ROAD Test

CAMARO 1LE SHOOTOUT: STOCKER vs. RACER

With today's new breed of great-handling performance machinery, we are sometimes lulled into thinking that we are driving full-blooded race cars. To some, a stoplight is like an invitation to test reaction time, while others see a twisting two-lane road as a personal challenge. Yet, there is another level of performance not distant from the dealer's floor called "Showroom Stock" which is true racing, ranging from streets converted to racing for a weekend event to 24 hours of endurance at legendary Watkins Glen.

One such class of racing is the Firestone Firehawk Series, which divides a wide variety of makes and models into three separate classes: Grand Sport, Sports, and Touring. Few types of racing have as many lead changes (in some cases as many as 30 per race), or close finishes (less than 1 second between first and second) as Showroom Stock. And more often than not, it's one of several Camaros that leads the field, derivatives of the factory-offered 1LE option.

To compare the differences between a street car and its racing counterpart, CAR CRAFT brought two versions of the 1LE Camaro together at Los Angeles County Raceway in Palmdale, California. The race car was made available by Mecum Racing of Rockford, Illinois, complete with one of their highly skilled drivers, Mitch Wright. Having won one race and finished second twice with his co-driver Mark Hutchins, Mitch had little problem putting both cars through their paces. Other

PHOTOS BY LYNNE MCCREADY (PPC PHOTOGRAPHIC) AND STEVE ANDERSON

BY STEVE ANDERSON

members of the Mecum Racing team include ZR1 engineer John Heinricy, Don Knowles, and Ed Mecum Sr. who actually races one of his three team cars. Their racing effort is supported through Mecum's family-operated used car dealerships located across Illinois and Indiana.

While minimum modifications are allowed in the Firehawk Series, changes are still made to "fine-tune" the vehicles, what various teams refer to as "race preparation." The chassis is refined for specific racing circuits through changes in anti-roll bars and shocks, as well alignment settings. In the case of the Mecum cars (and others), each is stripped down to the bare chassis before a step-by-step rebuild to maximize reliability, and to ensure that the cars remain within specification.

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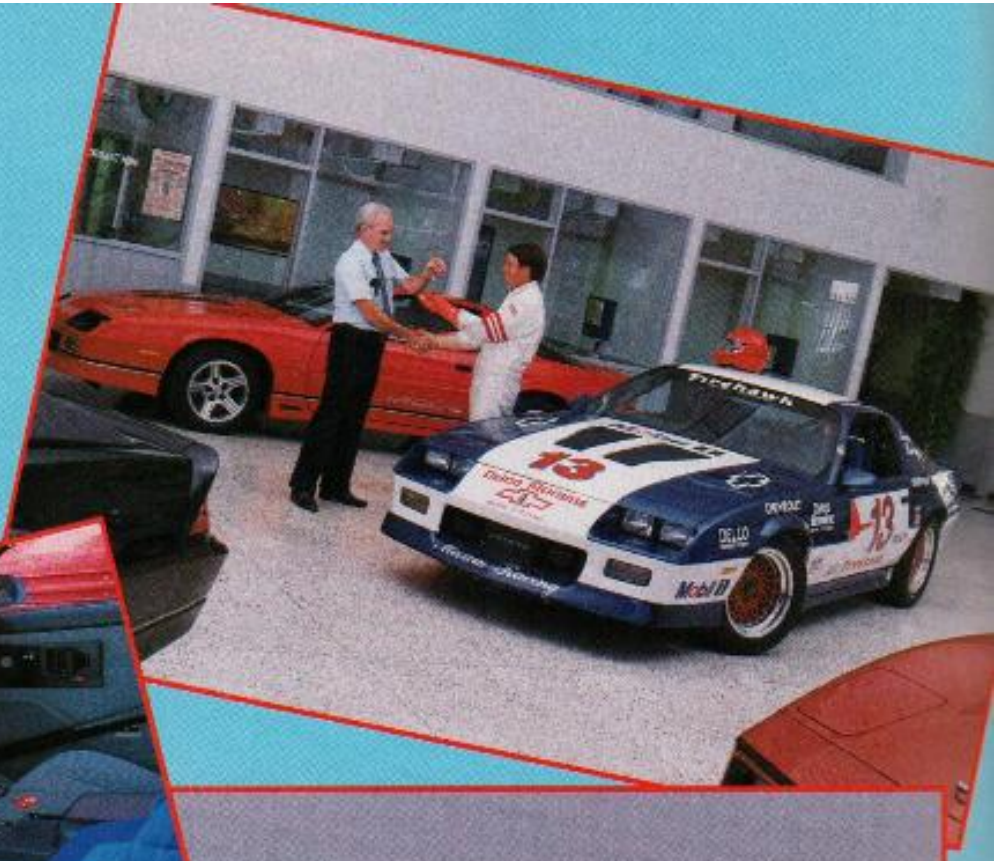
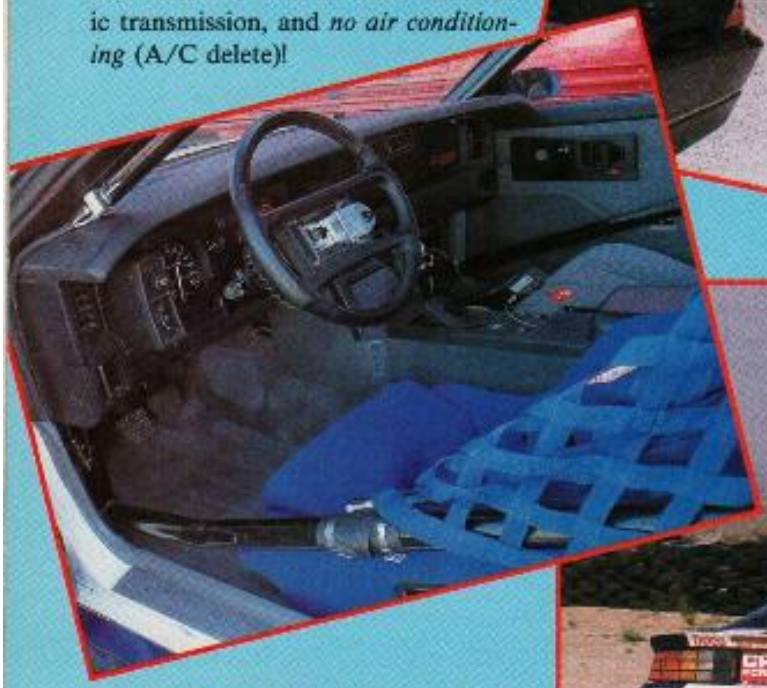
The foundation for these fierce competitors, the 1LE Camaro, is also a specially constructed version of an all-American favorite. To obtain one, a special combination of options must be ordered. The first step comes in choosing a G92 optional axle ratio, and LB9 5.0L V-8 with a MK6 five-speed transmission or a L98 5.7L V-8 with an MX0 automatic transmission, and *no air conditioning* (A/C delete)!





When this is done, numerous options are included in the package such as dual exhaust, 16-inch wheels, 245/50ZR16 tires, heavy-duty 1LE disc brakes, engine oil cooler, G80 Positraction, special fuel tank baffles, an aluminum driveshaft, and special deflected disc shocks; fog lamps are deleted. Once all of the hoops have been jumped through, one can take possession of a true "limited production" vehicle. In 1986, fewer than 100 such cars were constructed. Shades of the 1967 Z/28 Camaro option.

From this point on, the Mecum Racing 1LE gains an edge on its original counterpart with increased horsepower through blueprinting and adjustments to the suspension. The changes were reflected in 0.5-second/5 mph improvements in quarter-mile times. Because they utilize shaved tires, cornering has also been improved. The overall vehicle weight of 3250 pounds is equal to that of a "production " 1LE, as removal of certain interior trim pieces, spare tire, and jack was offset by the addition of a rollbar and Halon fire system.

To maintain consistency, crew chief Matt Saran maintains six spare rearends, four transmissions, and two engines, and a host of other spares in the truck at all times. (However, it should be noted that after 70 racing hours on one engine, only bearings and seals were replaced, while the rearends have yet to be changed.)

With their impressive performances in the Firehawk Series (the Mecum team collected two wins in the first three races in 1989), the 1LE Camaros have given notice as to just how good these cars truly are. Considering the few differences between the race version, and those for the street, the 1LE Camaro gives new meaning to the term "street racer." For those looking to go racing, this just may be the car in which to do so!

ROAD Test

1989 CHEVROLET CAMARO 1LE

• PRICE

Base Price	$14,145
Price as tested	$14,839

• ENGINE

Type	Chevrolet built 90-degree V-8, cast iron block and heads, five main bearings
Bore and Stroke, (in.)	3.74x3.48
Displacement	305cid: 5.0 liters
Compression	9.3:1
Rated Horsepower	230 at 4800 rpm
Rated Torque, (lbs-ft)	300 at 3200rpm
Valvetrain	Pushrods, hyd. roller lifters
Exhaust	Cast iron manifold, two 2.5-inch headpipes to twin catalytic converters to two 2.5-inch outlets to a 3-inch main pipe to a transverse muffler with twin outlets.
Fuel Metering	Naturally aspirated, electronic Tuned Port Fuel Injection
Recommended fuel[(R+M)/2]	91 octane Unleaded
Maximum recommended engine speed	5700 rpm
Total dressed engine weight (lbs.)	305cid: 658.7

• CHASSIS

Front suspension	Independent w/coil springs, modified MacPherson Strut
Spring rate at wheel (lb/in)	146
Anti-roll bar dia (in.)	1.3
Rear Suspension	Salisbury axle w/torque arm, track bar and coil springs
Spring rate at wheel (lb/in)	165.4
Anti-roll bar dia (in.)	0.9
Front brakes	11.86-inch disc
Rear brakes	11.65-inch disc
Assist	Tandem vacuum
Steering	Saginaw recirculating ball
Gear ratio	12.7:1
Wheel turns, stop to stop	2.14

• TRANSMISSION

Type	305cid: M46 5-speed
Clutch type	Hydraulic dry disc
Diameter (in.)	10.5
Total Spring load (lbs.)	1742
Gear ratios—1st	2.75
2nd	1.94
3rd	1.34
4th	1.00
5th	0.74
Reverse	2.76

• FINAL DRIVE

Type	Semi-floating axle, overhung hypoid drive pinion and rear gear
Final drive ratio	3.45
Ring gear diameter(in.)	7.625

• TIRES AND WHEELS

Wheel type and size (in.)	Cast aluminum, 16 x 8
Offset (I/r)	0mm/15mm
Tire type and brand	(Production) Goodyear Eagle Gatorbacks (Race Car) Firestone Firehawk SVs
Size	P245/50ZR16
Test pressure F/R, (psi)	30/33

• DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, (in.)	101.0
Length, (in.)	192.0
Width, (in.)	72.8
Track F/R, (in.)	60.0/60.9
Minimum ground clearance (in.)	(Production) 5.1 (Race car) 4.1
Location	Front crossmember
Fuel Capacity, (gal.)	15.5
Oil capacity, with filter, (qt.)	5
Curb weight (lbs.)	3250
Frontal area (ft.)	21.9

PERFORMANCE

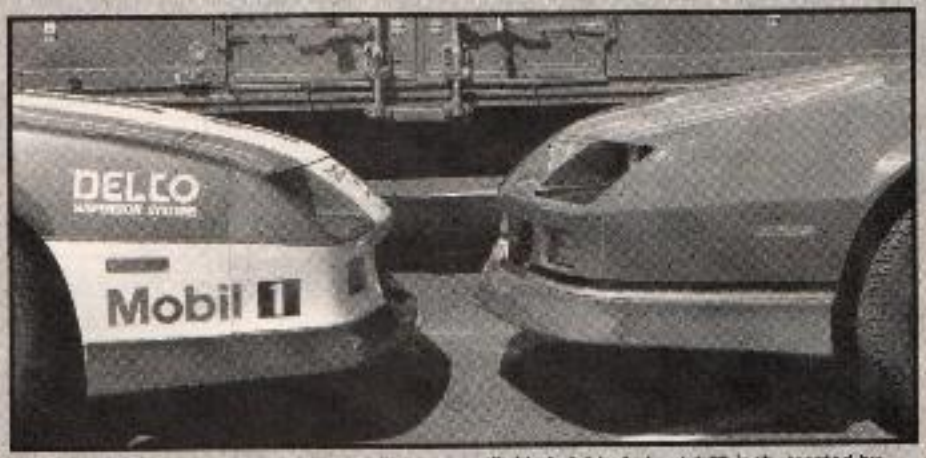
• Acceleration (sec.)

Quarter Mile	(Production) 14.70 at 93.01 mph
	(Race Car) 14.19 at 98.83 mph

• FUEL CONSUMPTION (305)

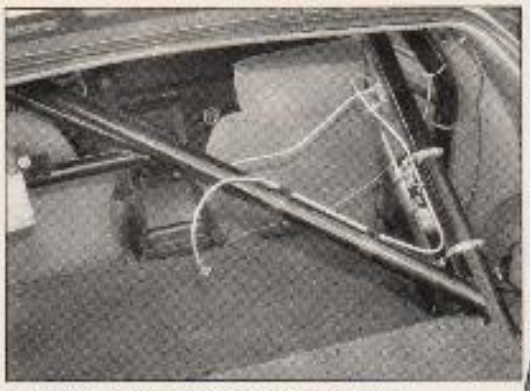
Performance driving	14.1
Normal driving	17.8

Considering the stock form of this Firestone Firehawk 1LE Camaro, you could stop off for a little shopping on the way to the track. The only giveaway might be the unmuffled exhaust note which gets pretty crisp at 6000 rpm! Still, it's a nice thought, eh, mom?

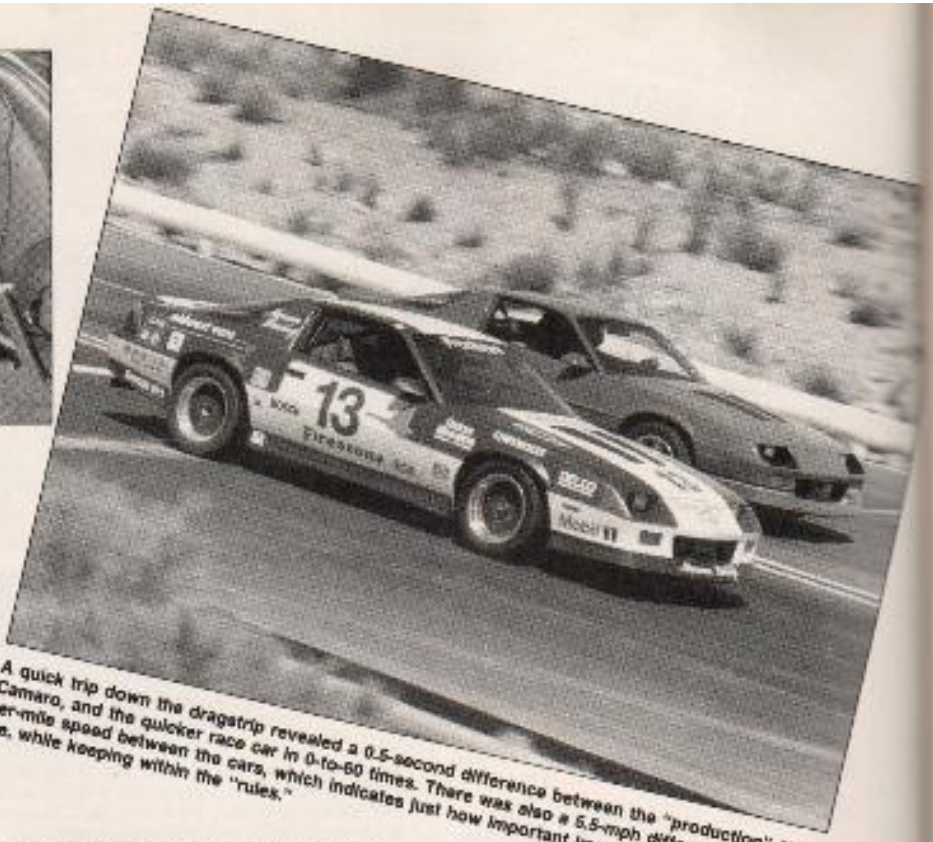


Refinements in the suspension include a lower overall ride height of about 1.00 inch, created by carefully selecting the shortest springs from a particular batch, as these vary from one to another. The shocks and anti-roll bars are also changed to suit various racing circuits throughout the season.

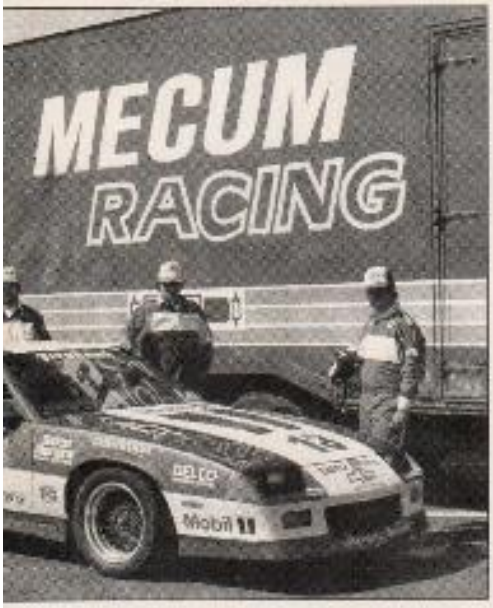
In a "Showroom Stocker," the area most heavily modified is the interior, which makes good use of a bolt-in roll cage including safety netting, a Halon fire system, and a Sparco racing seat. An added touch on this car is a Firebird steering wheel, which this team seems to prefer. Items like the radio and even the lighter have been removed in an effort to reduce weight.



The right rear upright support of the rollcage is also the mounting point for the Halon fire extinguisher. Its nozzles are located across the interior.

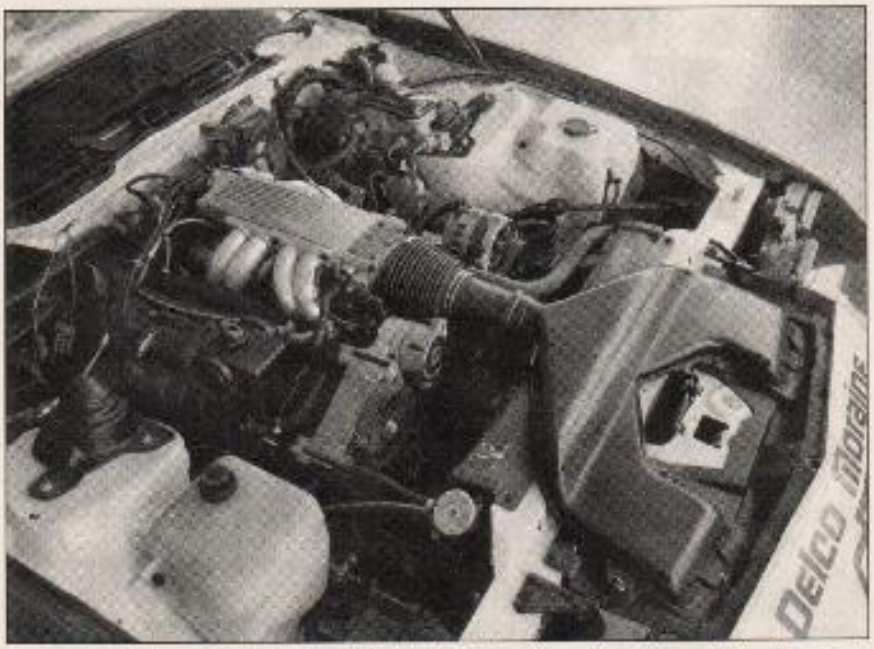


A quick trip down the dragstrip revealed a 0.5-second difference between the "production" 1LE Camaro, and the quicker race car in 0-to-60 times. There was also a 5.5-mph difference in quarter-mile speed between the cars, which indicates just how important improved intake air flow can be, while keeping within the "rules."



The people from Mecum Racing took time out of their winning season to be a part of CAR CRAFT's 1LE comparison. From left to right is engine builder Jeff Kalowinski, crew chief and operations manager Matt Saran, and driver Mitch Wright who, with teammate Mark Hutchins, has already earned two first- and one second-place finishes this season.

To improve the overall braking of both the production and race cars, 11.86-inch-diameter heavy-duty 1LE disc brakes have been added in front. Rear discs are 11.65.



Under its hood, the race car's 305 small-block looks just as it came from the production line. However, "race preparations" include blueprinting the engine and injector to maximize performance and reliability. This particular engine was raced for 70 hours using Mobil 1 oil. When rebuilt, only the seals and bearings were replaced, though still in excellent condition.