

# THE NOT-SO-KANDY KOLORED, NON-TANGERINE FLAKE, SORT-OF STREAMLINED (COSWORTH VEGA) BABY

The gearshift falls readily to hand, it corners like it was on rails, and the little cooker from Detroit stops on a dime and gives you nine cents change. Its long suit is its sporty motor and with its sleek looks it should give the low-slung foreign roadsters a run for their money.

By Gary Witzenburg

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by the words "Cosworth Twin Cam."

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Picture if you will the ultimate and last remaining real Supercar of today's fuel-poor and pollution-rich world: the Pontiac Firebird TransAm. Bristling with stripes, scoops and more-or-less quasi functional spoilers, the TransAm weighs about 3700 pounds and has Clydesdale ponycar exterior dimensions of 192.1 x 73.4 x 50.4 inches on a 108-inch wheelbase.

A true compact by Detroit's normally gargantuan standards. The massive TransAm engine displaces 455 cubic inches and pumps out 290 SAE net horsepower at 4000 rpm, giving the car a very respectable weight to power ratio of 12.8 lbs. per hp.

Now take that Firebird TransAm and stuff it into that incredible compacting machine often seen in a certain other manufacturer's TV commercials—you know, the one which crunches a year's worth of garbage into a capsule no bigger than a vitamin pill. The device the British call the electric pig.

After what seems like an eternity of breathless expectation, the machine finally stops. The sickening crunch-scrape-grind sounds of rearrangement have stopped, and after a moment's welcome silence, an entirely different noise rumbles forth. The sound is equally piercing, but strangely pleasant, and suddenly you remember where you've heard it before. On the grassy hillsides, under the rickety wooden bridges, around the dusty paddocks and behind the pit walls of the world's racing circuits.

A glimmer of gold appears from inside the pig's maw. The lovely noises diminish, no longer reflected and am-

plified by the chamber walls, leaving an erotic, muffled burbling. The dark form begins to take shape. It's a familiar shape, yet somehow *different*. It's definitely a car, shovel-nosed and hatch-backed, perched on fat radial tires on dazzling gold multi-spoked wheels. Gold trim accentuates the flared wheel openings and a slim gold double pin-stripe stretches from head to taillight, broken just forward of the wide door

by the words "Cosworth Twin Cam."

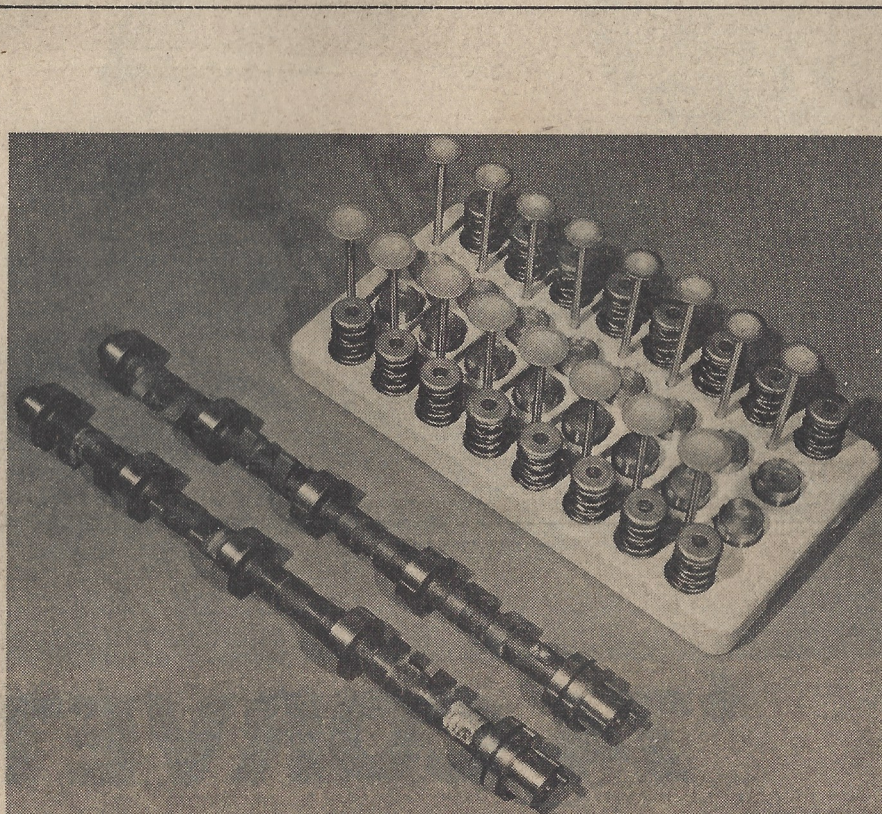
Suddenly you realize that you are looking at the new, limited-production Chevrolet Cosworth Vega. A common, American, Naderized Vega GT sporting a lean and hungry European-type twin overhead cam 2-liter power plant. This is the car that has been described by the most aware and cognizant of the motoring press as the first domestic SuperCoupe,

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Your thoughts are broken by a delicious Brap, Brap from the exhaust and for the first time you notice the driver. Not a mustachioed, Gucciclad television mannequin as you might have expected, but a short-haired, straight-cuffed, pipe-smoking, intense citizen without even a set of driving gloves to his name. His name is Warren Frank, and he's the Chevrolet development engineer assigned to the CosVeg project at GM's Milford, Michigan Proving Ground.

Frank beckons with his pipe, indicating that he wants to take you for a ride in his shiny CosVeg. Being the kind of enthusiast you are, you insist on driving the car and Frank obligingly clanders over the shifter and settles into the passenger seat. As you belt in behind the wheel, you are immediately struck by the dash (*not hard, hopefully—Ed.*) standard Vega GT in layout but wall-to-wall bright gold machine-turned aluminum, reminiscent of the silver-colored aluminum fascia of the Firebird which originally went into the magic machine. Frank doesn't like the gold dash and is trying to get Chevrolet to change it before the car goes into production.

Accelerating the CosVeg through the smooth Chevy 4-speed is an exhilarating experience indeed. It is not a low-end torquer as you might expect, and getting it off the line in a hurry requires some fancy footwork, high revs and abundant radial tire smoke—but once it's off, it's off!



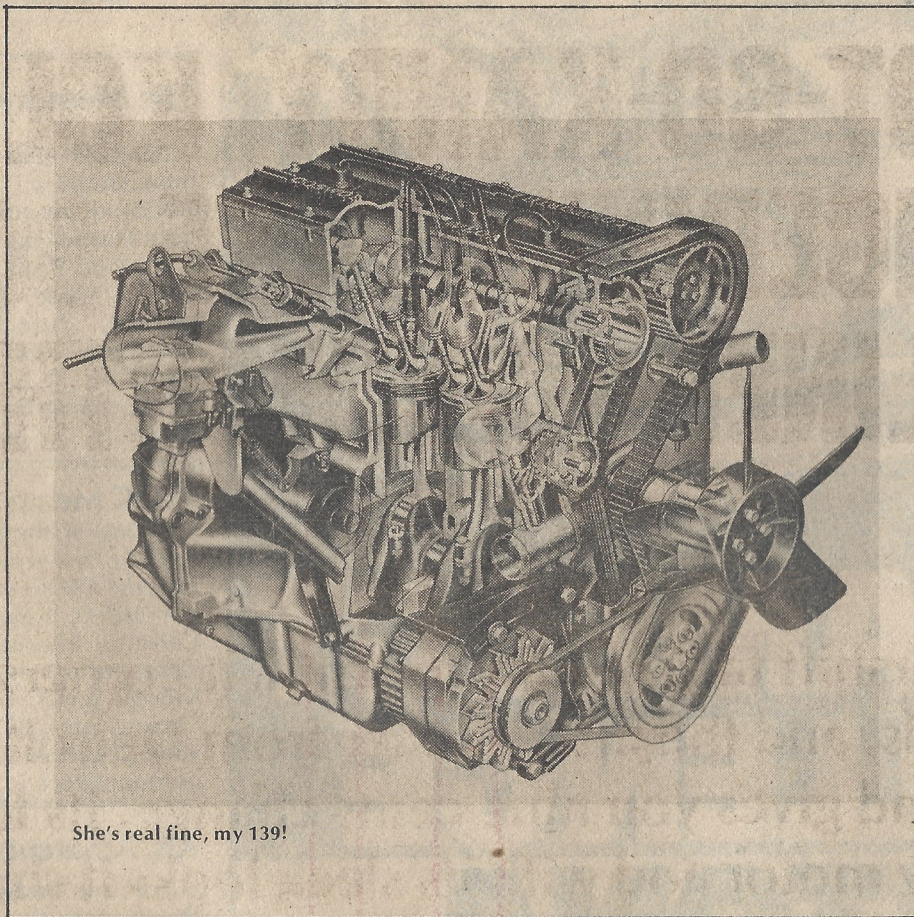
The twin cams and 16 (count'em) valves.



Zero-to-sixty times are consistently under 9 seconds and one-fourth-mile times are in the neighborhood of 17 seconds using the normal 7000rpm redline. Frank claims he has done 0-60 in 8.5 and turned a one-fourth-mile in 16.7—without driving gloves.

But you're naturally more interested in cornering than in straight-line performance, so Frank lets you take it around the infamous GM Proving Ground Ride and Handling loop. There it performs admirably, with the only fault being a tricky "bump-steer" condition which causes it to lose, momentarily, its remarkably stable and neutral cornering attitude whenever it encounters "washboard" roads. Frank explains that they're still working on the shock rates to remedy this and to keep the wheels on the ground for a larger percentage of the time on rough surfaces.

A few hasty trips around the Seven Sisters, a series of four tightly banked turns and three right-angle flat ones quickly reveals the CosVeg's other glaring deficiency in its present state. Unaccountably, Chevrolet has not seen fit to give it a limited slip differential. The Vega GT suspension, which is otherwise nearly flawless, is just not stiff enough to prevent the car from lifting its inside leg like an impolite dog on the hard, tight turns. This results in massive wheelspin as all the CosVeg's considerable power is transferred to the unloaded side, and the car skids helplessly sideways until it loses its momentum. Then the inside tire falls from the sky, finally



She's real fine, my 139!

recovers its bite, and off you go toward a repeat performance on the next turn.

This behavior is barely acceptable in a below-average econobox, but inexcusable in a car of this nature. You respectfully suggest that they equip production CosVegs with limited-slips and Frank says he'll

see what he can do.

Otherwise, the car is a masterpiece. It's 20 inches shorter than the Firebird (on a 97 inch wheelbase) and eight inches narrower, yet has all the room and comfort of the Supercar. Its fuel-injected, crossflow, twin cam 120cid engine is expected to deliver 140hp in legal street trim, yet will

average between 20 and 25 mph. With a curb weight of less than 2300 pounds, the CosVeg will weigh in at about 16.4 lb. per hp—not at all bad for an economy car. The styling is an acceptable if not classic rendition of the slightly weird 1974 Vega look, with a tasteful JPS Lotus-type paint job and a merciful lack of garish scoops, stripes, and spoilers.

A white/gold version would be welcome, especially in hot climates since there will be no air conditioning available with the Cosworth engine—but apparently all 5000 of the hand-built 1974 CosVegs will be jet black. A five-speed would be a tremendous addition to the package and may show up eventually but not this year, according to Warren. If Chevrolet just doesn't pull its usual cost-cutting trick on this car and adds whatever the car requires, (better shocks and a limited-slip for instance) they may just have a real winner as well as a much-needed domestic trendsetter. But if it allows the car's performance to suffer in relation to the imports against which it's supposed to compete, in the hallowed name of "cost" Chevrolet will have an instant collectors' item and not much more.

You thank Warren Frank for the demonstration and leave him and his CosVeg back with the magic compacting machine. You slip into the sumptuous reclining seat of your Mercedes—duly impressed. Perhaps there is yet hope for the American industry, fat and spoiled and encumbered in lead time as it is.



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