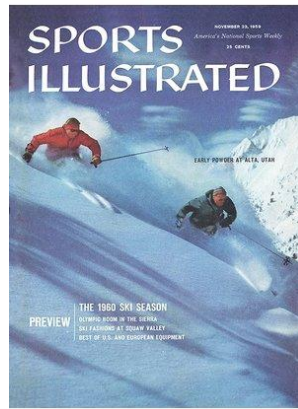


Battle of the Compacts at Continental Divide

Sports Illustrated - November 23, 1959



A Rambler drew first blood, but it was hard to choose between Falcons and Corvairs By Alfred Wright

The first meaningful argument between the new Detroit compact cars took place in an auto race outside Denver last Sunday and ended up in pretty much of a draw as far as the Ford Falcon and Chevrolet Corvair were concerned. For neither of them won the race. But a secondhand Rambler did—and very convincingly at that. Yet there were enough mitigating circumstances and genuine excuses lying around at the end of this very grueling six-hour endurance test to satisfy a whole floor full of Detroit brass hats.

To begin with, the "First International Small Car Marathon," as the Denver Sports Car Club so grandly named its race, was rather hastily organized. Sid Langsam and Ray Lavelly, a pair of energetic Denverites who, respectively, own and manage the Continental Divide Raceways, wanted to be the first to stage a contest between the Detroit compacts.

They had to beat Sebring, which is planning a similar event before its Grand Prix race of December 12, and Daytona, whose compact race is scheduled for January. So they signed up a group of Denver's Corvair and Falcon dealers who figured they could quickly organize teams. Of the seven Chrysler Valiant dealers in Denver, not one could dredge up more than a single specimen, so after a certain amount of hemming and hawing the Valiant was scratched.

The field finally went to the post at 9 a.m. on Sunday. A teeth-chattering wind blew off the snow-covered Rockies onto the plain south of Denver, where the Continental Divide track is planted on a hillside. Twenty-three cars showed up, but obviously the main interest of the few hundred hardy spectators centered around the Corvairs and Falcons. There were five of the former and three of the latter, each strictly stock. The Corvairs were all four-door sedans equipped just as you would find them on the dealer's floor except that none of them had heaters or radios and a couple carried tachometers and specially installed instruments for keeping tabs on oil pressure and motor temperature. The Falcons were two-door sedans, two of them carrying radio and heater. All cars had two-man driving teams—every one of whom was an experienced racing driver.

The remaining 15 cars comprised a hodgepodge of domestic and foreign makes. There was the second-hand Rambler which was owned and driven by Johnny Mauro, a local car dealer who finished eighth at Indianapolis in an Alfa Romeo in 1948. He had bought the two-door sedan a few days earlier from a lady who had put only 6,000 miles on it, but all he did was tune it up a bit in his shop. The Rambler, designated as class one (3,001 cc. to 3,500

cc.) was the biggest car in the race. Class two (2,501 cc. to 3,000 cc.) contained only an imported Ford Zodiac, but Lark and Valiant would both have been in this class had they competed. Corvair and Falcon were in class three (2,001 cc. to 2,500 cc.) and the remaining smaller classes contained an assortment of Volvos, Volkswagens, Renaults, Fiats of various dimensions, a two-cycle DKW Auto Union and a little English Riley.

It was obvious within a lap or two after the green flag had signaled a Le Mans-type start that there was nothing in the race likely to bother Mauro and his light-green economy Rambler as long as they both held together for six hours. Next, as they should have, came the Corvairs and Falcons, losing ground slowly but steadily to the Rambler, but a very good match for each other. After an hour the Rambler had a 45-second lead over a Falcon, with Corvairs third and fourth, a Falcon fifth, a Volvo sixth, a Corvair seventh and a Falcon eighth.

So far the rear-engine Corvair with 60% of its weight unconventionally distributed on the rear axle was having no trouble with the raceway's tortuous and hilly turns. And this 2.8-mile track, shaped something like an unfolded paper clip, is considered by good drivers to be one of the most sporting in the country. But shortly after the first hour had passed there were serious portents for the Corvair. Within a matter of minutes, two of them blew their left-rear tires. The Corvair pit crew immediately became chary and called for frequent pit stops to keep watch on the tires. The rear ones, in particular, were just not standing up. Danny Collins, one of the top Corvair drivers, blamed much of it on the U.S. Royals they were using. "It's a much harder tire," he explained, "and it cuts up quicker on these turns. The Goodriches we used in practice are softer and held up twice as long." Midway through the race, Corvair No. 3 blew a tire and did a complete flip on one of the turns, but the remaining four finished the race intact despite the agony of these frequent pit stops.

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The Falcons meanwhile hastened happily on their way but after a couple of hours they too were beginning to have more than their share of pit stops for tire changes. It began to look as if the compact car was the best thing that ever happened to the rubber industry. But as it turned out, the Falcons' trouble was simply disorganization. No one in the pits was paying much attention to anything and so no one seemed to have any clear notion of which car had good tires and which didn't. The safest thing to do was just to stop the cars now and then to find out. As it turned out, the three Falcons used only 14 tires in all, not counting the 12 on which they finished the race, and none of these used tires was in truly bad shape; but the four and a half Corvairs chewed up 40 tires something awful. To nobody's surprise Mauro and his Rambler finished the six hours in the lead by more than three minutes, having covered 333 miles at a very respectable average of 55.5 miles an hour. Next, believe it or not, was a little maroon-colored Volkswagen, which sneaked in a few yards ahead of Falcon No. 11 simply by observing the moral of the old fable of the tortoise and the hare. So Falcons were third, fourth and 15th, while Corvairs were sixth, seventh, 13th and 14th. Three cars (the Corvair mentioned above, a Volvo and a Renault Dauphine) flipped during the race after blowouts, but the remaining 20 all finished without mechanical mishap or shortcoming.

Anyone would have to admit that with a little better organization and a little more knowledge of how to handle the rubber problem, all eight of the new compacts would inevitably have come in not far behind the Rambler. And you could flip a coin as to whether a Falcon or a Corvair would have led the pack—there was that little to choose between the speed and handling characteristics of the two makes.