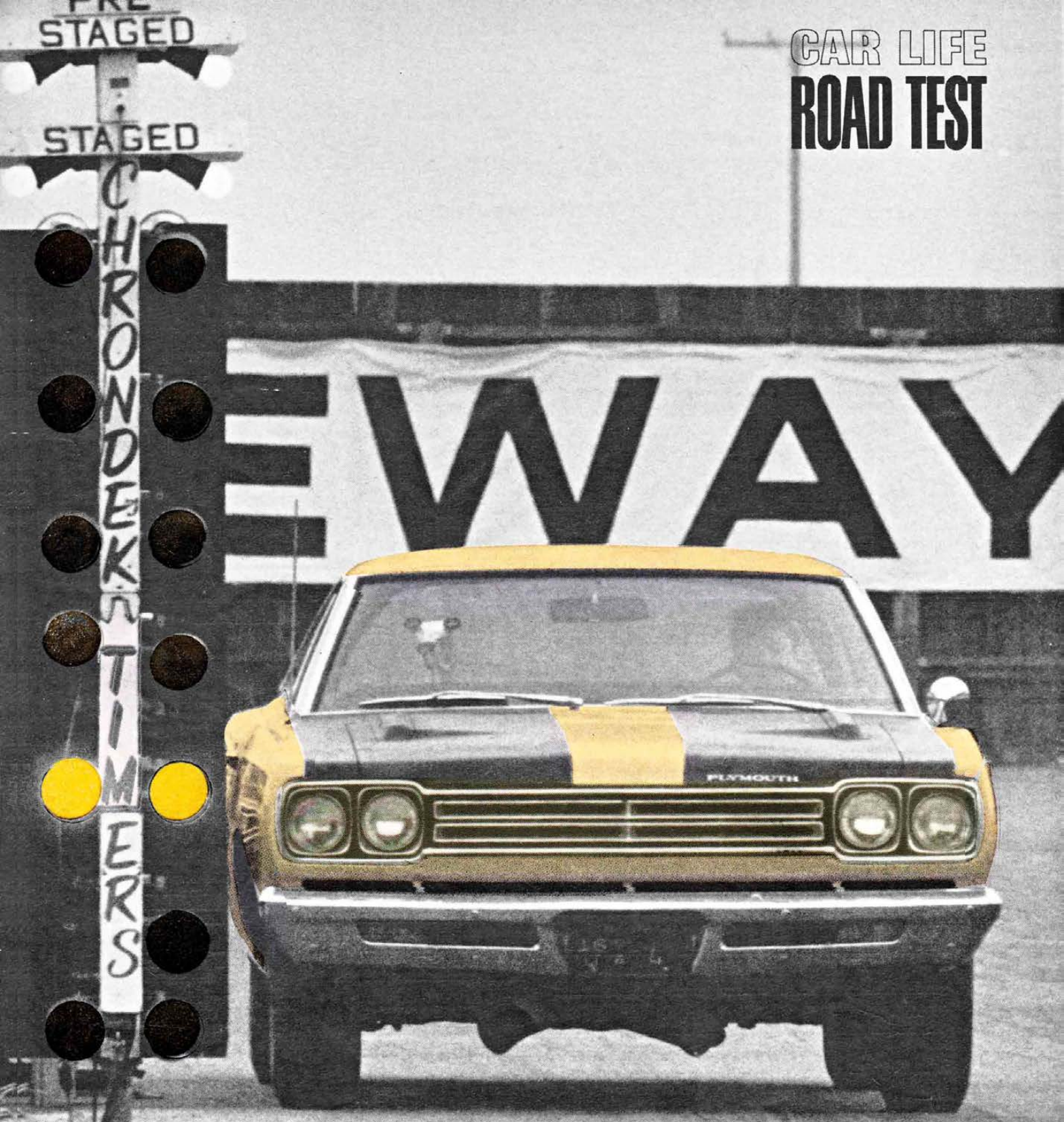


ROAD RUNNER

Put your money where your heart is—under the hood—and make the original budget Supercar live up to its promise

EXPLOSION IN BUDGET SUPERCARS

THE ROAD RUNNER as a sales statistic has been a success, indeed. As a concept, though, we've always felt it failed a little in spirit.

In its first year, youth rallied to the original Road Runner concept—an inexpensive, sleeper Supercar. Only the insiders would recognize the skinny bird decal, and know that under the sheetmetal, the very plain Belvedere breathed fire. There was, at first, an almost-secret cult built around the Road Runner. And it is as a *sleeper* that the Road Runner concept failed. First to go was the sleeper facade—matte black hoods and orange hood scoops do not a grandmother's car make. Ask any cop.

And the econo-Supercar never did get off the ground. Three grand would buy a plain-jane Belvedere with a 383-cid engine—but only mid-90 quarter-mile speeds. With that kind of performance a lot of GTOs and a sharp '57 Chevrolet could blow the Road Runner's image. Order the 426 Hemi engine, then? Sure, and blow the economy package.

CAR LIFE's running battle with factory public relations men is to keep them from "doctoring" a car before we get it (we can tell) or for trying to supply outright hot rods. Agreed, fast quarter-mile times look good in print (and some magazines rightly base their entire tests on a running dragstrip competition among the various makes of cars). We don't, and for good reason. When we test a "stock" car, we mean showroom stock—not NHRA-stock which allows unlimited amounts spent on tuning and fiddling, plus blueprinting to a hair's breadth within factory specs.

We broke the rule this time. And it will be a long time before we do it again. But to prove there's still a way to get Supercar performance from a budget car (the Road Runner we tested last year wasn't all that swift), we took a gamble. Would readers understand that we haven't gone into the business of testing pure hot rods, if we ran one through the same sort of tests purely street cars get? "Sure," we said hopefully (and with a little dread if they misunderstood our purpose).

So we took on a souped up Road Runner. The only purpose: To test a car with the performance of a Hemi, but at a lower price than the Hemi package, and with readily available parts.

The car began as a typical 383 Road Runner with a four-speed transmission, high-performance axle group (Hemi suspension and 3.90:1 rear axle), and a cold-air hood. For this, the sticker price is roughly $3300.

Then Plymouth sent the car to a speed shop where a high-rise Edelbrock manifold with a 780-cfm Holley carb, a set of tuned length Hooker headers; and a high-performance factory cam were installed. The cost was roughly $500. Not bad when the street Hemi option in the same car runs well over $700.

With the headers capped and street tires, our newly hopped up test car turned times of 14.7 sec. in the quarter with a top speed of 100.4 mph. Compare that with the dead stock 'Runner we tested last May that turned a 15.37-sec. quarter at 91.4 mph. Now we were talking the language of the young guys again.

Surely, the guy who'll spend the extra money and time for the equipment on our 'Runner plans on using the car at the drag strip, and will spend some more money for racing slicks. With headers uncapped and slicks in place, the car cut 0.6-sec. off the elapsed time and picked up 5 mph through the traps. That's Hemi country. The slicks should be mandatory for the strip. On street tires, the added power couldn't be used. The 'Runner had to be eased off the line, and elapsed times suffered for it. Snap shifts also loosened the bite—at each shift.

Okay, now we had a drag racer, and had to drive it on the street. We quickly found it was (1) fun, (2) we didn't mind the slightly lopey cam. Actually it was no different from a standard 383. Once in a while it was necessary to dust off the plugs, and we had to pay attention to starts so we wouldn't bog or squeal. But, best of all, it was a *real* sleeper. It could have been a great Hemi baiter at the stop lights. (But that doesn't follow. Ever hear of birds stalking their own kind?)

Handling was well above what we term average for a Supercar. The Hemi suspension genuinely helped the already-decent suspension characteristics of the stock Plymouth. Initially understeering, we'd try just a little and neutral steering was there—a characteristic we like. Try harder and it would oversteer, but we had to be really ambitious to get out of control. Key word was *predictability* as most corners could be taken as the situation required: Drive it in gently and proper, and blast it out early on the throttle; or dirt track it all the way around; or ▶

HIGH-PERFORMANCE rear axle group, including Hemi suspension, was a boon to the handling. Cornering was predictable and flat, yet ride was smooth.

PHOTOS BY GORDON CHITTENDEN

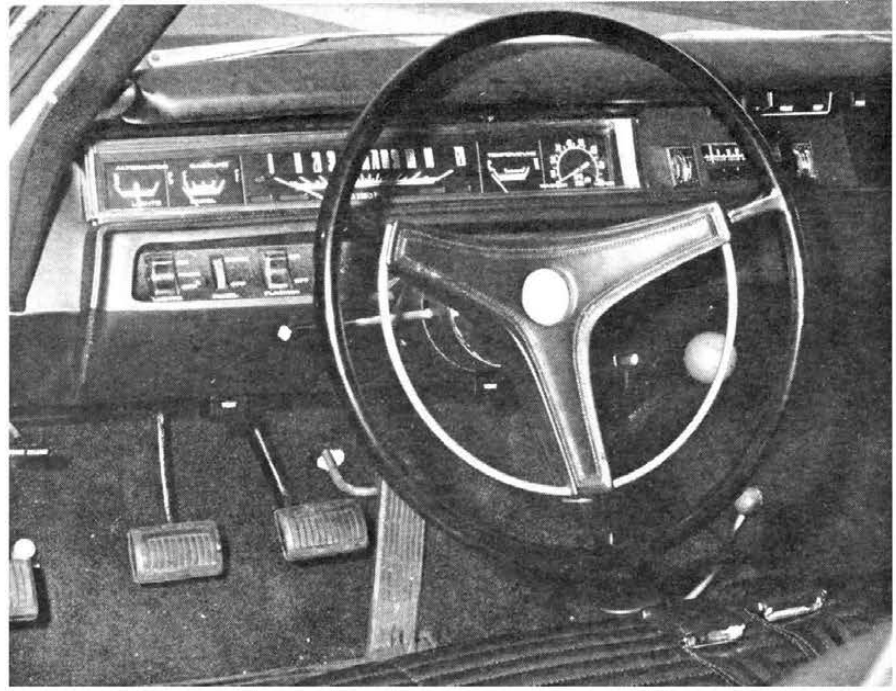
ROAD RUNNER

continued

if the fancy struck, pitch it in to scrub off speed, and power out when it slides into the proper attitude. Each could be executed with equal aplomb. With those characteristics, it is obvious that it was hard to get testers tired of driving around the handling course.

Unfortunately, as in our '68 test Road Runner, braking was not comensurate with the power and handling. The standard Road Runner package does not include discs (they have to be ordered as an option) and our test car needed them badly. Neither deceleative force nor fade resistance were acceptable for the performance potential. It's maximum deceleration rate in the CAR LIFE sequence of stops from 80 mph was only 22 ft./sec./sec. It only reached that reading once, fading to 18 ft./sec./sec. almost immediately.

We've never gotten used to the Chrysler four-speed. The sheer beef of the thing is certainly a boon to reliability, but when it comes to shifting like a "hot knife through butter" the GM or T-10 four-speeds are the winner every time. The box in our Road Runner was precise and road worthy, but the synchro balk rings had a mind of their own and it took a stronger arm than ours to make snap shifts. A Hurst positive reverse-lock-out shifter comes standard and while we found it great for keeping the drag shifts in the right place, it was a nuisance in the parking lot.



BUDGET BEGINS here. Plain dash is part of Road Runner's austerity program to save dollars for performance options. Program needs subsidy.

As for the slippery bench seat in front: surely some plain *bucket* seats could be incorporated into the package without cutting into the econo-car concept. A tachometer is a good investment, too, but the factory installed job is so small it's almost a joke.

1969 ROAD RUNNER

PLYMOUTH 2-DOOR

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in.	116.0
Track, f/r, in.	59.5/59.2
Overall length, in.	202.7
width	76.4
height	53.1
Front seat hip room, in.	56.0
shoulder room	58.1
head room	37.3
pedal-seatback, max.	39.0
Rear seat hip room, in.	60.0
shoulder room	58.1
leg room	33.1
head room	36.7
Door opening width, in.	46.0
Trunk liftover height, in.	26.0

PRICES

List, FOB factory	$2974
Equipped as tested	$3443+$450 perf. equip.

Options included: 4 speed trans., High-performance axle group, Hemi suspension, cool-air package, tach, power steering, dealer-installed cam.(Induction system, headers and slicks added after purchase price).

CAPACITIES

No. of passengers	5
Luggage space, cu. ft.	15.9
Fuel tank, gal.	19.0
Crankcase, qt.	4.0
Transmission/dif., pt.	7.5/4
Radiator coolant, qt.	17

CHASSIS/SUSPENSION

Frame type: Unitized.
Front suspension type: Independent by unequal length A-arms, longitudinal torsion bars, telescopic shock absorbers.

ride rate at wheel, lb./in.	111
antiroll bar dia., in.	0.94

Rear suspension type: Hotchkiss live axle, leaf springs, telescopic shock absorbers.

ride rate at wheel, lb./in.	138

Steering system: Integral assist recirculating ball.

overall ratio	18.8
turns, lock to lock	3.5
turning circle, ft. curb-curb	40.9
Curb weight, lb.	3645
Test weight	3940
Distribution, (driver), % f/r	56.4/43.6

BRAKES

Type: Cast iron drums front and rear.

Front drum, dia. x width, in.	11 x 3
Rear drum, dia. x width	11 x 2.5
total swept area, sq. in.	380.1

Power assist: Integral.

line psi at 100 lb. pedal	800

WHEELS/TIRES

Wheel rim size	14 x 5.5JK
optional size	15 x 6JJ
bolt no./circle dia. in.	5/4.5
Tires: Goodyear Wide Tread. size	F70-14
normal inflation, psi f/r	28/28
Capacity rating total lb psi	5600

ENGINE

Type, no. of cyl.	V-8
Bore x stroke, in.	4.25 x 3.38
Displacement, cu. in.	383
Compression ratio	10.0:1
Fuel required	premium
Rated bhp @ rpm	335 @ 5200 (st. ck) 365 @ 5600 (est)
equivalent mph	101
Rated torque @ rpm	425 @ 3200 (stock)
equivalent mph	62

Carburetion: Holley 1x4, on Edelbrock hi-rise manifold

throttle dia., pri./sec.	1.69/1.69

Valve train: Chrysler high-performance hydraulic camshaft (dealer installed option).

cam timing deg., int./exh.	36-68/80-24
duration, int./exh.	284/284

Exhaust system: Hooker "under the frame" Headers, detachable reverse-flow mufflers.

pipe dia., exh./tail	2.5/2.25
Normal oil press.@ rpm	45-65@ 2000
Electrical supply, V./amp.	12/37
Battery, plates/amp. hr.	66/59

DRIVE TRAIN

Clutch type: Single dry disc.

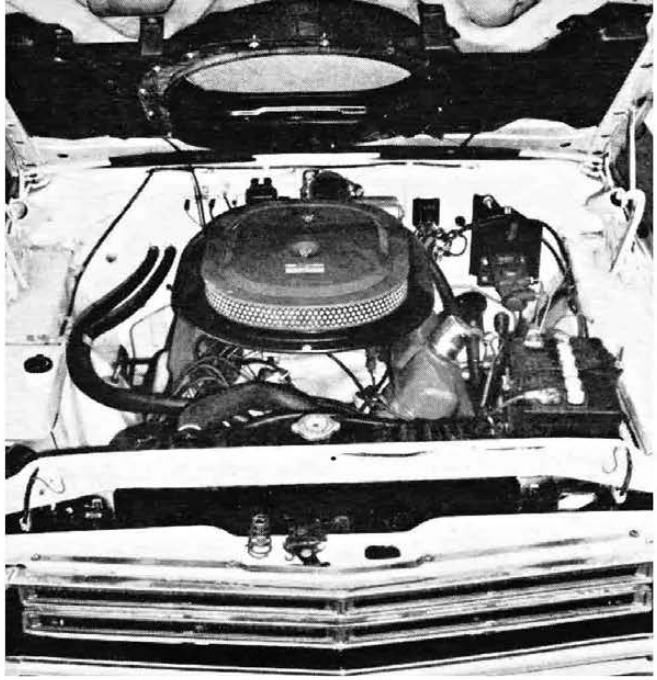
dia., in.	11

Transmission type: 4-speed, fully synchronized.

Gear ratio 4th (1.00:1) overall	3.90:1
3rd (1.39:1)	5.42:1
2nd (1.91:1)	7.45:1
1st (2.66:1)	10.39:1

Shift lever location: Floor.
Differential type: Hypoid, limited slip.

axle ratio	3.90:1



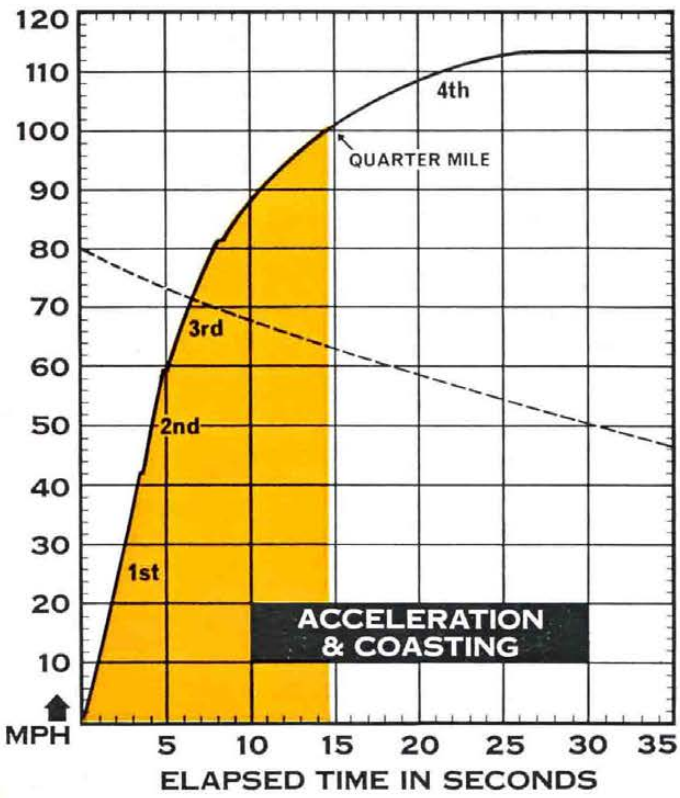
WARMED OVER to win you over. Holley, hi-rise Edelbrock, and headers are more apparent on the dragstrip.

BENCH SEATS may be cheap, but buckets are needed to cope with performance potential of car. These are slippery.

Obviously, interior appointments and noise level are not up to the standard America expects in its modern automobile. But then that's part of the Road Runner sacrifice for the performance value. Even more, it's part of the Cult. Same goes for fuel economy. If you're interested in that, you wouldn't be interested in the Road Runner.

The Road Runner concept has been a good one, all told, even if it does need some extra work to make it a thorough success. The following is loyal, happy, and proud. We found that driving one gives immediate identification as a member of an exclusive club—a "meep-meep" and a wave. Unfortunately our membership in that club must be in serious question by now. We weren't able to give the counter sign—our horn didn't work. ■

CAR LIFE ROAD TEST



CALCULATED DATA

Lb./bhp (test weight)	10.8
Cu. ft./ton mile	174
Mph/1000 rpm (high gear)	19.5
Engine revs/mile (60 mph)	3080
Piston travel, ft./mile	1733
CAR LIFE wear index	53.4
Frontal area, sq. ft.	22.5

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph, actual	38.2
40 mph	48.4
50 mph	58.9
60 mph	69.0
70 mph	79.1
80 mph	89.3
90 mph	99.4

MAINTENANCE

Engine oil, miles/days	4000/90
oil filter, miles/days	8000/180
Chassis lubrication, miles	36,000
Antismog servicing, type/miles	replace PCV/12,000; tune check/12,000.
Air cleaner, miles	replace/24,000
Spark plugs: Champion J-11Y. gap, (in.)	0.035
Basic timing, deg./rpm	TDC/900
max. cent. adv., deg./rpm	36/5000
max. vac. adv., deg./in. Hg.	21/16
Ignition point gap, in.	0.014
cam dwell angle, deg.	28
arm tension, oz.	17
Tappet clearance, int./exh.	0/0
Fuel pressure at idle, psi	3.5
Radiator cap relief press., psi	16

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (5800), mph	113
Test shift points (rpm) @ mph	
3rd to 4th (5800)	81.5
2nd to 3rd (5800)	59.5
1st to 2nd (5800)	42.5

ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec.	2.5
0-40 mph	3.3
0-50 mph	4.0
0-60 mph	5.1
0-70 mph	6.3
0-80 mph	7.8
0-90 mph	10.5
0-100 mph	14.4
Standing ¼-mile, sec.	14.7
speed at end, mph	100.6
Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.	3.8

BRAKING

Max. deceleration rate from 80 mph ft./sec./sec.	22
No. of stops from 80 mph (60-sec. intervals) before 20% loss in deceleration rate	2
Control loss?	Moderate.
Overall brake performance	poor

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Test conditions, mpg	9.4
Normal cond., mpg	12-14
Cruising range, miles	210-270