

SPORT

**Special
Reprint**

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**SPORT
BIRD**

A
very
uncommon
CHEVY Blazer



SPORT BIRD

FIRST OF THE HIGH- FLYING NEW SPORTS TRUCKS

The Indy pole-sitter's driving impressions of
a new-breed sports vehicle

BY PETER REVSON

From my first racer (a slab-sided Morgan Plus 4, with high wheel arches, genuine fenders and running boards, cut-down doors and rear mounted twin spare tires) to the ultimate road-racing machine, the M8 assigned to me by Team Gulf-McLaren, I believe I've driven every worthwhile sports car of the past decade. This includes heavyweight performers like the Ford GT40, and the Ferrari 375LM, as well as exotic small-displacement cars, such as the Alpine-Renault. But never a sports truck, until I picked up the keys to the SPORT-Bird at Watkins Glen the day before last July's big Can-Am event. As a car-loving,

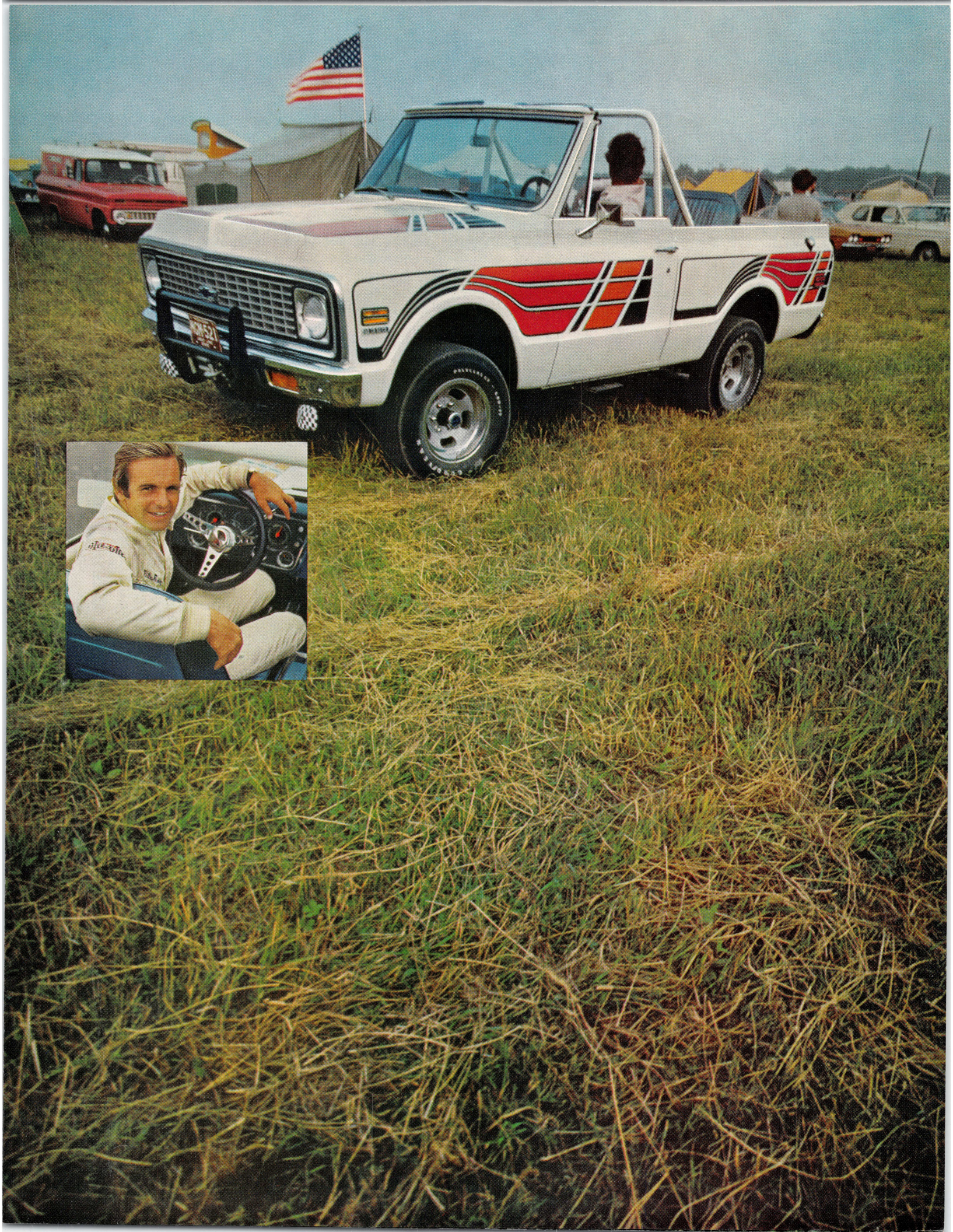
California-based bachelor, I had been mildly aware that the avant-garde car fraternity there had been gussying up trucks for some time, prodded perhaps by the insurance underwriters and the ecology protagonists, who have started to lean on sports cars and muscle cars.

SPORT-Bird is a solid-performing 4-wheel drive Chevy Blazer, into which SPORT's editors have incorporated their ideas for a multi-purpose, go-anywhere-in-style, on the road or off, fun-oriented vehicle.

Although I was supposed to road-test the SPORT-Bird, even seeing her wasn't too easy. A sizeable proportion of the 40,000 young people camping out at the Glen for the two-day race meeting, had discovered her

and were crowding around.

When I elbowed my way through this good natured group, I was immediately struck by the fact that it looked different from any truck I'd ever seen. Sure, it said Chevy Blazer on the side, but it had a complete Indianbird paint job using the forward yellow running lights as eyes. A very durable roll bar was triangulated just behind the driver's head—not a bad idea if you're going to go plunging full-tilt into the boonies. Believe me, I know how badly you need a roll-bar when you need one. A Nascar-style exhaust exited a tuned expansion chamber just in front of the rear wheels. The wheels themselves were handsome wide based polished aluminum, with 6-



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chrome studs on which were mounted ultra low profile Goodyear G60 X 15 Polyglas GT tires. The "60" means they're only 60% as high as they are wide.

The combination of substantial road clearance customary in 4-wheel drive units, plus the sporty low profile tires gave the SPORT-Bird a unique poised-for-flight stance.

Slipping behind the wheel, I noticed that it was a three-spoked, foam-rubber covered racing type. Should power-steering be missing or not up to snuff, I visualized a dandy new crop of blisters muscling this 4000 pound package over the backwoods, with the same sized steering wheel used on a featherweight Can-Am racer. Blisters are something you don't need the day before a flatout Can-Am race.

"Backwoods" here means that the locals farm only two cash crops: Firewood for the race-weekend campers, and Indian arrowheads for the tourists.

SPORT-Bird's front seats are big, thickly padded buckets designed to save your offroad posterior. From them you have a high, commanding view of the bonnet, the squarish front fenders, and the countryside. A twist of the key, and the 350 cubic inch V-8 burbles into life making a sound not unlike Junior Johnson taxiing into the pits at Darlington. Happily some very potent power steering burbles (quietly, of course) into life as well, and I can stop worrying about blisters. When I go to look for the shift lever, it's missing, so is the clutch pedal. In their place, a handy three-speed hydramatic, with the selector mounted on the steering column, plus a floor mounted 4-position shifter for the "transfer case." The transfer case is simply the mechanism whereby the high and low ranges of the 4-wheel drive and 2-wheel drive units are engaged. I had never before driven an off-road vehicle with automatic transmission,

and to me the idea made great good sense. I get enough gear shifting in the McLaren, and the standard off-road combination of a stiff clutch, and a balky synchromesh, is not my idea of fun.

In general, for tough going off-road, a good automatic gearbox can do a better job of selecting the right ratio for a given situation than a skilled driver.

The access roads at Watkins Glen on race weekend, are reminiscent of the worst weekend Paris traffic jams. Happily with SPORT-Bird you don't need roads. Ditches, gullies, rock piles, shale cliffet's don't cause SPORT-Bird a wing flutter. On reaching the main highway, SPORT-Bird accelerates like a well-tuned pony car, and the excellent choice of gear ratios in the automatic gear box becomes readily apparent. Cruising at 50, tramping the throttle produces an instant, throaty down-shift and rapid acceleration for effortless passing. The combination of a longer than typical wheelbase plus the Polyglas tires, results in a surprisingly comfortable ride. Having failed on my solo flight to extend SPORT-Bird I sought help. Help appeared: my Gulf-McLaren team captain and No. 1, Denny Hulme, a self confessed woodsman back home down under. With Denny riding shotgun we set out to get SPORT-Bird stuck. Down in the Watkins Glen State Park, there is one of the area's typical shale-bedded riverlets, most of which are endowed with waterfalls. The one we picked to drive in had a lake instead, three feet deep in mud, and out-of-season brown trout. Proud SPORT-Bird slithered to a halt, but not a defeat. Instead, a wonderful opportunity to use the front-mounted winch to haul us out of the treacherous bog.

Having been a polesitter more often than anyone else in modern sports car racing history, Denny proved adept at a new sport—pole hanging. He found a stout sapling and, positioning it between SPORT-Bird's tail feathers, and a formidable rock, aided the winch in our extraction by dangling his compact 175 pounds from the butt end.

Perhaps the SPORT-Bird pole exercise pleased the gods because we went out the next day and finished one, two in the Can-Am—a back-to-back win for me with Denny a close second. The Glen Can-Am pole-sitter, Jackie Stewart, who is very, very quick on the race-course, and equally quick in repartee, had to settle this time for few splashes of the Great Western Champagne that bubbled so liberally at the finish line. When the racing season's over, I'm going to borrow SPORT-Bird back again. We're going to take a quiet trip over the desert from Los Angeles to La Paz with nothing but a Trailblazer stove and lantern along, and see if she is as adept at fishing for marlin in Baja California, as she is at fishing for trout in Watkins Glen.

EDITORS' NOTE:

SPORT's congratulations to "Champagne Peter" Revson on his sparkling Watkins Glen Can-Am win and his writing debut—the first of three pieces the personable young front-runner will do for SPORT. In our own travels in SPORT-Bird, we were struck by the variety of uses that men who eye-balled the vehicle came up with—deer hunting, bird shooting, surf casting, surf boarding, small boat towing, desert camping, just to name a few. Already an artistic success, SPORT-Bird enters the commercial wars this fall when Chevrolet dealers will offer her Indian-feather paint job, and other key accessories on an optional-extra basis.

In his Los Angeles-Baja trip this winter Peter may get a chance to use others of these accessories, a pair of low mounted, rallye-type foglights, and a "swinging gate" arrangement for the externally mounted spare tire, which allows extra cargo space and the use of the tailgate at the same time. And, Peter, sometime before you leave the freeway and hit the desert, better swap those quiet, easy riding Polyglas GT tires for a set of knobby L70 X 15 Suburbanites. They're noisy but better suited to the terrain. At 110° even an 18 second Gulf-McLaren type pit stop seems long.