



# BREAKING THE RULES

## 1969 CHEVROLET CHEVELLE COPO 427

**T**O MANUFACTURE A MUSCLE CAR in the Sixties was to tread a fine line. On the one hand, it was an absolute necessity to offer a car to the "youth market." In 1965, Ford Division's manager, Donald Frey said, "Seventy-eight million of our 196 million citizens haven't yet reached their twentieth birthday. The sheer weight of numbers makes the youth of this country a faction that just can't be ignored." The amazing popularity of the revolutionary Mustang or the trend-setting Pontiac GTO was proof of that hypothesis.

But handing one of these high-speed projectiles to the "now generation" was a form of automotive Russian roulette. Look at what Ralph Nader did to the Corvair.



Imagine what another zealous consumer advocate could do to something really lethal, like Chevrolet's Camaro or Chevelle SS396. And so the American auto manufacturers had to project an image of safety along with an image of performance.

For giant General Motors, this balancing act was especially important. With slightly over 50 percent of the total American market during the Fifties and Sixties, GM was always open to attack. So when the GTO appeared in 1964, it was propelled by Pontiac's 389cid V-8, not the 421 that powered the full-sized cars. With an eye toward its safety image, General Motor's top management imposed a 400-cubic inch limit on all its compact and intermediate products. It was a strict rule not to be broken by any general manager.

STORY AND COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS GLATCH



more Chevy performance. Berger Chevrolet in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was another performance dealer that made 427 transplants, as was Nickey Chevrolet in Chicago and Dana Chevrolet in Southgate, California. Even sports car racer Don Yenko got into the act at his Yenko Sports Cars shop in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, turning out a number of 427 Camaros and Chevelles. A 427 conversion was an expensive proposition, although selling the original 396 did recoup some of the cost. The factory warranty, too, was voided by doing this. But if 428 Super Cobra Jet Mustangs and 440 Six-Pack Coronets were too much for a diehard Chevy man to take, it was a small price to pay.

Then there was the case of the 1968 Hurst Olds. George Hurst, of Hurst shifter fame, wanted to build what he called an "executive hot rod." He proposed a limited-edition car based on the mid-sized Cutlass, equipped with special paint and trim and powered by the Toronado's 455cid engine. Oldsmobile's top engineer was all for the idea, but of course, upper management would never have gone for it. In the end, a total of 515 Hurst Olds were built on the Lansing assembly line, then shipped to a nearby leased building for Hurst to install the graphics, trim and 455 engines. At least that is what management was told, and every subsequent story about these cars repeated this party line. In fact, the 455 engines were installed right on the Lansing assembly line, practically in the shadow of

Oldsmobile's main office. The engines looked almost identical to the 400s that were normally installed in the Cutlass 442 muscle cars, so the ruse was fairly easy to pull off, but there must have been some very nervous engineers and middle managers in Lansing the days those special Hurst Olds batches were run—had word leaked "upstairs," heads would certainly have rolled, even years after the fact. Now that everyone involved in this clandestine operation has retired the truth can be told.

**O**ver at Chevrolet, there was a more legitimate way to break the 400cid barrier. Most cars to come off an assembly line are equipped with standard options—Regular Production Order (or RPO) in General Motors' terminology. But it was possible to order a batch of cars with non-standard equipment using a little-known method, the Central Office Production Order (or COPO). Say you wanted to order a number of Biscayne four-doors for taxicabs, and you wanted some special heavy-duty equipment. Chevrolet could be approached with the proposition, and a COPO could be initiated for those special cars to be built right on the assembly line.

If the Central Office Production Order could be used for trucks and taxicabs, why not performance cars? Fred Gibb, a rural La Harpe, Illinois, Chevrolet dealer, did just that. In 1969, he proposed that a limited number of Camaros be built for Super Stock drag racing with the all-aluminum 427cid ZL-1 full-race engine (see *AQ*, vol. 29, no. 3). That proposal became COPO 9560, and a total of 69 of these \$7,000+ cars were built. Two more COPOs followed: 9561, which was identical to Gibb's Camaros except that the less exotic cast-iron L-72 427 high-per-

formance engine was installed, and COPO 9562, which installed the L-72 into the Chevelle Malibu two-door coupe.

Historians are unsure who proposed COPO 9561 and 9562 to Chevrolet, but Don Yenko would seem to be the most likely candidate. By 1969, he had established a network of 36 Chevy dealerships across the United States to sell his Yenko Super Cars. With that kind of potential sales volume, the prospect of doing so many engine swaps at his facility would make turning to Chevrolet a real probability. Don Yenko died in a flying accident a decade ago, so like so many aspects of these COPO Chevelles, we may never know the whole story.

How many COPO Chevelles were built is another mystery. As far as Chevrolet is concerned, they never built a 427 Chevelle. But Fran Preve, historian of the Tonawanda engine plant that built all the big-block engines, notes that 373 L-72 engines were assembled in 1969 coded for use in Chevelles. And Mark Meekens, president of the National Chevelle Owners Association, discovered 323 cars missing from the Chevelle's production records. The best guess of Preve and Meekens is that those 323 cars were COPO 9562 Chevelles, with another 50 engines set aside for service use. Of those L-72 engines, 96 were for automatic transmissions, 277 for four-speed use. The cars themselves are a curious mix of off-the-shelf trim: SS-style domed hood and blacked-out grille, "Malibu" side emblems and interior trim, and basic blue Chevrolet "bowties" front and back. All were equipped with a heavy-duty 4.10:1 Positraction rear end and front disc brakes. Current research indicates that 99 COPO Chevelles were sent to Yenko Sports Cars for their "Super Car" treatment: special "427" emblems, "Yenko SC" side stripes, and "sYc" embroidered on the headrests. It was thought all COPO Chevelles were built late in the model year at the Baltimore plant only, but one car built in Van Nuys, California, has been discovered, as has a COPO El Camino.



Don Yenko of Yenko Sports Cars offered special versions of the COPO Chevelles (above) and Camaros (right) adorned with the Yenko "Super Car" treatment.



Fred Nolan, humiliated by the Yenko Chevelle, sold his LS-6 a few years later; after that the demands of family life delayed any thoughts of owning a performance machine. But the sight of that 427 Chevelle was permanently etched in his mind, and finally in 1993, he saw an ad for a COPO Chevelle. Soon it was his. What made Nolan's car especially unusual is that it was one of about 15 COPO Chevilles to be sold in Canada. That has advantages. While Chevrolet claims to have no historical information on its cars, General Motors of Canada Limited will gladly supply all documentation to owners of cars sold originally in that country, whether they were built in Canada or the States. "I've had so-called experts at car shows tell me my car is a fake, that there is no such thing as a 427 Chevelle. But being a Canadian car, I have all the proof I need." Fred Nolan even has the original "Protect-O-Plate" warranty card, which, in the case of a

Canadian car, is in English and French. It is believed Nolan's code-59 Frost Green COPO Chevelle is one of only three built in that color. Further, about 30 were built with the column-shift automatic and bench seats like his.

The original owner of Fred Nolan's COPO Chevelle was Ron Howrie of Vernon, British Columbia. GM of Canada records show the car was shipped from the Baltimore plant on August 4, 1969. It was delivered on August 9, 1969, to Vernon Motor Products Ltd., the local Chevrolet franchise, according to matching records supplied by the original dealer. Fred Nolan spared no expense in bringing his rare machine back to perfection. While Ken Farley of Somonauk, Illinois, did the restoration work, Nolan

Fred Nolan still has the original Canadian warranty card for his COPO Chevelle.

gathered parts from 23 states. Only used or New-Old-Stock original service parts were installed, no reproductions. Four correct brand-new 1969-vintage Uniroyal Tiger Paw tires were mounted—they were unused spares taken from the trunks of other Chevilles. Even the spark plugs are new AC items taken from a box dated 1969. Fred Nolan's 427 Chevelle is as correct as it can possibly be.

One question remains: was the 1969 COPO Chevelle truly faster than the exalted 1970 LS-6? Fred Nolan's an-

## BREAKING THE COPO CHEVELLE CODE

Understanding a COPO car isn't easy considering the various codes involved. Chevrolet used COPOs for many special applications, and the COPO 9562 Chevelle stands as a prime example of just how confusing those codes could be.

Eight COPO 9562 options were listed in 1969, each with its own two-letter suffix. Common to all was the "High Performance Unit," which included the L72 427, related hardware (heavy-duty radiator and the L72's oil pan, left-hand exhaust manifold, and clutch fork assembly and housing), and a twelve-bolt rear end containing 4.10:1 Positraction gears. That differential was even beefier than the typical RPO G80 Positraction unit—not all COPO 9562 posi pieces will interchange with their G80 counterparts.

With the High Performance Unit established, the eight COPO 9562 combinations read like this:

### COPO # Description

9562AA	Four-speed manual transmission
9562BA	M40 three-speed automatic transmission
9562CD	Four-speed manual transmission, special contour bucket seats, COPO tires and special order springs
9562CE	Same as 9562CD except excludes special contour bucket seats
9562DD	M40 automatic transmission, special contour bucket seats, COPO tires and special order springs
9562DE	Same as 9562DD except excludes special contour bucket seats
9562EA	Four-speed manual transmission, RPO J52 disc brakes and RPO L78 tires
9562FA	Same as 9562EA except exchanges M40 automatic transmission for the four-speed manual

The automatic transmission was the Turbo-Hydramatic 400. Manual choices included the M21 and M22 "Rock Crusher" four speeds.

Two more COPO combos were mentioned. COPO 9566AA was "the same as option 9562EA with the exception of tires," and COPO 9566BA worked the same magic in reference to code 9562FA.

Disc brakes came through different channels, meaning more COPO codes. The SS396's J52 discs were included with

COPOs 9562EA and FA. Assembly manuals also explained that COPOs 9562AA and BA were offered "as a vehicle combination with [the] COPO option 9694 front disc brake unit." Two additional COPO 9694 codes combined the J52 discs with other options: 9694CA included the J50 power assist, a Muncie four-speed and the COPO 9737 "Sports Car Conversion," while 9694CB was the same save for an automatic in place of the four-speed. COPO 9737 was created for Yenko Sports Cars, hence its name. The Sports Car Conversion added a heavier front stabilizer; appropriate speedometer gear compensating for the transmission, axle and wheel/tire combination; and 15x7 Rally wheels.

Most COPO Chevilles used those unique Rally wheels, which looked similar to the Corvette's 1968 rims (1969 Corvette rims were eight inches wide) but differed slightly in offset. Although Rallies were a Chevelle option in 1969, they were 14-inchers and ended up on Malibus only—all Super Sports came with exclusive 14x7 SS rims, which some COPO cars did share.

No wheel/tire combo was listed under COPO codes 9562AA and BA. The SS rims were probably included here unless superseded by another code. Fifteen-inch "COPO tires," RPO ZP1, were offered and came on six-inch-wide rims on the wider Rallies. Also unique, ZP1 rubber consisted of four-ply Goodyear Polyglas F70-15s identified by "Goodyear Wide Tread GT" in raised white letters.

These Goodyears—probably mounted on Rallies in most cases—were automatic additions with COPOs 9562CD, CE, DD and DE. And Rally wheels wearing Wide Treads could've also been added by requesting COPO 9737, as Don Yenko did when ordering the 99 cars for his SC Chevelle conversions. COPOs 9562EA and FA listed "RPO L78 tires," the SS396's F70-14s on the smaller SS wheels.

Exterior imagery was also confusing. SS396 treatments were used, including—among other things—the RPO D96 upper body stripe, blacked-out rear panel (sans "SS396" badge), and chrome exhaust tips. But COPOs weren't Super Sports, although a few did come with SS steering wheels. Additional variations existed: at least one 427 Chevelle was equipped with Malibu lower body trim, and post-sedan versions have been reported—the latter a believable tale considering SS396s were also built that way in 1969 only.

Study this hard. There will be a test.—Mike Mueller

swer is simple and direct. "That little green car will walk all over an LS-6. Down low, up high, you name it, that 427 is superior!" Just the clouded memory of a distant encounter? Not at all. Before Nolan began the extensive restoration of his COPO car, he drove it hard for a few hundred miles. He wanted to see what his rare 427 Chevelle could do before it reached a state of perfection that would not allow such treatment. But the comparison?

Fred Nolan also owns a '70 LS-6 Chevelle that is now also under restoration. His observations come from first-hand, behind-the-wheel experience with both automobiles. How could a 427 beat a nearly identical 454? One reason may be the lower rotating mass of the 427 engine. The larger bore of the LS-6 meant heavier pistons and, therefore, a lower redline. And while Chevrolet rated the L-72 at 425 hp and the LS-6 at 450 hp, there is another twist: when the



The 1969 Chevelle COPO 9562 (below) was powered by a cast-iron L-72 427cid high-performance engine (above).



The wife of original owner Ron Howrie (above) objected to the car's late-night challengers.

L-72 was first installed in the 1966 Corvette, it was rated at 450 hp. Two months into production the engines started showing 425hp decals, thanks to the howls of the insurance industry. Vintage road tests also suggest the L-72 Corvettes were faster than the 427cid 435hp tri-carbed L-71 Corvettes of 1967 through 1969. It would seem the L-72 hit that magic sweet spot of bore and stroke, induction and exhaust that make legends.

Ron Howrie, the original owner of the car, recalled: "I was good friends with Doug Gee, the son of the owner of the Chevy dealer in town.

We all liked hot cars, and we all tried to out-do each other. When I went in to order a new Chevelle, the owner showed me the last page of his dealer book. There it was, the specs for a 427 Chevelle. And I wanted a real sleeper.

It took almost six months for the car to arrive. I was there the day it came off the trailer. The guy had a hard time trying to back it off the second story of the trailer, it had a fast, loping idle and he had to ride the brakes. It actually shook the truck.

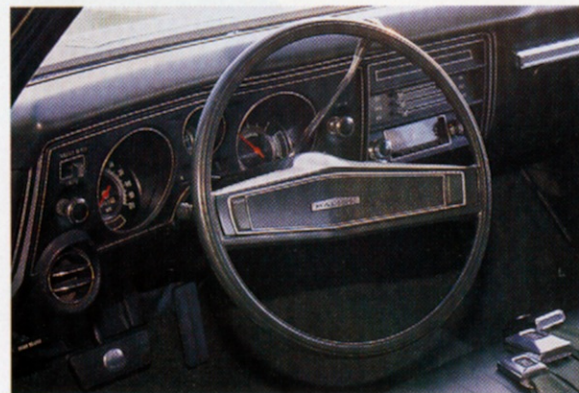
You know what, that SOB shifted at 7,000 rpm—stock. Put it in drive, nail 'er to the mat, get no squirrel, smoke or scream from the stock tires from the start, but hang on when it nailed second! Whenever I was midnight driving with anybody they'd beat me at the start, my headlights would be on their trunk. But when I'd hit second range I'd leap out in front two car lengths. It was scary. It was such a sleeper.

I lived just outside of Vernon, which is halfway between Vancouver and Calgary. I'd have guys outside my house smoking their tires at three and four in the morning challenging me from all over the Okenogan. My wife used to get so [ticked] off, she'd tell me, "Are you going to do something about this, or do we have to listen to this all night long?" So I'd go out





and warm up the 427. I'd tell them, "Look, the quarter mile isn't in front of my house. Let's just go up here a little ways. You got the flagman, you got the witnesses, I just got out of bed, let's get this over with. And don't [fool] around in front of my house any more, OK boy." Poof. Smoked. And that was it. A lot of people wished they hadn't seen that car, they lost a lot of burgers and gasoline over that car, eh.



Vintage road tests might support those claims. *Super Stock and Drag Illustrated* published the only test of a 1969 Yenko SC Chevelle. Using the normal tire pressures recommended for every day driving, *SS&DI* was able to turn the quarter mile in 13.83 seconds at 102.97 mph. "Time for some fussin'," author Ro McGonegal continued. "The rear tires were chopped to 20 psi and the front F70s were stuffed with 45. The trick worked—13.70-104.01." In the cool of the evening, they were finally able to pull off a whopping 13.36 at 108.04. Their conclusion: "We don't mean to say that the Chevelle would have to race at night to achieve such performance all the time. But you still can't argue with a 13.30 pure stocker. Headers and tires and the proper tuning procedure would drop it into the twelves quite easily, agreed? So look at it this way, if you want the roominess of a larger car, the scat of a much smaller one, and the distinction of the Grand Touring class, the Yenko 427 Chevelle may just be your thing."

Rules and regulations are a necessity of everyday life. Yet there are certain rules that just beg to be broken. Some of the greatest advances of mankind came about because someone did what shouldn't be done. Something like the COPO Chevelle. ❖