

by Eric Dahlquist

OK, you young bucks, grab all the wampum you have stashed — the "Chief" has something you might want to investigate

photography: Eric Rickman

ON THE TIGER'S TRAIL

The world comes at you over a thrusting, contoured hood in exact GTO scale, the scoops and tach put down precisely where they are in the big car. But you see, that's the key. The Firebird is shorter than the GTO (188 inches total compared to 200.7) and the wheelbase is more restrained (108 inches to 112), yet the width is nearly identical (72.8 to 74). And the track (Wide-Track) is identical at 60 inches. Under the bulging bonnet, one of the impressions you get, besides that Pontiac has deliberately created a flattering backdrop for their engine, is that all 400 cubic inches of it is slid way back into the compartment. At first it seems an illusion, like the deliberately long front fenders are distorting the perspective, but you go around to the side and notice the centerline of the front wheel runs through the front spark plug — quite farther rearward than most.

Programmed in with the sizing data, stiffer-rate springs and shocks, and Goodyear F-70 Wide Treads, you find yourself on more winding roads than ever

before, closing fast on whoever is trying in vain to avoid it. Almost no one will. And they'll never match the automatic precision of this close-ratio 4-speed Borg-Warner either. Downshifts, upshifts — the Hurst lever moves as if the gears were graphite-coated, teflon-light, even without the clutch, if that's your bag. Our GTO of last month had an outstanding transmission in its own right — it is, after all, the same model unit as the Firebird — but for what reason who can say; more careful adjustment, better weight factor or whatever, the Firebird had the edge. And how about road feel? Today's power steering is great, but they almost always forfeit a measure of their ability to relate accurately what's passing

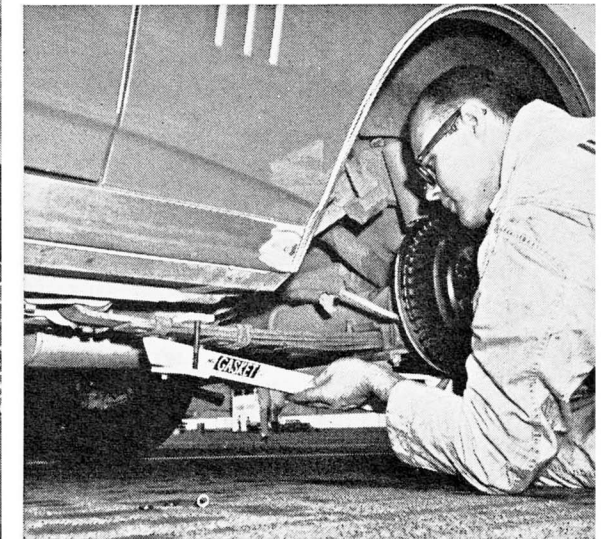
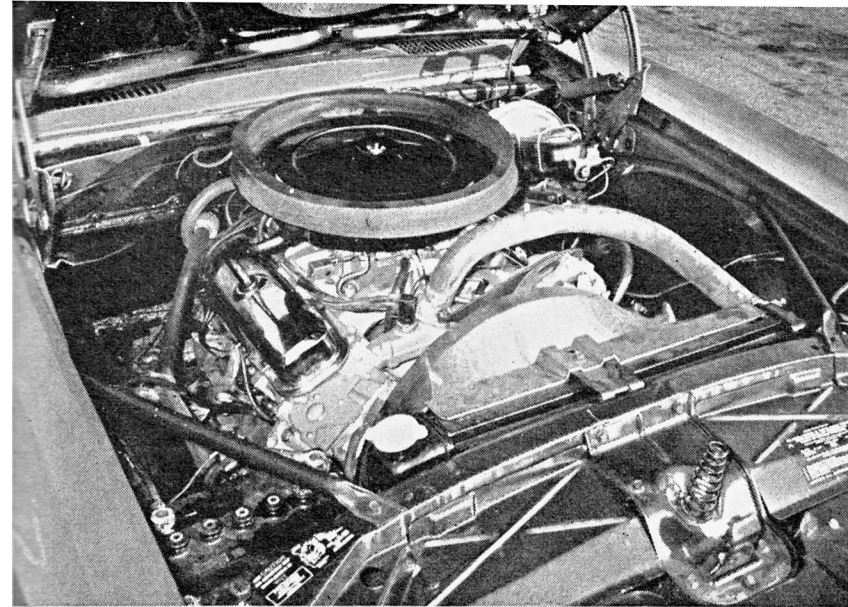
beneath the tires. Yet this Firebird has more than we expected to find, a result perhaps of being two hundred pounds lighter or possessing a different suspension calibration. It means the car is very agile in traffic. Escape from meandering 4-door station wagons piloted by Walter Mitty suburbanites is only a flick of the wrist away.

When the Firebird was first announced, we had the opportunity to try a prototype that demonstrated an extreme case of the front fender shakes. Thankfully, this has been corrected to a point where there is very little fender flutter, although a discreet tap in some areas creates pretty hollow echoes. Since this car shares a common body with the Camaro, it also utilized an almost identical dash which is just not on a styling par with the GTO, though still an easy-to-read layout. And like the Camaro, we would call the leg room adequate in front but it gets a little intimate when you are in the six-foot range (Lew Alcindor will not be a prime customer). In the rear, seating follows the traditional personal car idiom that two people can ride in comfort for the average commuter burst, but they would think twice about seeing America first, at least in large quantities. Part of it can be laid to minimum leg room but, even more than that, with four average adults the Firebird bottoms hard on its snubbers at the least hummock in the road. At best this is annoying; at worst the unsuspecting passenger can really brain himself on rear window molding.

But it's got more head room in front than the GTO — about 3 or 4 inches. Since the car is an inch lower overall, that doesn't quite make sense until you examine the buckets, which are a different kind of slim-line design, similar to the new 'Vette jobs. Oh, they're comfortable enough; still, we'd choose the GTO seats and sacrifice the head room so long as it didn't wreck the seat-to-steering-wheel relation which, as in bigger-edition Tigers, is near perfect without resorting to the tilt adjustment.

Last year, after the disaster Chevy had with Camaro wheel hop, Pontiac neatly side-stepped this problem with a cleverly designed set of adjustable traction arms to cope with the great torque of their big engines. This year, when Chevy announced they had solved the axle's St. Vitus dance dilemma by adding a couple of leaves to the rear spring and staggering the rear shocks, we still expected Pontiac to go with those hefty bars. Well, they didn't, and as a consequence, slight wheel hop on hard acceleration can be induced with stock tires. The addition of 7-inch-wide Casler slicks multiplied this problem significantly so we resorted to a set of Mr. Gasket's new bolt-on traction arms to get back on the right track which, at this point, happened to be Irwindale Raceway.

At 3800 pounds, the best our GTO

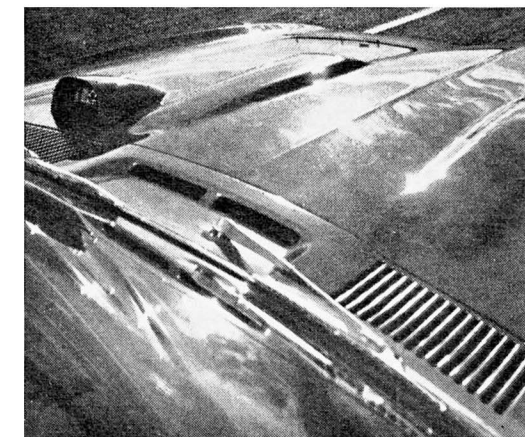


could muster was a respectable 14.25-99 mph in Pure Stock trim. Later we ran across a bulletin Pontiac issued outlining the removal of a vacuum line on the right-hand side of the carburetor (facing forward) that renders ineffective a retard device on the distributor. Originally this was to help the engine meet the prescribed Federal exhaust emissions level, but many owners complained of that annoying resonance in the exhaust we found in our GTO (this can also be aggravated by getting a standard-shift car with automatic transmission tailpipes), so it is now suggested dealers remove it. Doing this immediately gave the engine a shot in the arm, and for further improvement, Milt Schornack of Royal Pontiac suggested timing be advanced to 12 degrees BTC. These slight modifications did not affect the e.t. but raised the trap speed to 101.12. On a Firebird, one additional thing must be attended to. In order to produce the advertised horsepower, there is a small tab on the throttle shaft which actuates the secondaries, but only to two-thirds open at full throttle. Somehow you don't feel guilty at all bending it rearward. Our Firebird was supposed to be equipped with a 3.90 axle ratio like the GTO but somebody missed his cue, switching it for a 4.11 instead. Compared with the 200-pound-plus advantage, the slightly lower ratio probably wasn't significant but we'd rather have it than not. In fact, at the drags we'll just keep the whole car because the Ram-Air Firebird is champ — to the tune of 13.79-106.38 completely stock and 13.62-105.88 with slicks. That odd trap speed is the result of the Caslers being 1/2-inch smaller in diameter. Both cars are the soul of consistency, making run after run, never overheating, no theatrics — just even-tempered competition machines you don't have to spend hours flogging to keep tuned.

We harbored a few reservations about the going price on the Ram-Air package but have discovered that, besides an air-

VEHICLE	
Firebird Ram-Air 400	
PRICE	
As tested	\$3807.44
ENGINE	
Cylinders	8
Bore and Stroke	4.112 x 3.754
Displacement	400 cu. in.
Compression ratio	10.75 to 1
Maximum horsepower	330 @ 4800 rpm
Maximum torque	430 @ 3300 rpm
Valves: Intake	2.113 in.
Exhaust	1.767 in.
Camshaft:	
Lift414 intake, .413 exhaust
Duration	288° in., 302° ex.
Carburetion	Quadrajet
Exhaust system	2.00-in. exhaust pipe, 2.00-in. tail pipe
TRANSMISSION	
Type	4-speed manual
Ratios: 1st	2.20:1
2nd	1.64:1
3rd	1.28:1
4th	1.00:1
DIFFERENTIAL	
Type	Limited-slip
Ring gear diameter	8.125 in.
Ratio	4.11 to 1
BRAKES	
Type	Disc front, drum rear
Dimensions: Front	11.12 in.
Rear	9.2 in.
Swept area	323.6 in.
SUSPENSION	
Front	Coil spring
Rear	Multi-leaf rear spring
Stabilizer	N.A.
Tires	F70 x 14 Goodyear
Rims	6-in. wide
Steering gear:	
Type	Saginaw power
Ratio	17.5 to 1
Turning circle	38.5 ft.
Turns of steering wheel, lock to lock	3.4
PERFORMANCE	
0-30	2.5 sec.
0-40	4.8 sec.
0-50	5.0 sec.
0-60	6.0 sec.
Standing quarter-mile	106.38 mph in 13.62 sec.
DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase	108.1 in.
Front track	60 in.
Rear track	60 in.
Overall height	50.0 in.
Overall width	72.8 in.
Overall length	188.2 in.
Curb weight	3351
Test weight	3510
Crankcase capacity	5 qt.
Cooling system	18.6 qt.
Fuel tank	21.5 gal.

ABOVE — If you're going to do much serious racing with the 400 Ram-Air Firebird, a set of traction arms like the one Mr. Gasket makes is the plan. ABOVE LEFT — Pontiac not only builds neatly styled cars but keen engine compartments as well. BELOW — Sunlight sparkles and dances off a powerfully contoured hood, reflecting that men from Tigerland know what's happening.



induction package, the buyer gets a 4-bolt main cap cylinder block, high-capacity oil pump, different cam (standard shift only), tubular pushrods, stouter valve springs and swirl-polished valves. All of which means it doesn't seem like too bad a deal after all. In '67, even with a production hang-up, Pontiac delivered 2500 Ram-Air 400's and already they've almost matched that figure for '68.

If we had to choose between these two hot dogs, the GTO would probably win out but more on family considerations than anything else. For a young stud or the guy with two machines, the Firebird has a lot to say for itself — especially as a racer. The average drive-in honcho wants nothing to do with it. You know the only way out of this is to have both — then you can run yourself for the trophy.