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Chapter 6

◆ 1968 ◆

King Kong Lives!



Al Joniec had one of the rare Cobra Jet Mustangs that had a 335-horse 428 Ford engine. Dyno tests indicated the engine was actually putting out over 400 horsepower. Joniec's Mustang was quick enough to win Super Stock Eliminator at the '68 Winternationals. (John Kinker photo via Mike Goyda)

The ultimate muscle cars – the Dodge Hemi-Dart and Plymouth Hemi-Barracuda – were introduced in 1968. Everything else before or after was just plain boring in comparison. These two behemoths didn't come along until later in the model year, so before them, all the major manufacturers would introduce the latest in their (now) long line of muscle cars.

Even American Motors got into the muscle car act. It introduced its version of a pony car, the Javelin, to compete against the Mustang and Camaro in both the showroom and on the SCCA tracks in Trans Am racing, and it held its own nicely. Using a modified Rambler American Rogue chassis, the Javelin was a true pony car, with 2+2 seating and engines that ran from the economical six up to a high-performance 390-ci V-8. A 4-speed transmission was available, as was a limited-slip differential.

But American Motors wasn't finished. It also introduced a two-seat version of the Javelin called the AMX. By removing a full foot from just behind the driver's seat, the AMX ended up with a wheelbase of only 97 inches. It was supposed to compete against the Corvette for sports car sales, but it never caught up. At least the AMX only had two seats. It did have a 315-horsepower 390 under the hood, plus all the other performance goodies that were available in the Javelin – 4-speed, limited slip, custom wheels, and a pair of hood bubbles that shouted high performance. This was definitely not your granddad's Rambler. The '68 AMX could run the quarter in about 15 seconds flat. Not too bad, but with gears, tires, and headers, it would get down into the 13s without much trouble. The AMX's performance was enough to surprise many an unwary Mustang and Camaro owner on the street.

Over at GM, everything was rather status quo in regards to performance options, but all the brands were inter-

ested in introducing their new body styles. The intermediates started growing, with an inch added to their wheelbases. Buick retained the 340-horse 401 V-8 for the Grand Sport, now nicknamed the GS400. Why? Because now there was a junior version, the GS350. The 1968 GS350 differed only in engine size, down to a 280-horse, 350-ci V-8.

The Chevelle SS shared the basic structure of the Buick GS series, and it retained the standard engine lineup of 325, 350, and 375 horsepower 396 V-8s. Both the Turbo Hydramatic and 4-speed manual transmissions were optional. The Camaro retained its basic '67 body, minus the vent windows. Camaro engine and transmission options also remained the same as in '67, although the Z-28 was now readily available.

However, there was now something called "COPO" that was only available if you knew someone at the local dealer. It stood for "Central Office Production Order," a very special option order form that could bring you a 425-horse, 427-ci V-8 for your Chevelle or Camaro. There were relatively few of these cars available, except to the big-name performance dealerships like Nickey Chevrolet in Chicago, and Yenko Chevrolet in Pittsburgh. These types of dealerships specialized in special high-performance vehicles, and most of the COPOs went to these dealerships.

The Nova also started to grow. Chevy added an inch to its wheelbase and gave it more and more in common with the Camaro, including the suspension. Now available in only a 2- or 4-door sedan, the Nova was available with all the Camaro engine options except Z-28 – including the entire 396-ci V-8 family. Bill Jenkins built *Grumpy's Toy V*, a 375-horse, 396-ci 2-door Nova sedan for SS/D competition.

Oldsmobile still had the 4-4-2 option rated at 350 horses, but when you added the W30 cold-air package, which ducted air to the Q-Jet through a pair of flexible tubes from behind the grille, the horsepower went to 360

again. Late in the model year, Olds went together with the Hurst Company, maker of the floor shifters, to create the Hurst/Olds. It featured some special trim and, more importantly, a 455-ci V-8 rated at 390 horsepower.

At Pontiac, the GTO and Firebird were virtually the same as they had been in 1967. The top engine option was the 400HO V-8 rated at 360 horsepower with the Ram Air package.



One of the highlights of the '68 drag season was the Camaro Z-28, which became readily available. Dave Strickler campaigned a Z-28 under his usual Old Reliable banner, racing in SS/F. Factory painted in Corvette metallic orange (you could do such a thing back then!), Strickler's Z-28 turned 11.94 to win SS/F at the '68 Spring-nationals. (Jack Bleil)



Bill Jenkins campaigned a couple of big-block Chevrolets in 1968, including Grumpy's Toy V, a Nova coupe with a 375-horse 396. Racing in SS/D, the Nova was ready to step up if the SS/C Camaro would get beaten. Note the tall but narrow Stahl tires on the front, used to gain a fraction of a second in the starter beams. (Jack Bleil)