



Like all Chrysler products, Dodges got new Virgil Exner-inspired "Forward Look" styling beginning in 1955. The face of the 1956 models (top) was little changed, right down to the divided grille theme. A test driver adjusts a carefully calibrated speedometer wheel (second from top) before taking a '56 D-500 Dodge onto the Chrysler test track at Chelsea, Michigan. The "fifth wheel" could accurately measure speeds up to 120 mph, which was just beyond the top speeds to which magazine writers of the day were able to push their test cars. The D-500 was introduced in December 1955. By the early part of '56, it was available in all three Dodge trim levels: Coronet, Royal, and Custom Royal (above). Suggested—but hardly mandatory—D-500 colors were Sapphire White and Oriental Coral (below).

Can there be too much of a good thing? It's an old question with no definite answer. As the Fifties dawned for American automakers, horsepower was considered a good thing, and it was a commodity they were willing to spread around in big portions.

The engine of change in this case was the high-compression ohv V-8. Cadillac and Oldsmobile started the ball rolling in 1949. Chrysler advanced the cause in 1951 via the 180-bhp FirePower mill with its efficient hemispherical combustion chambers—the so-called "Hemi" engine. By 1955, the year Chevrolet, Pontiac, Plymouth, Packard, Nash, and Hudson all gained V-8s, every manufacturer but fading Kaiser and Willys offered such a power plant (CA, June 1991). The horsepower race that had been building for several years was finally in full stride.

All the while the engines were getting bigger and stronger, Detroit was creating a niche performance market. Racing successes, especially on the circle-track stock-car circuits, began featuring prominently in advertising. Meanwhile, specialized parts development and distribution ensured that qualified race teams would turn in the kinds of results that could be trumpeted in ads. As the automakers raised the visibility of performance, they wanted to get some of it in the hands of customers. Most began slowly with optional engines and available "heavy duty" or "severe usage" parts. But Chrysler Corporation went a step further by offering special high-performance cars.

The first was none other than the Chrysler C-300 of 1955, the start of the famed "letter cars" (CA, May 1985). It was offered only as a specially trimmed two-door hardtop, a formula followed in 1956 by DeSoto for its Adventurer (CA, October 1996) and Plymouth for its Fury (CA, April 1986). Dodge, too, was moved to produce a high-performance car—the D-500—but the division's approach would prove to be much broader than that of its corporate siblings.

Dodge joined the V-8 fraternity in 1953. Its 241-cid Red Ram engine was a hemi-head design that cranked out 140 bhp. When the V-8 was fitted in the newly downsized models that appeared for that year (CA, December 1990), Dodges were suddenly spirited performers in contrast to the staid flathead-six family cars they had been in years past.

Once in the horsepower competition of the Fifties, entrants had to run faster all

the time. For 1954, Dodge upped the Red Ram's output to 150 bhp for use in Coronets and the new top-line Royal. The V-8s in the bigger, bolder-looking 1955 Dodges were bored out to 270 cid; power ranged from 175 to 193 bhp. A 189-bhp 270 was the base eight for 1956, but a new 315-cid variant became standard in Royals and Custom Royals. It accounted for 218 bhp in regular tune, or 230 with a four-barrel carburetor. But the epitome of Dodge power in '56 was the D-500 engine, a stormer that left its considerable mark on salt flats, stock-car ovals, and drag strips across the country.

Although the hemi-head design generated great power, it was costly to produce. The intake and exhaust valves entered the domed combustion chambers at opposed angles, requiring two rocker arm assemblies. Starting in 1955, most Dodge V-8s went to a more cost-effective polyspherical head design, and the blessings of Hemi power were bestowed exclusively on the highest-output engines. In 1956, that distinction belonged to the 315-cid D-500.

Every Dodge V-8 for '56 shared a 3.63-inch bore, but the 315s were created by stroking the cylinders to 3.80 inches. (Block deck height was raised to allow the longer piston travel.) On the D-500, enlarged valves were actuated by mechanical lifters and beefed up valve springs. Two camshafts were available, each ground for high performance. A compression ratio of 9.25:1 (compared to 8.0:1 in the other V-8s) pressed on the flat-topped pistons. A Carter four-barrel carb fed the air-fuel mix to the engine; low-restriction twin pipes carried off waste gasses. A double-breaker distributor and ballast coil provided the hotter spark required for the high-compression power plant. Horsepower came in at 260 at 4800 rpm and 330 pound-feet of torque was attained at 3000 revs.

But there was more to the D-500 than just a fortified engine (at least at first). Six-leaf springs lowered 1½ inches from standard height were used in the rear. More compact heavy duty coils were applied in front, and stouter shock absorbers were mounted all around. Other D-500 chassis equipment included uprated steering arms and knuckles, 5½-inch-wide rims for the 15-inch-diameter wheels, and 12-inch center-plane hydraulic brakes cribbed from Chrysler (as were some of the other chassis pieces) that were 37 percent larger than those used on other Dodges.

