DRIVER'S REPORT

NEW 300-HP CHRYSLER

BY KEN FERMOYLE

Motor *Life's* Detroit editor gets behind the wheel of America's most powerful production car

A GOOD LOOKING CAR with sports car characteristics—and a back seat—that's the Chrysler 300, an automobile that won't have to take the back seat for anything on the road!

Named the "300" because that's the number of horses its modified FirePower V8 engine turns out, this new Chrysler is America's highest-powered automobile.

When the car was introduced, E. M. Braden, Chrysler sales manager, reported that it had been designed to the specifications of motor sports enthusiasts who had been asking Chrysler to build an automobile with many sports car characteristics since the FirePower engine came out in 1951.

"Among the things they asked for were modified FirePower engines like those used at LeMans and Watkins Glen, simple unadorned exterior, the road-hugging look and feel of a sports car . . . this car incorporates these qualities," he stated.

A tall order, so we decided to see how well Chrysler had done the job it set for itself. Just three weeks after the 300 made its first public appearance, arrangements were made for me to drive one. In fact, it was *the* one, because at that time they were not in production and the only fully completed and ready-to-roll 300 was the original prototype.

The car, a hardtop coupe, had 2,100 miles on the odometer when three company representatives and I pulled out of Chrysler's Jefferson plant, so we didn't have to be bashful because of a new not-yet-broken-in engine.

The car's low, clean lines drew many admiring glances as we headed for a stretch of road outside Detroit where traffic is light.

I noticed the ride was harder than normal for a Chrysler due to higher rate front and rear springs and heavy duty shocks. It wasn't harsh enough to be unpleasant, however, and we soon found that it smoothed right out at speeds of about 70 and over.

On acceleration, the power surge was so smooth it was hard to realize the car was getting from 0 to 60 in the neighborhood of 10 seconds! Since this wasn't a full-scale road test, we weren't using the elaborate testing equipment normally attached to check performance. Burt Bouwkamp, resident engineer at the Jefferson plant, was with us and reported that 0-60 times of about 10.5 seconds had been turned in at the Chelsea Proving Grounds in accurate fifth-wheel checks. This doesn't seem out of line since the car's power-to-weight ratio is about 11 to one!

Acceleration up to 30 mph is roughly comparable to that of standard Chryslers; from there on it really moves! Performance in the middle and upper speed ranges is particularly impressive. This is due mainly to valve timing. Downshifting, possible up to 65 mph, really results in a kick in the back. Even while cruising at 80 or 90 mph there is plenty left. Just a nudge on the throttle and the 331-inch engine jumps the 300 ahead.

We got to a long straight stretch of fairly deserted highway and Bouwkamp told me to go ahead and stand on it. The speedo needle swept past 80 . . . 90 . . . 100 . . . 110 and was quivering at 120 when a couple of cars that had been 'way off in the distance began getting bigger and bigger. The car was still winding up and you could still feel reserve power when I backed off and dabbed the big power-brake pedal a few times in the interest of safety. Bouwkamp reported that this engine in a New Yorker of approximately the same weight as the 300 had been clocked at 134 mph at the test track—which gives some indication of potential top speed.

The car was rock-steady all the time and there was no wander or feeling of instability at any speed. It gobbled up sweeping curves with no strain and the full-time power steering aimed the car right where it was pointed.

We headed for St. Clair Metropolitan Beach and got permission to take pictures and do some fast cornering and brake checks in the huge parking lot.

It was here I found the only flaw in the 300. The car is leather-upholstered and has bench seats, making it rough to stay anchored in tight turns. On hard left turns the driver tends to slide to the right and it's difficult to retain control of the car. Several times I wound up sitting almost in Bouwkamp's lap over on the passenger's side! Safety belts would be a must for hard driving. Bucket front seats would be a big improvement. Maybe they will be offered as optional items.

Aside from that, the car lived up to its billing extremely well. There was a minimum of heel-over and no wheel-hop or skip. The parking lot was surfaced with asphalt and fine gravel which caused the rear end to slide more than it would on concrete; even so, the car never gave you that panicky out-of-control feeling. Front end dive during hard braking was practically nil and there was no apparent fade, but the car did have a tendency to pull to the left slightly in fast stops.

After a three-hour workout we reluctantly headed back to the plant where I was filled in on more 300 details.

The body shell is basically the same as the Windsor hardtop with modifications, particularly in front end treatment. It's not a small car, having a 126-inch wheelbase and measuring 218.8 inches long and 79.1 inches wide. The weight, I was told was 4,340 lbs. Weight distribution is 54 per cent front, 46 per cent rear. Both front and rear seats have that familiar Chrysler chair-high comfort, despite the car's lowness—58.6 inches.

Chrysler engineers boosted the engine to 300 hp by using a favorite trick of theirs—increasing breathing capacity. Basically the 300 engine is the same as the New Yorker's, which puts out 250 hp. Major modifications include full-race cam, intake manifold mounting two four-barrel carbs and mechanical valve lifters. The dual exhaust system is two inches in diameter all the way through, ¼-inch bigger than on the New Yorker. Standard valve sizes are used in the 300 but they have a lift of seven-sixteenths inches, against the New Yorker's three-eighths.

The cam has 60 degrees overlap; intake duration is 280 degrees and exhaust, 270 degrees. (Figures for the 250-hp mill are: overlap, 30 degrees; intake duration, 252 degrees; exhaust duration, 244 degrees.) Peak rpm has been upped to 5400 and it will wind higher. Despite its hot cam the 300 idles surprisingly well. To help make up for low speed torque loss due to the hot timing, the transmission stall speed is 200 rpm higher than standard to allow operation from a start at higher torque. The PowerFlite transmission—standard equipment—is beefed up a bit to handle the increased power.

Heavy duty copper-lead on steel main and rod bearings are used in the engine. Compression ratio is 8.5 to 1. Cast iron heads and three-ring slipper-type aluminum pistons are similar to those in the 250 hp engine.

The frame uses rugged box-section side frame rails. Independent front suspension consists of heavy duty shocks mounted inside coil springs, with a rubber-bushed torsion rod stabilizer. Rear suspension is by semi-elliptic springs with grooved and tapered leaves and straddle-mounted shocks for a hard, flat ride.

Both standard and power steering is available. Power brakes are standard. A "wide variety" of rear axle ratios will be offered; the one we drove had a 3.54 rear end. Chrome wire wheels with non-functional knock-off hubs are standard. Oil-bath air cleaner will be standard (the prototype had racing-type air cleaners).

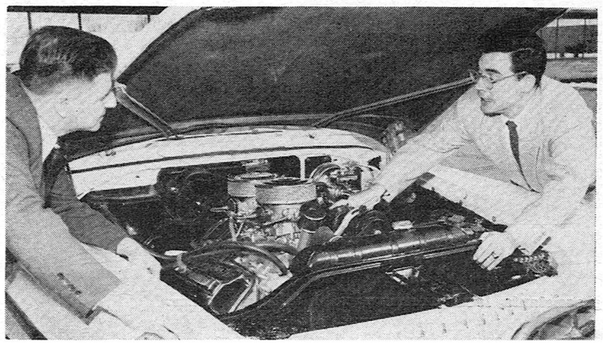
All in all, it looks like Chrysler has done a remarkable job with the 300. The car combines sports car-like performance with excellent roadability, clean attractive lines, comfort and near-family sedan roominess, quite an engineering achievement. It adds up to an attractive automotive package.

"Initial production has been set for 1,000 Chrysler 300s," Braden reports. No price had been decided at press time.

As a high speed touring car, the 300 will be hard to beat. It looks like a natural for stock car racing and the Mexican Road Race, where its stability and power should be tremendous assets. The car was slated to run during NASCAR's Speed Week at Daytona in February, which means it will get a real baptism under fire. What it does there will give further indication of what we can expect from this newest—and most powerfull—product of Detroit ingenuity. •

Fermoyle tries leather bench seat, found safety belts helpful in holding position behind wheel in high speed cornering.

Chrysler engineer (left) tells Fermoyle about engine modifications. Race-type air cleaners will be replaced by conventional models.



Body shell is basically a Windsor hardtop with cleaner lines. Despite its size, the car performs remarkably.