

**Special Test Report:
A Car and Driver staff
comparison of America's
fastest sports sedans**

6

SUPER CARS!

OLDSMOBILE 4-4-2 • CHEVELLE SS 396
PONTIAC GTO • SKYLARK GRAN SPORT
FAIRLANE GT/A • COMET CYCLONE GT

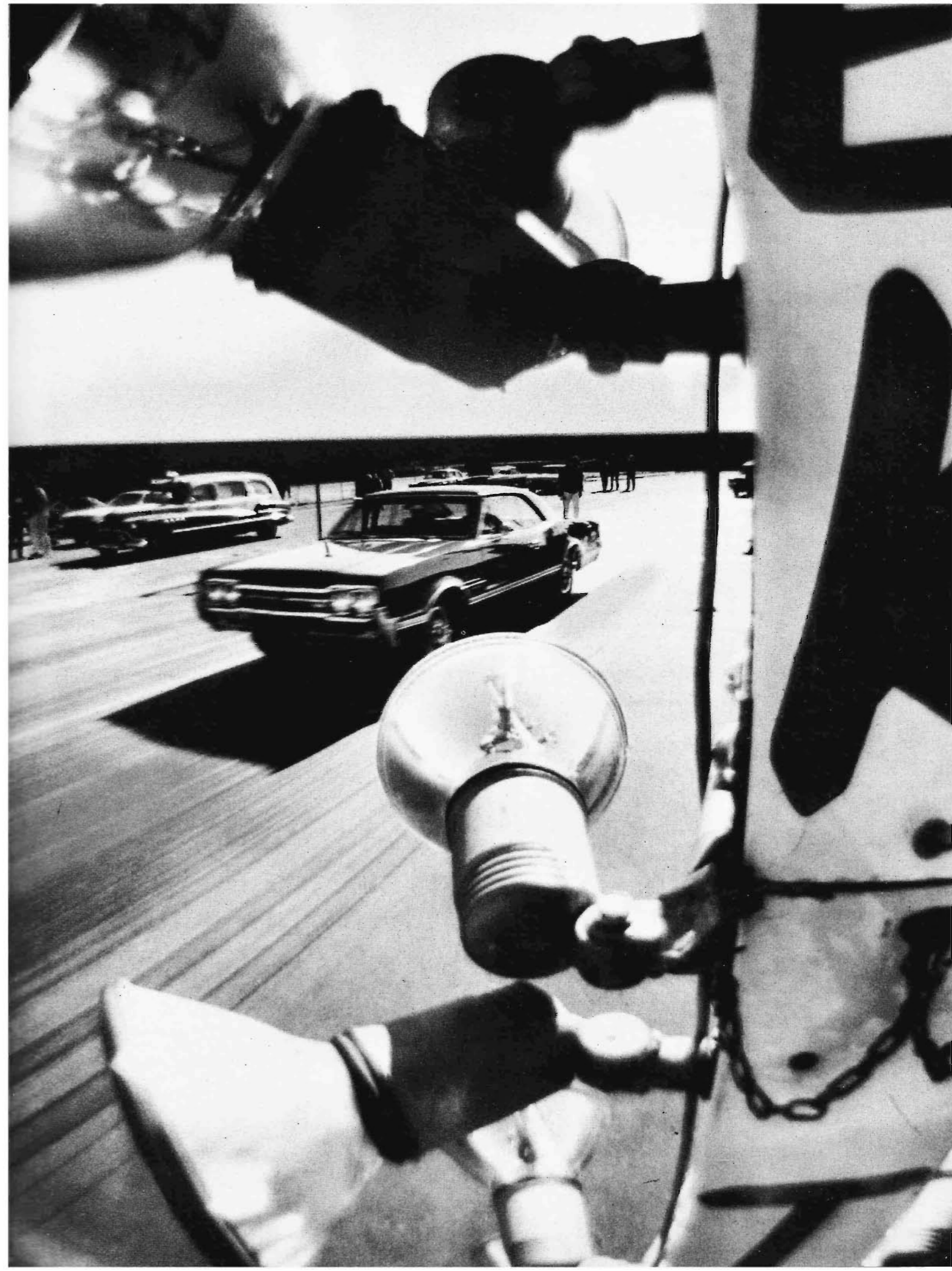
GATHER together six of the hot intermediate sedans and compare them? One against the other? Actually *rank* them on the basis of their performance on the race track, the drag strip and street? You guys are out of your minds!

And so they laughed when we sat down to play. The idea to run a bonanza six-way test on the so-called Super Cars was hatched immediately following our wildly successful test between the Ferrari 2+2 and the Pontiac 2+2 that appeared exactly one year ago. Proceeding cautiously, we established a basic format for multi-car comparisons with our evaluation of six luxury cars in July, 1965, and the stage was set for the most elaborate and possibly the most important automotive test that has yet appeared in *C/D*. The choice of the Super Cars was obvious. First of all, no group of sporting automobiles has made a greater impact on the American scene. The excitement started the moment the first Pontiac GTO appeared in 1963 and has steadily mounted as new cars like the Olds 4-4-2 and Comet Cyclone have arrived to compete for a share of the booming performance market. Secondly, these automobiles are tailored specifically for the American enthusiast and *C/D* has therefore had a great editorial involvement with them since that famous moment in March, 1963 when we alternately enraged and delighted readers everywhere by implying that the Pontiac GTO was in many ways a better car than the fabled Ferrari GTO. Two years later, we are still receiving mail about that story.

Our original plan of action called for testing eight cars, all to be driven by an expert driver on a drag strip and road course. Acceleration, braking and suspension behavior would be measured there, with the final phase of the test involving extended use of the cars on the street. From the start, it was agreed that the ultimate measure of the test cars would be their usefulness as high-performance, over-the-road vehicles, and not as potential racing machines. The eight cars included the Buick Skylark Gran Sport, Chevelle SS 396, Comet Cyclone GT, Dodge Coronet Hemi, Plymouth Belvedere Hemi, Ford Fairlane GT/A, Oldsmobile 4-4-2 and the granddaddy of the bunch, the Pontiac GTO. This would have given us a group of cars ranging in wheelbase from 115 inches to 117 inches, with engines varying in size between 389 cubic inches and 426 cubic inches. Weights would have averaged somewhere around 3700 lbs., and we would have had a chance to evaluate eight basically similar automobiles. As it turned out, the two Chrysler products were unavailable (for reasons we will recount later), and we ended up with six nearly identical cars. In fact, our test cars were within one inch of having the same wheelbase, within 12 cubic inches engine displacement and within 166 pounds curb weight!

Because it is an excellent road course, with plenty of room to shake out really fast cars, our first choice as a test site was Bridgehampton Race Circuit on the eastern tip of Long Island. We had used the track on previous occasions and knew it was the sort of course that strongly resembles a first-class, two-lane highway, with pronounced elevation changes, sweeping bends and long straightaways. It was an ideal place to evaluate cars of this sort. Because it was near

CONTINUED



ALFRED PHIBBS



the track and fully equipped with the proper electronic timing gear, we decided to use the Westhampton drag strip for our acceleration runs.

Choosing a driver was more complicated. He had to be of top caliber, with an established reputation in the United States. Ideally, he would not have contractual agreements with any of the Big Three that might prompt anything besides absolute objectivity. Masten Gregory was our man. An American who has been living in Paris for the past few years, Masten had recently ended a run of poor luck with a sparkling performance at Indianapolis and a well-deserved victory at Le Mans. He had an acknowledged ability for handling nasty, overpowered racing cars, and his ability to articulate his reactions behind the wheel had gained him favor as a test driver in Europe. Not only was Gregory completely unconnected with any of the Detroit manufacturers involved in the test, but also, he informed us by letter, he hadn't ever seen, much less driven, any of the cars! This meant that we could expect some highly impartial—and probably surprising—opinions from him.

Firestone had supplied the tires for the Ferrari-Pontiac test program and expressed their willingness to provide rubber and a crew of experts to handle operations at both Bridgehampton and Westhampton. Because this comparison would be based entirely on "streetability" and not on maximum performance, it was imperative that a high-speed passenger car tire and not an outright race tire be used. After consulting with Firestone officials, it was decided that the cars would be shod with the company's 7.75 x 14 "Super Sports 500" tire that offered high cornering power in both wet and dry weather at speeds up to 120 mph.

Realizing that some sort of inspection procedures would be necessary to ensure that stock parts were being used on the cars, we contacted the Hurst-Campbell Corporation in Warminster, Pa., and they came up with an ideal solution. They enlisted the talented group of young men who make up their performance division in Detroit. Headed by Jack Watson, they are probably as wise to hot domestic machinery as any aggregation anywhere. A number of them are former technical officials of the National Hot Rod Association, an organization which has an unequalled record for keeping their thousands of entrants abiding by the rules. The Hurst people agreed to run compression and displacement checks on the six entered cars, to check suspensions, and to generally scrutinize the automobiles to ensure that stock components were being utilized. In addition, Hurst forged aluminum wheels were offered for all of the cars. Because of the excessive strain that would be placed on the stock wheels, we had decided early in the planning that some sort of special wheels would be necessary, and the Hurst products were perfect. Having been designed and tested to be stronger than most other custom wheels offered to the public, the Hurst wheels would not only greatly increase the inherent safety of the test, but would give

each of the six automobiles the same amount of unsprung weight with regard to wheels and tires.

Now all we had to do was get the cars. Late last summer we contacted the manufacturers by letter. After outlining the basic format of the test, we added a paragraph stipulating clearly the rules of the test: "We want the cars to be *stock*. They can be set up for absolute maximum performance using *available* optional components, but we don't want any NASCAR or NHRA race cars. Furthermore, we don't want any rear axle ratios or tires changed between the quarter-mile tests and the timed laps on the road racing circuit." To make sure that our position was unmistakable, we sent a follow-up letter that said, in part, "We want *stock cars*. Any optional equipment that can be purchased on the car from the dealer is acceptable. We do not want any non-standard shock absorbers, camshafts, stabilizer bars, carburetors, ignition equipment, exhaust headers or any other special equipment of this sort. We want these to be good examples of the cars our readers can buy, not specially-equipped competition cars." We were to discover later that not everybody was completely intimidated.

Nonetheless, our rules were tacitly accepted by the companies that consented to take part in the test. Only Chrysler Corporation notified us that they were unable to participate, and their action was prompted by several official and unofficial reasons. Publicly, both Dodge and Plymouth withdrew because production Hemi engines would be available until after the test was completed. However, several highly-placed officials dealing in the Corporation's performance activities privately felt the test would prompt a great flurry of rules-bending and subtle cheating. "Whether you guys like it or not, you're running a race involving a bunch of very serious competitors. Frankly, we don't know how you're going to keep everybody legal," one Chrysler man said. In all, a rather prophetic observation.

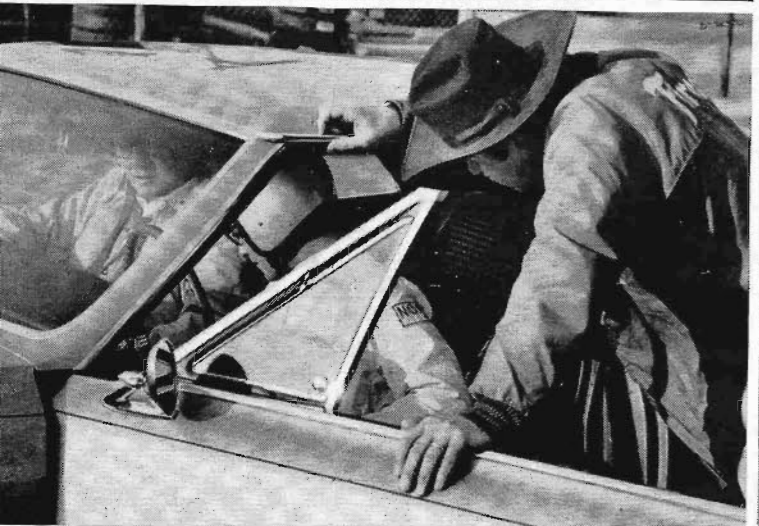
Plymouth indicated that no Hemis would be available and said no more—officially. Dodge, which sometimes indicates more enthusiasm for fun and games of this sort than its sister division, tried hard to get a special pre-production vehicle prepared, but had to give up when costs became prohibitive. A convertible was available, but it was agreed that the additional weight and slightly more flexible chassis would place an undue disadvantage on the car during the handling phase of the program. Exit Chrysler Corporation.

Meanwhile, word began to filter into our office about where and how the test cars were being prepared. We heard that former race driver and sports car builder, John Fitch, was doing the final tuning on the Oldsmobile 4-4-2 and had gone to the trouble of renting Bridgehampton for a day to sort the car out. This was initially a bit alarming, but an exchange of correspondence and telephone calls with Fitch satisfied us that he was operating with completely available showroom parts. The Chevrolet people called up several times to double-check a few minor points in the

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rules and then disappeared to quietly prepare their machine. The Pontiac people notified us that their car would be equipped with the special Royal Bobcat conversion which includes special carburetor jetting, thinner head gaskets, blocked heat risers and advanced ignition timing. This left us somewhat less than ecstatic because the Royal kit is available only through a single Royal Oak, Michigan dealer and can therefore hardly be described as universally available. However, Pontiac was perfectly candid about the alterations which did involve stock parts and could be made by any GTO owner in his own garage, so we decided to let them run. We heard nothing from Buick, other than a letter acknowledging that they would participate and matter-of-factly stating that their car would conform to the rules. The alarming news came from the south. We heard that Holman and Moody, the world-famous stock car and drag racing car builders were "preparing" the Fairlane GT/A and checked with Ford for confirmation. "Yes," said a jaunty voice, "but only because the Fairlane is being built in our Atlanta, Georgia plant and we want Holman and his boys to check it over to be sure all the nuts and bolts are tight before we send it north." This was followed by a throaty chuckle and we knew the fun had started.

A few days later Lincoln-Mercury told us that Bud Moore, the Spartanburg, South Carolina stock car wizard, was setting up their Comet Cyclone GT. Thanks to a rather effective underground, we were aware of the fact that Moore was doing considerably more to the Comet than "tightening nuts and bolts," but all we could do was keep our fingers crossed until the car arrived.

ON THE STRIP

You don't flirt with winter in the northeastern United States, and we were therefore genuinely concerned that we get the Bridgehampton evaluations completed before eastern Long Island was enveloped in the fog and rain that precedes the snow. We had set aside one day for technical inspections and drag strip runs and two more for the road circuit trials. As it turned out this was not sufficient, but everything got underway on a bright, if somewhat chilly day at Westhampton. The C/D staff arrived at the strip with several cars, including the SS 396 Chevelle that was Chevrolet's entry. We had picked the car up in Detroit a week earlier and, after a 688-mile trip to New York and regular duty in traffic, were absolutely assured of its stock condition. Several others inspired less confidence. The GTO, decked out in an eye-popping coat of "tiger gold" metallic paint, was pulled from Detroit to New York via tow bar behind an identical stand-by machine. A third car in the Pontiac entourage was pulling a trailer full of spare parts. But it was on the way to the strip that we encountered the most startling sight. There it was, parked in front of a motel—a gigantic red transporter bearing South Carolina license plates, with a shiny red Comet Cyclone GT chained down on the

ramps that were normally occupied by one of Bud Moore's famous NASCAR Grand National Stock cars. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

We arrived at the drag strip to find that the Oldsmobile 4-4-2, the Fairlane GT/A and the Buick Skylark had been driven out in normal fashion and we immediately commenced the timed runs. Because stock car drag racing technique is highly specialized—and, we might add, not particularly related to what one normally considers either street or circuit driving—Masten Gregory was not involved in the Westhampton tests. He spent the day at Bridgehampton, learning the course (which he had never run before) while others more adept at the rev 'em up, slambang business of dragging took his place. It had been agreed beforehand that representatives from each car would drive with times being recorded without regard to who was driving. While the runs were going on, each car was systematically pulled out of action and run through technical inspection by the Hurst group. This involved, as we mentioned, displacement and compression checks, weighing and a visual examination of the engine, drive-line and suspension components. In the meantime, the Comet had arrived in the company of none other than ol' Bud Moore himself, and he and his crew set about unloading the machine and taking it for a few shake-down cruises on the slightly bumpy Westhampton quarter-mile.

Both the Comet and Fairlane sounded fierce. Their mufflers had been unbaffled to reduce back pressure—though the Holman and Moody mechanic who had driven the GT/A north on one hand, and Moore on the other, both firmly maintained that the exhausts were dead stock. It was apparent from the start that considerably more than routine bolt-tightening had been done to these automobiles. For openers, they sat approximately 1½ inches lower than showroom versions which we had examined prior to the test—due primarily to some clever work with the spacers that separate the rear leaf springs from the axle housing. It appeared that both machines had also received considerable attention to their front and rear shock absorbers and springs, though Holman-Moody and Moore are both such acknowledged experts in the area of "super-tuning" stock cars that challenging them on specific points was absurd.

Meanwhile, the Chevelle and the Oldsmobile were showing signs of being under-prepared. Several of the Hurst crew made runs with each car and returned to complain about the way they ran. A check of the works indicated that the Chevelle needed its valves adjusted and the Oldsmobile had a spark plug lead that needed replacement. At the same time the two engineers who had brought the Skylark Gran Sport were standing around looking a bit baffled by the entire drag strip procedure so both the C/D and Hurst staffers pitched in to make sure the Buick got a representative number of runs.

Within an hour of running, the pattern of the test became apparent; we had three stock

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cars—the Chevelle, the Oldsmobile and the Skylark—and three others—the GTO, the Comet and Fairlane—that were armed to the teeth. In the case of the Royal Bobcat GTO, we at least knew what we were dealing with, but with the Comet and the Fairlane, only the men with access to the inner precincts of the Holman and Moody and Moore shops could tell for sure how far the rules had been stretched.

The Comet bordered on the ludicrous. It came off the line like a Super Stock, surging up on its haunches under power exactly like a specially modified NHRA stocker. Its engine was an ostensibly stock 390 cubic inch Ford—the same prosaic old workhorse that has loyally powered the Thunderbird for so many seasons. Anyone who knows engines will tell you there isn't a 390 built that will turn more than 5300-5500 rpm in stock form, but the ones in our Comet and Fairlane would turn an effortless 6500 rpm.

How was this done? The expertise with which men like Messrs. Holman and Moore tune engines is both unparalleled and undetectable, but it should be noted for the record that the valve train of the racing Ford 427 can be installed on the 390 block with relatively little effort.

After each run the Comet had its gas tank topped up in order to keep a maximum amount of weight—crucial in dragging—over the rear wheels. Not that this was in any way illegal, but it does contrast significantly with the low-key, almost casual approach being taken by several of the other entrants. We made over 200 runs during the day at Westhampton, with the Comet recording the fastest time: 13.98 seconds at 103.80 mph. This stands as some sort of unofficial world's record for a "stock" Comet Cyclone GT. (A competition magazine which specializes in drag coverage ran a previous test on a Cyclone, using a champion drag racing driver on what is known as a "high traction" drag strip. Poor fellow, he was only able to run 14.40 seconds at 99 mph using special drag racing slicks! But then he could only wind his engine to 5200 rpm.)

The GTO sounded almost as fierce as the Fairlane and the Comet while it turned the second-fastest E.T. of the day. Much of the noise was traceable to the blocked heat risers, which caused a deep resonance in the exhaust, and the optional cold air box which amplified the sound of air being sucked into the carburetors. The car turned the fastest trap time, at 105.14 mph, while clocking an E.T. of 14.05 seconds.

The GT/A, operating with Ford's new automatic gearbox, was third fastest, with a time of 14.26 seconds at 99.00 mph. The H-M representative admitted that the pump pressure in the transmission had been increased to permit faster, more positive shifts, and this, coupled with the high-revving engine and the doctored suspension helped the times considerably. Unlike the Comet, which seemed to have a kind of compromise suspension setup to make it handle on both the road course and the drag strip, the Fairlane appeared to be over-balanced toward excellence in the



1. Comet Cyclone GT
The Comet turned in the fastest lap at Bridgehampton, though Gregory had to run in fourth gear exclusively because of nasty rear axle tramp.

2. Chevelle SS 396
Though far from the fastest, the Chevelle had excellent road manners at all speeds. Gregory encountered some bottoming on rougher corners.

3. Pontiac GTO
Spring windup and serious rear axle tramp under braking was the major GTO flaw. Gregory also noted an unexpected softness in the suspension system.

4. Fairlane GT/A
Mushy front suspension caused the Fairlane to porpoise in the corners. Gregory found the car the most difficult to handle at high speeds.

5. Oldsmobile 4-4-2
Far and away the best-handling car of the six, was the staff consensus. It turned in the second-fastest lap despite being down on raw horsepower.

6. Buick Skylark GS
Excellent suspension location almost nullified excessive vertical mushiness. Despite this, Gregory found the car to be forgiving and very comfortable at speed.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALFRED FISHER, NOEL VERRETT

quarter-mile. The front shocks seemed inordinately soft, and heavy applications of throttle at the starting line would cause the nose to rear up, dragster fashion, prompting a weight transfer to the rear for improved traction. The only other quarter-mile acceleration times that we have ever seen published on a GT/A Fairlane were 16.5 seconds at 82 mph.

Though they were less than a second slower than the Comet's top time, the Chevelle, the 4-4-2 and the Buick were out of the action at Westhampton. After some rather vigorous driving by the Hurst crew, the 4-4-2 was finally clocked at 14.59 seconds at 100.55 mph, but there wasn't a prayer of making it run any quicker in its present shape. The Chevelle ran a best time of 14.66 seconds at 99.88 mph while the Buick surprised a few people by cranking off a 14.92 run at 95.3 mph. This was better than a number of those present expected from the Gran Sport, considering its relatively unprepared condition and its two-speed automatic transmission. While the Fairlane's 3-speed automatic was a truly high-performance option, the unit employed on the Buick was unsuited for high-

performance driving on any kind of race track. During the planning stages of the test, we were approached by the people who operate the Brockway truck company in upstate New York with a proposal that we test one of their high-performance diesel tractors along with the six automobiles. The object of this effort would be to blunt some of the general criticism that trucks are sluggish, oversized traffic bottlenecks. Though we assured them we wouldn't be able to give them equal time or billing with the cars in question, it sounded like a unique opportunity to learn what sort of developments were taking place in the trucking industry and we welcomed them to come along. Operating in co-operation with the Goodyear truck tire division, Brockway announced that they were bringing a Model 359T lightweight tractor powered by a supercharged Detroit Diesel engine. Their driver would be Dutch Hoag, an outstanding veteran of modified stock car racing in the east and an expert operator of big trucks. They arrived at the strip, complete with a trailer loaded with enough weight to give the rig a total burden of 45,000 pounds. Hoag used the 15-speed

transmission in a way that would bring tears to your eyes, slamming shifts home through the non-synchro gears with lightning speed, and he finally got the gigantic unit to rumble through the quarter-mile in under 30 seconds. In all, an impressive time for the monster, though, as in the case of the six cars, the real action was being saved for Bridgehampton.

AROUND BRIDGEHAMPTON

The first day at Bridgehampton was planned as a shakedown for both Gregory and the cars. Masten was anxious to get a fair amount of practice in each of the automobiles before he began the three timed laps that would be run as an official segment of the test. At the same time, the entrants wanted the opportunity for final tuning before trying any really hot laps. The day was uneventful for the most part, except that the Comet, the Fairlane and Chevelle overheated on their initial runs, and Masten expressed dismay over the long throw from second to third gear in the SS 396. This was corrected by the

Hurst guys, who shortened the lever travel with a few adjustments. After all, they're in the shifter business, aren't they?

The Comet smoked furiously on deceleration, but Moore and his boys assured us it was only because "we set her up a little loose," but still within the factory specifications, they maintained. Late in the afternoon the Oldsmobile's limited-slip differential failed, but was repaired following an emergency trip to a nearby dealership for spare parts.

The weather did not co-operate and it took us three full days of running at Bridgehampton before we completed the timed laps and the braking tests. It got foggy and then it rained and the wind blew and we sat for hours waiting for the track to dry. One of the first cars to take its three flying laps (officially timed by Heuer watches) was the Comet and it was simultaneously the fastest and the untidiest of the bunch. After turning in the top time of 2:05.8 (81.9 mph) the ever-smoking engine blew up on the back straightaway and spread a trail of oil in the groove. A connecting rod holed the block, putting the

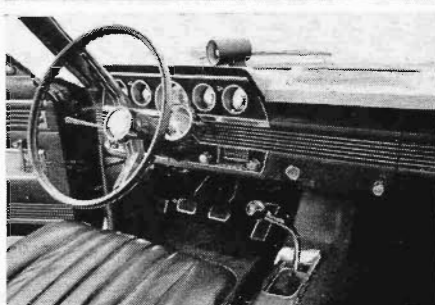
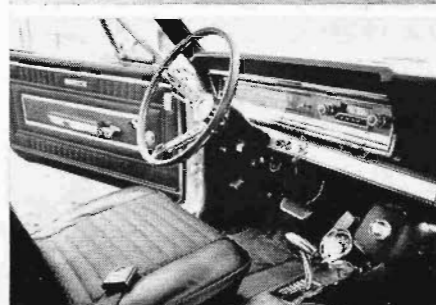
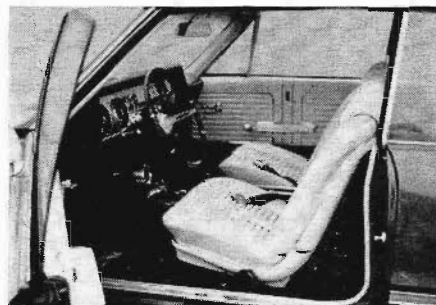
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Super Cars!

OLDSMOBILE 4-4-2
CHEVELLE SS 396
PONTIAC GTO
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PHOTOGRAPHY: ALFRED FISHER



OLDSMOBILE 4-4-2
Price as tested.....\$3730.97
Engine displacement (cu. in.).....400
Bore & stroke (in.).....4.00 x 3.97
Carburetion.....Single 4-bbl
Compression ratio.....10.5 to one
Horsepower @ rpm.....350 @ 5000
Torque @ rpm.....440 @ 3600
Transmission.....4-speed manual
Rear axle ratio.....3.55
Wheelbase (in.).....115
Track, F & R (in.).....58-59
Length x width x height (in.).....204.5 x 74.5 x 54.0
Test weight (lbs.).....3490
Suspension...F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle and locating links, coil springs, anti-sway bar
Brakes F & R (type & dia.)...9.5-in. drums
Steering.....Recirculating ball
¼-mi. acceleration.....14.59 sec. @ 100.55 mph
Lap time (Bridgehampton).....2:06.0
Panic stop (80-0 mph).....5.1

CHEVELLE SS 396
Price as tested.....\$3551.45
Engine displacement (cu. in.).....396
Bore & stroke (in.).....4.09 x 3.76
Carburetion.....Single 4-bbl
Compression ratio.....10.25 to one
Horsepower @ rpm.....360 @ 5200
Torque @ rpm.....420 @ 3600
Transmission.....4-speed manual
Rear axle ratio.....3.55
Wheelbase (in.).....115
Track, F & R (in.).....58-58
Length x width x height (in.).....197 x 75 x 53
Test weight (lbs.).....3605
Suspension...F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle and locating links
Brakes F & R (type & dia.)...9.5-in. drums
Steering.....Recirculating ball
¼-mi. acceleration.....14.66 sec. @ 99.88 mph
Lap time (Bridgehampton).....2:08.1
Panic stop (80-0 mph).....5.2 sec.

PONTIAC GTO
Price as tested.....\$3621.62
Engine displacement (cu. in.).....389
Bore & stroke (in.).....4.06 x 3.76
Carburetion.....Three 2-bbl
Compression ratio.....10.75 to one
Horsepower @ rpm.....360 @ 5200
Torque @ rpm.....424 @ 3600
Transmission.....4-speed manual
Rear axle ratio.....3.55
Wheelbase (in.).....115
Track, F & R (in.).....58-59
Length x width x height (in.).....206.4 x 74.4 x 53.8
Test weight (lbs.).....3620
Suspension...F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle and locating links, coil springs
Brakes F & R (type & dia.)...9.5-in. drums
Steering.....Recirculating ball
¼-mi. acceleration.....14.05 sec. @ 105.14 mph
Lap time (Bridgehampton).....2:06.8
Panic stop (80-0 mph).....5.5 sec.

BUICK SKYLARK GRAN SPORT
Price as tested.....\$3978.04
Engine displacement (cu. in.).....401
Bore & stroke (in.).....4.18 x 3.64
Carburetion.....Single 4-bbl
Compression ratio.....10.25
Horsepower @ rpm.....340 @ 4600
Torque @ rpm.....445 @ 3200
Transmission.....2-speed automatic
Rear axle ratio.....3.36
Wheelbase (in.).....115
Track, F & R (in.).....58-59
Length x width x height (in.) 204 x 75 x 54
Test weight (lbs.).....3550
Suspension...F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle and locating links, coil springs, anti-sway bar
Brakes F & R (type & dia.)...9.5-in. drums
Steering.....Recirculating ball
¼-mi. acceleration.....14.92 sec. @ 95.13 mph
Lap time (Bridgehampton).....2:08.5
Panic stop (80-0 mph).....5.0 sec.

FORD FAIRLANE GT/A
Price as tested.....\$3059.34
Engine displacement (cu. in.).....390
Bore & stroke (in.).....4.05 x 3.78
Carburetion.....Single 4-bbl
Compression ratio.....10.5 to one
Horsepower @ rpm.....335 @ 4600
Torque @ rpm.....427 @ 2800
Transmission.....3-speed automatic
Rear axle ratio.....3.89
Wheelbase (in.).....116
Track, F & R (in.).....58-58
Length x width x height (in.) 197 x 74 x 55
Test weight (lbs.).....3640
Suspension...F: Ind., upper wishbone, lower link and drag strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, coil springs
Brakes F & R (type & dia.)...10-in. drums
Steering.....Recirculating ball
¼-mi. acceleration.....14.26 sec. @ 99.00 mph
Lap time (Bridgehampton).....2:08.1
Panic stop (80-0 mph).....5.6 sec.

MERCURY COMET CYCLONE GT
Price as tested.....\$3550.00
Engine displacement (cu. in.).....390
Bore & stroke (in.).....4.05 x 3.78
Carburetion.....Single 4-bbl
Compression ratio.....10.5 to one
Horsepower @ rpm.....335 @ 4600
Torque @ rpm.....427 @ 2800
Transmission.....4-speed manual
Rear axle ratio.....4.11
Wheelbase (in.).....116
Track, F & R (in.).....58-58
Length x width x height (in.).....203 x 73.8 x 54.3
Test weight (lbs.).....3474
Suspension...F: Ind., unequal-length wishbones, coil spring, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid, semi-elliptic leaf springs, coil springs
Brakes F & R (type & dia.)...10-in. drums
Steering.....Recirculating ball
¼-mi. acceleration.....13.98 @ 103.8 mph
Lap time (Bridgehampton).....2:05.8
Panic stop (80-0 mph).....N.A.

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car out of the test completely and preventing us from getting any 80-0 mph brake times. The Fairlane barely made its three laps before Gregory brought it in with great clouds of smoke issuing from the exhaust. He reported that the engine was beginning to seize and felt it advisable to stop before it blew up. It did however, manage to limp through the brake tests, which put it one up on the Comet.

Although the Comet was the fastest, the Oldsmobile 4-4-2 impressed Gregory the most and he got it around the 2.85-mile course in 2.06 flat. "It's far and away the best-handling car of the bunch," he reported, and went so far as to say it was faster in the corners on a wet surface than the other five cars were in the dry! The only reason it was not fastest of all was its relatively low power, which Gregory reported was less than any of the six cars except the Buick. Conversely, the GTO had far and away the strongest powerplant, but a generally soft suspension and severe axle hop under braking prevented it from running better than third fastest, at 2:06.8. The Fairlane and the Chevelle both turned the track at 2:08.1, with the GT/A's substantial powerplant offsetting its porpoising suspension and fading brakes. The Chevelle might have lapped more quickly, had it not been for an inadequately-positioned tachometer. His view of the tach obscured by a steering wheel spoke, Gregory reported that he lost speed on several occasions by accidentally pumping up the valve lifters when he lost track of the revs. The Buick was the slowest of the lot at 2:08.5, due primarily to its two-speed automatic transmission, which was out of place on the Bridgehampton circuit. The Brockway truck and Dutch Hoag

were tremendous. Carrying various members of the staff on wild laps, Hoag managed to get the 22-ton giant around the track in 3:27.4!—a truly stunning demonstration of driving and truck performance.

Although the Gran Sport was the slowest in both the quarter-mile and road circuit phases, it sparkled in the 80-0 braking tests. Running two consecutive stops to test fade, the car recorded the quickest time, screeching to a halt in 5 seconds flat. The Oldsmobile recorded the next best time, at 5.1 seconds, and the Chevelle stopped in 5.2 seconds. The GTO was a bit unmannerly, but did manage to stop in 5.5 seconds. The only car of the bunch to exhibit fade on its second stop was the Fairlane (while the others improved) and it consumed 5.6 seconds in coming to a complete stop.

The formal segments of the test completed, we then took the cars for intensive testing on the street—that is, the ones that would still run. The Comet was loaded onto its transporter and trundled back to South Carolina for repairs, and the Ford was taken to a New York dealer for a checkup. Both were returned later for us to complete our evaluations. Several days following the Bridgehampton runs the GTO gave up on a Manhattan street, the victim of a broken fuel pump drive. Shortly after that was fixed, the left upper control arm of the rear suspension ruptured and it was returned to the shop a second time. Ironically, it was the three most stock machines, the Chevelle, the Buick and the 4-4-2, that gave the least trouble. All of them operated dutifully for the duration of the test, with only the Oldsmobile showing any signs of late-hour weakness when both the transmission and rear end began growling before it was returned. The other casualty of the test was the Chevelle, which lost its fourth

gear synchromesh on the last day at Bridgehampton.

After nearly two weeks of round-the-clock involvement with the cars, we sat down with masses of notes, including several hours of taped interview with Gregory, and began the difficult task of evaluating and ranking the cars. The results follow.

TEST RESULTS

Oldsmobile 4-4-2

When the 4-4-2 was introduced as a 1965 model, our enthusiasm was limited by what we felt was a rather ill-mannered suspension and a generally pallid performance package. One year later, we are forced to change course completely, because the entire C/D staff, as well as Masten Gregory, were in complete agreement that the 4-4-2 was the best machine of the six we tested. Our most positive impression is based on the car's handling, which, as we mentioned, surpassed the competition in every department.

Masten Gregory had this to say: "The Oldsmobile was the only car of the bunch that I genuinely enjoyed driving. If I had gotten more practice time, I'm sure I could have gone fastest in this car. It was the most comfortable and would definitely be my choice for a transcontinental journey. Though it was too small, the 4-4-2's tach was one of the few that I could read easily, and its placement—on the left side of the dash, just below eye level—was one of the best. It was superior to the other cars in road-holding, so I naturally liked it more. It was more fun to drive at speed. I felt more comfortable in it, and I felt you could do much more with it without getting into trouble. I didn't think it had the strongest engine by a long way. Adequate—but not really what I would call the quickest by any means."

Thanks to a minor relocation of the upper rear control arms on the entire 1966 F-85 line, Oldsmobile has come up with the best-mannered car of the six. It was the only one tested that didn't bother Gregory with rear axle tramp under heavy braking, and its near-neutral handling under all high-speed conditions impressed us immensely.

If we had to register any complaints, they would center on the abrupt, on-off way in which the power comes in. Gregory found it difficult to feed in power in fast bends without going over the detent in the 4-barrel carburetor and bringing in the two additional

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The Fairlane was the only car in the test that wouldn't hold all our luggage.

throats with a bang. Though it is purely subjective, the looks of the 4-4-2 didn't cause much response among the staff. They are purely Oldsmobile, without any attempt to copy any other proven performance image like the GTO, but the car does come off a bit dowdy when compared to some of the flashier shapes of the competition. We found that the Hurst wheels did wonders for the exterior, and we can only try to examine our psyches to determine how much of our negativity can be traced to the Kalifornia Kustom white vinyl interior.

In all, the 4-4-2 is a beautifully balanced automobile. Our test car came to us in absolutely stock condition, and placed fourth in the drags, and second in both the timed laps and braking test. It was strong and exceedingly comfortable and it exhibited some of the most civilized handling we've found in a domestically built car. When we consider that this is only the second year the car has been produced, we can only pause to wonder just how good it will be in another 24 months.

Chevelle SS 396

On the record, our SS 396 wasn't a particularly impressive performer. It finished fifth in the drags, tied for fourth in the timed laps and took third in the brake test. But we must keep in mind that the car was, next to the Buick, the least prepared of the bunch, and it was therefore one of those which we could evaluate with some idea of how it would run fresh off a showroom floor. Two staff members drove the car from Detroit to New York and they still haven't stopped telling people that it was one of the most comfortable trips they ever made. The Chevelle, like the 4-4-2, scored very high with us because of its intrinsic balance. It handled very nicely and therefore was a ball to drive. Its engine, which certainly is one of the most advanced designs in the world, has great, turbine-like smoothness with tremendous power (and probably more *potential* power than the others by a wide margin) plus great flexibility.

Masten Gregory described the Chevelle this way: "I like it quite a bit as a road car as opposed to going fast around the course. It had a very light, sensitive feeling which I enjoyed. It was certainly not mushy in any respect—it reminded me a bit of a thoroughbred dog. The suspension felt quite good, but not as good as I would have expected. It bottomed more around the course than

I felt it should have. None of the cars seemed to have as much horsepower as their factory ratings, and the Chevelle didn't feel like it had anywhere near its claimed 360. Maybe somewhere between 280 and 300 hp. The Chevelle had the best seating position by far, but it had a six-way power seat and an adjustable wheel. On some of the cars (the GTO, the Comet and the Fairlane) I had to put a block of wood on the accelerator so that I could get the seat back far enough and still reach the pedals, but the Chevelle was almost ideal the way it was. The tachometer was big enough to read, but its position was terrible."

Adding to Masten's complaints, we found an excessive gap in the third and fourth gear ratios. With our test car geared at 3.55:1, third gear was usable only to 80 mph, which was considerably under some of the competition and probably hurt its lap times. Like the Oldsmobile, its appearance did not cause much excitement. Its simple exterior borders on being barren, though we found the Hurst wheels added a much-needed element of flashiness. Gregory locked up the inside rear wheel twice on Bridgehampton's only really tight corner, but could find no major flaws in the running gear of the Chevelle.

The SS 396 is not the fastest car or the best handling, but it is possibly the best compromise of them all, especially when its relatively low price is considered. It too is a new car on the market and you can rest assured that its development has just begun. On that basis, we think the Chevelle deserves second spot by a wide margin.

Pontiac GTO

This is the car that started it all, and in some ways the GTO still has a year's jump on the competition. It is certainly the sportiest looking and feeling car of the six, and it indicates an awareness on the part of its builders about what this market demands. It was the only car to have a truly legible, complete set of instruments, including a dash-mounted tachometer. Its shape, its paint, its *flavor*, say GO! and on the basis of purely subjective, emotional response, the GTO should win hands down. In addition, its superb, if unstock, engine was the most powerful (though smallest) of the six cars, but it was its suspension that let it down. Only one of the other cars (the Comet) had more excessive rear axle tramp and we found them both bordering on the uncontrolla-

ble. Gregory encountered such massive rear spring windup and resultant axle tramp under heavy braking that he was forced to use both the throttle and brake simultaneously while slowing down.

Gregory's comments on the GTO are as follows: "The GTO had more horsepower than the rest of the cars. It certainly made more engine noise, and this sucking sound from the carburetors tends to give you the impression of power. It felt *very* strong. The suspension was certainly too soft, which surprised me—I had expected it to be quite firm—but it was so soft that it affected its time. It tends to float and bounce in the corners and the rear axle tramp is awful. In addition, the body seems noisy, with some rattles, and I encountered a bit of brake fade."

In all, the GTO with the Royal Bobcat package simply seems like too much. By that we mean it's hard to start and keep running in the cold; it tends to stall whenever the engine is slowed from high speeds; its idle is much too high—near 1000 rpm, and the gas mileage at steady turnpike speeds is around 11 mpg. Don't get us wrong, the GTO is maybe the raciest car of them all, with genuine guts, but it seems over-balanced in the engine department. When it was first produced, we tended to forgive some of its handling foibles because of its newness and exciting originality, but now, in the face of sophisticated packages like the 4-4-2, it needs improvement. Last year, in our 2+2 vs. 2+2 test, the Pontiac tended to shed fan belts; this year we encountered the same problem with the GTO at the drag strip. Pontiac officials assure us this only happens on the Tri-Power carburetor setup when it is coupled with power steering, and add that it is being corrected. But they said that last year. And of course, we had the aforementioned problems with the fuel pump drive and the rear control arm.

Buick Skylark Gran Sport

The Skylark makes us wonder just how good it might have been if somebody had really been aware of what our test was going to demand. Sending us a car with the two-speed automatic was an unfortunate error in judgement that prevented us from really measuring the car's potential. While everybody else was busily filling their tires with approximately 45 psi of air at the recommendation of Firestone and Gregory, the Buick men stubbornly insisted that the hot laps be run with the stock 28 psi pressure. Finally logic prevailed, but this is an indica-

CHECK LIST (Cars rated numerically, with 6 as maximum)	Oldsmobile 4-4-2	Chevelle SS 396	Pontiac GTO	Buick Skylark GS	Fairlane GT/A	Comet Cyclone GT
ENGINE						
Starting	3	5	4	6	2	1
Response	2	4	6	1	3	5
Noise	5	4	2	6	3	1
Smoothness	5	4	1	6	3	2
DRIVE TRAIN						
Clutch action (manual)	6	5	3	—	—	4
Shift smoothness (auto.)	—	—	—	3	1	—
BRAKES						
Response	4	5	1	6	3	2
Pedal pressure	4	5	6	2	3	1
Fade resistance	5	4	2	6	1	3
Smoothness	3	2	1	6	5	4
Directional stability	5	4	1	6	3	2
STEERING						
Response	6	5	3	4	2	1
Accuracy	6	5	4	3	2	1
Feedback	6	5	3	4	2	1
SUSPENSION						
Power-to-ground transmission	6	4	1	5	3	2
Harshness control	5	4	3	6	2	1
Roll stiffness	6	5	2	1	2	3
Tracking	6	2	5	3	1	4
Pitch control	6	5	2	3	1	4
Shock damping	6	4	3	2	1	5
CONTROLS						
Location	3	4	6	1	5	2
Relationship	3	4	6	1	2	5
Small controls	3	5	6	2	1	4
INTERIOR						
Instrumentation	3	5	6	1	2	4
Storage space	6	5	4	3	1	2
Wind noise	3	6	4	5	1	2
Road noise	4	5	3	6	1	2
QUALITY CONTROL						
Materials, exterior	4	2	5	6	3	1
Materials, interior	4	1	6	5	2	3
Exterior finish	3	2	5	6	4	1
Interior finish	3	1	6	5	4	2
Hardware and trim	4	2	5	6	3	1
GENERAL						
Service accessibility	6	5	2	1	4	3
Bumper protection	6	4	5	3	2	1
Exterior lighting	6	4	5	3	2	1
Resistance to crosswinds	5	6	4	3	1	2
Luggage space	6	3	5	4	1	2
COMFORT (2 front, 2 back)						
Steering wheel position	4	6	5	3	2	1
Seat adjustment	4	6	5	3	2	1
Seat design, front	3	6	5	4	2	1
Seat design, rear	3	4	6	5	1	2
TOTAL	181	167	157	155	91	90

tion of the laudable, if slightly naive resolve with which Buick intended to keep their car stock. The Gran Sport is in many ways good in spite of itself. Its springing is soft to the point of absurdity, but this is partly offset by an excellent suspension and chassis. You are given the impression that Buick isn't really at-tuned to what this performance market is all about and they aren't about to find out.

"I didn't like the car at first," said Gregory, "because I thought it was much too soft, but as I got used to it, I started liking it quite a bit. I think it had less preparation than any of the cars and it was probably the only one that was just driven off the factory floor and to the test. When I first drove it around, the tires were too soft and it felt a bit mushy—but not bad. Later we blew up the tires and though it was still too soft, it was much better. I didn't like the gearbox. I don't think a two-speed automatic is adequate for a car of this type. But it is a well-balanced automobile. Definitely too soft on the suspension, but with stiffer springing it would be a very good car. Despite this, I really got to like the car and I think it might be great for regular driving."

The softness in the suspension was as bad as any we have encountered in some time. The mere presence of one person in the back seat would cause the car to bottom frequently on secondary paved roads, and we are sure that a full load of passengers and luggage would make the situation intolerable. Despite its 401 cubic inches—the largest engine in the test—Gregory and the staff agreed that it felt the least powerful. We all drove the car in the wet for rather lengthy periods of time, and were impressed with its controllability and roadworthiness. Gregory said that it was the most forgiving of the six, and that is eloquent testimony to the car's suspension geometry. The seating is excellent, though the interior and instrumentation is pure middle-class America, with a liberal allotment of idiot lights and generally uninformative dials. It is too bad Buick doesn't really pay some close attention to the demands of this super-car market, because the Gran Sport has tremendous potential. If they ever decide to go to work, look out.

Fairlane GT/A

We might just as well say it right now and get it over with: it was extremely difficult to get a clear picture of the true worth of the Fairlane and the Comet because of their highly-tuned condition. Because

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both the engines and suspensions bore little or no relationship to what the customer will find on his dealer's floor, we can only disqualify ourselves from making really valid judgements. In the case of the GT/A, it was set up primarily to perform on the drag strip, and therefore its value as a road car practically disappeared. The front suspension, as we mentioned, was so limber that Gregory found that the car would leap and bound around even on the long and comparatively smooth Bridgehampton main straightaway. Gregory said that he was running through the high-speed, downhill series of bends at the end of the main chute 20 mph slower with the Fairlane than the other cars, and still had to work harder to keep it on the road. As we said, it had great power, and the three-speed automatic transmission, which can be shifted at will, was its only redeeming feature. Unfortunately, even this had been "adjusted" to make faster shifts, so a positive evaluation becomes difficult.

This is what Gregory had to say: "What impressed me most was the three-speed transmission for driving on the street. It was very quick shifting, and it felt like it was set up in different power ranges. The brakes were the least efficient of all the cars, although that may have been because of the linings—I don't think they were metallic. (*Right, the Olds, Chevelle, Buick and GTO had metallic linings.—Ed.*) I was not terribly happy with the suspension or the way the car handled. It seemed to me to be too soft for the power that was involved, and I think it needed a firmer, more level ride than it had. It seemed very comfortable on the road, but not at all comfortable speeding around Bridgehampton. Back to the transmission for a moment: it shifted very quickly, certainly much quicker than I could have shifted it manually. It was the noisiest of the bunch—with an exhaust like a racing car. In all, it has a very sporty feel, but the suspension and brakes need improvement."

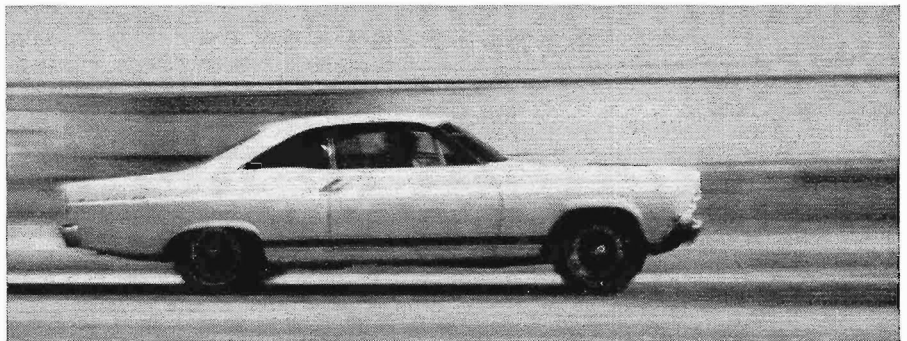
Enough said.

Comet Cyclone GT

The Cyclone was the most difficult to evaluate because it was by far the most modified. As we said, many hours of hard work had gone into making the Comet a truly hot machine, and the result was much closer to a racing car than to a representative showroom model. It was the fastest of the class on both the

drag and the road course, as it should have been, considering its modifications. The Lincoln-Mercury people who accompanied the car got a bit belligerent when we implied that their vehicle stretched the spirit of the rules. They claimed, and rightly so, that every piece was an authorized factory accessory, but forgot our stipulation that they be "generally accessible" to the general public. The Ford Motor Company, being active in racing, has volume upon volume of parts catalogues, with infinite variations in springs and shocks and valves and cams, etc., but they exist almost exclusively for their stock car and drag racing programs. Anybody trying to buy that sort of equipment from his local dealer would only get a blank stare or an indulgent smile for his trouble. Our Cyclone GT test car, sadly, just wasn't in the same league with the others and we therefore cannot take its times seriously. In addition, it blew up before the test was completed.

Masten Gregory's comments on the Comet: "It seemed to have been prepared more for racing and had quite a harsh ride. A completely different ride—much flatter and harsher, but better for racing around Bridgehampton. It had very severe axle tramp under heavy braking. So bad, in fact, that even though it had a four-speed gearbox, I had to drive it all the way around the course in fourth gear. It had a very good engine with a very good power range. It worked from 3500 rpm to 6500 rpm, which was the best power range of all the engines



there. And that's the only reason I could go so quickly. It became very difficult if I shifted into third gear approaching the corners, because of this rear axle tramp."

After the blown engine had been replaced and the car returned to us for our road evaluation, we found that the very tight limited-slip differential would ratchet severely on any slow-speed corner. We can only presume that this is not standard for

all Comets. Aside from the great clouds of smoke that billowed out of the engine at the race track, the interior constantly smelled of oil. The clutch was stiffer than any we had ever encountered on a production machine. Like the Fairlane, the car sat about 1½ inches lower on its suspension than other Cyclones that we checked. However, the seats were quite comfortable, and the instrumentation and interior appointments were above average. And we're sure that you can find *them* in a showroom.

CONCLUSION

The man from Chrysler was right. In a certain sense we did end up sanctioning a racing event and we did encounter some wildly diverse interpretations of our rules. Nevertheless, we are convinced of the validity of the tests, and are inclined to think the results would have been much the same even if all of the entrants had enjoyed virtually the same state of preparation. As a class, we were impressed with the general quality and finish on all of the cars and certainly view them as representative examples of what Detroit can build in the way of high-performance vehicles. They are sensibly sized for our driving conditions and offer a high level of reliability with commensurately great performance. If there were to be any single area of universal complaint, it would be the brakes. Not one of the cars appeared with disc brakes, and we frankly had hoped that some of these cars, weighing no more than 3700 lbs., would be able to stop from 80 mph in under 5 sec-

onds. Additionally, only the Fairlane and the Comet (plus the untested Dodge and Plymouth) offer 3-speed automatic transmissions, while the GM intermediates offer only two-speed automatics.

But on the whole we were amazed by the cars and by the fact that we managed to get them all together in the same place at the same time.

With any luck at all, we'll do it again next year.

C/D