

1961 “Big John” Mazmanian Drag Racing Car

Big John’s Corvette could easily be said to have a competition record equal to the other historic racers sold recently

by Thomas Glatch



Photos: Durin Schnabel

Chassis number: 10867S100093

While drag racing gained popularity nationwide through the 1950s, its epicenter was Southern California. There, speed and engineering prowess often went hand in hand with beauty and mechanical excellence. Spurred on by fellow car club members, parts availability, and a growing performance-oriented group of periodicals, racers began to gravitate toward a more serious trend in modifications. This was the case of John Mazmanian of Whittier.

By 1960, the 31-year old Mazmanian was operating a successful waste management and removal business. He decided to go all out and buy a new 1961 Corvette in late 1960; VIN 10867S100093 tells us that this was the 93rd Corvette to come down the assembly line that year. One of 10,939 produced in 1961, it had a base price of \$3,934. It was equipped with RPO 419, the \$237.75 optional removable hard top. The very first “Big Go West”—NHRA’s just-named Winternationals to be held on the Pomona Fairgrounds in January 1961—would give Mazmanian and his nephew and driver Rich Siroonian a chance to try something new.

For 1961, after reportedly using the car to clean some clocks on the streets of Southern California, Siroonian had the Mazmanian & (Earl) Wade ’Vette running in the high 12-second range to take home Winternationals class honors in the hastily-established AA/SP class (apparently thanks to the Corvette’s new 315-horsepower 283-ci engine) with a 12.94 at 109.96 mph. The 19-year-old driver then went on to run through the Street Eliminator field on Sunday afternoon, going all the way to the final against Johnny Loper’s Willys and finishing as runner-up.

By the time the same event happened in 1962, changes to the car were radical enough to move it into the CM/SP division. Pictures from the 1962 Winternationals show it

Details	
Years Produced	1961
Number Produced	Base Corvette: 10,939 RPO 582 315-hp Fuel-Injected: 1,462
Original List Price	\$4,654.95
CM Valuation	\$76,000–\$134,000 (Fuel-Injected, non-competition)
Tune-up	\$150
Distributor Cap	\$19.99
Chassis #	VIN plate on the steering column
Engine #	Pad on front of block below right cylinder head
Club	National Corvette Restorers Society
More	www.ncrs.org
Alternatives	1937 Fiat Topolino “Bad Habit” Altered Fuel Dragster 1965 Dodge A100 Pickup “Little Red Wagon” 1970 Chevelle SS 454 LS6 convertible
CM Investment Grade	A

was still not the beast it would become, but it did have American Torq-Thrust wheels and a low-profile scoop on the hood. Regardless, it looked like business, and proved it when it won the CM/SP class title with another speed record at 113.84 mph. Siroonian then downed Loper's Willys during the Street Eliminator runoffs on Sunday (though he did not go to the final round that year; former partner Earl Wade won in another Corvette in A/SP trim). The entire car had been repainted in 24 coats of Candy Persimmon by Junior Conway, Eddie Martinez had done a roll-and-tuck interior including the trunk, and almost everything that could be bolted on was chromed or polished. As a result, Big John's fast Corvette had also taken third place honors at the big Winternationals Car Show the NHRA held just before the competition event.

The car was soon in the shop for some serious upgrades. Hot parts from Iskendarian, Edelbrock and the Crank Shaft Company reworked the engine's displacement to 316 ci, and a 4-71 GMC supercharger and Hilborn injection were added. The factory 4-speed was removed and replaced with a B&M 2-speed Hydromatic. The grille was removed and a polished Moon gas tank added front and center, and now the chromed externals jutted through the hood and off the wheel hubs. According to then-crew chief Dick Bourgeois, Mazmanian had about \$10,000 tied up in the car (Big John admitted the modifications had cost more than the car itself).

It was in this condition that it drew the attention of track-goers with an 11.11 ET at 129 mph at the original Fontana Dragway during an AHRA championship race that summer, as well as the cameras of Petersen Publishing. It was featured in this format in the October 1962 issue of Rod & Custom. This was followed by a cover inset and feature in the March 1963 issue of Hot Rod magazine. By the time the 1963 Winternationals

rolled around, the car had been modified again. The engine now displaced 327 ci, thanks to a fresh 3/8-inch stroker crank, and the blower was now a fat 6-71 GMC.

But things were changing; Siroonian ended up in the army in 1963 and Mazmanian turned his attention to building the first supercharged Hemi-Willys for 1964. The Corvette became drag racing history.

It next went to a new owner in Minnesota, was raced only briefly, and changed hands a couple of times until a collector named John Lange ended up with it. In 1989, after several years of pursuing it, Bloomington Gold winner Steve Hendrickson acquired the unrestored car to begin a complete restoration. That effort was completed in 1998 in time for the NHRA's Hot Rod Reunion in Bakersfield, California, where Mazmanian was honored and reunited with the car for the first time in over 30 years.

CM Analysis *This car sold for \$247,500, including comission, at RM's Icons of Speed & Style Auction in Los Angeles, California, on September 26, 2009.*

Over the years, I've had the privilege of photographing a number of Steve Hendrickson's Corvettes. Many of them were ultra-low-mile factory-original "time machines." Those that were restored were usually done in his own shop to exacting factory-original standards while drawing on his huge stash of N.O.S. parts. Hendrickson proudly showed me the Mazmanian Corvette shortly after he purchased it, and while it needed work, I knew it was in very good hands.

Restoring a vintage racer correctly takes a lot of detective work, and it took Hendrickson the better part of a decade before the Mazmanian Corvette was seen by the public. He had the body resprayed by Jon Kosmoski, founder of the House of Kolor, and had famed custom auto upholsterer Tony Nancy stitch the blower cover. The engine was recreated to the early 1962 configuration using the correct vintage components. One of the biggest challenges was finding the correct N.O.S. rubber, which Hendrickson was finally able to do. This is simply one of the most correct vintage race Corvette restorations possible, and Hendrickson chose an excellent event at which to sell this type of automobile.

The Mazmanian Corvette is the third high-profile racing Corvette to be sold in 2009. Despite the challenging economic times, the "Gulf One" 1963 Z06 racer sold for just over \$1m at Mecum Kissimmee in January, and the Scuderia Filipinetti 1968 L88 sold for \$572k at RM Monterey. Yet the Mazmanian Corvette sold for just \$247k. The Filipinetti car had one significant class win in its career, and Gulf One had one significant class win and a number of regional victories. With class wins at the 1961 and 1962 Winternationals, and a variety of other successes, Big John's Corvette could easily be said to have a competition record equal to the Z06 and L88 above.

Plus, the Mazmanian Corvette contained much more of its original equipment, was restored with all of the correct vintage and N.O.S. hardware, had volumes of documentation, and received much national exposure during its racing career and recently.

Had the historic Mazmanian car raced at venues like Le Mans or Daytona, and not Pomona and Fontana, I feel the price would have much higher. Instead, the prejudices of the market come into play, where drag racing is seen as a second-class sport to the upper-crust world of road racing.

As a vintage drag car, the Big John Mazmanian Corvette sold for average money, but as a historic Corvette racer, the price was a disappointment, at least to me. This should be considered very well bought by someone who now owns a piece of history. ■

(Introductory description courtesy of RM Auctions.)



THOMAS GLATCH has been an automotive writer since 1983. His work has appeared in *Corvette Fever*, *Corvette*, *Sports Car Market*, and elsewhere.