

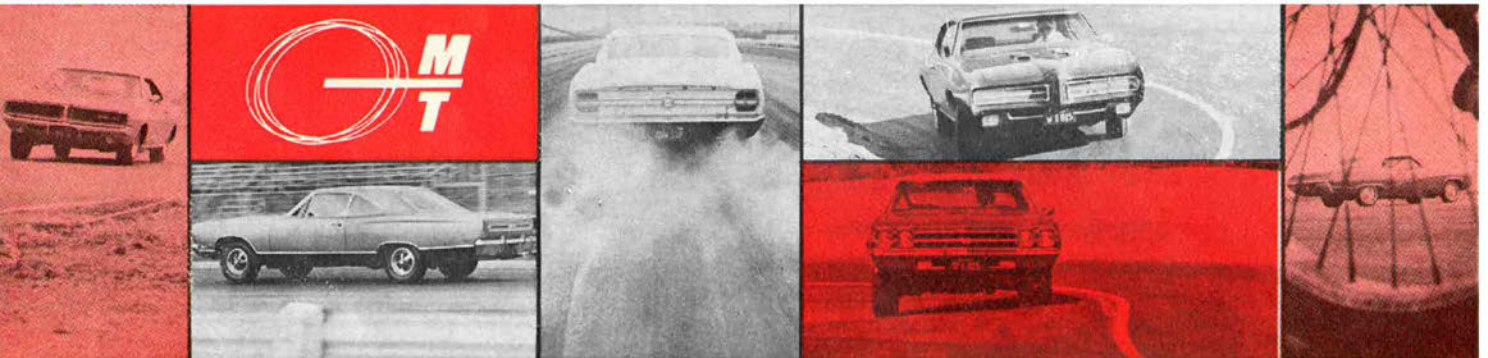
ANALYZING SUPERCARS

PLYMOUTH GTX 440 • DODGE CHARGER RT 440

FORD COBRA 428 CJ

PONTIAC GTO 400 • CHEVELLE SS 396 • BUICK GS 400

by Bill Sanders



Supercars. Whatever you may choose to call them, they're still around in abundance in 1969. Last year was the big change year for the super group, both in styling and performance; consequently not much new has appeared on the scene for '69. A few frills and minor modifications have been incorporated to mark the passing of another model year; bumpers have received minor treatment, tail lights have been shifted around, and, in some instances, vent windows have disappeared. Chrysler Corporation is still going with vent windows on all non-air-conditioned cars though, because that company feels there is no substitute for maximum air circulation, or even for flicking out cigarette ashes for that matter.

Supercars. They come in various shapes and prices: fastbacks, notchbacks, tunnel backs, and, if you want the luxury of all the extra options available, even "shirt-off-your-back." We selected a representative group for this test, featuring a variety of engine sizes and options.

Supercars. Not only are they unchanged from 1968, each manufacturer uses the same body shell and components for cars in the various corporate divisions. Thus, the Plymouth GTX and the Dodge Charger RT have the same basic body, ride and handling characteristics, interior dimensions, and to some extent, performance abilities. The same is true with the General Motors "A" bodied cars. The Chevelle, GTO and GS 400 all share the same body shell and practically identical interior and trunk dimensions. Ride and handling differences are noticeably more pronounced within the GM group though, and with two different engine displacement sizes tested, performance variances were also apparent. Ford is in the same boat. The Torino Fairlane Cobra, which is a new entry for 1969 and is the latest Ford product to bear the marquee of the big Shelby snake, sports a 428 cubic inch Cobra-Jet engine. Carrying the same powerplant and body as the Mercury Cyclone, the Ford Cobra is also a martyr to the cost-conscious economics of duplicity.

Supercars. You have to look deeper for the subtle differences between cars of each company's separate divisions. The differences are there. They may be tenuous, but they are there: a distinct instrument panel, a different road feel. Collectively, the differences add up to a unique personality for each car. That's what gives substance to comparison tests, owner satisfaction, and the ultimate arbitrator of all, sales.

CHRYSLER CORPORATION

PLYMOUTH GTX

No matter how you may try to camouflage it by loading a car with power and comfort options, when you get down to the nitty gritty of supercar existence, an inescapable, basic fact always remains on the surface: one primary purpose of a supercar is to get from here to there, from this light to the next, in the shortest elapsed time. To this end the Plymouth GTX was the flat out, best qualifier of all. A 13.7-second, 102.8 mph quarter-mile, and 0 to 60 in 5.8 seconds testifies to the super performance of the GTX.

Our test car had Plymouth's "in-between" (between the 383 cubic inch V-8 and the 426 hemi) performance engine, the 440 cubic inch V-8 turning out 375 hp @ 4600 rpm. There's no escaping the attraction of sheer power in a car and we fell for the GTX, even though its virginity was in question, as it had been romanced by Plymouth's fine tuning experts before we met it. It might not idle too well, but when the horses were running — look out!

A functional, cold air hood ventilation system called the "Air Grabber" feeds cool, outside air into the carburetor on

the '69 GTX. Manually operated, the "Air Grabber" has an interior lever that allows the driver to open and close vents that push either outside or inside air into the engine, significantly increasing engine efficiency and performance. The "Air Grabber" is not a hood scoop as such and vent louvers are flush on the hood. This limits height and doesn't interfere with road vision as significantly as the Ford Cobra hood scoop and, to a lesser degree, the GTO cold air scoops.

Three transmissions are available: a manual 3-speed, manual 4-speed and a 3-speed automatic. The same number of axle combinations are also available to further enhance performance. Optional ratios are 3.55:1, 3.91:1 and 4.10:1. Our test car had the 3-speed automatic transmission coupled to the 4.10:1 rear end. In addition, with the high-performance 440 and 426 hemi, Track Pack and Super Track Pack performance options are offered. Track Pack features a 4-speed manual transmission with Hurst shifter, 3.55 ratio axles, viscous fan drive, dual breaker distributor and Sure-Grip differential. Super Track Pack adds disc brakes and the 4.10:1 rear axle ratio.

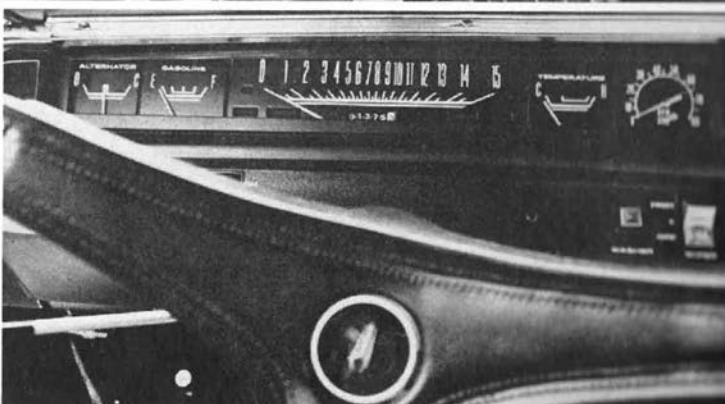
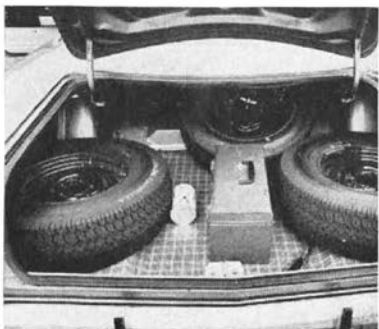
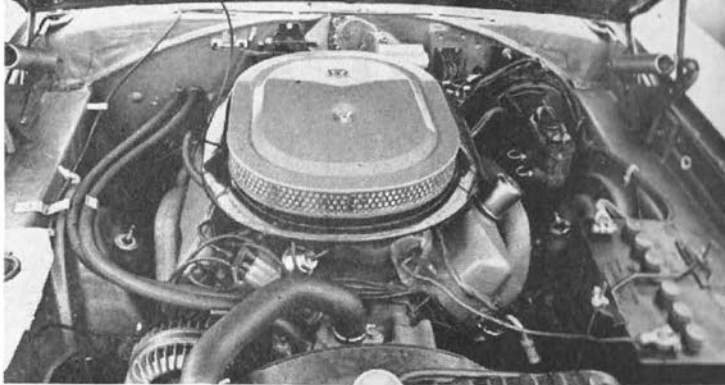
Obviously, we were impressed by the performance capabilities of the GTX. It turned in the best performance times in every category: acceleration, passing and quarter-mile acceleration. The Charger was close on its heels though, with

PLYMOUTH GTX 440

Photos by George Foon



(Above right) GTX will really lay a stretch of rubber accelerating. (Right) Floor mounted automatic shifter is quite far forward for easy shifting. In "Park" position it interferes with opening ashtray. (Far right) Unique "Air Grabber" induction system has airtight underhood fit. Big air cleaner scoops in plenty of air. (Below) Trunk space is good for a supercar. Opening is big enough to admit lots of luggage, and GTX has lowest liftover. (Far right below) GTX instrument panel is easy to read, but tachometer is too small for precise shifts. Oil pressure gauge is also needed.



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times only fractions of a second slower. Additional credit must be given to the GTX when it's considered that each car had the same engine and transmission (the Charger had a higher rear axle ratio), but the GTX weighed 35 pounds more by our scale weight, 3790 pounds for the Plymouth versus 3755 pounds for the Dodge.

Besides going great in a straight line, the GTX also handles tolerably. The built-in understeer is slight on normally twisting roads and becomes pronounced in extremely tight maneuvering. Although both cars have similar suspensions, the Charger seemed to handle slightly better. The GTO and GS 400 were far superior. Both the Ford Cobra and Chevelle were a little less responsive in handling. Inclusion of the Sure-Grip differential and handling package suspension created a tendency for the GTX to hop around corners, rather than taking tight turns flat and level, a problem that wasn't as apparent on the Charger or the Chevelle and Cobra.

Going through the gears with the GTX automatic is a pleasure and cuts down e.t.s. Shifts are instantaneous. Plymouth's floor-mounted shift with center console is a good idea, but unfortunately the shift lever is too far forward, and when the driver's seat is all the way back, it's out of sight. In fact, the shift lever is so close to the dash, when it is in the "park" position it is almost impossible to open the ash-tray, which is situated directly ahead.

The GTX instrument panel isn't as well instrumented or planned as the Charger, GTO or Cobra but is as good as the Chevelle and GS 400. Heater and radio are both located in the center of the GTX dash and easily reached by both driver and passenger. The GTX tach is too small for gauging accurate shifts, creating a tendency to overrev the engine in low or second. Our car had no oil pressure gauge, which is needed.

A 4.10:1 rear axle ratio is rather low for extended freeway or open highway driving, turning the engine at 4500-5000 rpm at 65-70 mph. It also cuts into gas mileage. Our mileage range was 8.7 to 10.4 mpg. At the drags or around town, it is great for acceleration.

DODGE CHARGER RT

We were sitting next to the slippery-slide and jungle bars down at Herbert Hoover Elementary School waiting for delivery of our '69 Charger RT. We were hoping, praying that the Dodge Boys hadn't put it back in its 1967 shipping crate again. Suddenly, there it was and our fears abated. It hadn't changed much from '68 and the brute Charger styling, that symbol of masculine virility, was still intact.

Grille and tail lights are new this year, but outside and in it's still basically the strong bomb we remembered so well. Powertrain on the Charger was basically the same as that on the GTX, with Dodge's 440 cubic inch Magnum 4-barrel V-8 and a 3-speed automatic transmission. It was immediately evident from the idle that the Charger hadn't caught Dodge fever as badly as the GTX had submitted to "...and the beat goes on." And, too, our Charger only had a 3.55:1 rear axle. Consequently, performance figures were slightly cooler for the Charger. A quarter-mile in 13.9 seconds at 101.4 mph, which the Charger ran, still shows no lack of vitamins though. Gas mileage was improved with the higher axle ratio, giving a range of 10.4 to 11.8 mpg.

Performance is a relative thing and the RT felt more comfortable than the GTX. Charger performance was more versatile, whereas the GTX always seemed to require going flat out or nothing. A column-mounted shift lever seemed as easy to operate on the RT as the floor-mounted shifter on the GTX. In fact, with the shift lever and center console out, the RT gave the impression of having far more interior room, even though both cars have similar interior dimensions.

Charger handling and steering also seemed more responsive than the GTX. On a ride and handling course, the Charger was more nimble and seemed to negotiate turns easier than the GTX, even though they're based on the same chassis. Charger, like the GTX, rates well below the handling characteristics of the GTO and GS 400.

Interior treatment has changed little, and luckily the well-instrumented Charger dash is still the same. It has the easiest to read instrument panel of all the cars tested. A large tach and speedometer are directly in front of you and the four necessary gauges are spread out to the right. All gauges are white on black to stand out, and allow instant checking without removing eyes from the road for too long.

The RT has a special handling suspension package which includes heavy-duty torsion bars, heavy-duty shocks, extra heavy-duty rear springs and sway bar.

An acceptable styling change reflects consumer taste, and Charger proved that in 1968. Original plans called for 35,000 sales in '68, but public response caused Dodge to project upward and build 85,000 units. Charger accounted for 15.5% of Dodge car sales in '68 and ran a fantastic 437% ahead of the 1967 model.

CHARGER — GTX FEATURES

With a base price differential of only about \$150, a 440 equipped Charger RT and GTX are fundamentally quite similar. Leg and head room, both front and rear, are basically the same. Trunk openings are the same dimensions, but Plymouth, with a deck lid that curves down close to the rear bumper, has a liftover height that is a good 10 inches lower than the Charger and is lower than all the other cars tested. Trunk opening measurements on both cars are 26 inches deep and 46 inches wide. GTX liftover is 24 inches and Charger 34 inches.

Interior roominess seems much more expansive in the Chrysler Corporation cars than in any of the GM products or the Ford. Rear seat knee room with front seats forward is 13½ inches. With seat back it's nine inches, and rear seat headroom is 34½ inches. Chrysler Corporation bucket seats are more comfortable than the heavily padded, semi-buckets of Ford or the bucket seats of GM cars. A unique, manually-operated, 6-way bucket seat adjuster with 160 driving positions claimed by Chrysler is optional on the driver's seat of both cars. One lever controls a normal 10-position, fore/aft seat track with 4½ inches of travel. A second lever controls vertical position and tilt angle of the seat. Our test Charger had this option, and while it was better than nothing, it doesn't compare with the number of positions available with a power unit or with some of the standard manual adjusters on imports such as the BMW. Under dash air vents on the Chrysler products are far superior to either GM or Ford. On the non-air-conditioned supercars they forced in an ocean of cool air on warm days.

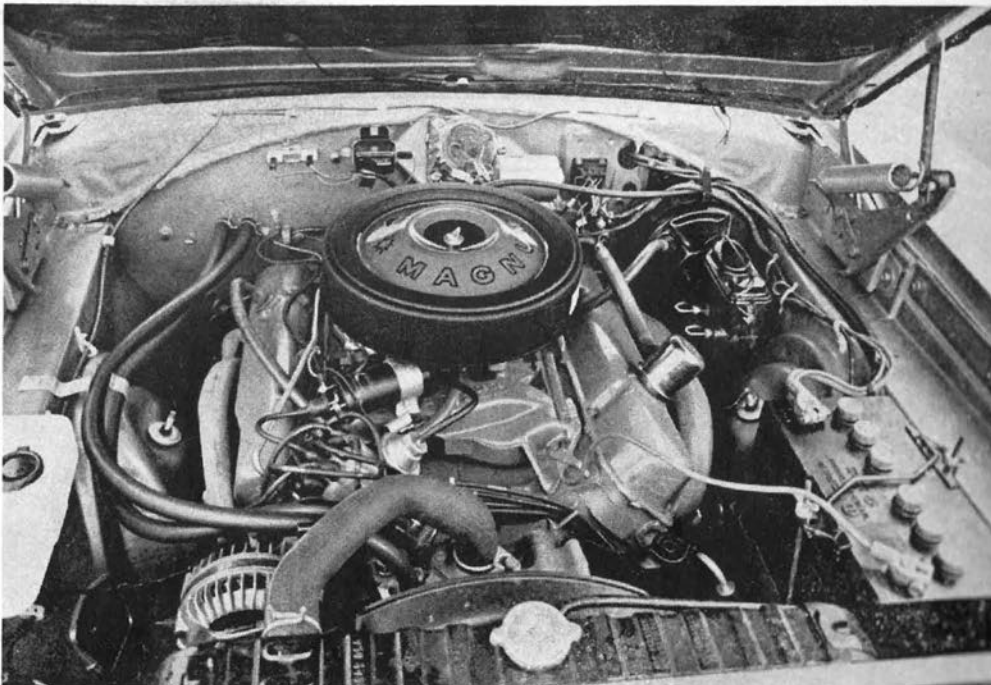
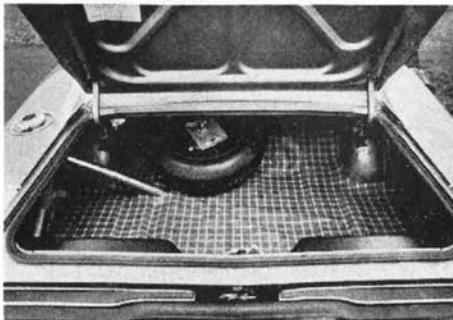
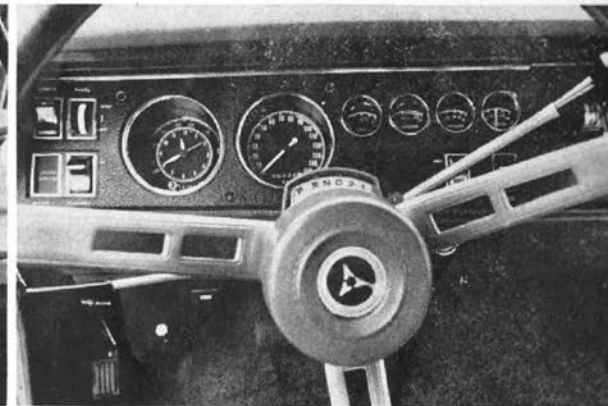
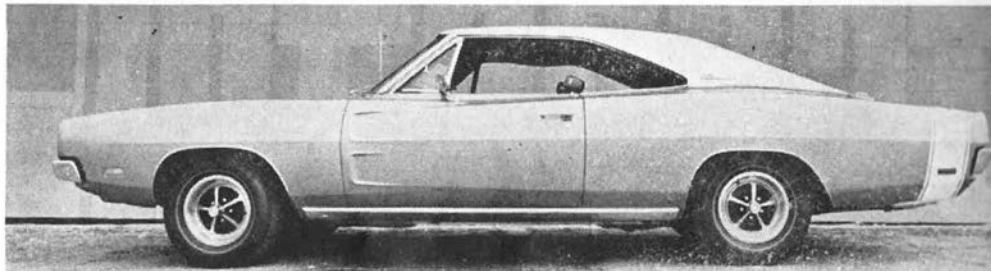
Both cars also had the new Chrysler automatic brake adjuster. Adjusting is still done while in reverse, but adjustment now takes place as the brakes are applied rather than when they are released. The possibility of over-adjustment during hard use is greatly reduced and adjustment is more even and pedal height is more consistent with the new system. We still noticed some swerve in panic stops, but brakes are much improved over 1968. The Sure-Grip differential has been improved in 1969 and uses a cone type clutch preloaded with coil springs. It differs from the multiple disc design used previously.

Power steering is still rather loose and unwieldy compared to power steering on the Ford and GM cars. You just don't get the solid road feel and solid steering feel with the two Chrysler cars. Construction quality and body tightness still fall far short of Ford and GM, with many rattles and a generally loose feeling in both cars even though they



CHARGER RT 440

(Above) At Orange County Raceway, Irvine, Calif., the Charger RT goes through its paces without difficulty. Handling is good, but could be improved. Chrysler product steering still feels loose, and at full lock turn, pulsating power steering pump transmits weird feeling. Wide-oval F70 tires help handling as well as braking and acceleration. (Right) In profile, Charger lines are unchanged from 1968, retaining long, lean look. (Below right) Rear seat headroom measures 34½ inches in Charger and GTX. Rear head and leg room needs improvement in all the cars tested. Charger and GTX bucket seats are probably the most comfortable and not overly padded. Charger instrument panel is one of best. All gauges are easy to see, white on black, and the tachometer is large and centrally located. Thin bar steering wheel is good, but lack of horn ring can be annoying. (Bottom right) Charger engine compartment is clean. Big 440 doesn't have excessive amount of hoses and tubing. (Bottom) Tail lights as well as grille are new in '69. Car looks good from front or rear. Trunk space is adequate, but gas filler pipe takes up valuable storage space.





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had very few miles on them. Front seat head restraints, a 1969 safety requirement, also come off second best when compared to Ford and GM. They look good on the GTX and RT, but are much too hard if you ever slam your head back.

GTX styling seems to be a little more honest than the Charger, which, when the two are together, seems too dressed up and a little ostentatious. The GTX looks lean and strictly functional. Watching a '69 GTX in the rear-view mirror as it followed us through traffic, it looks like a mean, hungry animal, and we could imagine how it would feel to be slip-streamed by Richard Petty at Daytona or Charlotte.

GTX and Charger 440s have an out-and-out edge on performance if our test cars are an indication, and, to some extent, an edge in seating comfort. But, when it comes to handling, steering and construction quality, they don't quite measure up to the Ford Cobra or the GM supercars.

FORD

FORD COBRA

Pity the poor snake. He's getting shuffled more lately than a Las Vegas black jack deck. In 1969 he's firmly planted in Fairlane territory, and for his sake we hope he's found a permanent home. Last year the Torino GT was the hot one of the line with Ford's big 390 cubic inch engine, rated at 335 hp. Then came the 1968½ Mercury Cyclone Cobra Jet (see MT, Aug. '68) cradling the big bomb 428 cubic inch CJ engine. The follow-up was inevitable. This year the Ford super offering is the Cobra Fairlane with the 428 cubic inch CJ engine, and with the same advertised horsepower rating of 335 as the 390 cubic inch powerplant, incidentally.

All out performance is the name of the game in '69. The Cobra is available in either the formal roof, notchback hard-top coupe or the familiar fastback version. The standard equipment list is impressive, including the 428 cubic inch engine, a 4-speed manual transmission, a competition suspension with heavy-duty shocks and springs, and functional hood locking pins. Our test car was equipped with "Ram Air," which is optional. "Ram Air" consists of a fiber glass hood scoop and a special air cleaner assembly. Incoming outside air by-passes the filter element and flows directly into the carburetor through a large valve in the air cleaner cover.

This inlet valve is opened automatically by a vacuum motor when the engine is operated at nearly full throttle. The forced flow of cool air into the engine is supposed to develop additional horsepower, but Ford doesn't say how much. Under normal driving conditions, air is filtered through the air cleaner.

Performance was great, but not as fantastic as we had expected or hoped for. Our test car was right from the factory though, and with a complete tune job, we're sure all acceleration e.t.s. could be cut down to size. The big 428 has a docile idle and performs smoothly under all normal conditions. At the drag strip or during fast acceleration when the Ram Air cuts in, the car really puts you back in the seat. Lots of wheel spin results from any full throttle start with clouds of tire smoke. The standard, fully synchronized, close ratio 4-speed manual transmission is an excellent choice for the 428 and the 3.50:1 standard rear axle ratio. Optional rear ends are 3.91:1 and 4.30:1. The Ford shift lever is located far enough back to get off some great power speed shifts and the close ratio gears click in fast so you don't make many mistakes. We flubbed a few, but it was probably due more to our own reflexes. We liked the Ford shifter almost as well as the Hurst shifter in the GTO. We were surprised at the low gas mileage figures we got on the Cobra. We know the 428 with 4-barrel carburetor and "Ram Air" really gulps the gas, but we thought the higher rear end ratio would compensate for it. Our mileage range ran from 7.7 to 9.1 mpg.

Going through the corners the understeer is very noticeable. Unlike the '68 Torino GT, the Cobra seems to plow a little in the turns with a tendency to break loose in the rear end without advance notice. Attempting to drift is tricky business, whereas it was such a smooth operation with the GTO and GS 400. Our Cobra had Ford's staggered rear shock arrangement which is designed to control spring wind up and wheel hop. It is great for control in direct, full throttle acceleration, but doesn't have that much effect on handling. Cobra handling is more springy than either the Chrysler or GM cars and doesn't feel as flat and road hugging. Ford's improved "Traction-Lok" differential was included as part of the powertrain package.

Only minor changes have taken place inside. The Fairlane instrument panel is the same as 1968 and seating arrangement is still the same. Ford seats seem to contain more padding, putting you higher up. This results in excellent road visibility, except for the hood scoop. Rear seat knee room with front seats back is six inches and 11½ inches with the



(Far left) Newest Cobra has hairy looking, functional hood scoop and functional hood locking pins. (Center left) Clean plugs mean a lot for performance, so Dahlquist and Sanders check them out on Cobra. Rubber rimmed air cleaner fits neatly against underside of hood air scoop to get the most cold air into engine. (Left) High-speed running on a wet track caused minimal hydroplaning, even with wide F70 tires. Cobra was easy to keep in straight line. (Above right) Fairlane Cobra has good interior trunk space, but on fastback model opening is mighty small. Getting a big suitcase in is a trick. (Below right) Cobra brakes pull car to fast stops with little or no swerve. Front discs help hold car in straight line, even in full lock-up stop. Wide-oval tires help here, too.



front seat forward. Rear seat headroom is 35 inches, which is good considering we had the fastback. The fastback has a good sized trunk, but getting anything in presents a problem. The trunk opening is only 18 inches deep. Spare is easily accessible. If you plan to travel with lots of luggage, the notchback hardtop with bigger trunk opening would be a better choice.

The Cobra definitely is the leader when it comes to body tightness, quality construction and low noise level. None of the other cars could match it.

Braking distances were adequate and there was less swerve from straight than the Chrysler cars. Stopping distances and brake response was quite similar to the GM cars, although the Ford brakes required more pedal pressure.

For smooth, quiet expressway driving, the Cobra is tops. In stop-and-go traffic, the optional automatic would undoubtedly be better than the 4-speed as clutch pressure gets to you after awhile. The big engine has the power, but drinks a lot of gas, even more so than the better performing GTX, though, as stated previously, a good tune might correct that.

GENERAL MOTORS

PONTIAC GTO

Changes on the "Goat" have been slight for '69, but it still impresses with the condescending aura of being "THE" supercar. Every staff member who had an opportunity to drive the '69 GTO was even more impressed than they were in '68 when it was Car Of The Year. GTO is still the most versatile in every area: performance, handling, appearance and comfort.

Pontiac still offers four engine options on the GTO. Each has 400 cubic inch displacement. Standard is the 350 hp model. A step-down version, for those interested in economy, has a 2-barrel carburetor, mild 8.6:1 compression, Turbo Hydra-Matic only and a 2.93:1 rear axle ratio. You can even get an option as high as 2.56:1.

The standard 350 hp @ 5000 rpm variation of the engine was used in our test car. It has one 4-barrel carburetor and 10.75:1 compression. The other two step-up options are "Ram Air" with 366 hp @ 5100 rpm, and "Ram Air IV," which has a much higher duration cam and 370 hp @ 5500 rpm.

We got our favorite GTO transmission, 4-on-the-floor with Hurst shifter. It's far superior to the 3-speed manual or automatic, and just seems to 'fit' in the GTO. The standard

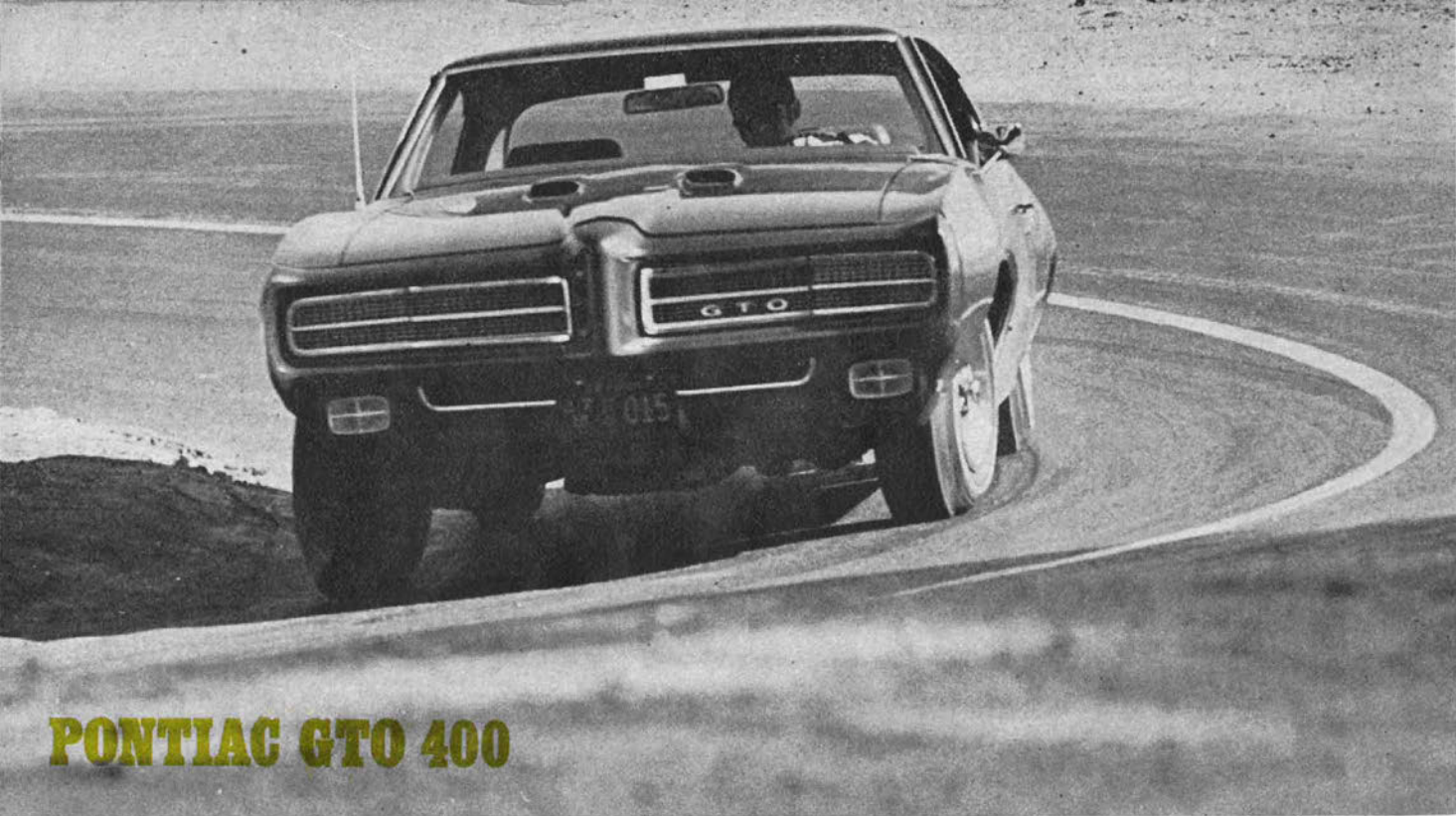
3.55:1 rear axle ratio completes the versatile package. Although the GTO gives away a few cubic inches to the Dodge and Plymouth 440 and the Ford 428, it still runs right up there with the hottest. A quarter-mile with an e.t. of 14.9 seconds at 98.3 mph can't be frowned on. If you want really flat-out acceleration from a GTO, that quarter-mile performance and the snappy 0 to 60 mph in 7.2 seconds could be cut down considerably with either of the "Ram Air" packages. Transmission and shift lever location, while good, are just a little too far forward to flick off absolutely precise power shifts. We liked the Ford shifter location better.

We could write reams about GTO's handling and cornering ability. Briefly, it's absolutely great. As great as some sports cars we have driven, both American and European. On the road course at Orange County Raceway in Irvine, California, or in the rugged Southern California mountains, we drove and drove the GTO just for the sheer pleasure of driving, an emotion that is receding too rapidly in these days of automatic everything. GTO's understeer, what there is, is hardly noticeable. You have control of this car and you can place the rear end anywhere you want. There's never any surprise traction loss or other fun things like that. The GTO goes through any corner uncannily flat and smooth. Getting out alone and drifting the GTO can develop into an insatiable desire. It executes a fully controllable, full power drift with exacting precision. A GTO with 4-on-the-floor clearly is the handling star of the '69 supercars.

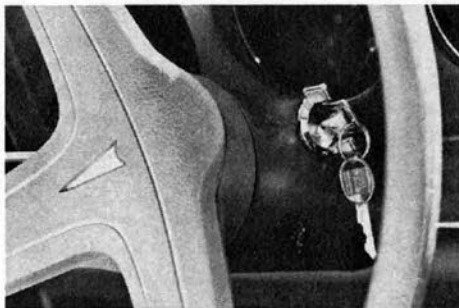
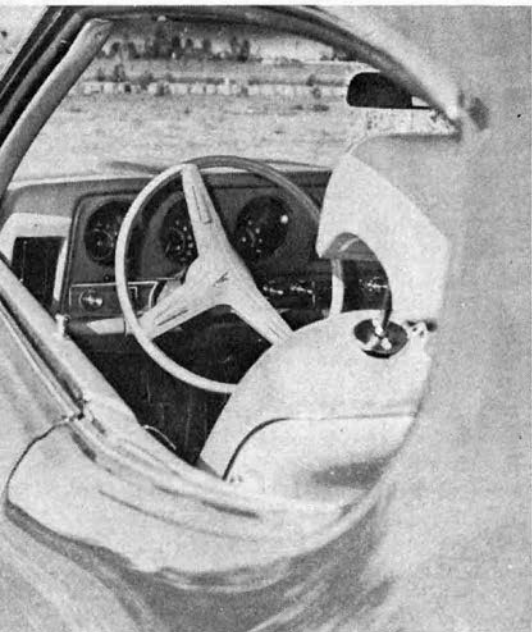
The dash has changed slightly and gained more padding. Three round instrument clusters still stare up at the driver. We said once that only a Mercedes looked good with a rich chocolate brown paint job. We must retract that. Our GTO had the same color paint with tan, leather-like vinyl upholstery, and it was one of the most impressive cars, inside and out, including luxury cars, we've seen. That's it. The GTO is all around tops with very few faults.

CHEVELLE 396

The GM "A" body hasn't changed this year, but somehow the Chevelle has developed a whole new personality. More so than any of the other cars. We got a variety of power options on our supercars to compare their use: the Charger had power windows, the Buick had power windows and the driver's seat was power operated. All cars had power brakes and steering. With the Chevelle we went flat out on luxury options: power windows, power brakes, power steering, radio with FM stereo, and, the big horsepower drain for any car — air conditioning. It's interesting to note how far



PONTIAC GTO 400



(Above) GTO handles phenomenally well for a big car. Going through a hairpin turn as shown here, mild understeer is evident, but car stays relatively flat and is completely responsive. Pontiac power steering is easy to operate and still gives plenty of solid road feel.

(Far left) Redesigned GTO dash still contains three round pods similar to 1968 version. Three-spoked steering wheel has conveniently located horn buttons. General Motors head restraints, a mandatory safety item in 1969, are much softer than Chrysler versions if head is snapped back in collision. (Top left) Now familiar GM steering column ignition is a good safety feature on '69 cars. It locks both steering column and transmission. With 4-speed, transmission must be put in reverse to lock and remove key. (Bottom left) Body is completely unchanged from 1968, but rear tail lights are new. Endura bumper is still only on front.

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the option bug can carry you. Base price of the Chevelle was \$2821.50, including \$148.50 destination charge. The cost of options totaled \$2170.85! If you want luxury with your supercar, though, it's a good way to go. We enjoyed the conveniences and the 396 still could push you down into the seat with a full throttle start.

Chevy's 396 cubic inch engine has great versatility from economy to full-bore performance. Two versions are offered with the SS model. Base horsepower rating is 325 @ 4800 rpm, and our car had the step-up 350 hp version rated @ 5200 rpm. Both use premium fuel. A variety of axle ratios are also available, starting at 3.07:1 and going way down to 4.10:1. For this test the car had the Turbo Hydra-Matic with console-mounted horseshoe shifter and the 350 hp standard

rear axle ratio of 3.55:1. The 3.55:1 rear end gives plenty of acceleration go and fair gas mileage, although we're sure fuel consumption would be much better with the 3.31:1 economy axle ratio. We also had Chevy's Positraction differential, an option no supercar should be without. Both Turbo-Jet 396 engines (325 hp-RPO Z25, 350 hp-RPO L34) have "porcupine heads" in which valves are angled toward their ports and intake and exhaust passages are individually ported. They also have what Chevrolet calls "inboard balancing" where engine accessories are located as close to the block as possible for smooth running.

Performance was surprisingly brisk with all the options the Chevelle was carrying. Acceleration times ran quite close to the other GM cars and the Ford, which had no air con-

ditioning. The 396 was also the smallest displacement engine in the test. We ran the quarter-mile in 15.4 seconds at 92 mph, and went from 0 to 60 in 7.6 seconds. While performance was impressive, our fervor was really aroused by the one 1969 Chevrolet addition that is guaranteed to turn you on, or you aren't a red-blooded, hairy-chested American male. It's the new chambered exhaust system, and it has the mellowest rap we've heard since our last flat-head Ford with dual Smithies and that was a few years ago. The chambered system is just what it says; it runs straight through and has chambered indentations the length of the pipes. The sound it puts out is pure pleasure. We're sure that many a local gendarmerie, untuned to such vibrations, will take a different attitude though. But, it's stock factory so live while you may.

Chasing the GTO with the Chevelle on a winding mountain was no contest, but the Chevelle does handle reasonably well, especially when you consider the test car was carrying a lot of additional under hood weight in the form of air conditioning. Four coil springs give it a soft ride, but a 937-inch diameter front stabilizer bar holds down front end sway. Understeer is something you have to live with on modern cars and the Chevelle is no different. It is much more difficult to attain a precise drift than it is with the GTO or the GS 400.

A completely new dash features two instrument clusters canted inward for excellent visibility. A centrally located clock reflects in the daylight so you can't read it at all. Only a few gadgets and switches are on the dash, leaving it clean and functional. All our car had were switches for lights, wipers and lighter. The console shifter is well placed for going through the gears manually, and the automatic shift response is immediate. The ashtray is in a bad spot and we found the same fault existed that we had noticed on the '69 Impala when the left side bucket seat was thrust forward. The head restraint makes perfect contact with the steering wheel horn buttons and the resulting clamor is annoying. So, we guess Chevrolet hasn't corrected that problem yet. We noticed too that white vinyl upholstery, which the Chevelle, Buick and GTX had, tends to get dirty rather fast.

With all the options, the Chevelle rates high on comfort. Even though it has the same body as the GTO and GS 400 the Chevelle somehow seems smaller and shorter and is very maneuverable in traffic. As a first car for someone who doesn't want to spend the extra money for top performance or the more exotic machinery, a Chevelle 396 SS without all the luxury options makes a good choice.

BUICK GS 400

Of all the supercars, the GS 400 will probably be the one most likely to appeal to the older, middle-age owner who wants power and performance without flaunting the fact too much. To be sure, Buick does offer the "Stage I" factory package and the build-it-yourself-out-and-out-race-car "Stage II," but the basic GS 400, especially the convertible we tested, is a comfort machine with lots of power potential.

Buick has introduced a unique cold air package that's standard on all '69 GS 400s. It's an induction system that operates through twin air scoops on the redesigned hood. The scoops are almost flush with the hood and aren't actually scoops in the ordinary use of the term. Being flush they don't obstruct road vision or detract from the lines of the car. A specially designed air cleaner with twin snorkels pushes cold air into the carburetor. Compressible foam rubber muffs on the snorkels fit flush on the inside when the hood is closed. Our test car had the option, and while we couldn't notice any tremendous power increase, especially on an extra hot Los Angeles day, the GS 400 always had power to spare for passing or pickup. In a Buick comparison test between '68 and '69 GS engi's based on underhood

temperature on a 100° day, the cold air system provided 6½% more power in peak torque and 8% more in peak horsepower throughout the speed range.

Step-up engine versions of Buick's 400 cubic inch powerplant include "Stage I" which has a high lift cam and other improvements and is rated at 350 hp @ 4800 rpm. Transmission is equipped with a 5200 rpm governor to protect against overrevving and standard rear axle ratio is 3.64:1 or 3.42:1 with air conditioning. "Stage I" is a factory-installed performance option, but the next step up, "Stage II" is a performance package available from Buick parts departments only, and which you must build yourself. Buick recommends that "Stage II" not be used on the street or on a car equipped with mufflers.

Performance figures on our standard GS 400 were the lowest of all the cars tested. The GS 400 carries the same displacement 400 cubic inch engine as the GTO, but the standard GTO engine is rated at 350 hp @ 5000 rpm compared to 340 hp @ 5000 rpm for the Buick. Besides less horsepower, the convertible chassis carried more weight making the gap even wider. Quarter-mile performance showed 89 mph with an e.t. of 15.8 seconds. After a lengthy highway trip we noticed that the rear bumper chrome was getting quite discolored by the exhaust of the well-tuned engine. If that becomes a problem, longer tail pipes or extensions might be necessary.

For a car with coil springs all around, the GS 400 handles beautifully. Understeer isn't too noticeable and cornering characteristics are similar to the GTO, although not as good. With plenty of road room and judicious throttle use, the Buick will drift precisely through most turns. It goes through curves flat and level without any unnecessary roll or pitching one might associate with a Buick. Second only to the GTO in handling, the GS 400 is ahead of the competition.

Buicks are generally regarded as comfort cars and the GS 400 is no exception. Ride was extremely quiet, with a minimum of wind, road or engine noise, plus you get the added utility of a convertible. And let's face it, convertibles are fun. The Buick center console lid lifts up from the front, rather than from the driver's side, making access easy for the front seat passenger. It was the only car that had that feature, which is a good one. Dash panel instrumentation was extremely simple, befitting the middle class supercar. The only gauges on our test car were the huge speedometer and a fuel indicator. Everything else was indicated by idiot lights. GM convertibles have a unique shoulder harness arrangement that in some ways is more convenient to use than the set-up in the hard roof cars.

Without the mean, pulsating look of the GTX, Charger, GTO or the fastback lines of the Cobra, the GS 400 could be classified as the middle-class businessman's car. Its smooth lines and emphasis on comfort give that impression. All you need though is "Stage I" or—look out—"Stage II" and your docile Gran Sport will make sport of the other bombs.

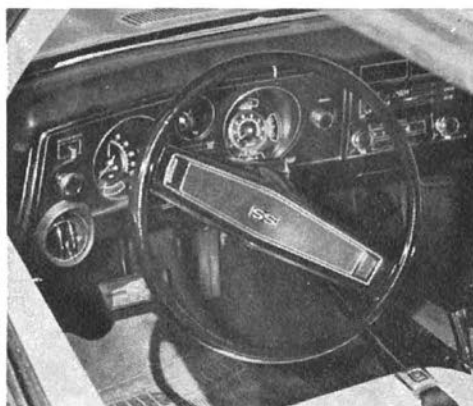
GTO — CHEVELLE — GS 400 FEATURES

Sharing the same body and many of the same components, the three GM cars are alike in many ways, if not in performance. They all have a 112-inch wheelbase. Trunk opening dimensions are approximately 27 inches deep, 49½ inches wide, with a liftover of approximately 31 inches. Rear seat knee room with front seats forward is 12½ inches, and with front seats back, 7½ inches. Rear seat headroom is approximately 35 inches.

Vent windows have gone for '69, adding a feeling of spaciousness. But GM models without air conditioning have much poorer under dash ventilation than the Dodge, Plymouth or even the Cobra. The new GM anti-theft ignition and transmission locking device is an excellent feature as



CHEVELLE SS 396



(Top) SS396 cornering doesn't compare to GTO or GS 400. On winding mountain road car is not nearly as responsive, needs more correcting and has tendency to plow. Chevelle lines haven't changed much, still have clean, flowing look. Vinyl top adds distinctive touch to silhouette, as do rallye wheels and white lettered tires. Safety release button is in center of front seatback, is hard to find from outside and difficult to reach. Bottom location in view near door is better. (Above left) GM cars have adequate trunk space with wide opening deck lid. Spare takes up half the room on one side. (Above center) New instrument cluster for '69 is good, with two pods canted in toward driver. Center clock reflects light, is difficult to see. Both radio and heater/air controls are in center of dash and convenient for passenger. (Right) With new grille and rear end treatment, Chevelle SS turns heads on country outing.

ANALYZING SUPERCARS

are the single piston disc brakes. Both the Chevelle and Buick have functional hood louvers just in front of the windshield, allowing warm, under hood air to escape, also a good performance feature.

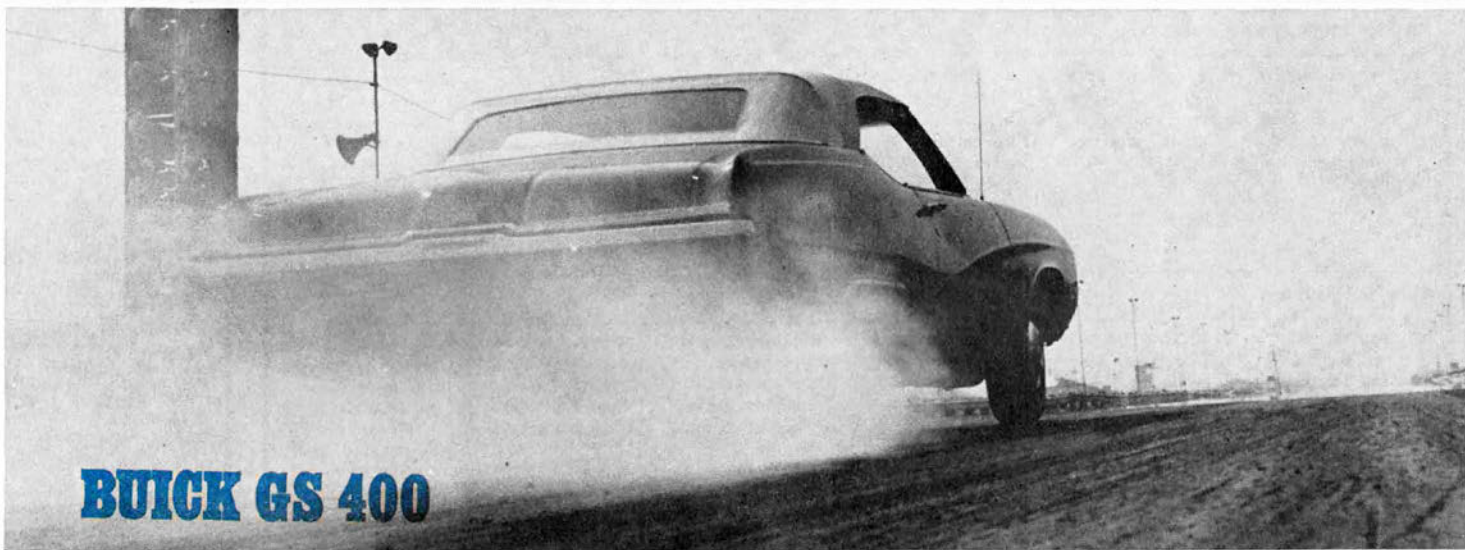
Although the GM cars share the same body, each division has done a remarkable styling job, giving their car a unique personality.

SUMMING UP

In the search for that elusive perfection that will touch a nerve in the eye and wallet of the devout, each company, each division has sought to produce the ideal supercar, concentrating on what they consider important to the market. Going fastest in a straight line, handling, comfort, solid construction... all these are evident to a greater or lesser degree and only by driving and comparing all of them simultaneously do these differences, whether they have been devised or just turn out that way, become apparent.



(Left) At old California mission, GS 400 exhibits class appearance and new grille work. (Above) On freeway with top down and speedometer reading 65 mph, there is little wind buffeting and ride is solid, yet comfortably fluid. GS 400 handles beautifully on freeway or through corners with only mild understeer. (Below, left to right) New cold air package features flush, unobtrusive hood louvers and twin snorkels. With top down, GS 400 interior is roomy, but could still use more rear seat leg room. Top boot fits snugly and is easy to put on, take off. Trunk space is similar to GTO, Chevelle. (Bottom) At Irwindale Raceway, Irwindale, California, GS 400 starts wildly smoking quarter-mile run.



We still have to go with our big choice last year, the GTO, as the most versatile and best all around. The GTO has just the right combination of all the essentials that go to make up a good supercar: performance, handling, stopping ability, comfort, ride, convenience and styling. Each of the other cars excels in one area more or less. The GTX has best acceleration. Cobra has the quietest, tightest body construction. The GS 400 appeals to a more conservative market wanting performance without inconvenience. The Charger has the second best acceleration performance but

with a little more luxury pizzazz. The Chevelle has great potential for those on a more limited budget, with a good combination of all the essentials on a more modest scale.

Except for the GTO it's difficult to rate the cars one, two, three or in any order as they are all different and each one will appeal to different requirements. A supercar shopper will have to define his wants and needs. With the number of supercars now being offered and the combination of engines, axle ratios and variety of options available, tailoring a supercar to personal taste is now an easy task. /MT

PERFORMANCE

	GTX	CHARGER R/T	COBRA	GTO	SS 396	GS 400
Acceleration: (2 aboard)						
0-30 mph	2.5 secs.	2.6 secs.	3.1 secs.	3.0 secs.	3.4 secs.	3.5 secs.
0-45 mph	4.1 secs.	4.2 secs.	5.1 secs.	4.8 secs.	5.2 secs.	5.5 secs.
0-60 mph	5.8 secs.	6.1 secs.	6.3 secs.	7.2 secs.	7.6 secs.	7.7 secs.
0-75 mph	8.3 secs.	8.5 secs.	9.3 secs.	10.4 secs.	10.9 secs.	11.4 secs.
Standing Start 1/4-Mile						
	13.7 secs. 102.8 mph	13.9 secs. 101.4 mph	14.5 secs. 100.0 mph	14.9 secs. 98.3 mph	15.4 secs. 92.0 mph	15.9 secs. 89.0 mph
Passing Speeds						
40-60 mph	2.8 secs. 204.9 ft.	3.4 secs. 248.8 ft.	3.3 secs. 241.5 ft.	3.0 secs. 219.6 ft.	4.0 secs. 292.8 ft.	4.1 secs. 300.1 ft.
50-70 mph	3.5 secs. 308 ft.	4.0 secs. 352 ft.	3.5 secs. 308 ft.	4.4 secs. 387 ft.	4.0 secs. 352 ft.	4.5 secs. 396 ft.
Speeds in Gears						
1st ...mph @ rpm	38 @ 5000	43 @ 5000	48 @ 5000	42 @ 5000	50 @ 5500	50 @ 5000
2nd ...mph @ rpm	63 @ 5000	73 @ 5000	62 @ 5000	58 @ 5000	82 @ 5500	84 @ 5000
3rd ...mph @ rpm	98 @ 5000	106 @ 5000	82 @ 5000	75 @ 5000	90 @ 4000	94 @ 4000
4th ...mph @ rpm	—	—	106 @ 5000	108 @ 5000	—	—
MPH per 1000 RPM	19.6 mph	21.2 mph	21.2 mph	21.6 mph	22.5 mph	23.5 mph
Stopping Distances						
From 30 mph	24 ft.	31 ft.	29 ft.	23 ft.	25 ft.	26 ft.
From 60 mph	141 ft.	143 ft.	137 ft.	144 ft.	139 ft.	149 ft.
Mileage Range	9.9-10.8	10.4-11.8	7.7-9.1	10.7-12.8	8.6-11.8	13.2-15.0

COMMENTS

	GTX	CHARGER R/T	COBRA	GTO	SS 396	GS 400
Performance & Potential	Big bomb with 440 and low rear axle ratio. Good performance combination choice.	Second fastest to GTX. With slight modifications, could go faster.	Torque gives rubber big bite for fast acceleration. 4-speed helps. Ford has many hop-up parts for 428.	Fast, with great power range in 2nd and 3rd gears. Hurst 4-speed is fast shifter. Two step-up engines give good drag strip energy.	Runs fast, even with power options. No big step up engines, but low axle ratio available.	Plenty of power without wild cam. Step-up engines belie Buick image. 'Stage II' is full bore race car.
Ride & Handling	Cornering fair, hops around with Sure-Grip differential.	Smooth ride, mild understeer. Can get through corners without trouble.	Suspension great for freeway and city streets, but can be hairy in hard corners. Ride is springy soft.	Handling fantastic for supercar. Corners with precision, drifts like sports car. Gears aid handling.	Corners fair, but don't go flat out through the turns. Ride is comfortable and soft.	Excellent handling characteristics for basically boulevard suspension. Will drift precisely.
Normal Use Value	Lots of interior and trunk room. Needs tamer engine for family use.	Tops for comfort. Easy to read gauges. Cam doesn't ruin engine idle.	Terrific for family use except 4-speed for women. Interior comfortable and plush. Fastback trunk has too small opening.	Has interior appeal of luxury car. Quality and taste excellent. Get automatic for family use.	Great for first supercar. Can get in for low base price. Short overall length, but good interior room.	Conservative supercar. Can be used for business, or pleasure without drag strip stigma.
Overall Quality	Not too good. Body loose, lightweight steering feel.	Same as GTX, tight, solid feel missing. Power steering lacks good road feel.	Body solidity and quietness absolute best. Low noise level from road, wind.	Must rate close to Cobra for solidity and tight feel. Quality control fastidious.	Fisher Body quality shows in tight body and good construction.	Sturdy, quality construction with many personal touches.

SPECIFICATIONS

	GTX	CHARGER R/T	COBRA	GTO	SS 396	GS 400
Engine	90° ohv V-8	90° ohv V-8	90° ohv V-8	90° ohv V-8	90° ohv V-8	90° ohv V-8
Bore & Stroke — ins.	4.32 x 3.75	4.32 x 3.75	4.13 x 3.98	4.12 x 3.75	4.09 x 3.76	4.04 x 3.90
Displacement — cu. in.	440	440	428	400	396	400
HP @ RPM	375 @ 4600	375 @ 4600	335 @ 5600	350 @ 5000	350 @ 5200	340 @ 5000
Torque lbs.-ft. @ rpm	480 @ 3200	480 @ 3200	445 @ 3400	445 @ 3000	415 @ 3400	440 @ 3200
Compression Ratio	10.1:1	10.1:1	10.7:1	10.7:1	10.25:1	10.25:1
Carburetion	1 Carter 4-bbl.	1 Carter 4-bbl.	1 Holley 4-bbl.	1 4-bbl.	1 4-bbl.	1 4-bbl.
Transmission (Test Car)	Automatic	Automatic	4-speed manual	4-speed manual	Automatic	Automatic
Final Drive Ratio (Test Car)	4.10:1	3.55:1	3.50:1	3.55:1	3.55:1	2.93:1
Steering Type	Power	Power	Power	Power	Power	Power
Steering Ratio	18.8:1	18.8:1	21.6:1	22.0:1	20.4:1	20.9:1
Turning Diameter (Curb-to-curb-ft.)	40.6	40.9	41.4	40.5	44.7	41.5
Wheel Turns (Lock-to-lock)	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.2	4.0	4.0
Tire Size (Test Car)	F70x14	F70x14	F70x14	F70x14	F70x14	F70x14
Brakes	Power front disc, drum rear	Power front disc, drum rear	Power front disc, drum rear	Power front disc, drum rear	Power front disc, drum rear	Power drum front and rear
Front Suspension	Independent, lateral, non-parallel control arms with torsion bars	Independent, lateral, non-parallel control arms with torsion bars	Independent with ball joints and coil springs	Independent control arms with ball joints and coil springs	Independent with coil springs and concentric shocks	Coil springs and ball joints
Rear Suspension	Parallel, longitudinal, semi-elliptic leaf springs	Parallel, longitudinal, semi-elliptic leaf springs	Semi-elliptic leaf springs	Trailing link coil springs, pivoted control arm	Linked coil springs, Salisbury axle fixed by control arms	Coil springs, control arms
Body/Frame Construction	Unit construction	Unit construction	Partly unitized frame	Body/Frame	Body/Frame	Body/Frame
Wheelbase — ins.	116	116	116	112	112	112
Overall Length — ins.	202.7	207.9	201.1	201.5	196.9	202.0
Width — ins.	76.4	76.7	74.6	75.8	76.0	75.6
Height — ins.	53.0	53.2	52.6	52.1	52.8	53.0
Front Track — ins.	59.5	59.5	58.8	61	59.0	59.4
Rear Track — ins.	59.2	59.2	58.5	60	59.0	59.0
Curb Weight — lbs.	3680	3400	3399	3672	3335	3706
Fuel Capacity — gals.	19	19	20	21.5	20	20
Oil Capacity — qts.	4	4	4	5	4	4

PRICES/OPTIONS

GTX	
Base price	\$3433.00
Super performance axle	271.50
Console	54.45
Torqueflite transmission	40.40
3-speed windshield wipers	5.40
Undercoating	16.60
Bumper guards — front & rear	32.00
Tachometer	50.15
Air Grabber	55.30
Radio — solid state AM	63.35
Rear seat speaker	14.45
Power steering	97.65
Performance hood paint	18.05
Redstreak tires fiber glass belt F70x15	34.10
Destination charge	149.00
TOTAL PRICE	\$4335.40

CHARGER	
Base price	\$3591.00
Special Light Group	25.95
Performance axle package	102.15
Disc brakes — front	50.15
Power brakes	42.95
Head restraints — left & right	26.50
Left side manual seat — 6-way adjust	33.30
Tinted windshield	25.90
Right side manual mirror	6.85
Left side remote-control mirror	9.65
Windshield wipers — 3-speed	5.40
Locking gas cap	4.40
Undercoating & hood insulator pad	16.60
Hood-mounted turn signal	10.80
Sill molding	21.15
Tachometer — w/clock	50.15
Power windows	103.20
Stereo tape w/radio AM	201.95
Rear seat speaker	15.15
Power steering	97.65
Steering wheel — sport type	26.75
Vinyl roof — white	88.35
Chrome stamped road wheel & trim ring	88.55
Fiber glass tire	26.45
Destination charge	149.00
TOTAL PRICE	\$4819.95

COBRA	
Base price	\$3139.00
428 cubic inch V-8 4-cyl. ram-air engine	133.44
Bucket seats	120.59
Traction-lok differential	63.51
Power steering	100.26
Power brakes	64.77
AM/FM stereo radio	181.36
Dual rear seat speakers	25.91
Chrome style steel wheels	116.59
TOTAL PRICE	\$3945.43

GTO	
Base price	\$3293.00
4-speed manual ...	184.80
Safe-T-Track differential	42.13
Radio	61.09
Retractable headlights	52.66
Instrument cluster — tach, rallye gauge	84.26
Rallye wheels	84.26
Console	55.82
Power steering	105.32
Power brakes	42.13
Front disc brakes	64.25
Tinted windshield	26.33
Head restraints	16.85
Ride & handling package	9.48
TOTAL PRICE	\$4122.38

SS 396	
Base price	\$2673.00
Soft-ray tinted glass	36.90
Power windows	105.35
Strato-bucket front seats	121.15
Head restraints	16.90
Floor mats — 2 front & 2 rear	11.60
Door edge guard	4.25
Vinyl roof cover/white	89.55
4-season air conditioning	376.00
Remote-control rear-view mirror	10.55
Visor vanity mirror	3.20
Center console	53.75
Sport striping	26.35
Positraction axle	42.15
350-hp Turbo-Jet 396 V-8	121.15
Turbo Hydra-Matic. Comfortilt steering wheel	221.80
Power steering	45.30
Special instrumentation	105.35
door locks	94.80
Speed warning indicator	11.60
Light monitoring system	26.35
AM/FM stereo push-button radio	239.10
Front bumper guards	15.80
Rear bumper guards	15.80
Auxiliary lighting	16.35
Deluxe seat & front shoulder belts	12.15
Special SS396 equipment	347.60
Includes: 396 V-8 engine, domed hood, black-accented grille, power disc brakes, sport wheels, wide-oval tires, and special chassis features.	
Destination charge	148.50
TOTAL PRICE	\$4992.35

GS 400	
Base price	\$3308.00
Super turbine 400 transmission	227.04
Power steering	100.05
Power brakes	41.60
Sonomatic radio w/manual antenna, rear speaker	16.64
Positive traction differential	42.13
Rallye ride control package	15.80
Front & rear seat belts & shoulder belts	35.07
Soft-ray tinted windshield	26.33
Door-guards	5.27
Remote-control outside rear-view mirror	10.53
Carpet savers	7.37
Power seat 4-way tilt adjuster	73.72
Power windows	105.32
Vacuum-operated door locks	47.39
Convenience group	23.17
Super sport wheel	68.46
Floor console — non-operating	31.60
Rallye steering wheel	31.60
Head restraints — driver & passenger	16.85
Custom trim vinyl strato-seats	78.99
Destination charge	154.00
TOTAL PRICE	\$4536.44