STARFIRE
prestige from Oldsmobile

MARVIN LYONS PHOTOS

Enroute to the races, nothing can catch it for silent splendor

CAR LIFE ROAD TEST

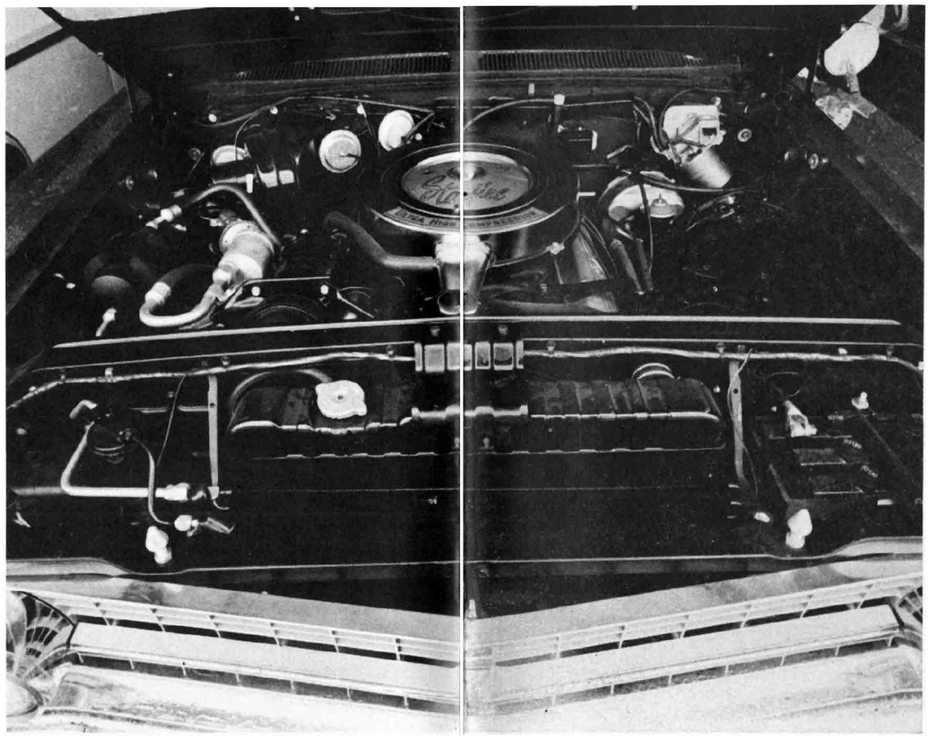
THERE ARE MANY things to be said of the Oldsmobile Starfire, but the term "sports car" emphatically is not among them. The company and its advertising agency seem all too anxious to bandy this term about when referring to the car, although they might not be so far wrong if they would put in an apostrophe. The Starfire could well be the car of sports ("a sport's car") and it undoubtedly is entitled to the term "sporty." But as a car for sports (without apostrophe), the Starfire is in another league. It is doubtful if it could take home any hardware from the local drag strip on Sunday, let alone fit on and make it around a road race course. When seen among sports cars, you can be sure the Starfire is merely pacing the parade lap.

In an all-too-successful attempt to isolate the passengers from the realism of the road, Oldsmobile engineers also have succeeded in removing the rapidity with which the car responds to a driver's command. This responsiveness, in its broadest sense and without belaboring the point, is basic when the sports car mantle is to be properly bestowed upon an automobile.

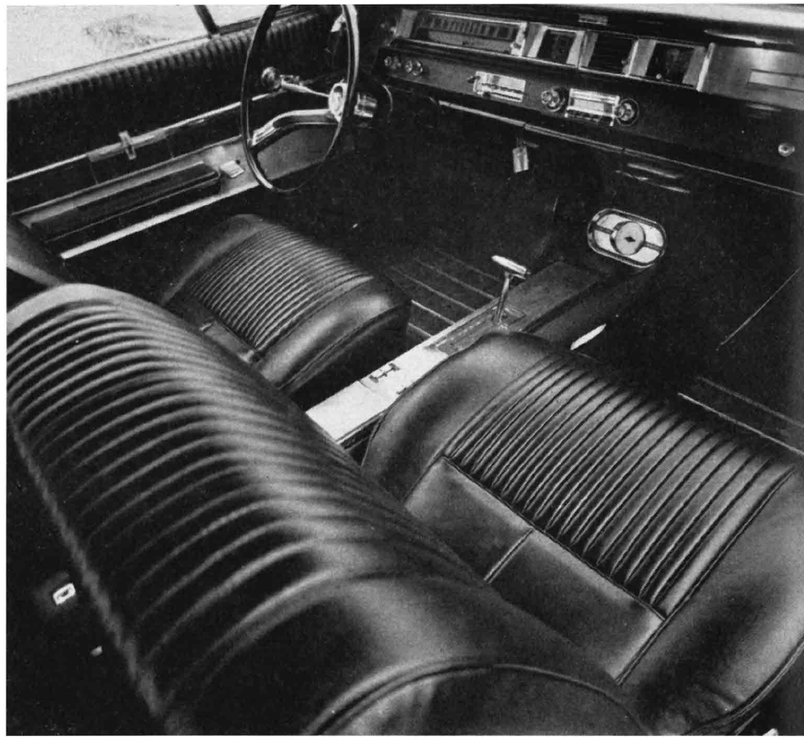
With this point thus made, we can proceed to examine the Starfire as an example of what it really is—a fast-touring highway cruiser that pampers the psyches (and physiques) of its occupants.

What better place to begin than in the driver's seat, where the hand comes easily to grips with Oldsmobile's now-familiar deep-forked steering wheel. Our test car was fitted with the optional (add $43.04) tilting wheel, which we found to be a praiseworthy feature from the standpoints of both ▶

RAINDROPS GLISTEN on Starfire's hood. Grille emblem is distinctive.



MOST POTENT Olds engine develops 345 bhp.



SPACIOUS VINYL-trimmed interior is divided by central console with T-shift handle.

STARFIRE

comfort and safety. While we would like to see this available on all cars, it presently is limited to General Motors cars with power steering. A short lever behind the turn indicator flipper on the steering column unlocks the steering wheel hub, allowing the wheel to tilt through seven positions, angling from 15° above to 15° below perpendicular to the steering shaft. Different drivers can set it in different positions or the wheel can be altered during long trips just to ease forearm weariness.

Such a wheel, coupled with the 6-way seat adjustment available on the Starfire, makes it possible to tailor the driving position to more nearly fit our widely varying physiques. With the wheel at its lowest, most vertical position, optimum steering control can be maintained. As long as car makers persist in mounting the steering columns at such high angles (allowing the wheel rim to clear fatter laps), they should make such provisions as the tilting wheel available.

The individual bucket seats in front give good support to driver and passenger, while the bright-metal transmission tunnel cover is almost high enough to serve as a rest for the driver's right elbow. A beefy, chrome T-handle, serving as the Hydra-Matic shift lever, is mounted in a long slot atop the console and falls easily to hand. Although the total distance from Park to Reverse makes for a rather long throw, it also results in a spacing between the three forward gear locations (Low, Super and Drive) that permits quite positive shift motions while avoiding the tendency to overshoot the desired gear. Starfire drivers will seldom need to concern themselves with operating this shift lever, but its convenience and pleasant operation encourage one to make the best of the transmission available. A thumb-button on the left tip of the T, incidentally, must be pressed before the lever can be moved into either Park or Reverse positions, serving as an effective safety device (for both transmission and car) during exuberant shifting. There are no manual transmissions available for the Starfire, although other 88 series models have a 3-speed synchromesh unit as standard equipment.

A tachometer is mounted at the toeboard end of the transmission cover, an unfortunate location that is not unique with the Starfire. With the automatic transmission, the utility of this instrument is limited to impressing the passengers. It is difficult to read, not only because of its location, but also because of the dial face background of multi-shaded green stripes which camouflage the pointer's location. Had a manual transmission been available, we would seriously question why the rev counter wasn't located in the blank center panel on the dashboard, a spot the stylists have reserved for an air conditioner outlet (which could just as easily go underneath the dash). Although still not an ideal spot for the tachometer, it at least would be better than its present location.

Little has been changed in the Oldsmobile 88 series (of which the Starfire is the top-of-the-line example) over the past few years, although some interesting detail refinements have been incorporated in the '63s. The transmission tunnel has been reduced considerably (of no importance in the Starfire with its center divider) by moving the engine 3 in. farther forward. A new aluminum front cover and water pump housing, weighing some 40 lb. less, helped make the engine move possible. Track has been widened 1.2 in. and the turning circle decreased to 44.1 ft.

There have been some suspension refinements that improve the handling and control characteristics of the car over previous levels without sacrificing the pillow-soft comfort expected in an Oldsmobile. These include an increase in stabilizer bar diameter to 1.0937 in. and alteration of the location of the rear suspension arms. Keeping in mind that each change must also add to the luxurious quietness of the car as well as improve handling considerations, this much helps. But as we have observed in previous tests of Oldsmobiles (CL, April 1962 and August 1962), the deceptiveness of the silent ride and easy speed can betray the driver when he discovers that a corner is sharper than he had anticipated.

The Starfire is fitted with a 42-amp. alternator (52-amp. when air-conditioned), a smart move with everything so electrified and power-assisted. Significantly, the owner's manual has three full pages of fuse and light bulb specifications—nearly the only useful service information included in it. In addition to the usual electric circuitry, the Starfire has electric window lifts with the switches located atop the divider behind the shift lever. The rear half of the divider is a lockable compartment that has an internal light, as does the usual glove compartment. There are lights on the side of the divider to illuminate the floor area, on the rear quarter panels to light the interior and on the dual ash trays in the dash, to aid nighttime aim.

Worth special mention is the Starfire's floor covering, a heavy pile carpeting that has large vinyl pads in the fast-wear area underfoot. Front passengers sit straight-legged in the sports car manner because of a low seat cushion and high (level with the door sills) floorboard. But a footwell extending under the front seats gives the rear seat passengers more than usual foot and legroom between the seats.

A driver first trying out the Starfire will find himself edging away from cars parked at the curb or pulling too wide in passing another car. This, we finally decided, was caused by the ridged fender crowns. The eye tended to overlook the central hood decoration as an aiming guide and unconsciously took the right fender ridge as the reference. Once this tendency was overcome, we again managed to take up no more than our allotted lane of traffic.

The raised edge fender line, we felt, presented a thoroughly distinctive styling treatment to the new bodies. A wide aluminum panel lengthwise along the side and an almost exclusive roof distinguishes the Starfire from lesser stablemates. The Starfire has its rear window dished inward slightly, a styling touch that we particularly liked. Neither glass distortion nor any unusual tendency for grime to accumulate could be detected.

Oldsmobile has used new mountings to attach the large car bodies to their separate frames and this fact serves to emphasize the maker's continuing search for quietness and elimination of road noise. The fact that these cars do have separate frame and body construction (although the smaller F-85 has not) and that such silence and solidarity are developed to a high degree speaks volumes for the Oldsmobile approach in general and the potential of non-unitized construction in particular.

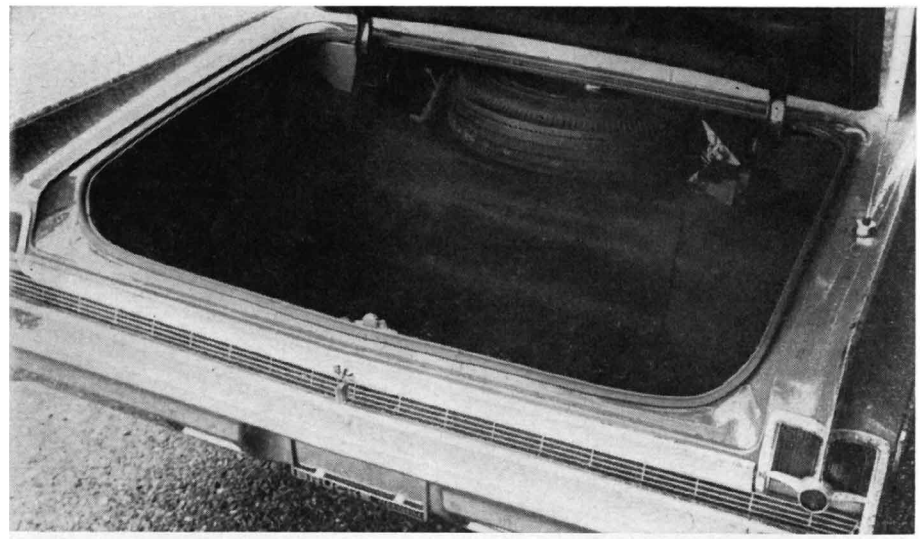
The separate frame is a perimeter type, with torque boxes at the four corners where inner and outer side rails join, providing a high degree of torsional stiffness. Company engineers (who have experimented with unitized construction for the 88 series) are convinced the separation of body and frame with rubber mountings just inside the rocker panels has accomplished the required isolation from noise, harshness and vibration. In addition, the flexibility in chassis structural requirements and variables in location of mounting points permit continual im- ▶

STARFIRE

provements in this area of construction.

The Oldsmobile 394-cu. in. V-8 engine in its highest output form—345 bhp at 4800 rpm—powers the Starfire. It has a 10.5:1 compression ratio which requires premium fuel for the 4-barrel carburetor. Considering the Starfire's weight, the automatic transmission and the 3.42:1 rear axle ratio, we felt the mileage figures we obtained (11-14 mpg) were quite reasonable. Highway performance was more than adequate and a high cruising speed, in fact, could readily be maintained—a tribute once again to the engineered silence. Our acceleration figures probably could be bettered by the regular 88 hardtop, a less weighty (and less expensive) car which can be ordered with a 330-bhp version of this engine, the same axle ratio and a more positive manual transmission. The previous 88 tested, with the least powerful engine and an "economy" axle ratio, turned the standing quarter mile in 17.8 with a terminal speed of 71 mph.

The acceleration of the Starfire could have been improved upon, we felt, by some adjustments to the transmission and throttle. The former had a tendency to lurch and stumble as the car moved away from the line, complicated by a delay in response after stamping



CAVERNOUS TRUNK approaches pickup truck capacity, is fully lined in felt.

the latter. Called a "4-stage" Hydra-Matic by Olds engineers, the car's transmission is really only a 3-speed. The fourth "stage" is a tiny torque converter which operates only for the first few feet of travel in first gear, increasing the overall torque multiplication to 9.0:1 for better break-away.

Where brute strength is a criterion, brakes on the Starfire are excellent. Drums are 11 in. all around and have a total swept area of 310 sq. in. The vacuum power-assisted pedal action, however, could only be called sensitive and demanded a feathering action for easy stops. Otherwise, action was abrupt.

From a purely performance standpoint, we think Oldsmobile came closer with the Jetfire, the turbo-supercharged version of the F-85 which we tested last month. Although the Starfire naturally turns in better figures across the board, the Jetfire ignores the bigger car's 130-bhp advantage and produces virtually as good performance. Of course the Jetfire is almost half a ton lighter and lacks the pitch control advantage of the longer wheelbase, but interior room and comfort for front passengers are a toss-up between the two and rear seat legroom isn't really that much better. The Starfire, it should be added, will

WIDE ALUMINUM strip is exclusive trim. Starfire shares roof and concave rear window with only one other GM car.

probably have more appeal to the more affluent.

No one can quarrel with the Oldsmobile quality of finish and luxury of appointments. The car is well assembled and trim pieces and stylish touches are all in place. Enough rubber bushing, foam padding and pile carpeting is evident to cradle even the most demanding buyer in complete comfort. It is, in all, a substantial automobile to drive to the races, if not in them. ■

CAR LIFE ROAD TEST

1963 OLDSMOBILE
Starfire Hardtop Coupe

SPECIFICATIONS

List price	$4129
Price, as tested	4562
Curb weight, lb	4330
Test weight	4560
distribution, %	57/43
Tire size	8.00-14
Tire capacity, lb @ 24 psi	4700
Brake swept area	310
Engine type	V-8, ohv
Bore & stroke	4.12 x 3.69
Displacement, cu in	394
Compression ratio	10.5
Bhp @ rpm	345 @ 4800
equivalent mph	112
Torque, lb-ft	440 @ 3200
equivalent mph	74
Carburetion	1 x 4

EXTRA-COST OPTIONS

Tinted windshield, electric windows, seat belts, tilt mirror, remote control outside mirror, tilting steering wheel, wheel discs, white wall tires, radio, electric antenna, dual speaker system.

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in	123.0
Tread, f and r	62.2/61.0
Over-all length, in	214.5
width	77.9
height	55.0
equivalent vol, cu ft	532
Frontal area, sq ft	23.8
Ground clearance, in	5.9
Steering ratio, o/a	21.8
turns, lock to lock	3.8
turning circle, ft	42.8
Hip room, front	2 x 24.7
Hip room, rear	55.1
Pedal to seat back, max	43.2
Floor to ground	14.0
Luggage vol, cu ft	17.1
Fuel tank capacity, gal	21.0

GEAR RATIOS

3rd (1.00), overall	3.42
2nd (1.56)	5.34
1st (2.97)	10.16
1st (2.97 x 1.20)	12.19

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4800), mph	112
Shifts, rpm–mph (forced)	
3rd ( )	
2nd (5200)	77
1st (4600)	36

ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec	3.6
0-40	5.2
0-50	6.7
0-60	8.5
0-70	10.7
0-80	13.9
0-100	22.4
Standing ¼ mile	17.2
speed at end	89

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Normal range, mpg	11-14

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph, actual	27.3
60 mph	59.3
90 mph	87.5

CALCULATED DATA

Lb/hp (test wt)	13.2
Cu ft/ton mile	129.1
Mph/1000 rpm	23.2
Engine revs/mile	2580
Piston travel, ft/mile	1590
Car Life wear index	41.1

PULLING POWER

70 mph, maximum gradient, %	20.1
50	21.8
30	43.0
Total drag at 60 mph, lb	126