



Is The AMX a True Sports Car?

Would you believe a Rambler at Le Mans?

Don't laugh! American Motors may be represented at the 24-hour French endurance race this June.

The car would be the firm's new AMX — the sports model AMC officials have dubbed "the hairy little brother of the Javelin."

Whether the AMX is hairy enough for the Le Mans circuit remains to be seen. But the fact that the company is even thinking about competing there indicates the scope of the new look at AMC.

The company, which appeared on the brink of disaster in recent months, is endeavoring to save itself by using the same formula that resurrected Pontiac 10 years ago. It's trying hard to build a performance image. Gone is all the talk about compact cars. And no latter-day George Romney flails away at the "gas guzzling dinosaurs" of the Big 3.

Instead, you hear about the family of big new V-8 engines, the Javelin sporty car and now the AMX, AMC's answer to the Corvette. "This does represent a little change in our thinking," laughed John Adamson, AMC's vice president for engineering.

The new boss of AMC, Chairman Roy D. Chapin Jr., has long been a sports car buff. So has Richard Teague, AMC's vice president for styling. Abernethy, before he left a year ago, "had finally come around and was starting to think in terms of young cars — but by then it was really late in the game," said one official.

However late the cars may have been in arriving, the new brass fully expects the AMX and Javelin to mark another

turning point in the company's fortunes, just as the compact Rambler did in the late 1950s.

"I believe this is the most notable achievement of 1968 in the auto industry — two cars in one year," Chapin said. "The AMX has a completely different character from the Javelin. As a 2-passenger car it doesn't have universal appeal. It's aimed at a specialized market."

But Chapin feels it will do well, particularly since it has a price of "not much more than \$3000." This places it \$1300 under the Corvette. He calls the AMX sales goal "one of the most interesting problems we have. Our present program is very modest — the target is under 10,000 cars this year. But we may get a big surprise — on the upside."

The man who has to sell it, AMC Vice-President William S. Pickett, says the car is "sure properly timed for me. It will increase showroom traffic. People who aren't interested in the Javelin because they think it's another Mustang will take notice of the AMX. It will be a great image car — something we haven't had."

AMC is going to push the car first in the warm climates. "We have made a detailed study of where cars of this type should do well and dealers in those areas are more stirred up than in other areas," Pickett continued. "It will be a very effective car in some places like the Los Angeles area, Florida, the Southeast from Washington down, Texas, Denver and the like." The big push in the northern climates will come in the spring.

Pickett says he's convinced the car "will get a lot of attention from people

interested in performance. We are not getting that attention now. But this company has made a decision to go after the youth market. We're going to stay with the other products we have but we are also trying to sell the young people."

A lot of AMC's dealers "are competition-conscious," Pickett says, "and they are delighted with our new stance. The AMX will help convince people that this is a performance-conscious company — that we are thinking of people who like a high-performance car."

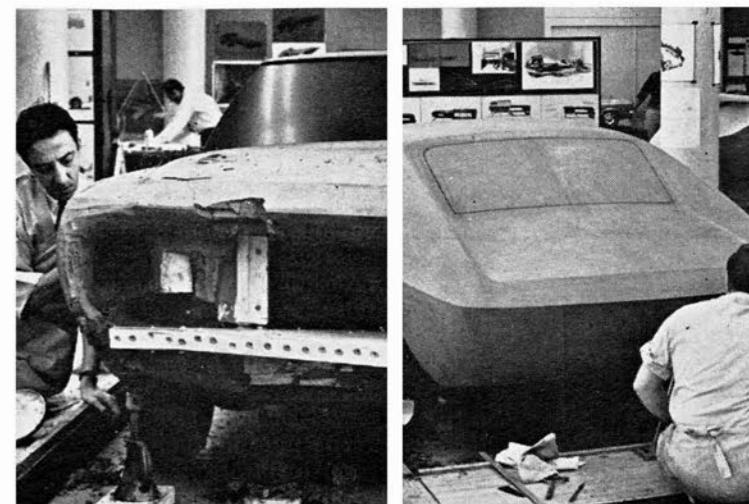
And this is why a guy named Carl Chakmakian is now a big man around AMC. He's in charge of the firm's budding racing program. Chakmakian began last year a modest effort to get seen on the drag strips, partly through an arrangement with Grant to build a funny car. Next he laid out plans to compete with the Javelin in a dozen Trans-Am sedan races. "We hope to do fairly well there," he said.

Now Chakmakian is in the midst of setting up a sports car racing schedule for the AMX. "We are tentatively thinking of getting into SCCA's Class A and B," he said. The firm passed up the chance to enter the 12 Hours of Sebring, however. "We would have had to homologate the car by last November 10 and that was quite a ways in advance of the introduction date in February," he continued. The AMX may be eligible for competition by April.

What about Le Mans in June? "I would be unrealistic to say we have no aspirations," he answered cautiously. "This is one of our plans which we haven't firmed up yet. If everything goes well, we possibly will be there."

He reminded an interviewer that

Maybe full-bore competition is an ambitious goal for American Motors, whose performance image still has to be shaped before it can be polished. But if determination wins trophies, AMC's shelf might not be bare for long...



Clay models of future AMX were being prepared 'way back in Oct., 1965. Many body style configurations were made and discarded before final lines were decided upon. Production AMX uses many body compounds that are interchangeable with Javelin.

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He reminded an interviewer that "this is not new ground when you look back to the early '50s. Some Nash-Healeys ran at Le Mans in 1952 and one came in 3rd place overall behind two Mercedes."

Teague agrees. "This car's genealogy goes right back to the Nash-Healey," he says. And that even pre-dates the Corvette. In December, 1950, the old Nash-Kelvinator Co., forerunner of AMC, decided to build a sports car. It shipped the engine and other major components to England where Sir Donald Healey put them in a car body. About 100 were built this way in 1951. Then in 1952, Pininfarina of Italy designed a new body and it was all mated by Healey again. A total of 506 cars were built from 1951 until the car was discontinued in August, 1954.

"When it came out we called it the

first American sports car in 20 years," recalled one AMC official. But price and the introduction of the Corvette in 1953 killed it. "At \$5500 it was just too expensive," Teague said. "And the timing was off. There wasn't the market then that you have today. The war babies were just children then."

The old Nash-Healey is now a collector's item and will bring a minimum of \$2500 in any condition, says Teague, a classic car buff who once owned a gull-wing Mercedes 300SL but got rid of it because "it was too hot in the summer and I didn't want to drive it in the winter because it might rust." He now owns a 50-year-old Panhard and a 1932 2.6 Alfa.

This is by way of showing that Teague isn't a johnny-come-lately. "It reminds me of an old JFK quip that 'Success has 1000 fathers and failure is an orphan,'" Teague said.

He traced the history of the AMX through the first show car by the same name, the Javelin sporty car introduced last fall, and finally to the current model. It still retains a lot of the flavor of the experimental model introduced two years ago, minus, of course, the rumble seat.

Recalling a talk with his stylists, Teague said "we decided to do a really hot 2-place car — one like Ferrari would do, but instead of 10 a year, design it

so we could build 10,000. I said one of the things I'd like to see in a car was a rumble seat and they looked at me like I was from the moon."

After seeing the mockup, Abernethy gave the go-ahead to construct a working model. It was built by Vignale in Turin and displayed at the 1966 International Auto Show in New York. The company had just completed plans for the Javelin when it started work on the AMX.

To convince the public it was doing things despite skidding car sales, it exhibited the AMX, the AMX II and a pair of small experimental cars in what was billed as AMC's Project IV. About this time, Detroit industrialist Robert B. Evans bought 200,000 shares of AMC stock, became the firm's largest shareholder and was elected to the board of directors. At one of the Project IV showings, Evans dropped the word that AMC was going to build a production version of the AMX.

The company was then embarked on parallel development programs. One was to build the production AMX by modifying the Javelin, and the other was to create a new car out of fiberglass. Evans was a prime mover in the second phase of the project.

"He wanted the car very quickly and felt at the time that this was the fastest way to get it," Teague recalled. It



seemed like a good idea at first because plastics are considered a good bet for low volume work since tooling costs are less although unit costs are higher. Dow-Smith built two running models. At the same time, it was working on a plastic car for Pontiac.

And while the Corvette has been plastic since it was introduced, "our situation was different because we are a frameless auto builder," Teague said.

Consequently, the Dow cars were unique in that they had a unitized steel underbody. "But from a feasibility and an economic standpoint we felt that the better route was to come up with the AMX off the Javelin," Teague said. "From a tooling standpoint, this would cost a lot less than to have built a new car in plastic."

This is one reason many interesting designs were scrapped, the rumble seat was discarded and the resulting car looks very much like the Javelin. Safety also reared its head. "We didn't have enough time to study the structural integrity of an FRP-frameless body," Teague said. "There were just

AMX is a combination of power and good sports car handling qualities. Graceful, continental styling follows Italian coachbuilder Vignale's Prototype on which AMX is based. .390-cu.-in. V-8 gives wild acceleration.

too many unknowns without a rugged frame." The rumble seat also figured in the safety issue. Some AMC officials felt the car's safety could be challenged if it had a rumble seat, while others said it was no worse than a convertible. Nevertheless, caution prevailed—and the rumble seat went.

So did designs for sports cars bearing names like the Mach 1 (before Ford's Mach 1), the Demon and the Stiletto. The Demon design was discarded because of poor rear vision. The Stiletto had retractable headlights and would have required too many sheetmetal changes from the Javelin. The same was true of a third design with a "cute but costly" duck tail, Teague said. The design, however, recalls the current 'Vette.

The final product, with changes to the grille, hood and roofline from the Javelin, "is a very hot little vehicle with a strong family resemblance," Teague said. "We have tried to keep the cost down and build an uncomplicated vehicle," he continued. "It is still a different type of vehicle because it is a foot shorter than the Javelin and is a 2-place car."

Engineer Adamson figures there are two basic areas of difference between the AMX and the Javelin. "One in which the Javelin will catch up is the engine," he said. "With the 390 incher,

there is more power than we have ever had in an automobile. The other important difference is that while all design functions are a compromise, in the past our tendency has been to compromise cornering ability in favor of a softer boulevard ride. With the AMX we turned this approach around and now have superior handling at the expense of a superior ride."

Adamson also figures the company "played it safe" in designing the larger engine. "We decided to overdesign if we had to to make sure we had the durability we wanted since it was our first push into engines of this size."

"I think the car can be competitive," Adamson said. "We have all the basic hardware there to make it so."

"I believe it will stack up very well," says Chakmakian.

The original AMX was dubbed that to show it was an "American Motors Experimental" car. The name stuck. "It had a good ring," said Pickett. "Everybody's been calling it that so we decided to officially name it AMX," said Chapin.

In a way, it's appropriate because the AMX is truly an experiment for the No. 4 automaker—and one where the results won't be known for at least several months.

(Turn page for driving impressions.)

