fortunate enough to find a buyer to take Jaguar Land Rover off their books.

Pacific Raceway is the hub of auto sports in the NW. The Fiorito family started the track almost 60 years ago and grandson Jason, is the current president. The family had leased the facility to other operators over the years and by about year 2000, the track and facilities were in bad shape. In 2002 the family took control of operations, resurfaced parts of the track, added turn 10 to keep the road race cars off the drag strip and the traction compound (which turns to almost slippery soap in the wet) improved restrooms and in general made it a better track. They also ditched the Seattle International Raceway moniker and reverted to the original Pacific Raceway name. The owners have announced huge plans with a $25 million first phase of a possible $200 million investment. New research buildings related to automotive concepts, office space and of course motor sports use. Construction of the first phase is expected to start about the end of this year and include repaving parts of the road course and extracting 1 million cubic yards of gravel (the site is basically a gravel deposit) which will be processed and sold to help finance the development. The developer is Miles Resources of Puyallup which also owns several concrete ready-mix plants in the NW. I suspect we all know where the gravel will go. I remember reading years ago about some of these changes, so it will be interesting to see if they can actually make all the proposed improvements this time.

I have written twice before about local land speed record contender North American Eagle. Built mostly by retired engineers, Eagle consisted of a 4-wheeled surplus military F-104 jet fighter. We last saw Eagle at the conclusion of an autocross at the Shelton airport when Eagle and crew showed up for some static testing. In person Eagle is immense; almost 4 times as long as a C7 Corvette. It is with sadness that I report that in late August, Jessi Combs was driving (piloting?) Eagle on the dried lakebed in the Alvord Desert about 90 miles south of Burns, Oregon when she crashed Eagle and perished in the crash. Jessi was trying to best the women's land speed record of 512 mph set in 1976 in a 3-wheeled jet car. Jesse already had set the women's 4-wheeled record of 398 mph in 2016. Last year she had a one-way pass of 483 mph, but mechanical problems prevented the mandatory two-way pass to validate the speed. Jessi was a competitive racer and somewhat of a TV personality with appearances on Overhaulin, Xtreme 4X4, and MythBusters.