

NEW CORNERING stability is shown in sequence of Comet Sportster, illustrating reduced body lean resulting from stiffer suspension. Sloping roofline is also shown to advantage.



**CAR
LIFE**
ROAD TEST

Comet S-22 Sportster

Slant roof and V-8 give Mercury a 'Sprint'

WHEN LINCOLN-MERCURY Division first brought out the Comet in mid-1960, it was a slightly oversized Falcon with a posh factor that was then (remember?) above anything in the fledgling compact car sweepstakes. The price to be paid for this plushness of appointment, assorted sound deadening and greater length was, of course, excessive weight. The sheer bulk of this compact was more than the standard 144-cu. in., 6-cyl. Falcon engine could cope with and the stroked, 170-cu. in. engine was rapidly made available. While the substitution represented an improvement from minimal

to marginal, the hefty car still could barely get out of its own way (CL, July 1961).

As a mid-1963 model, the Mercury people Meteorized the Comet and effectively eliminated this problem (just as the Falcon was Fairlaned into the Sprint by Ford). The 260-cu. in. Fairlane/Meteor V-8 engine has been made available as an option in the Sportster, an engine swap that also has brought about some other interesting changes in the Comet.

The new engine develops 164 bhp at 4400 rpm and 258 lb./ft. of torque at 2200 rpm, both figures representing a

62% increase over the output of the 170-cu. in. 6-cyl. powerplant. It might also be noted that the V-8's output all but doubles what has been available in the "standard" 85-bhp engine, although it is to be hoped that few buyers would continue to accept such an unsatisfactory level of performance.

There is little need to review our technical analysis (CL, Sept. 1962) of this engine except to say that it is rapidly becoming the workhorse of the FoMoCo bread-and-butter lines. Starting as the standard Fairlane/Meteor powerplant in 221-cu. in. form, it now powers the Falcon/Comet as a 260-

cu. in. option and in its 289-cu. in. form is standard for the Galaxie and optional for the Meteor.

This engine, in addition, has won its spurs by powering (in much warmer tune) such interesting sports/racing vehicles as the Shelby AC Cobra, the Lola GT, the Holman-Moody Challenger, and the Lotus nee FoMoCo Indianapolis cars. It is a tough and relatively light (120-lb. block) powerplant by virtue of the Ford-developed thin-wall casting techniques.

In its more workaday garb (and you can't get much more workaday than the Comet) the engine uses a single



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2-barrel carburetor and an 8.7:1 compression ratio, suitable for regular grade fuel and a reasonable 14-16 mpg range. But, more important than the pennies saved is the improved performance.

Our test car was fitted with the 2-speed Merc-O-Matic transmission, a unit that always leaves something to be desired, although 3- and 4-speed manual transmissions are available. The automatic has a torque converter with a 2.5:1 ratio at stall and it did permit accelerations that were tire-squeaking if not startling. The standard 3.25:1 rear axle ratio seemed to be an admirable compromise for a car of this type (and the buyer to whom it would appeal) but 3.5:1 gearing is available by special order for those wishing a bit more lower range urge.

Our data panel illustrates the extent of the improvement over the 101-bhp Comet, recalling that the latter covered the standing start quarter mile in 20.2 sec. with a 67.4 mph terminal speed. Other significant comparisons are:

	170 cu. in.	260 cu. in.
Lb./bhp (test weight)	27.4	20.2
0-30 mph, sec.	4.7	5.0
0-60	15.2	14.5
Top speed, mph	85.0	103

The Comet, of course, was never intended as a high-performance car, but by the same token there is little excuse for a car that is dangerously minimal in performance. Today's driving conditions make a measure of reserve power mandatory and it can be seen that the 260 engine now accomplishes this.

As indicated earlier, this engine change has been accompanied by other changes in the car. Mercury, like Ford, backs up the power increase with all the Meteor underpinnings, a thoroughness often lacking in home-made engine trades. While the beefier drivetrain components and body modifications do add to an already weighty car, the increased power output is more than adequate to handle that extra handicap.

For extra chassis stiffening, heavier rocker panels have been installed and front side rails have been extended. Fairlane/Meteor-type torque boxes have been built into the underbody, between inner and outer side rails at the rear of the front wheel wells. Suspension components, front and rear, have been stiffened and Meteor spindles provide greater front wheel bearing surface. The spring towers and the diagonal braces running from them to the cowl have heavier gauge metal and bracing, a move which contributes in surprising measure to the decrease in body lean. Comet spring dimensions (unlike Falcon) are retained but rates are increased to cope with the additional 175-lb. (V-8 and power steering) weight. Where front spring rate normally is 220 lb./in. at the pad for 1300 lb., it now is 262 for 1445 lb. Comet's 5-leaf rear springs, normally rated 75 lb./in. for 635-665 lb., are stiffened to 85 for the same weight range.

A straddle-mounted pinion, with bearing support on both sides of the gear, is incorporated in the rear axle. Axle shafts have been borrowed from the Econoline truck. By installing 7.00



FALCON DOORS fit Comet with hastily attached rib.



SLANTBACK roofline was marred by flaking paint over weld.

by 13 tires, Mercury has slightly increased slip angles and to a degree improved road adhesion in the Sportster. These are, it should be noted, mounted on stronger 5-bolt wheels; optional 6.50 by 14 tires with 4.5-in. rims extend this benefit even further.

Brake drums of 10-in. diameter replace the Comet 9-in. units, increasing the swept area from 212 to 251.3 sq. in. This brings the car's stopping power closer to what it should be, considering its weight. During our tests and in ordinary day-to-day driving, we found

the brakes to be adequate; yet we couldn't help thinking covetously of the Meteor wagon brakes with longer and wider shoes and a total of 314.2 sq. in. swept area.

Several things continually remind the driver that the Sportster, despite its name, is not particularly sporting in nature. To be sure, in overall performance (or, as FoMoCo says, "total performance") it is a vast improvement over the 6-cyl. Comets. There is a noticeable improvement in stability and less body lean with which to contend. Cornering is more acceptable and the brakes are adequate. Acceleration is equal to the task imposed by freeway on-ramps and boulevard traffic signals. Combining all this with the longer 114-in. wheelbase and extra weight results in a basic automobile much as it should be. The ride is both comfortable and controllable, interesting in view of the determination of some other auto makers to sacrifice the latter to achieve the former.

Our test car was fitted with the newly available power-assisted steering, and while it eased the effort of steering considerably we found some drawbacks. It had no discernible self-centering action after a turn, it cut turns only to 4.4 (from 4.7 with manual) which is still a lot of winding, and its throttle-kicker switch continually "spooked" staffers by increasing engine idle speed while reversing out of a diagonal parking slot (when the wheel was cramped around).

The Sportster has the S-22 trim, making it the top of the line in plushness. The omnipresent bucket seats have an in-between knick-knack bin in front and an unusual rearward rake about the backs. This keeps the steering wheel at arm's length, where it should be, and also makes headroom

seem a lot better than it really is. It also encourages an attitude of looking down one's nose while driving and tends to become a bit tiring. Since it is such an easily remedied thing, we can't really fault the car on this point. The rear seat is quite another matter, however. The bench is so short and knee-room so precious that an almost doubled-up position is necessary here for any but the most short-legged.

Upholstering is in black and white vinyl, with what appears to be a slim strap running down the centerline of the front seats (two at the rear). It is matched in tastelessness only by the instrument cluster, a silvered plastic molding with a studied busyness about it that is almost hypnotic. Under the dashboard, wires and levers and such dangle in plain view, and the fiberboard kick panels at each side are so ill-fitting that they appear to be from some other car.

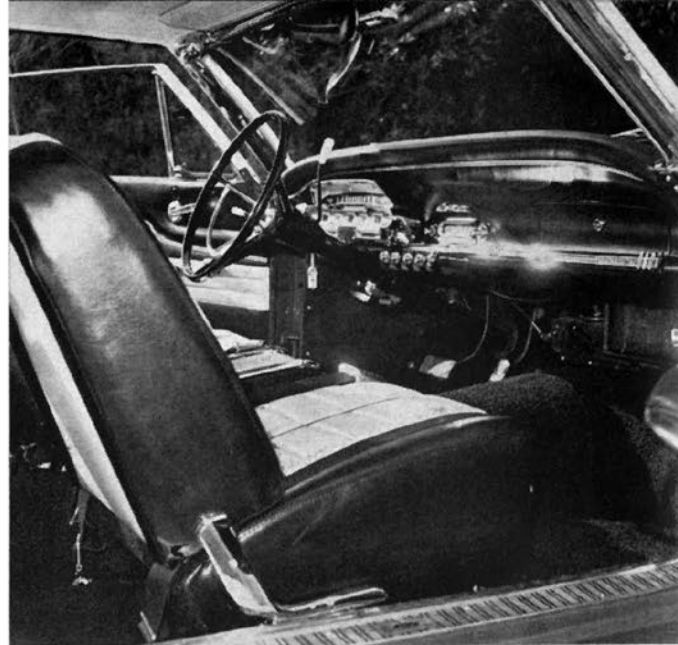
It has always seemed that Mercury stylists must have labored long to come out with such a homely car. The so-called "fastback" roof line represents an improvement in looks, although the better airflow might still be debated. The top half of the car does appear more fleet, but not quite enough to overcome the drawbacks inherent in the lower half styling. Our test car also displayed an unhappy flaking in the paint at each side where the new sloping rear quarter panels were mated to the rear deck. Such cheapness, we felt, was completely unjustified in a car that isn't really inexpensive. Like the Falcon Sprint, the slant back increases visibility by adding some 200 sq. in. of glass area at the rear.

It is unfortunate that Ford's much-better 3-speed automatic transmission is not available for this engine in this car. The 2-speed unit lacks the flexi-





CHROME-SPLASHED front end is now lightened with power steering.



INTERIOR combines the well-done with half-done.

Comet S-22

bility that is necessary to realize the full potential of this new engine. With that in mind, our recommendation would have to be for the 4-speed manual transmission. The familiar Warner T-10 unit, it uses the 2.73:1 series of gears in the Sprint/Sportster application and is the best compromise for best performance with this vehicle.

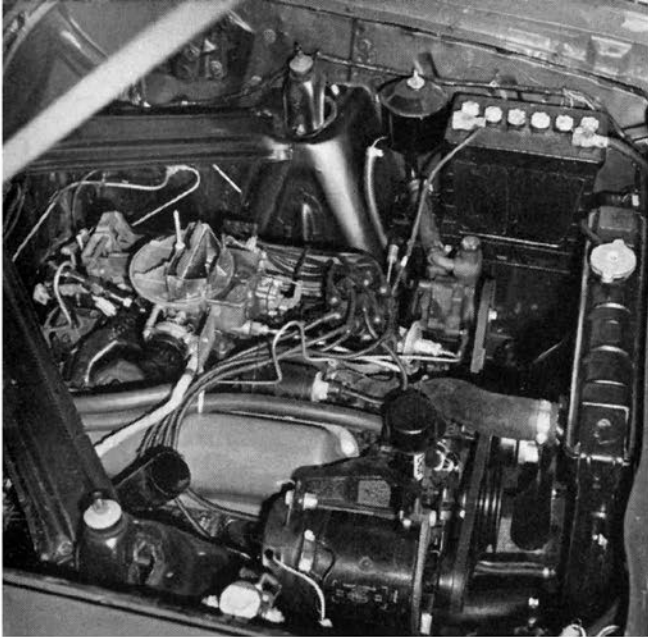
While not quite as flexible, Ford's new 3-speed manual transmission with synchromesh low would be our second choice. It has ratios of 3.02:1—first, 1.84:1—second, and 1.00:1—third. Both manual transmissions come with floor-mounted shift levers, of interest to the performance conscious.

It is worth noting that the Sportster

has a relatively large trunk capacity by virtue of the car's greater (than Falcon) rear overhang. With the improved over-the-road character of the V-8-equipped car, the extra trunk space can well be put to use by Comet owners who no longer need dread cross-country trips.

The engine, in the final analysis, adds some much-needed personality to the Comet (and of course the Falcon) and helps lift the car above the basic transportation category which has been its fate since its debut. The slantback





NESTLING under hood is 260-cu. in. V-8.



ROOMY TRUNK will be welcome for long-range touring.

roofline, while perhaps not quite enough, does make an interesting departure in styling for the car that could

spur on showroom interest. Had Mercury gone just a bit further and cleaned up the debris-like over-ornamentation

on the car, it might well have produced a Grand Prix for the compact car set. ■

CAR LIFE ROAD TEST



1963 MERCURY COMET S-22 Sportster V-8

SPECIFICATIONS

List price	\$2594
Price, as tested	3182
Curb weight, lb.	2985
Test weight	3320
distribution, %	56.5/53.5
Tire size	7.00-13
Tire capacity, lb.	3680
Brake lining area	251
Engine type	V-8, ohv
Bore & stroke	3.80 x 2.87
Displacement, cu in.	260
Compression ratio	8.70
Carburetion	1 x 2
Bhp @ rpm	164 @ 4400
equivalent mph	97.0
Torque, lb-ft	258 @ 2200
equivalent mph	48.5

EXTRA-COST OPTIONS

Radio, auto. trans., wsw tires, seat belts, outside mirror, power steering, power brakes.

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in.	114.0
Tread, f and r	55.0/54.5
Over-all length, in.	194.8
width	70.4
height	54.5
equivalent vol, cu ft.	433
Frontal area, sq ft.	21.4
Ground clearance, in.	5.9
Steering ratio, o/a	27.0
turns, lock to lock	4.6
turning circle, ft.	39.9
Hip room, front	2 x 21.0
Hip room, rear	52.0
Pedal to seat back, max.	40.0
Floor to ground	10.0
Luggage vol, cu ft.	15.5
Fuel tank capacity, gal.	14.0

GEAR RATIOS

3rd (n.a.), overall	n.a.
2nd (1.00)	3.25
1st (1.82)	5.92
1st (1.82 x 2.05)	12.1

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4650), mph	103
3rd ()	
2nd ()	
1st (4200)	51

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph, actual	29.6
60 mph	59.0
90 mph	90.0

ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec	5.0
0-40	7.5
0-50	10.5
0-60	14.5
0-70	18.1
0-80	23.0
0-90	30.6
Standing ¼ mile	19.3
speed at end	72.5

CALCULATED DATA

Lb/hp (test wt)	20.2
Cu ft/ton mile	123
Mph/1000 rpm	22.1
Engine revs/mile	2720
Piston travel, ft/mile	1295
Car Life wear index	35.2

PULLING POWER

70 mph, max gradient, %	10.5
50 mph	14.5
30 mph	27.0
Total drag at 60 mph, lb.	150

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Normal range, mpg	16-19
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