

TRIO GRANDE

Brawny, big-bore, take-no-prisoners Detroit muscle is back. How does 1225 horsepower sliced three ways grab you? by Arthur St. Antoine



Whoever said “knowledge is power” never got blown off by some pimple-faced kid in a ratty Trans Am after screaming, “The area of the square built upon the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares upon the remaining sides!”

Often, there’s just no substitute for power of the powerful variety. Say, when you’re trying to coax an 800,000-pound Boeing bound for Mumbai off the runway (try *that* by flaunting your facility with irregular second-conjugation Italian verbs). Or if you want a car so deliciously quick it’ll entice you to skip “Desperate

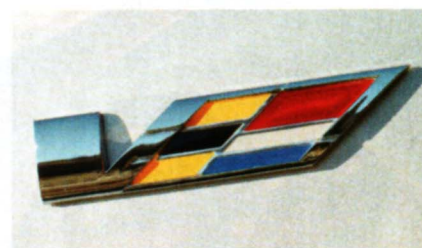
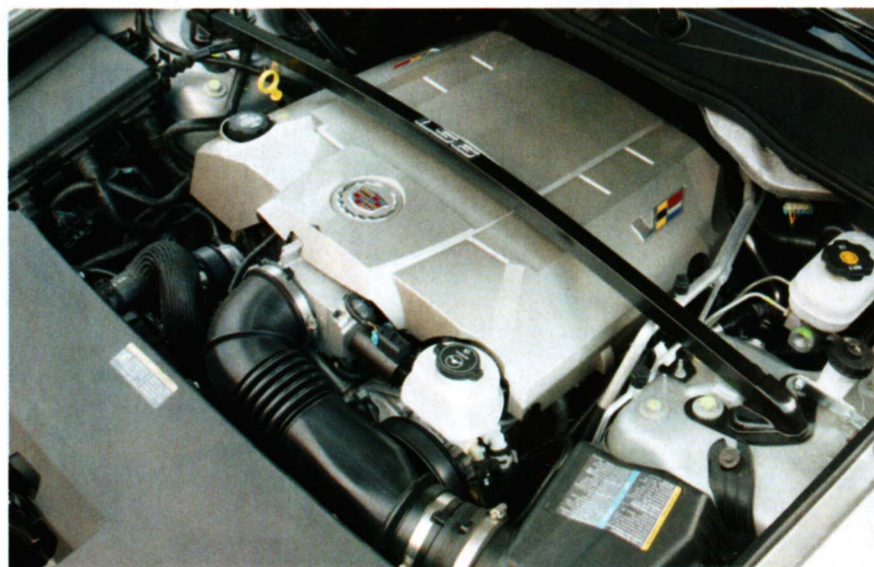
Housewives” just to get in another run to the Piggly Wiggly.

Detroit used to know this. In the heyday of the 1960s, the Big Three tossed out brawny, ballsy, rear-drive automobiles like so many internal-combustion poker chips: “Okay, I’ll see your 440 Charger R/T and 428 Cobra Jet and raise you a 454 Chevelle SS.” Then Detroit, uh, forgot—and for decades, we watched in collective horror as drive wheels mostly migrated from rear to front and horsepower ratings got as drearily sensible as Ralph Nader’s sport coats.

Now—heh-heh—Detroit muscle is back. Big-time. How much horsepressure would you

deem sufficient to embolden a rakishly attired, thoroughly modern automobile capable of ferrying four adults in leather-lined splendor? Would 375 horses do? No, let’s be greedy—how about 400? Minimum.

Feast your eyes on these three Patriot missiles. Each flaunts a proper rear-drive layout and a big, lusty, Detroit-bred pushrod V-8 producing 400 horsepower—or more. The slowest of the trio rips to 60 mph in five seconds flat (and remember: These bad-boys have back seats). Brakes are vented and large at all 12 corners; tires are of the big and sticky variety. The pimply kid in the ratty Trans Am is doomed.



Cadillac's stealth-chiseled, four-door CTS-v was first of the trio to get past the bouncer at the 400-horsepower club, appearing for the 2004 model year with a Corvette Z06 5.7-liter V-8 packed, like a week's worth of clothes in an overnight bag, into an engine bay originally designed for a 3.2-liter V-6. We love the smell of overkill in the morning.

Yet this hyper-caffinated Caddy, unlike so many of the 1960s-era muscle machines, isn't just a pair of Schwarzenegger biceps grafted onto a Will Farrell body. The Sigma chassis underneath is one of GM's best: tight, immensely strong, easily able to ward off the

twisting efforts of the LS6 V-8's 400 horsepower and 395 pound-feet of torque. Also, Cadillac fine-tuned the chassis not at the Friday-night drags but at Germany's old Nürburgring racetrack (a place so terrifying that even Formula 1 boss Bernie Ecclestone will tell you, "We're not racing there—you think we're nuts?"). The CTS-v boasts other mil-spec hardware, too, including four Brembo disc brakes the size of trainer Frisbees and a Tremec six-speed manual that's the one and only transmission on the menu (indeed, with rivals now switching to automatics or manumatic paddles, the CTS-v is the only big-bore sport

sedan in America that lets you stir your ratios for yourself).

When Pontiac's new Holden Monaro-based, Australian-built GTO arrived for 2004, it warmed our hearts. Many, including us, had hoped it would fry our adrenal glands. Equipped with a 350-horse, 5.7-liter LS1 V-8 (the 2004 Corvette's base engine) and a two-door body about as flamboyant as an Amish dance instructor, the 2004 GTO impressed us with its unfailing civility, but ultimately seemed a bit underwhelming given its menacing moniker—like meeting a Golden retriever named "Killer."

For 2005, though, Pontiac has spiked the punch bowl by dropping in the new C6 Vette's 6.0-liter LS2 V-8, which kicks out 400 horsepower and 395 pound-feet (despite their identical outputs, the V-8s in the CTS-v and the GTO are different animals). New hood scoops and polished exhaust tips reveal a bit of chest hair. Brakes have grown larger. The standard four-speed automatic transmission and optional six-speed Tremec manual (same as the Caddy's) remain. At last, muscle mavens, Pontiac has got your Goat.

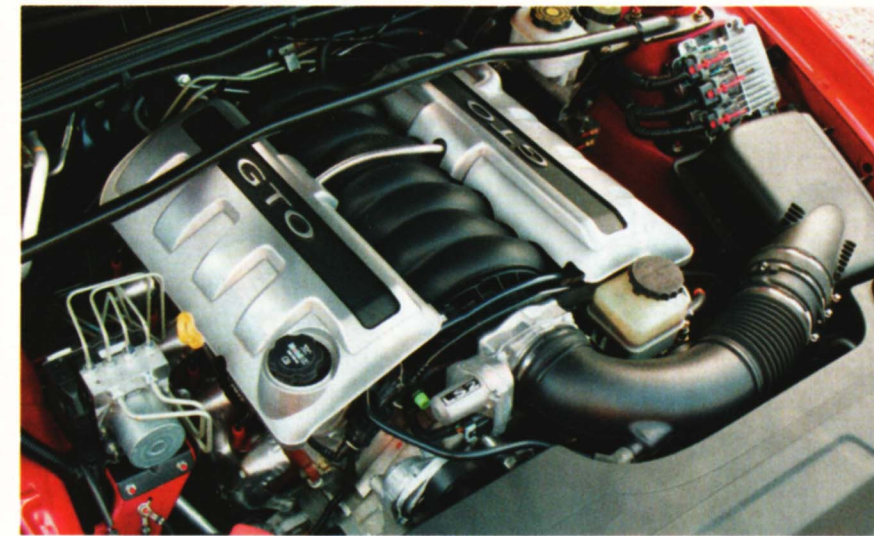
The all-new bully on the block is Chrysler's strapping SRT8. Not content simply to snatch 2005 *Motor Trend* Car of the Year honors with its fabulous 300 four-door, this spring Chrysler is piling on by unleashing a new high-output version prepped by the power brokers at its Street and Racing Technology (SRT) group. The standard 300C's 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 receives a bore increase (to 6.1 liters) and a thorough upgrading (including larger-diameter valves and intake runners and a

reinforced engine block), upping horsepower by 25 percent to 425 at 6200 rpm (a five-speed automatic with AutoStick remains the only available transmission). Giant, vented Brembo discs now sit at each corner like zealous radar cops, ready to arrest outrageous displays of speed. A stouter, stiffer suspension rides on 20-inch forged-aluminum wheels wearing standard three-season Goodyears. The bodywork tastefully hints at the engine's additional muscle with subtle cladding and a small rear spoiler. There's even... *whoops*—sorry. We were starting to drool.

Much has changed since the 1960s. As Ashlee Simpson can attest, it's now possible to make millions as a pop singer if you're reasonably good at karaoke. Also, today you can drive through town in an exceedingly powerful, exceedingly fast Detroit musclecar without causing passers-by to run for cover while screaming "quake!" The SRT8 is especially good at being genteel, its long, 120-inch wheelbase adding poise over road

imperfections; its luxurious cockpit well-isolated from vibrations and annoyances outside; rear-seat passengers enjoying more than 40 inches of legroom. The SRT8 feels big, too—indeed, it's more than five inches longer than the Cadillac, and, at 4190 pounds, it's the heaviest car in this group by more than 300. The steering wheel seems a little large, the steering response a little slow and dead on-center—none of which is surprising, given the syrupy Mercedes-Benz DNA that created the 300. But there's no ignoring the SRT8's more antisocial side, either. The signs are everywhere: the aggressively bolstered front leather buckets with suede inserts, the 180-mph speedo, the instant response of the gas pedal. Oh, yes: You'll want to tread on that throttle as if it were the tail of a sleeping lion.

The CTS-v feels noticeably smaller than the SRT8, less plush, hard-wired to your hands and backside. Move the Cadillac's steering wheel a fraction, and the front wheels bite *right now*. The ride is conspicuously firm—you'll never



forget you're driving a performance car. The interior is loaded with standard features—DVD navigation, XM Satellite Radio, Bose audio with six-disc CD changer—but it's as all-sport as the car's hardware: dark, monotone, not a shred of wood in sight. It's unexpectedly severe for a Cadillac, as if the designers were trying to hit us over the head with a "this is a serious sport sedan and don't you forget it" theme.

Compared with the two lavishly equipped four-doors, the two-door GTO feels like a throwback (with its midsize-coupe body and big motor, it's also the truest to the original musclecar formula). The cabin is as spare as a bachelor's refrigerator: no gleaming, color navigation screen, no automatic climate control, just a few knobs and switches and simple, green-hued LCD displays. This is a close-fitting space-capsule cockpit you strap on to battle g's. The leather seats are simply fantastic: comfortable, deeply pocketed, so supportive and enveloping you half expect to

find a sticker on them that says, "Release canopy before ejecting." The leather steering wheel has a pleasing heft. The pedals are well-positioned for heel-and-toe work. The purposefulness of the cabin seems all the more appropriate once you twist the ignition key and get an earful of that rolling-thunder soundtrack. The CTS-v and the SRT8 each make luscious pipe music, but the GTO sounds like a V-8 echo from the 1960s remastered in Dolby Digital surround. You'll be goosing the throttle even when the transmission's in neutral.

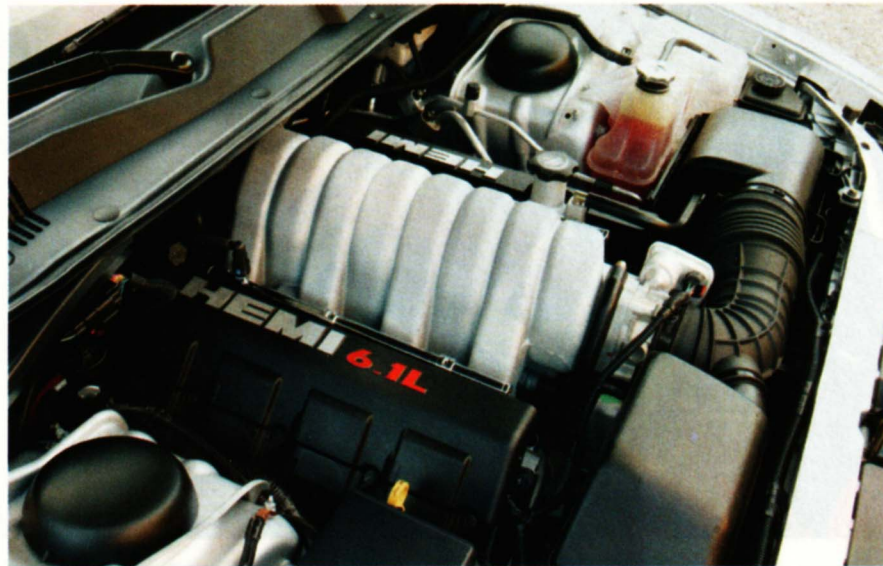
So, are these 21st-century muscle machines fast? Does Tommy Lee have tattoos?

All three cars are within a few ticks of each other in the sprint to 60 mph, the GTO nailing the run in a mere five seconds flat (three-tenths quicker than last year's 350-horse version), the two-ton-plus SRT8 needing just 4.9 seconds (test driver Chris Walton kept mumbling something about liquefied rear tires), the trim CTS-v besting the group with a scorching

4.7-second blast (after Walton managed to work around a nasty case of axle hop off the line). The CTS-v also just edged the other two in the quarter mile, tripping the lights in 13.1 seconds at almost 110 mph. That's a Cadillac—in Porsche 911 territory. The only time your grandfather's Fleetwood ever got anywhere near there was when he banged its door into a Carrera outside the optometrist's office.

The 1960s-era musclecars were stirring on straightaways, too, but when the road curved they mostly handed over all steering control to Newton's first law of motion ("an object moving in a straight line tends to remain in a straight line until it crashes into a McDonald's billboard"). Not so these three. In fact, as we discovered during a full day of flogging through the mountain switchbacks in the Sequoia National Forest north of Los Angeles, when the road goes twisty, these power players shine their brightest.

The 2005 GTO retains the supple chassis response of the 2004 edition, rolling into



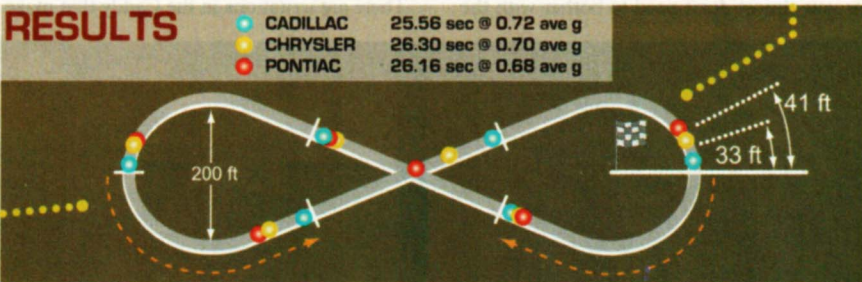
THINK OF MT'S FIGURE-EIGHT AS A ROAD COURSE IN A BOTTLE



If we had to choose just one performance test from our spec-chart roster, which would it be? The quarter mile? The slalom? The skidpad? While each of those is ideal for the specific insights it reveals, individually, they're like a single jigsaw-puzzle piece. Or dabs of color on an impressionist painting. Incomplete.

Putting the picture together demands a test that exercises all the essential aspects of performance: acceleration, braking, and cornering (left and right)—and, furthermore, in the speed ranges we typical drive at. The Motor Trend Figure-Eight test does just that, but what's more, it's also crucially rich with the subtleties of how skillfully a vehicle can transition from one performance domain to another. Accelerating out of a corner. Braking into one. These are the types of transitions that go unmeasured by our competitors.

Here, senior road test-editor Chris Walton has jockeyed each of our cover-story's trio of cars through our serpentine course, while acquiring speed and acceleration data via our RacePak GPS-based test equipment. But in addition, he's done so wearing a microphone to record his real-time impressions. Buckle up!



REAL-TIME commentary by Chris Walton



LEFT CORNERING

CADILLAC
I'm turning-in now—wow—really crisp. I can feel the back end coming out a bit—no [stability control] nannying at all. The steering is pretty darn light.
0.5 g 0.92 g

CHRYSLER
Lots of lateral grip; oops—there's a nanny in here [stability control].
0.5 g 0.88 g

PONTIAC
The steering feels a bit heavier compared with the Cadillac or Chrysler; there's a slight amount of understeer.
0.5 g 0.85 g

BRAKING

CADILLAC
Hitting the brakes now—the pedals themselves are well spaced—these are good, solid brakes.
0.5 g 0.98 g

CHRYSLER
Immense brakes. But ahh...it's got brake assist; the brakes are still working even after I've released the pedal!
0.5 g 1.10 g

PONTIAC
Brake pedal is noticeably mushier than the other two cars'; the ABS is allowing a bit more skidding, too.
0.5 g 0.94 g

ACCELERATION

CADILLAC
It's tremendous at putting the power down; the shorter gearing means I'm grabbing third gear before hitting the brakes.
50 mph 72.2 mph

CHRYSLER
Accelerating onto the straight, the kick-down is very good—there's no wheel spin at all.
50 mph 71.2 mph

PONTIAC
The GTO is unwinding onto the straight nicely; the archaic rear axle is certainly putting the power down better than I'd expect. Third is needed before braking.
50 mph 70.4 mph

RIGHT CORNERING

CADILLAC
Similar grip as the SRT8, I think. Like the Corvette, it'll do exactly what you want—it feels like a sports car.
0.5 g 0.89 g

CHRYSLER
I'm too hot here, but it's actually oversteering (laugh); I guess it can oversteer, but it really doesn't like it.
0.5 g 0.88 g

PONTIAC
There's a little more understeer starting to develop. I might have overcooked the corner a bit.
0.5 g 0.84 g

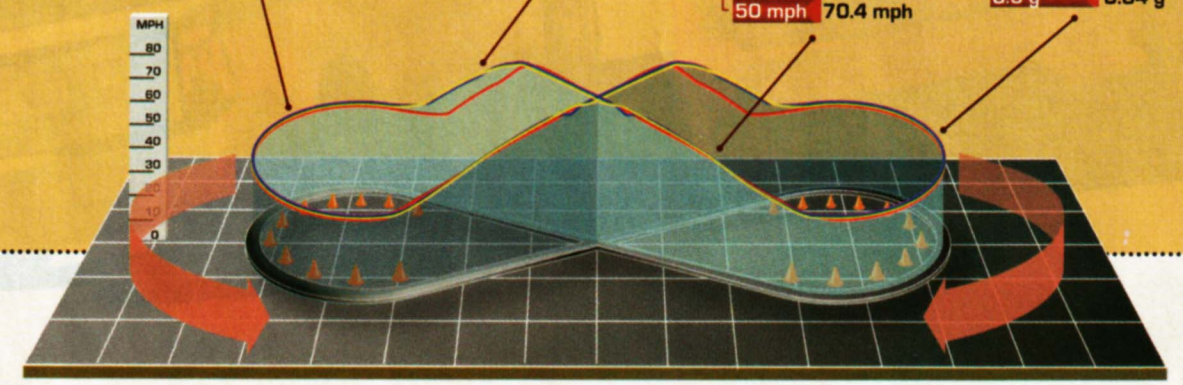


ILLUSTRATION BY KIM REYNOLDS

corners, taking a secure set (max grip is 0.85 g), and ultimately understeering as it nears the limit. At times, we almost wished for a tad more firmness, but a performance coupe with such ride civility is no bad thing. Neither is so much performance and finesse for a base price of around \$33K (final prices had not been set at presstime).

The SRT8 will surprise you. It's big, and on tight mountain two-lanes it feels it, but once you accept that this beefy Chrysler isn't going to turn in with the quickness or neutrality of a Lotus, hang on—the SRT8 can really hustle. Max grip is a stupendous 0.88 g, the Brembos are always there to rein in corner-to-corner sprints, and the Hemi makes speed so effortlessly it almost feels lazy. It isn't. It loves to rev, and it's matched to a five-speed automatic so adept at choosing (and holding) the right gear you almost don't need to bother with the

AutoStick. Oh, there's one more surprise: This American-style AMG Mercedes starts at only \$39,995 (and, no, that's not an unassembled IKEA edition). It'll be interesting to see which is quicker: the SRT8 itself or the way the 5000 or so examples slated for 2005 fly off dealer lots.

Before we headed into the mountains with the CTS-v, test driver Walton came back from the track grinning like he'd just been given free access to the Playboy Channel. "Whoever designed that chassis really knows what the hell they're doing." It took us about, oh, one fast sweeper to agree. The Caddy's turn-in is scalpel-sharp, the front end bites hard, and, just as the car is beginning to push, a squeeze on the throttle brings the rear end out ever so gently and the nose back in line. Few sport sedans—or sports cars, for that matter—are so beautifully balanced and neutral.

There are irritations in the Caddy that make

us want to smack GM upside its corporate head: a tilt wheel with limited detents instead of infinite adjust, pedals too far apart and too high for easy footwork, a parking-brake pedal (in a manual-transmission car?) instead of a hand lever. But the rest of the CTS-v is so brilliant we almost don't care. Look at the stats on the accompanying spec chart. Note the CTS-v's figure-eight performance. That's less than half a second behind the \$190,000 Lamborghini Gallardo's time (and we've never been able to find the Lambo's back seat).

At \$51,295, the 2005 Cadillac CTS-v tops this group in price, but it's still a bargain, a sexy, luxurious four-door that'll run with AMGs and M5s (and occasionally taunt a 911) for tens of thousands less. In this trio, it's also the car we'd ask out first for a date to the asphalt dance.

We can't wait to see the look on Miss Two-Lane Blacktop. **MT**

