



Cool for the Club Hot for the Track



***The '59 Thunderbird has a little of everything
for everyone—a smooth, sporty look and, as
an option, a 430-cu. in. mill for potent power.***

FROM the results of early-season NASCAR stock-car racing, it looks as though Ford's low-slung Thunderbird sedan may dominate the sport this year the way the old Hudson Hornets and later the Chrysler 300s did a few seasons back. The Hornet's superiority came largely from its low center of gravity combined with what was, for the early '50s, a high-torque engine. The Chryslers got their string of wins with brute power, the best drivers in the game, and the painstaking preparation Carl Kiekhaefer's meticulous mechs gave them.

What is the Thunderbird's secret? Well, it's a little of all of these things: low-slung design, powerful engine and meticulous preparation. First of all, the T-Birds that have been winning the NASCAR laurels were all set up by Holman and Moody, the stock-car magicians from Charlotte, N. C., who used to set up Fords for the factory team and have learned even more since. Like the Hornets, the T-Bird has a very low center of gravity, and like the 300s, it has a powerful engine. Its giant 430-cubic-inch block, largest in the industry, develops 350 advertised bhp at 4,400 rpm—and camshafts are optional in NASCAR racing.

That, of course, is the competition version. How, we wondered, does an ordinary "civilian" T-Bird compare with this "combat" model? To find out, SPEED AGE selected a comparatively mild 'Bird—a white convertible with the standard 352-cu. in. engine, Cruise-O-Matic trans-

mission, power brakes, steering and windows. How was it? Well, it won't do any 145 mph around the banks at Daytona, but it's mighty lively for running down to the supermarket.

The first four-place T-Bird came out about halfway through the 1958 model year, and the convertible model a few months later, so there would have been no point in a major re-styling for 1959. Accordingly, Ford made just enough styling changes for identification purposes—the chrome trim on the side spear is changed and the grille is composed of horizontal bars instead of a punched-metal sheet.

Although Ford was always careful to refer to its now-discontinued two-place 'Bird as a "personal car," its jaunty, low-slung two-seater design led most Americans to think of it as a sports car. Some of that sports-car identification has perforce rubbed off on the current model. It is certainly a sporty-looking car. One of the more successful examples of the "sculptured metal" trend favored by Ford styling chief George Walker, it is flashy enough to satisfy Detroit-oriented buyers, yet restrained and clean-lined enough to attract those who favor European sports-car styling, and its compact, low-slung look helps to continue the sports-car illusion.

That compact look is deceptive—the T-Bird is really only 2.8 inches shorter than a standard Ford (although

its wheelbase is five inches less), and it's actually half an inch wider than the full-sized sedans. But low-slung it certainly is—the 'Bird is nearly four inches lower than its Fairlane cousin. The hardtop stands just 52.5 inches above the road, and when a six-footer stands on a normal six-inch curb, next to the car, the rooftop is exactly level with his belt buckle.

Unlike any other American car, the T-Bird is frankly a four-seater (so are a lot of the others that claim to seat six), so that the problem of the transmission hump and drivershaft tunnel is neatly sidestepped. The unitized body-frame drops in two deep wells on either side of the tunnel, permitting the bucket-type seats to be placed low enough for ample head-and leg-room in front, despite the low roof. Leg-room in the rear, too, is adequate, though somewhat limited when the front seat is all the way back. The transmission hump itself is used as a seat divider and console, housing radio speaker, ashtrays and power window controls.

The convertible is even more rakish-looking than the hardtop, but it seems to be one of those compromises that a sales department occasionally forces upon the engineers. In other words, the close-coupled layout (seats close together and rear seat hard on the axle) and the very low silhouette

make it impossible, in normal practice, to make this car into a convertible. But a T-Bird convertible would obviously be an extremely salable item, and one was contrived. Since there is no room behind the rear seat for the well into which a conventional convertible top retracts, the T-Bird top must be stored in the trunk.

In order to drop and stow the top, the driver must unlock two latches at the top of the windshield frame, undo four snaps along each side and unzip the rear window. Then he presses a button under the dash, which unlocks the rear deck lid. Preliminaries over, he gets out of the car, walks around to the back and releases the deck lid safety latch and, manually, swings the rear-hinged lid open to the vertical

position. Walking back to the rear of the car, he reaches up and releases a locking pin (anyone taller than five feet nine can easily reach it on tip-toes) which permits him to raise the "finish panel" from its folded-under position to full extension. Then he strolls around to the forward end of the trunk and operates a toggle switch there, which lowers the cloth top into the luggage compartment, almost completely filling it. All that's left for the driver to do now is to lower the huge deck lid and slam it down to engage the latches, and he can climb back in, put on his sports-car cap, and drive away. Putting the top up, of course, requires the reverse procedure, and can probably be done, in a sudden shower, before you're soaked *all* the

Side angle on '59 T-Bird displays handsome new grille of horizontal slats. Trim on side "spear" is new.





T-Bird's brakes are smooth working and adequate for normal driving. Under pressure, there's some fade.



Low, wide engine compartment gives more room to work on 352 and 430 cu. in. mills; both sit far forward.



The T-Bird corners as well as any stock passenger car, but it will not handle like a sports car.



Side view of '59 'Bird shows close-coupled passenger compartment contrasted with fairly long hood and trunk. Integral body frame construction permits low silhouette with good headroom.

way through.

Under the hood there are no significant changes from last year's equipment. The engine is the tried-and-true 352-cu. in. model. Fed by a four-barrel carburetor and using a 9.6:1 compression ratio, it develops a healthy 300 bhp at 4,600 rpm. The most significant engineering change is the switch back to Ford's familiar Hotchkiss leaf-spring rear suspension (from the coil spring, track rod and torque arm on the earlier four-place 'Bird). This eliminates chatter in the clutch and driveline on stick-shift models. The coil arrangement, probably put on the early 'Bird to allow for air-suspension installation, became unnecessary when the great air balloon went pfffft! last year.

Ride and handling do not seem to have been changed appreciably by the suspension modification. The Thunderbird is a very pleasant over-the-road car; small road irregularities are soaked up unnoticeably, and the larger ones do not produce the up-and-down float that softly sprung American cars are famous for.

One difference I found between the road characteristics of this model and the hardtop I drove last year is due to its convertible construction, not the new rear springs—the car had as much body shake and vibration as most Detroit body-and-frame cars, although not nearly as much as some other 1959 convertibles. But last year's hardtop was as completely rattle-free and structurally rigid as a unit-con-

struction car should be, and undoubtedly is the same this year.

Steering, with 4.1 turns from lock to lock, is quicker than most Detroiters, but slower than the 3.5-turn power steering on the Chrysler Corporation lines, and far from the two to three turns found on most sports cars and many economy sedans. Nevertheless, the T-Bird takes ordinary turns and bends well, without undue lean or tire squeal, and the low center of gravity gives it excellent road-holding characteristics under normal driving conditions. High-speed cornering, as we found out in a few laps around the Lime Rock sports-car track, is another matter. Better slow down for the hairpins.

To do so, you'll have to use the

brakes—the Cruise-O-Matic does not provide a manual control for downshifting, as some competing makes do. The brakes are adequate for normal driving, but solid wheel discs over 14-inch wheels do not provide a great deal of cooling, and two stops from high speed produced noticeable fade. During our acceleration runs, it was necessary to take a lap or so around the track to cool off the binders after every two or three dashes down the straightaway.

There is some nose dive when you hit the brakes hard in a panic stop—the "windup" of the rear leaf springs permits a little more than the rigid torque arm did—but it is not especially severe in normal traffic driving.

Performance in general was a cut above most stock sedans of the same power—remember, this was not the hottest T-Bird. Acceleration, we found, was about the same whether the transmission was held in low range as long as possible or allowed to shift automatically at about 40 and 73 mph respectively into intermediate and high gear.

Using the fast-start technique of releasing the brakes after the engine has picked up some speed, we saw 60 on the speedometer just nine seconds after we moved out (average of four runs), and 88 mph as we passed the quarter-mile marker, 17.4 seconds after leaving our starting line.

Top speed must be an estimate—it takes several miles of straight pavement, which our test track did not pro-

vide, to make an all-out speed run. But the driver who finds such a stretch and has the nerve and disregard for speed limits to hold his foot down long enough, would probably see the speedometer needle pass the 120 mark.

That should satisfy the driver who buys a Thunderbird as a high-performance, sporty-looking luxury car, which is what Ford is selling, with a great deal of success. The four-seater has been selling at the rate of 16,500 per quarter, or 63,600 for the model year, if it keeps up. That's about four times the sales rate of the two-passenger model. Ford's market researchers knew what they were about when they recommended the change.

Any buyer who is contradictory enough to be interested in the fuel economy of a \$4,000 car will be delighted that a 1959 T-Bird won Class E (upper-medium price range) in the Mobilgas Economy Run with an overall miles-per-gallon average of 19.1301. Our own mileage, which of course included the hard driving of the acceleration and other test runs, was 12.7 mpg.

Anyone not satisfied with this kind of performance can, of course, buy the 430-cu. in. engine, take the stick-shift option, stop in at Holman and Moody for a little reworking, and head for Daytona Beach. If he can arrange for a run through the measured mile or a few laps around the Speedway, he'll find out what it feels like to drive at 145 mph.

Rear quarter view emphasizes T-Bird's considerable overhang and the jukebox-type quad tail light group.



SPECIFICATIONS: 1959 THUNDERBIRD

ENGINE AND CHASSIS

ENGINE LAYOUT	90°, V-8
BORE	4.00 IN.
STROKE	3.50 IN.
DISPLACEMENT	352 CU. IN.
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.6:1
VALVES	OH PUSHROD
CARBURETION	SINGLE QUAD
TRANSMISSION	CRUISE-O-MATIC, TORQUE CONVERTER WITH PLANETARY GEARS

OVERALL RATIOS

1st	14.14:1
2nd	8.57:1
3rd	5.89:1
REAR AXLE RATIO	3.10:1
STEERING: TYPE	RECIRC. BALL AND NUT
WHEEL TURNS	4.1
TURNING DIAMETER	40.32 FEET
BRAKE LINING AREA	225.50 SQ. IN.
SUSPENSION: FRONT	IND. COIL
REAR	LEAF
WEIGHT (CURB)	4048 LBS.
FUEL CAPACITY	20 GALLONS

DIMENSIONS

OVERALL LENGTH	205.3 INCHES
OVERALL WIDTH	77.0 INCHES
OVERALL HEIGHT	52.5 INCHES
WHEELBASE	113.0 INCHES
TREAD: FRONT	60.0 INCHES
REAR	57.0 INCHES
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.8 INCHES

PERFORMANCE

ACCELERATION THROUGH GEARS	
0-30 MPH	3.5 SECONDS
0-40 MPH	5.3 SECONDS
0-50 MPH	7.1 SECONDS
0-60 MPH	9.1 SECONDS
0-70 MPH	11.9 SECONDS
0-80 MPH	15.1 SECONDS
STANDING 1/4-MILE	17.5 SECONDS
SPEED AT END OF 1/4	88 MPH
MAXIMUM SPEED	121 MPH
MAXIMUM BHP	300 @ 4600 RPM
MAXIMUM TORQUE	
(LBS/FT)	395 @ 2800 RPM
HP PER CU. IN.	85
LBS. PER HP	13.4

