



CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

PONTIAC FIREBIRD 400

Another candidate for the Mustang's sporty-car crown hits the pavement. Will it succeed? Only the Youth Market knows for sure.

Frankly, the announcement of Pontiac's new Firebird was celebrated around the *Car and Driver* office with immoderate periods of yawning and thumb-twiddling. How could we get all turned on about another Mustang-hunter? Detroit had already bombarded the American public with such imitation Mustangs as the Cougar, the Barracuda and the Camaro, and one more candidate for the sporty-car crown—Pontiac or no Pontiac—promised to be just another variation on what was becoming a tedious theme.

These were altogether reasonable reservations, especially after we learned that the Firebird was, in fact, a last-minute conversion of the Camaro, begun by Pontiac engineers and stylists in mid-'66. Having been handed the basic General Motors "F-body" employed for the Camaro, the Pontiac people had no choice but to utilize the sheet metal designed for Chevrolet Division's product. Time was so critical that Pontiac was forced to stick with the Camaro's interior fittings, right down to the door handles and instrument bezels. New sheet metal could be used on the hood, grille and tail light panel, but that was all.

This meant that the Firebird's identity as a Pontiac product would have to be established in a new and wholly original way. So the men who manage the Pontiac Division of General Motors—men who are among the most aggressive and creative in the business—made a last-ditch effort to inject some energy and excitement into what appeared to be a lame-duck Chevy offspring.

There was extra incentive behind Pontiac's desire to make the Firebird into something special. For years—in fact, since before Ford's Mustang was introduced—Pontiac had reportedly been trying to talk the GM biggies into letting them

swing with a small, four-place sports-type car. But GM's hierarchy was never able to muster up sufficient nerve to give Pontiac the all-clear, so they sat around like a club full of dumbfounded Colonel Blimps while the Mustang caved in the roof. The ensuing panic over the Mustang rebellion prompted GM to hand Chevy the Camaro. Pontiac was only brought into the picture as a sort of backstop for Chevrolet. A great many management people in Detroit would have simply rolled over and died at this point, but the Pontiac guys decided they would take the F-body, Chevy legacy and all, and raise a little hell, in the Pontiac tradition, in the new sporty-car market.

Pontiac's first decision was to market the Firebird (née Panther, and at one point named the Banshee, until somebody discovered Banshee meant "bird of death") as five basic cars with five basic drive trains.

The Firebird Six is the bottom-of-the-line model, equipped with a single-carb edition of Pontiac's overhead-cam engine. This is followed, in the price structure, by the sportier Firebird Sprint, with the four-barrel, 215-horsepower ohc six, and the floor-mounted 3-speed manual (4-speed or 2-speed automatic optional). Next comes the tame-but-torquey Firebird 326, with its proved, obedient V-8, and its more powerful counterpart, the 326 HO (High Output), which features a 4-barrel carb, dual exhausts and a racy stripe down the side. Its rated horsepower is low enough so that the insurance companies won't choke up, and Pontiac is aiming this car specifically at the youth market. At the top of the five-car line-up is the Firebird 400, powered by the gutsy 400 cu. in. GTO engine, with either a floor-mounted 4-speed or 3-speed Turbo

Hydra-Matic automatic transmission options.

All of these cars are marketed with the new Firestone Wide Oval tires as standard equipment. This brand of rubber is being used not only to increase performance, but also to enhance the appearance of the car. Pontiac's stylists were displeased at the contrast of the Camaro's bulging body lines with its skinny, standard-equipment tires, and opted for the wider-profile Firestones. To further enliven the Firebird's appearance, the Chevrolet springs were altered to make the Firebird sit substantially lower than the Camaro. In addition, all of the Firebird models, except the single-carb six, have traction arms to keep the wobbly Chevy II single-leaf-spring suspension in place. Big, finned brake drums, front and rear, are delivered on all of the lines except the 400, which is being marketed exclusively with Delco-Moraine front discs. Our test car, which had been used for engineering tests, was equipped with drum brakes at the front, which were obviously not as effective as discs would have been.

The car we tested was a special version of the 400 (a hopped-up street racer called the "Ram-Air," complete with special hood scoops). It was immediately apparent that a reasonably successful job had been done in giving the Firebird a personality of its own, although in profile it is barely distinguishable from a Camaro. The traditional Pontiac split grille has been integrated into a bold front-end treatment that features a sharp-edged snout and a bumper that doubles as the outer perimeter of the grille. This entire unit is five inches longer than the Camaro nose, and accounts for most of the Firebird's extra length. Another two inches has been added to the back.

The powerplant is decidedly Pon-

PHOTOGRAPHY: M. BRADY



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tac's. It's the direct descendant of the 389 V-8 that single-handedly propelled Pontiac into its present high-performance image, and now offered in 400 cu. in., 4-barrel carburetor trim. A corporation edict last year limited GM's sporty cars to four carburetor throats, thereby dooming Pontiac's fun-and-games three-deuces set-up. Gone is that cataclysmic yowling sound prompted by all six throats opening at once, and with it the ensuing jolt of vicious acceleration, but the 400 still has adequate suds for most earth-bound creatures.

Our car carried the Muncie gearbox with a neat Hurst-substitute linkage from GM. This linkage was called into service because the Firebird's development period was so brief that the famous Hurst shifter couldn't be adapted in time. They'll be used next year, says Pontiac. Power was transmitted through a 3.90 rear axle ratio, which is well suited for releasing inhibitions at stoplights, but lousy for normal driving because it's too tight a gear. The body is well insulated and the noise is limited to a pleasant mechanical roar and a hearty rumble from the exhaust, but the high gearing forces one to run at a Sprite-like 3150 rpm while cruising at 60 mph. This borders on the asinine for anyone seriously contemplating high-speed travel and economy.

In order to bring the weight distribution to tolerable levels (53/47%), Pontiac engineers moved the Firebird's engine back several inches from the position occupied by the Camaro's 327-350 engines. We expected that this would create an outsized transmission bulge on the front floor, but it was not the case. In fact, there is plenty of room for both driver and front-seat passenger, though rear-seat foot room is admittedly limited (though still far more capacious than several European cars that lay claim to being four-seaters. The one drawback in placing the engine so far rearward is the fact that the distributor is tucked up against the firewall, making maintenance the sole province of double-jointed mechanics.

Because Detroit was assaulted by an early-season snowstorm during our stint with the Firebird, we had only a limited opportunity to evaluate its handling. However, several very salient impressions reached us through the snowflakes. First, we at no time were conscious of the great bulk of the engine up front. The understeer, which was inevitable, was less than we had expected, and was completely within the realm of controllability. More important, though, the awesome rear axle tramp that was evident in our first Camaro test (*C/D*, November 1966) seems to have been almost eliminated by the

traction arms. A certain amount of rear-wheel thumping and banging can be induced by drag-racing-type starts, but, like the understeer, it remains within the limits of control for the average driver.

We were immediately impressed by the solidity of the Firebird's suspension, and the tight, integrated feel of the car, even at speeds approaching 100 mph. On a purely subjective basis, our test car felt more stiffly sprung than the Cougars, Camaros and Barracudas we've driven, but the overall driving impression was essentially the same as that found in the other cars of this class. Aside from its tremendous edge in power and torque (capable of accelerating the car smoothly from 10 mph in fourth gear), the Firebird has no vivid characteristics that would set it

apart from the rest of the new breed.

If the Pontiac entry has an edge over its sporty-car contemporaries, it is the aura of excitement created by its overall boldness. Only Pontiac would have the audacity to plant an optional tachometer in a waterproof pod out on the hood; only Pontiac would make high-performance tires standard throughout the line; only Pontiac offers two kinds of styled custom wheels for the Firebird at a ridiculously low cost; and only Pontiac has developed a truly contemporary six-cylinder engine for this kind of automobile.

It is this brand of freshness and the willingness to modify the dull, gutless tradition of the world's automakers for making so-called "new" cars out of old components, that makes Pontiac General Motors' most visible division. Other automakers

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bitterly accuse Pontiac of achieving a performance image through overblown advertising claims and shameless, cornball sales pitches, but the fact remains that Pontiacs do have a flair the others don't have, and Pontiacs, like it or not, do go fast. No matter how barbaric an automotive accomplishment some purists may consider this, you'd better believe it sells, baby. And in Detroit, that's the name of the game.

In terms of interior appointments, visibility, instrumentation, and so on, the Firebird is still a Camaro. Pontiac had to content itself with adding a couple of rings of brightwork around the two main instrument circles and the random placement of a few Navajo-inspired emblems (dubbed the "Hamtramck Crow" by Pontiac insiders). An optional instrument cluster is avail-

able for the dashboard (the Camaro's optional instrumentation package is mounted just above the console).

The seats are wholly a Camaro legacy, and fall somewhat short of the optimum. Side support is below par and the padding, springing, etc., are not adequate to prevent aches and pains on long hauls.

The Camaro's mediocre forward visibility is virtually unchanged, thanks to the low windshield and high dash cowling, which give the driver a vantage only slightly wider than a pillbox gunport. To make matters worse, the wipers miss a large portion of glass in the right and left corners of the windshield, making wet and snowy weather a major headache.

The Firebird's substantial front
(Text continued on page 100;
Specifications overleaf)



PONTIAC FIREBIRD 400

Manufacturer: Pontiac Motor Division
General Motors Corp.
Pontiac, Michigan

Number of dealers in U.S.: 3450

Vehicle type: Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger sports sedan, all-steel integral body/chassis with front sub-frame

Price as tested: N.A.
(Prices for the Firebird models had not been released by the manufacturer at press time. Our unofficial estimate would be ca.\$4000.00, as our test car was equipped.)

Options on test car: "Muncie" close-ratio 4-speed transmission, limited-slip differential, power steering, power brakes, hood-mounted tachometer, custom interior, Rally II wheels, instrument cluster (oil pressure, fuel level and water temperature gauges, ammeter); heavy duty radiator, viscous fan drive, AM radio, simulated wood-rim steering wheel

ENGINE

Type: Water-cooled V-8, cast iron block and head, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke... 4.12 x 3.75 in, 104.7 x 95.3 mm
Displacement... 400 cu in, 6560 cc
Compression ratio... 10.75 to one
Carburetion... 1 x 4-bbl Rochester Quadrajet
Valve gear... Pushrod-operated overhead valves, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE)... 325 bhp @ 4800 rpm
Torque (SAE)... 410 lbs/ft @ 3400 rpm
Specific power output... 0.81 bhp/cu in, 49.5 bhp/liter
Max. recommended engine speed... 5300 rpm

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission: 4-speed manual, all-synchro
Clutch diameter... 10.4 in
Final drive ratio... 3.90 to one

| Gear Ratio | Mph/1000 rpm | Max. test speed |
|------------|--------------|--------------------|
| I 2.20 | 8.6 | 51 mph (6000 rpm) |
| II 1.64 | 11.5 | 69 mph (6000 rpm) |
| III 1.28 | 14.8 | 89 mph (6000 rpm) |
| IV 1.00 | 19.0 | 114 mph (6000 rpm) |

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase... 108.1 in
Track... F: 59.0 in, R: 60.0 in
Length... 188.8 in
Width... 72.6 in
Height... 51.5 in
Ground clearance... 5.4 in
Curb weight... 3598 lbs
Test weight... 3895 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R... 57.0/43.0%
Lbs/bhp (test weight)... 12.0
Battery capacity... 12 volts, 61 amp/hr
Alternator capacity... 444 watts
Fuel capacity... 18.5 gal
Oil capacity... 6.0 qts
Water capacity... 17.8 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., unequal length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle, single-leaf springs, twin trailing links

STEERING

Type... Recirculating ball
Turns lock-to-lock... 4.5
Turning circle... 38.4 ft

BRAKES

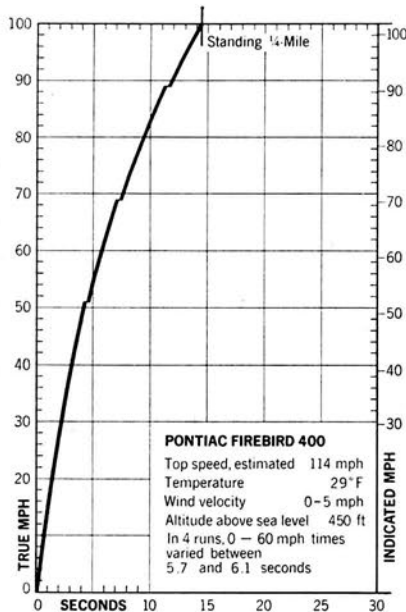
F: 9.5 x 2.5-in. finned bi-metal drums
R: 9.5 x 2.0-in. finned bi-metal drums
Swept area... 269.2 sq in

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size and type... 6.0JK x 14-in pressed steel disc, 5-bolt
Tire make, size and type... Firestone E70-14 Super Sports Wide Oval, 2-ply nylon tubeless
Test inflation pressures... F: 30 psi, R: 30 psi
Tire load rating... 1190 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

PERFORMANCE

| Zero to | Seconds |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 30 mph | 2.2 |
| 40 mph | 3.2 |
| 50 mph | 4.3 |
| 60 mph | 5.8 |
| 70 mph | 7.4 |
| 80 mph | 9.5 |
| 90 mph | 11.6 |
| 100 mph | 14.4 |
| Standing 1/4-mile | 14.4 sec @ 100 mph |
| 80-0 mph | 2.99 ft (.72 G) |
| Fuel mileage | 10-14 mpg on premium fuel |
| Cruising range | 185-259 mi |



CHECK LIST

ENGINE

Starting... Good
Response... Very Good
Vibration... Very Good
Noise... Fair

DRIVE TRAIN

Shift linkage... Very Good
Synchro action... Excellent
Clutch smoothness... Excellent
Drive train noise... Good

STEERING

Effort... Poor
Response... Very Good
Road feel... Poor
Kickback... Good

SUSPENSION

Ride comfort... Very Good
Roll resistance... Very Good
Pitch control... Very Good
Harshness control... Very Good

HANDLING

Directional control... Excellent
Predictability... Very Good
Evasive maneuverability... Very Good
Resistance to sidewinds... Very Good

BRAKES

Pedal pressure... Good
Response... Good
Fade resistance... Good
Directional stability... Fair

CONTROLS

Wheel position... Good
Pedal position... Fair
Gearshift position... Very Good
Relationship... Fair
Small controls... Good

INTERIOR

Ease of entry/exit... Fair
Noise level (cruising)... Good
Front seating comfort... Fair
Front leg room... Fair
Front head room... Fair
Front hip/shoulder room... Good
Rear seating comfort... Poor
Rear leg room... Poor
Rear head room... Poor
Rear hip/shoulder room... Fair
Instrument comprehensiveness... Very Good
Instrument legibility... Good

VISION

Forward... Fair
Front quarter... Good
Side... Very Good
Rear quarter... Poor
Rear... Fair

WEATHER PROTECTION

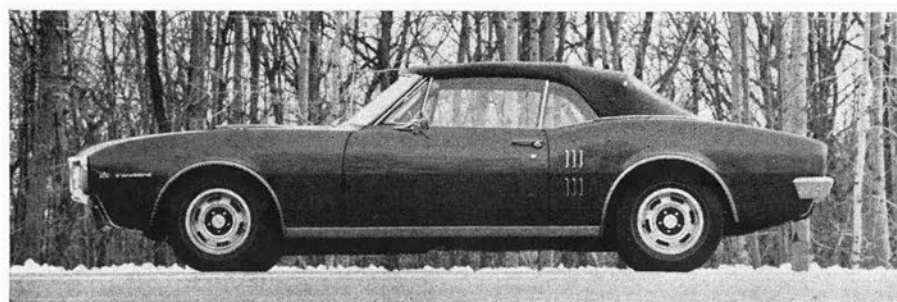
Heater/defroster... Very Good
Ventilation... Fair
Weather sealing... Good

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY

Sheet metal... Very Good
Paint... Very Good
Chrome... Very Good
Upholstery... Fair
Padding... Good
Hardware... Fair

GENERAL

Headlight illumination... Very Good
Parking and signal lights... Fair
Wiper effectiveness... Fair
Service accessibility... Poor
Trunk space... Poor
Interior storage space... Fair
Bumper protection... Poor



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PONTIAC FIREBIRD 400

(continued from page 31)

overhang, coupled with its pointy nose, makes it particularly vulnerable to minor front-end denting during parking maneuvers.

Pontiac has done a creditable job of breathing the Division's heady personality into a car that, for now, at least, is outwardly Chevrolet's product. We are confident that next year, with several months to shape the F-body to their own requirements, Pontiac's Firebird has an excellent chance of turning into a wholly distinctive member of the Detroit sporty-car set. Pontiac has an image to protect with thousands of their own enthusiasts—so you'd better believe the Firebird's on the way. **c/d**

DENBEIGH SUPER-CHAUVINIST

(continued from page 51)

Super-Chauvinist.

To leave the boot free for larger loads, the jack is stored in a bracket under the fascia, on the passenger's side—handy for emergencies, save for the fact that it is trapped by the handbrake shaft. Denbeighs report that the handbrake mechanism can be quickly disassembled, however, and since it will not be required during the time the jack is in use, all works out well in the end.

While fuel consumption hovered around 11 miles per gallon for our entire test, it should in fairness be mentioned that the engine was new and therefore somewhat "thirstier" than normal, and that a mere 1300 miles' driving, some of it at 35-mph-plus speeds, may not be a comprehensive indicator of true mileage. Those who make petrol economy a major concern might benefit from an ingenious tactic practised by Denbeigh's own Chief Engineer. Faced with long or difficult motoring, he often drives to a neighborhood garage, parks his car, and makes use of Britain's excellent rail or bus networks. This has the double virtue of saving petrol costs and wear-and-tear on the car's working components, and with the chaotic traffic conditions rampant throughout most of modern-day England, such arrangements, undertaken on a broad scale, might bring about a drastic and long-sought change in circumstances. Sitting warm and snug in a garage, our test staff unanimously agreed, the Denbeigh Super-Chauvinist Mk. VII is without fudging the full equal of any car made in Britain or the outside world today. **c/d**