GTO

are the three letters Pontiac has made synonymous with performance and youth. In stock or hot trim, for the road or on the drag strip, the three-carb Tiger is a versatile charger, light on its feet, has phenomenal top end potential and, in short, lives up to its reputation

by Eric Dahlquist/ technical editor

"Giddy-up, giddy-up, giddy-up, GTO." So goes the opening stanza of the million-seller recorded by Jan and Dean which some have said has gone a long way toward immortalizing Pontiac's jazzed-up Tiger as the machine of machines for American youth. Whether or not this ditty has measurably increased the car's popularity or not, everyone and his brother has tested, wrung out, raced and rebuilt it to a point where there's hardly anything left unsaid. In light of this situation, we elected to conduct an evaluation, but with a slightly different wrinkle than previous tests. Take one GeeTo Tiger (as the car has been nicknamed from another ballad, sung, appropriately enough, by the Tigers) in showroom shape and then another, whose tail has been bobbed slightly for a quicker pulse, and compare them: stock vs. hot.

This whole project could and did become a bit complicated before we were through, but it turned out to be quite enlightening, too. When all the arrangements were settled, we wound up with a silver-blue metallic hardtop and an all-white two-door sedan. Outwardly the difference in both cars' appearance was only a set of alloy wheels that were mounted on the white job, but under the sheet metal there was a difference of night and day.

The first thing you do when you get your hands on one of these bombs is to lift the hood for an inspection as well as exhibition. There it is, 389 cubic inches of go, topped with three 2CG Rochesters that are capped with shimmering chrome-plated, non-restrictive air filters. In outward appearance at least, it is readily apparent that the powerplant is of the same illustrious family that Fireball Roberts blazed to victory on Daytona's high banks, or that Jim Wangers won Top Stock with at the Nationals in '60. In the GTO you can get either a four-barrel 335 hp version or the three deuces job that sports 25 additional ponies and a nutty, custom-looking, non-functional hood scoop that really shatters the drive-in set.

Both our cars had the optional engines which really represent only a small portion on an available-extra-parts list as long as your arm. Things like 10.75-to-1 compression, cam that sports .406-inch lift intakes and .408-inch lift exhausts, and bigger 1.657-inch diameter valves are some of the subtle touches that breathe extra life into the Tiger as compared to the milder Tempests and Le Mans. The more docile of the two test machines came equipped with air-conditioning and therefore was outfitted with the 3.23 differential ratio as prescribed by the manufacturer. Because there is the chance that we'd become entangled in a morass of intricate comparisons we'll talk generally about the showroom car first and then turn the microscope on the hotted-up version.

The blue hardtop's interior was stitched up in all-black motif with an imitation wood applique on the dash around the instrumentation. We were never quite able to determine if the eight-grand tach in the car is standard, but very few GTO's are without one and it represents a worthwhile addition in any case. Looking like wood also was the rim on the rather small steering wheel that, with the aid of power, needed only 4.2 spins lock to lock and felt just right in conjunction with well-placed bucket seats. Not quite so handy was the Hurst shifter that treaded through an attractive console to the standard four-speed box with ratios of 2.56:1 – first; 1.91:1 – second; 1.48:1 – third; 1.00:1 – fourth.

The transmisison shifted well enough but the handle was just too far forward to manipulate without stretching. Electrically-operated window lifts were one accessory that we grew much to admire, not because of any inherent laziness on our part but the fact that with the seat belt fastened, it is well-nigh impossible for the driver to reach across to the opposite door to raise or lower the windows by hand.

Some amazing things occur when you get this 115-inch wheelbase animal on the road, not the least of which is the admiring glances passed out, especially from the young people. It's plain enough from the strategically-placed insignia that the car is a GTO, but that cool hood scoop marks it as the three-carb charger. On twisty, short-radius-turn roads, where driving as the average person would, the car handled beautifully; tracks well and goes where it's pointed without complaint. Increase the speed from 40 to about 55 or 60 mph in an identical situation and that big hunk of cast iron under the bonnet begins to exert Newtonian influences, causing noticeable understeer. We should interject here that Pontiac has a heavy-duty handling package and, as installed on the other, white Tiger, raised cornering potential measurably.

All the GeeTo's with air, as noted earlier, have the 3.23 rear end and this, coupled with the progressive carburetor arrangement, allows some advantages and one drawback over other configurations. The car cruises phenomenally well, easily in excess of 90 mph if asked, on just the center two-throat alone and does it economically. At a sustained 75, we recorded slightly over 15.5 mpg on relatively uninterrupted stretches of touring. Because of the lively response on *(Continued)*

GTO

ABOVE – Hot Tiger's stuffing is this 389-inch powerplant. Rochester 2CG carbs, connected with progressive linkage, yield mileage and power.

ABOVE LEFT – Fifty feet out of the San Fernando chute, this is the difference between stock (near lane) and hot, "Bobcatized" versions.

LEFT–Clean GTO design is evident against backdrop of the desert. For extended use on remote, washboard side roads, handling package is needed.

BELOW LEFT – Competition version of GTO has relatively plain interior, and close-ratio transmission option places shifter in more favorable position to driver than normal Tiger. BELOW – Plusher with air-conditioning and power windows, stocker is easy to drive and has excellent top speed, thanks to 3.23 rear end ratio. Detailing is very good.

photography: Eric Rickman

the single job, a woman driver or someone with a light foot would never know an extra pair of carbs was lying out there just down the line a bit farther on the accelerator. Conversely, however, a self-styled hot dog who likes to have everything hanging out, continually opening all the butterflies at low speed, will ultimately do himself in because the engine just can't use all the gas at low rpm and some residue will wind up in the oil pan, effectively thinning the lubricant. The idea is to treat the setup as it was designed to be used and no problems will be encountered.

Normal springing notwithstanding, the car feels exceptionally secure at high speeds. Even with the needle swinging past 125 out on one of Southern California's dry lakes (and the engine still pulling) there is no dangerous floating and the stiff springs are even better. On washboard dirt surfaces, however, the machine is skittish as a young colt and even the handling package doesn't represent the ultimate solution. This condition won't represent a serious handicap for most GTO buyers, however, because there aren't many populous areas that have scores of these jarring lanes left anymore. In short, our stocker did just about all the things it was supposed to, and in excellent form at that.

The white GTO was set up for competition, taking full advantage of the abundant part options. The engine was basically identical to our strictly stocker but with one critical difference: It had been Bobcatized.

In less generic parlance, this meant that Royal Oak Pontiac's (Royal Oak, Michigan) high-performance kit consisting of quicker centrifugal distributor advance, thin head gaskets, blocked heat riser gasket, larger .070 carburetor jets, fiber insert rocker-arm-stud lock nuts and high-output oil pump had been installed. By way of supplement, a neat set of headers by Doug ensured that exhaust gases would exit in the most expeditious, as well as noisiest, fashion.

Broken down separately, the individual pieces each had a specific purpose. The distributor alteration allowed the curve to come in fast at around 1000 rpm and be all finished at 3000. Total advance was held at 34 degrees and not to exceed 36 in any case. The thin head gaskets (.027-.035-inch, compared to .054-inch normally) hike compression to 11.23-to-1. Blocking the heat riser speaks for itself as do the larger jets. The fiber insert lock nuts allow rpm to exceed the stock 5500 limit by about 500, while the oil pump helps keep the engine in one piece for sustained competition periods.

All these things had been done to the powerplant previously and approximately 5000 miles of normal driving logged, including several drag dates, before we received the car. We had neither the time nor the opportunity for a complete check to see if everything was functioning properly, but we did add a fresh set of spark plugs and check the distributor curve. In addition, while the .070 jets fitted all the way through the Rochesters may be suitable for the damper and cooler East, it is too much for the primary carb in the drier West, so the stock .063-inch primaries were put back in to lean the mixture out to comply with the conditions at hand.

You can defer for an aluminum-cased, close-ratio four-speed in the GTO and our drag model had it with cogs of 2.20:1 first gear; 1.64:1 second gear; 1.28:1 third gear and 1.1:1 for fourth. And where the other shifter was a little too far forward, the one on this box was perfect. The rear axle ratio was a beaut at 4.33 or just what you need for instant out-of-the-gate shots with a set of 8.50 x 14-inch M&H slicks on the back. As a final touch, two Air-Lifts installed in the rear coils gave the opportunity for some tries at chassis jacking for better bite.

Despite these modifications, the rules makers have put their stamp of approval on the operation so the car competed as described in B or C/Stock, depending what Association you run. On the road, the pepped-up Tiger eats more gas due mostly, one suspects, to the relatively high rpm necessitated by the 4.33, but even hard driving doesn't lower the figure much below 10 mpg. And increased engine noise isn't really a problem either because, for one reason, solid lifters aren't part of the deal and, for another, sound deadening is pretty good in the body.

One thing is sure, however: In modern freeway traffic the short gear gives such good response that's just the ticket for changing lanes with room to spare or getting out of tight spots; when you hit all three carburetors, the sock is unreal.

Since one of the objects of our evaluation was definitely a thorough strip session, we packed tools, extra parts and cameras aboard the Tigers and made a beeline for San Fernando Raceway on the first free weekend. No attempt was made to super-tune the stock Wide-Track, other than making sure everything was functioning properly. The performer, by contrast, was ready for on-the-spot adjustments of any sort should they be necessary. The Bobcat kit is supplied with Champion J-10 spark plugs and we had a new set of these, plus another of Autolite's comparable A-42 range, both gapped at .030-inch. After getting all unnecessary weight unloaded, we decided to run both cars off together to see what the real difference in setup was. This necessitated the enlistment of an additional driver and, because someone extra sharp at dragging was more than just slightly desirable, we were fortunate in obtaining the services of none other than veteran AA/Fuel pilot Mike Snively, who, incidentally, later in the day turned out to be Top Eliminator at the helm of Ed Pink's "Old Master" rail.

Mike did a commendable job, but when the L.L. went green, there just wasn't any way that the stocker could equal the "tuned" version. With 4.33's pulling strong, our "racer" went on to win, with headers corked, at 95 mph in 15.40 seconds. Mike hit a creditable 90 mph in 16.50, which wasn't bad considering the 3.23 long-screw in the rear. Later on, after uncapping the headers and getting accustomed to the car a bit more, we got the hot Tiger down to around the 14-seconds-flat area at between 102-103 mph. The engine ran flawlessly on every run but despite the fact that we were never dumped out of the gate, the e.t. wasn't quite enough to match the class leaders. The main difference between our car and the GTO that finally got the gold was the little matter of a thorough blueprint job and engine balancing which seems to be the key in cracking out 12-second et's.

Our trip to the strip brought out several points of consideration. For one thing, the GTO stock posted one of the quickest as-is quarter-mile performances we have found in this year's HRM road testing program. We must quickly mention, however, that this isn't quite good enough for serious weekend racing. True, in some areas of the country the Bobcat treatment will be sufficient to beat the pack, but to do the job right it is apparent that an engine rebuild along the lines of blueprinting and balance is a must. This isn't a blotch on the GTO potential because every car we've tested has had the same problem.

In all, the GTO is a fun-to-drive machine, hot or stock. Success formulas are elusive creatures at best but Pontiac seems to have at least part of the market cornered for the time being. For some, this era appears indeed to be the years of the Quick-Wide-Track. ■■