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WHO KNEW THAT CHEVY'S SCORNO CORVAIR COULD BE TURNED INTO A QUICK, WELL-MANNERED SPORTS CAR WITH SOME MODEST BACKYARD ENGINEERING AND TWO EXTRA CYLINDERS?



# COULDA HAD A V-8

RALPH NADER'S WORST NIGHTMARE:  
A CORVAIR WITH A SMALL-BLOCK IN THE BACK SEAT.

» THE CHEVY CORVAIR'S SWING AXLES AND HEAVY TAIL are implements of the devil, at least according to Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* diatribe. Paul Siano, the creator of the mid-engine Siano special, doesn't buy any of that. He's owned, modified, and drag-raced Corvairs for more than half of his seventy years without suffering a single unintended spinout.

Siano bought what began life as a 1966 Corvair Corsa after supercharging a Volkswagen Beetle and owning a '64 Corvair Spyder convertible. He drove the coupe 50,000 miles before ripping out the stock 180-hp engine to install major upgrades.

A Crown Manufacturing kit provided the means of upping the cylinder count and moving the engine from the back porch to the rear seat. That \$600 package included a tubular-steel subframe, an engine-to-transaxle adapter plate, a new transmission input gear, cooling-system pipes, shift linkage, and two new antiroll bars.

Siano's prize possession is a rare, experimental aluminum 283-cubic-inch engine block that General Motors pitched out as scrap. Engine builder Bryce Flinn added a roller cam, aluminum heads, and the induction overkill. Siano fabricated the necessary bits and brackets with an emphasis on minimal weight. He also added four-wheel disc brakes, Minilite wheels, radial tires, and a Ron Davis aluminum radiator.

Siano didn't partition off his eight-pack of Weber intake trumpets, because he's a patron of the rolling, reverberating, internal-combustion arts. Living with Webers is not for the meek of heart. When cold, they spit and stumble. When they're up to operating temperature, they fill the interior with a combustible cloud of reversion gases. Smoking is discouraged.

**THE SPECS**  
**ENGINE:** 4.6-liter (283 cu in) OHV V-8, 300 hp (est.)  
**WEIGHT:** 2600 lb  
**WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION F/R:** 44.0/56.0 percent  
**DRIVE:** Rear-wheel



Headphones are available for those rides when hearing preservation takes precedence over the din of a barely muffled Chevy V-8. Only two things keep the whirring water-pump pulley from biting the occupants' elbows: the flush bolts that Siano installed in place of hex-head screws and every human's natural preservation instincts.

When we drove to the test track, Siano's homebuilt special revealed evil streaks: quick but heavy steering, vague shift linkage, and a throttle pedal that offers yes and no but very little maybe. However, a few miles were enough to establish an amicable working relationship.

Offered the opportunity to redeem itself, the Siano special settled into stride to post a reasonably impressive performance report: 0 to 60 mph in 5.2 seconds, the quarter mile in 13.9 seconds at 104 mph, and a top speed of 130 mph. More amazing, the handling balance is excellent, offering just under 0.90 g at the limit of adhesion and only a touch of easily controlled oversteer when the fourteen-inch Goodrich Radial T/As finally let go. The cobbled-together chassis held firm over bumps, and the dampers kept body motions nicely controlled throughout the testing gauntlet.

Back in the Corvair's day, GM fiddled with various mid-engine sports cars, only one of which (the Pontiac Fiero) ever saw the light of a production line. Leave it to a motivated Corvair enthusiast to demonstrate what could be achieved by adding a couple of cylinders and relocating the engine to a more productive location. **AM**