

**PONTIAC FIREBIRD
& CHEVROLET CAMARO**

THE FIRST GENERATION OF GRAND TOURING CARS



GENERAL MOTORS—OFTEN PICTURED AS THE MOST STAID OF DETROIT'S CAR-MAKERS—IS GAMBLING THAT ITS CUSTOMER RESEARCH STAFF IS RIGHT AND HAS GIVEN UNPRECEDENTED FREEDOM TO THE STYLISTS AND ENGINEERS IN BUILDING THESE NEW "SPORT COMPACTS"

Detroit is Detroit and Italy is Italy, and even the far-sighted Mercator never expected the distance between the two to diminish by so much as one inch. But if you forget about maps and study the new Firebird and Camaro for a moment you will begin to see Turin nestled alongside of Grosse Pointe, as a suburb of America's Motor City. It's all right there in the finely drawn lines. The Firebird and Camaro are the first of a new generation of American GT cars—low, taut and sleek of flank in the manner that earns daily bread for Bertone and Pininfarina and a generous helping of fame to boot. This strong styling didn't just happen. G.M. has a hunch that appearance, both exterior and interior, is the key to success in selling this kind of car, and the Firebird and Camaro have been built with that priority in mind. And beneath the svelte sheetmetal is the computer-guided handiwork of hundreds of engineers who wouldn't give up until they had tailored a blend of agility, comfort and silence beyond anything the world had ever seen in a GT car of this price.

The Firebird and Camaro are exceptional automobiles. They are also, in Detroit parlance, "sport compacts," which any student of new car sales statistics will instantly tell you is a market segment that is dying on the vine. This small offshoot of Detroit's bread-and-butter mainstream started in 1964 with the Mustang and Barracuda; by 1967, fortified by the Camaro, Firebird and Cougar, it mushroomed to 13% of Detroit's new car sales. But the Fates have a way of sidestepping product planners. Even with the addition of the Javelin, the years since 1967 have arranged themselves in a downward staircase—down to only 9.0% in 1969. The sport compact doldrums continue in 1970 with no immediate relief in sight; money is tight, many youthful buyers are caught up in the draft and the volatile public is preoccupied with Mavericks, imports and yet-unseen fundamentalists like Chevrolet's XP-887. Conditions being what they are, sage economists must have cringed at the multi-million dollar investment required to tool up the new G.M. F-body. Even series E bonds look more profitable.



All day long we had been driving Firebirds and photographing Firebirds and kicking Firebird tires and looking under Firebird hoods. You'd have to say it was a typical Firebird press preview. It wasn't until dinner that night—after the beating of marketing drums had ceased and the public relations smoke had blown away—that the real Firebird came into focus. It was Bill Collins—a Pontiac assistant-chief engineer who has managed to retain an uncommon level of enthusiasm despite the process of dilution that is inevitable for those who reach his level—who provided an insight into the Firebird that had been just below the surface all day.

"In September we made a final evaluation trip from Denver to San Francisco with a Firebird and several other cars for comparison. When I got back to Detroit I had a list of 50 things wrong with the Firebird. Even the tach needle was too wide. I'm not going to give my approval to a car with a fat tach needle."

Now do you understand? The Firebird is a rare automobile, and honestly so, because a few knowledgeable men who can tell a vibrant car from an indifferent one have been hovering over it from the beginning. Every detail right down to the tach needle has been fine-tuned.

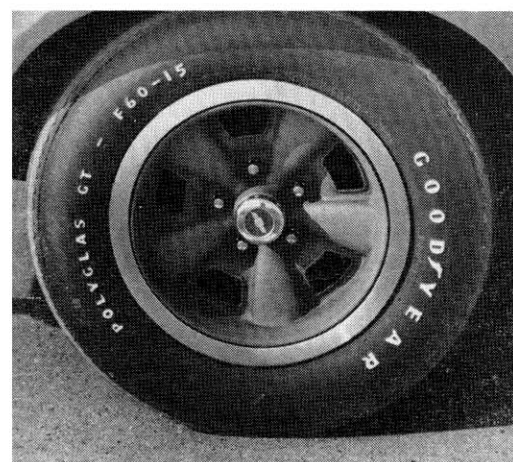
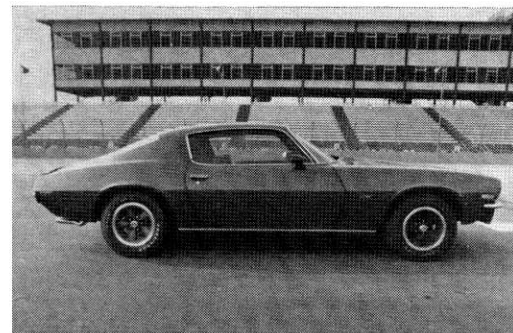
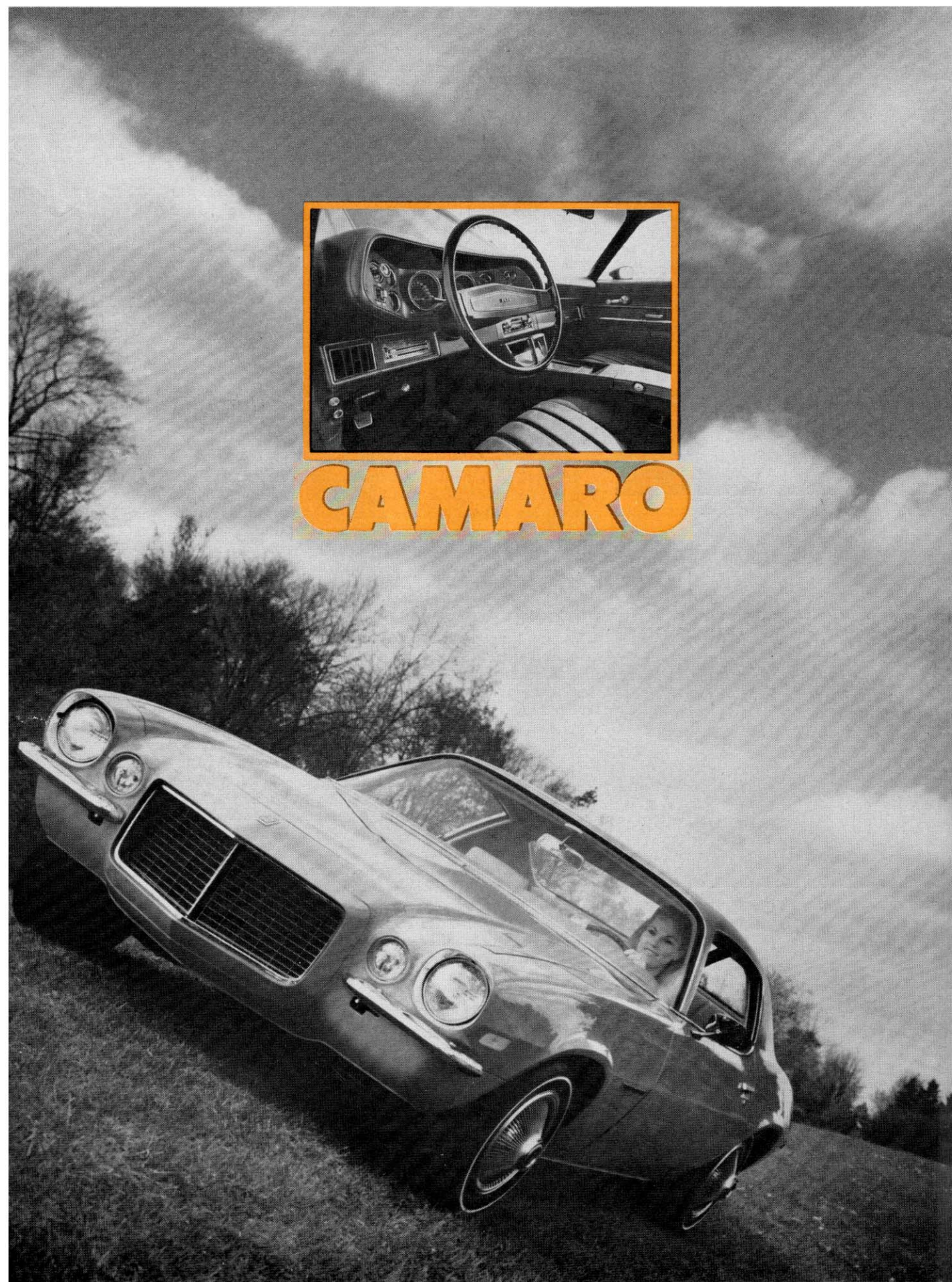
Collins went on to say that of the 50 items on his list all but three had been fixed and he hadn't given up on those. In a business that spews out fragmented model lines like grape shot in hope of striking the fancy of every conceivable buyer, the Firebird stands unique. It's been aimed. It's a Grand Touring car with a distinct European flavor and, to our way of thinking, it hits the mark.

It's exciting in a way that Detroit could never master before. You will feel it as soon as you slip into the cockpit. The bucket seats are low and the backrests are no longer upright like church pews. You lean back, as if in the arms of a Maserati. And the steering wheel doesn't rub on your chest—you reach for it now. As an option you can reach for a small, black padded one that is surely fresh from a Formula One car. The instrument panel is of the same flavor—round, black-faced gauges set into a flat wood grain (engine turned on the Trans-Am) panel, all surrounded by padding. The tachometer has been turned so that the red line is straight up and a small clock fits into the right side of the dial, strongly suggesting the instrumentation on a high-revving Japanese motorcycle. It is functional styling at its best.

Physically, the Firebird is one-inch longer and a half-inch narrower than its predecessor, on the same 108-inch wheelbase. There are four separate models; the base Firebird, the more luxurious Esprit, the Formula 400, which packs a 400 cu. in. engine as standard equipment, and the Trans-Am, a coupe that looks and drives like it belongs on the race track. For the first time there will be no convertibles. Engine choices are little changed, ranging from a 250 cu. in. 155-hp Six to the highest output 400 cu. in. Ram Air IV V-8 with one 350 V-8 and three 400 V-8s in between. Front disc brakes are now standard equipment and the coil front/leaf rear suspension has been completely redesigned.

Of all these models the most arresting—and the one most likely to cause your arrest—is the Trans-Am. It is built with no less than the 345-hp Ram Air 400 as standard equipment and a collection of spoilers that is even beyond the imagination of Jim Hall. In the front there is an air dam under the nose that continues up along the leading edge of the front wheel openings, there is a fairing just in front of the rear wheel openings and a tall ducktail on the rear deck. Pontiac engineers report that all of these devices are effective in killing high speed lift except for the one just before the rear wheels, its assignment being the reduction of drag. The Trans-Am also has functional air outlets on the front fenders and a backward facing "shaker" hood scoop. But none of this aerodynamic trickery will be as noticeable to the street driver as will be the suspension. Both the Formula 400 and the Trans-Am use front and rear anti-sway bars but the bars are stiffer on the Trans-Am and selected to give neutral steer conditions on the skid pad. The result is an "expert" driver's car, a car that, even at the limit of adhesion, responds eagerly to minute movements of the throttle and steering wheel. Even though the steering seems uncomfortably quick in hard cornering, the car is fantastically capable on a race track. As for its predictability on the street, particularly in the rain, we'll have to wait and see. And we can hardly wait.

**THE FIREBIRD
IS A RARE
AUTOMOBILE
BECAUSE
A FEW
KNOWLEDGEABLE
MEN
WHO CAN TELL
A VIBRANT CAR
FROM AN
INDIFFERENT ONE
HAVE BEEN
HOVERING
OVER IT
SINCE THE
BEGINNING**



After seeing the new Camaro, will Mark Donohue regret his defection to the American Motors team? What will Indy do for a pace car now that there are no more Camaro convertibles? Will the Mustang, which has never failed to drub the Camaro by at least three to two in the showrooms, be finally brought to its knees? We don't know the answers to any of these questions. We aren't even sure the new Camaro is really a Camaro. It sure doesn't look like one, and aside from the drivetrain there are precious few hand-me-down parts that would allow us to make a positive identification. Even the Z/28 is different now, 350 cu. in. instead of the old 302.

You could always tell the old Camaros right off. They were plump-looking things with truncated ends, but this new one, it's long and thin (two inches longer but the thinness is an illusion, it's 0.4 inches wider) and sweeps to a point in front like an Eldorado. And it's a fastback, the same styling theme that was so charming in the Barracuda. What's happening, anyway?

As product planners like to say, this one started on a clean sheet of paper. An F-body, they call it, and it's used only for the Firebird and Camaro. Basic body structure, which determines the size and shape of the passenger compartment, is common to both cars, as is the suspension. From there on out each is unique and represents what the respective division thinks a sporty car should be.

The Camaro seems more reserved than past Camaros. Where you could almost believe that Firebirds arrive by boat from Europe, the Camaro is still very Detroit. Its shape is smoother than any Detroit effort we can think of and uncommon restraint has been used in the exterior ornamentation, but somehow the high, narrow, pointy grille betrays its Tech Center breeding. (The standard Camaro has a full width front bumper which is replaced on the Rally Sport model by a split bumper and an Endura lip around the grille mouth.) And the "Detroit" theme is always directly before the driver in the form of an Avanti/Plymouth Fury/Pontiac Grand Prix wrap-around instrument cluster. Compared to the past Camaro's console-mounted gauges, which equaled a wrist watch strapped to your ankle in utility, the new instrument panel is a brilliant layout, but it still gives the feeling of a posh tourer rather than a taut GT car.

Like the Firebird the driving position is extremely good and the interior is far more spacious, particularly in the rear seat area, than you would expect in a fastback. The rear seat cushions are now buckets, one on each side of—and both lower than—the driveline tunnel. Getting the seats down in this way leaves more room for your head; it also puts the seat of your trousers at about the same level as your heels which means that your thighs are pointing upwards like anti-aircraft guns. The 5.5-inch longer doors allow significantly easier passage to the rear and at the same time eliminate the need for rear quarter windows. And, in addition to their obvious functions, the long doors also make fantastic offensive weapons in crowded parking lots. Park next to an F-body only if you drive a rubber car.

For power the Camaro draws on almost the full line of Chevrolet engines right up to the 450-hp 454. The Z/28, now rated at 360 hp, should be even more popular since it will be available with an automatic transmission. With the extra displacement it's far more tractable than the old 302 and torquey enough so that it's not uncomfortable with the automatic. Z/28s will still have the traditional competition stripes on the hood and deck lid but the rear spoiler has been trimmed down to a less conspicuous height and the front spoiler has been eliminated altogether. And no hood scoops or outside air induction devices of any sort will be available.

Those who like to turn and stop haven't been forgotten. Manual disc brakes are standard equipment and a higher effort, variable-ratio power steering gear will be available for SS models. All the big-engine Camaros (396 and 454) and the Z/28 will have special handling packages which include a rear anti-sway bar. The performance Camaros are definitely more understeering than the Firebird Trans-Am but Chevrolet engineers feel that the Camaro is a better compromise for the "average" driver.

Whether or not it really is better will remain unanswered until we can do a full road test on a production car. Still, we've seen enough already to know that the Camaro is a meritorious automobile. Like the Firebird, it's the first of a new generation of purposeful American GT cars.

**THE NEW
CAMARO'S
SHAPE
IS SMOOTHER
THAN ANY
DETROIT EFFORT
WE CAN THINK OF
AND THE
LINE-UP OF
AVAILABLE
POWERPLANTS
ALLOWS IT
TO APPEAL
TO A BROAD
RANGE
OF POTENTIAL
BUYERS**

INSTRUMENTAL IN THE DECISION
TO BREAK NEW GROUND
WITH THE 1970 FIREBIRD AND CAMARO
WAS THE ANNOUNCEMENT
THAT "SPORTY CARS"
ARE BRILLIANT DECOYS
FOR LURING NEW BUYERS
INTO THE FOLD

But the axioms concerning faint heart still apply and General Motors didn't elevate itself to the level of "world's largest corporation" by manipulating securities. It always has angles—angles that are the envy of all of Detroit's competing motormen. Inspiration for the Firebird and Camaro arose from many sources but justification from only one—the General Motors Customer Research Staff. With the kind of impassivity reserved for statisticians and 5-star generals the Research Staff ruled that not only were sporty cars good things to have in stock for keeping the corporate image youthful but they're brilliant decoys for luring new buyers into the fold.

As is characteristic of researchers, the staff has numbers to back up its contentions. Using an undeniably logical approach, considering its title, Customer Research Staff, it set out to determine just who was buying Firebirds and Camaros. The early results were less than devastating. Surveys showed that those who ended up with sporty cars in their garages were those who set out to buy sporty cars in the first place. That is hardly the kind of information you'd want to stake your future on. But after more sifting of data a gleam of truth began to show through. Look at Pontiac's sales, for example. While only one out of five GTO buyers considered buying a competing performance car and roughly the same ratio applies to Le Mans buyers, fully half of those who drove off in Firebirds had considered a Camaro before reaching a final decision—and more than a third of them had also entertained thoughts of a Mustang. By being only slightly simplistic it can be said that a GTO buyer is a GTO buyer and the same for the Le Mans, but the sporty car customer shops around and can be attracted by the right kind of car. Build a better sporty car and you'll probably get him.

Of course, G.M. is quite happy to sell you a sporty car but it doesn't want that to be the last it will ever see of you. Call it good business, call it greed (are they different?), call it whatever you like because G.M. proposes to continue living in the style to which it has grown accustomed by also selling you your next car and the one after that—on and on in an unbroken chain until you're too feeble to drive. Is pushing sporty cars a good way to get you hooked? Surprisingly, it is. We've already seen that sporty car buyers are fickle; they look around before they buy in the first place and when it's time to trade there are fewer repeat sporty car buyers than there are repeat buyers in any other market segment. Mustang owners are the most loyal, if you can call it that when only 26% of them buy another Mustang. This

curious relationship tapers off until you get to the Firebird which manages to resell only 9% of its owners. The key lies in what the ex-sporty car owner buys next; 55% of the Camaro traders move up to a bigger Chevrolet, 52% of the Mustang owners found something in a Ford and 45% of the Firebirds were replaced with a Pontiac of some description. All any division asks, it would seem, is half a chance to sell you another car and the "sport compact" provides that opportunity.

To a manufacturer, the charm of this market segment is that it draws in customers who otherwise wouldn't have been attracted to his line (remember that sporty car buyers only wanted sporty cars) and then builds them up to such a level of loyalty that roughly half of them come back for another car. And this segment is more important than it would at first appear because it contains a higher percent of first-time new car buyers than any other marketing area. It is well known that virgin customers are a source of supreme pleasure in dealerships everywhere.

So the benefits of the sporty car business are obvious. Not only does it offer a profitable one-time sale but it also funnels new, potentially long-term customers into the division. And the G.M. researchers expect the demand for Camaros and Firebirds to increase in the future. As evidence they point to the age of the buyers. It's a youthful group—62% are under 35 years old. The median age of Firebird owners is 28 years compared to 47 years for full-size Pontiac owners. When the researchers balance this bit of information against the projected census figures for the U.S. in 1980, the sporty car market takes on the warm glow of the mother lode. The 25-34 age group will almost double in size and the number of 20-24-year-olds will be up by 22%. These two groups—the ones that buy most of the Firebirds and Camaros—are expected to grow way out of proportion to the rest of the car-buying public. The 45-54-year-olds—the range that includes the median age of the full-size Pontiac—will be down by 5%. The only inconsistency in this scheme is that the leading edge of the population wave should have boosted sporty cars sales in the years since 1967 and it clearly hasn't. But apparently this lump in an otherwise smooth flow of statistics wasn't enough to make the Research Staff, or any of the high level decision makers in G.M., flinch because the Camaro and Firebird are right on schedule for a mid-year introduction—the earliest date consistent with engineering requirements and a time when their impact will not be diluted by other new car introductions. ●