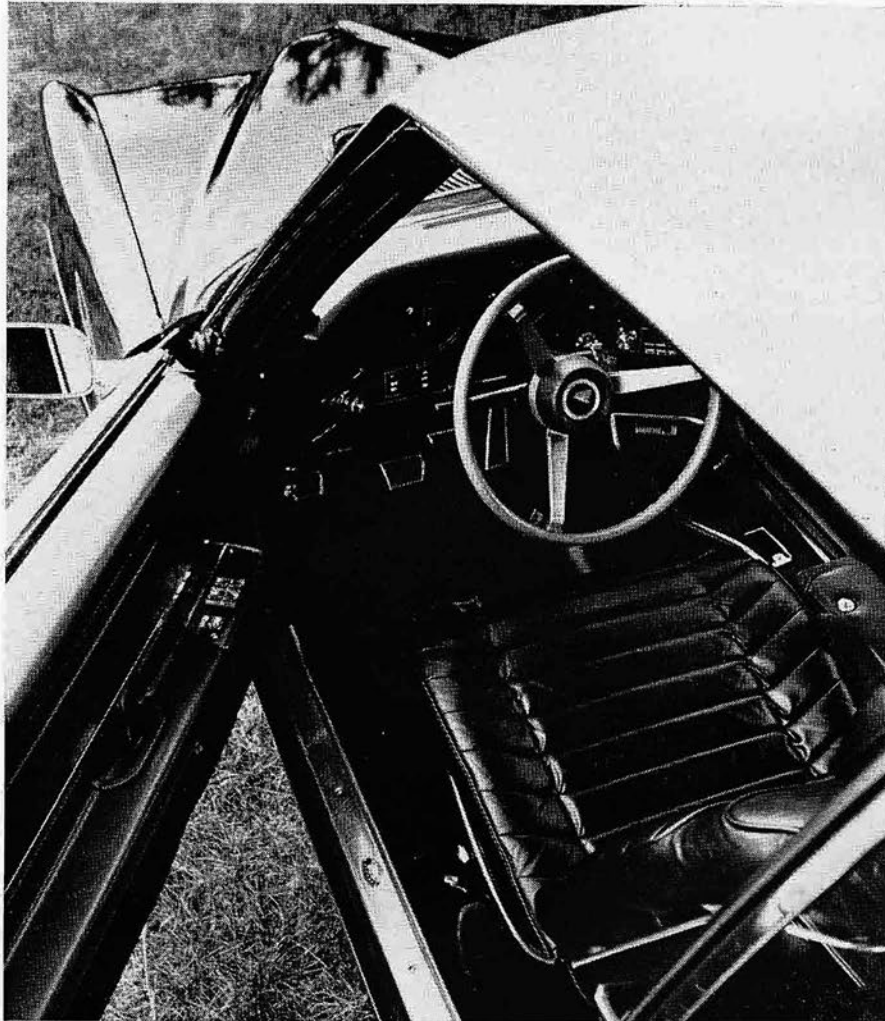


CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

Two Pontiac Grand Prix

Externally alike, one has the personality of a geisha . . . the other, a Bobcat.



Whether you win or lose doesn't really matter. Were you a memorable competitor? That's the key. Pontiac hasn't won any kind of race in years. Every time, it starts the sales race from its customary inside-of-the-second-row grid position and finishes in the same spot—a remarkable achievement considering that Pontiac is in no way a low-priced car. Even so, this isn't winning—although Dodge, Mercury or Plymouth would be ecstatic if they could just change places. So it's as we said, not winning doesn't make any difference. Everybody knows that Pontiac is there because it always does something obvious—something visual that nobody can

miss. Not tricks with the lower control arms or combustion chambers, because nearly everybody misses that. *Styling* is the way you become a memorable competitor and Pontiac has achieved its position of influence simply by shaping its cars like no one else in the business.

Effrontery is the requisite as much as anything, and Pontiac is stuffed with that. Take the Grand Prix for example. You are expected to know that it's a Pontiac so there are no labels anywhere on the car. If "Grand Prix" isn't a big enough hint you'll have to ask somebody. Leaders don't have to show no stinkin' badges. They are always recognized.

That's the way it is with the latest Grand Prix. Easily recognizable in an Eldorado sort of way—striking rather than beautiful. It will be memorable too, if for no other reason than the automotive buying public can now have an Eldorado-shaped car for half the money. It is a new shape for Pontiac: razor creases instead of swoopy curves and long hood/short deck proportions incorporated into a full-size car. And if the shape is a significant departure from the normal Pontiac theme, the size of the new Grand Prix is even more so. In the past, the GP was based on the Catalina with sheet metal and trim changes to distinguish between them. Now it is much more like a stretched-nose GTO. The wheelbase is 118 inches (three inches shorter than before), and the overall length has been reduced six inches to 210.2 inches. More than four inches have also been pared off the width so that it is now actually slightly narrower than the Tempest series. Interior space, with the exception of hip room, is virtually identical to the Tempest. Hip room is less by 2.2 inches in front and 5.6 inches at the rear, because of the thick padding.

All of this is to say that the GP is a long, narrow car with less rear leg room than a Toyota Corolla Sprinter. Why? Because it's a Detroit "sports car" which is licensed to use up 17.5 linear feet of roadway with barely enough interior space for four adults. From a conservation-of-resources point of view the Grand Prix is a waste.

Attractive styling precludes a useful rear seat only in Detroit. Assume though that you don't really need a rear seat, that a rear seat is just a place to throw your dirty shirts on the way to the laundry or to keep your umbrella on sunny days. What you *really* want is a car that says something when you drive up to the golf course or the ski lodge—makes the guys down at the office a bit envious when you pull out of the parking lot on Friday night. Now we are talking about things the Grand Prix can do with finesse. First, it's a Pontiac, and for some reason that's like being seen with a blonde—two notches on the right side of acceptable. And second, it really looks more like an Eldorado

You figure anything that looks so much like an Eldorado can't be *that* fast—and most of the time you'd be right, but watch out for strangers bearing "Bobcat" medallions.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE BUTER.

than a Pontiac—which is to say double the money. Which brings up an interesting point. If you've decided the Grand Prix is your kind of calling card, what *about* the tab? What good is the car if you don't have enough cash left over to make that skiing trip while it is still new?

The base price for the GP is \$3777—about a grand less than a Corvette and half again more than a Charger. If you play the options game close to the vest you can get by for \$4500, but you can also roll up a \$6000 total if you aren't careful because the GP's options appear to have somewhat inflated prices—like \$142.18 for a vinyl top.

Still there's a good side. By selecting the right options you've always been able to make what you want out of the sporty and intermediate size cars, but in the past no such solution was possible with bigger cars. In fact, the GP is the only car larger than the intermediates in which you can order a 4-speed manual transmission. And here is where we come in. Since you wouldn't want to make a mistake and order the wrong kind of Grand Prix, we've tested the extreme ends of the scale. The whole idea is to give you some idea what to expect.

Grand Prix comes in two denominations, J and SJ. The SJ is the premium one, with a 428 cu. in. engine, an automatic load-leveling system and a full set of gauges as standard equipment, so that is the logical choice for the opulent extreme. Add on all the power options, air conditioning and an automatic transmission and you've upped the price to \$5852. Even ersatz Eldorados don't come cheap.

The other extreme is performance. It may seem silly to try to build a Grand Prix into a racer—but then it might be fun too. So take the Model J, add the 428 HO engine with a 4-speed manual transmission, a 3.91 limited-slip differential, heavy duty suspension, disc brakes and fat G70 x 14 tires on 7-inch wheels. Admittedly, that kind of parts list looks like it would be more at home on a GTO but you can order every one of those items on a GP and Pontiac wouldn't have made them available if people didn't want them. There is one more thing. Since this is an extremist car why not go all the way? Royal Pontiac, a spirited dealer in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak, has been known to do things to Pontiac engines if properly approached. The proper approach in the case of the Grand Prix is \$200, and when you get the car back, half of the roof is painted white and there is a "Royal Bobcat" sign stuck on the door. That is the part you can see. The parts that you can't see are all inside the engine and you wouldn't believe them anyway.

Now there are two GPs. One is kind of a geisha girl in waiting who will tell you stories through her AM/FM/stereo radio and warm or cool you as required through her Automatic Temperature Control system. The other is a Bobcat. The difference

is astonishing. Two completely different personalities. The luxury GP is an indifferent automobile that makes very little fuss. It idles smoothly, allows very little road noise to filter into the interior and, in general, tries very hard to be an appliance rather than a car.

The Bobcat, being very much a lusty, sensual car, freely produces a heady mixture of growling exhaust and gear whine. You never forget that *you* are driving, and every little open space is an invitation for a recreational lunge to wipe out commuter boredom.

And no one on the outside has any reason, other than the "Bobcat" signs, to suspect—you want to talk about sleepers. Even as the driver, you don't suspect that this machine is as quick as it is. It *seems* strong but anything that looks like an Eldorado can't be too fast. With all the windows up it's deceptively quiet despite the high engine revs accompanying the 3.91 axle. The tip-off comes when you put the two cars side by side in the quarter. The Bobcat gets to the far end an easy 10 car lengths in the lead at 102 mph, with an elapsed time of 14 seconds flat—almost the equivalent of persuading a 4040-pound car to walk on water. Since the Bobcat has a manual transmission, the times vary considerably depending on how quickly you shift and how well you get launched. Fastest time recorded in the test was a 13.98 which easily puts this GP in the Super Car class.

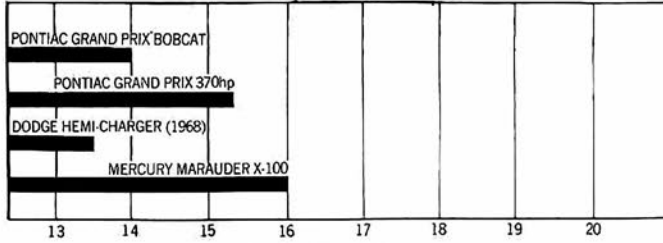
Don't assume that the phenomenal acceleration of the Bobcat precludes a tractable car. Starting was a questionable operation, particularly when hot, but once the engine is running, the problems are over. No flat spots were noticeable in the carburetion and the engine broadcasts no unpleasant mechanical noises. We are tempted to say it even lugs along in farm-tractor fashion.

According to Royal, the Bobcat consists more of fine tuning than of extensive modifications. The most important change is increasing the compression ratio to approximately 11.25-to-one by milling the heads and installing thin head gaskets. The carburetor and the distributor advance curve is recalibrated and lock nuts are installed on the rocker arms to provide positive adjustment. Other than that it is a matter of precise adjustments and, of course, knowing what to adjust and how much. Royal Pontiac obviously knows. Because of its eager camshaft, the manual transmission version of the 428 HO responds best to the Bobcat treatment (Pontiac traditionally uses tamer cams with its high-performance engine/automatic transmission combinations).

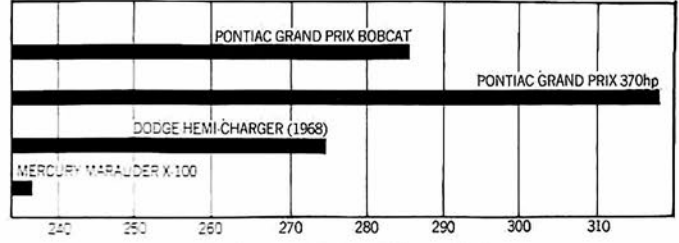
Despite all the fine tuning, the Bobcat's ignition system still gave up at about 5200 rpm even though the Royal mechanics swear on a stack of box-end wrenches that it should be good for at least 5700

(Text continued on page 82; Specifications overleaf)

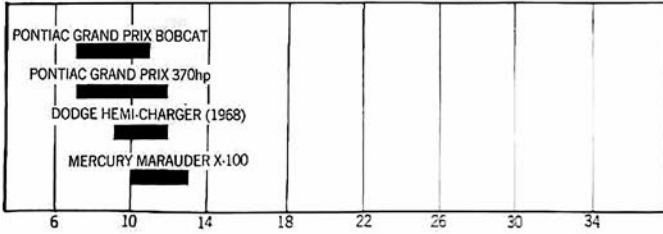
ACCELERATION standing 1/4 mile, seconds



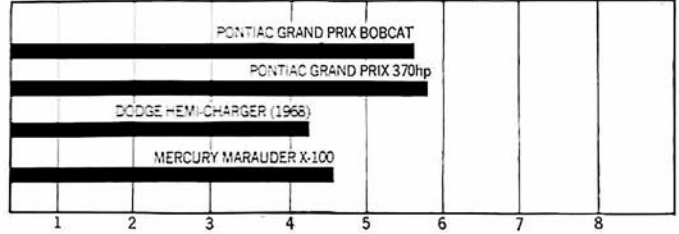
BRAKING 80-0 mph panic stop, feet



FUEL ECONOMY RANGE mpg



PRICE AS TESTED dollars x 1000



PONTIAC GRAND PRIX (ROYAL BOBCAT GRAND PRIX)

Manufacturer: Pontiac Motor Division
General Motors Corporation
196 Oakland Avenue
Pontiac, Michigan
[Royal Pontiac
400 North Main Street
Royal Oak, Michigan]

Vehicle type: Front engine, rear-wheel drive, 4-passenger, 2-door hardtop

Price as tested: \$5673.79 (\$5852.40)
(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges, does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car:

SJ package, \$315.96; vinyl top, \$142.18; lamp group, \$41.07; limited-slip differential, \$42.13; automatic transmission, \$227.04; AM/FM stereo radio, \$248.56; remote mirror, \$10.53; automatic speed control, \$63.19; wheel covers, \$51.61; power steering, \$115.85; power disc brakes, \$71.62; tinted glass, \$44.23; power door locks, \$45.29; power windows, \$110.59; power seats, \$73.72; deluxe steering wheel, \$50.55; air conditioning, \$421.28.

(428 H.O. engine, \$177.94; 4-speed manual transmission, \$227.04; limited-slip differential, \$63.19; leather trim, \$199.05; AM/FM stereo radio, \$248.56; rear window defogger, \$47.39; tachometer, \$84.26; styled wheels, \$84.26; deluxe steering wheel, \$50.55; power steering, \$115.85; power disc brakes, \$71.62; tinted glass, \$44.23; power door locks, \$45.29; power windows, \$110.59; HD suspension, \$9.48; under hood lamp, \$7.37; G70 x 14 belted tires, \$97.95; Royal Bobcat engine and paint, \$200.00.)

ENGINE

Type: V-8, water-cooled, cast iron block and heads, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke: 4.12 x 4.00 in, 104.8 x 101.7 mm
Displacement: 428 cu in, 7015 cc
Compression ratio: 10.5 (11.25) to one
Carburetion: 1 x 4-bbl Rochester
Valve gear: Pushrod operated overhead valves
Power (SAE): 370 (N.A.) bhp @ 4800 rpm
Torque (SAE): 472 (N.A.) lbs/ft @ 3200 rpm
Specific power output: 0.86 (N.A.) bhp/cu in, 52.8 (N.A.) bhp/liter

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission: 3-speed, automatic (4-speed manual)
Max. torque converter: 2.05 to one
Final drive ratio: 3.23 (3.91) to one
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed
I 2.48 9.7 49 mph @ 4700 rpm
(2.20) (8.9) (46 mph @ 5200 rpm)
II 1.48 16.2 76 mph @ 4700 rpm
(1.64) (11.9) (62 mph @ 5200 rpm)
III 1.00 24.1 105 mph @ 4360 rpm
(1.28) (15.3) (80 mph @ 5200 rpm)
IV (1.00) (19.7) (102 mph @ 5200 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase: 118.0 in
Track, F/R: 62.0/60.0 in
Length: 210.2 in
Width: 75.7 in
Height: 52.1 in
Ground clearance: 4.3 in
Curb weight: 4206 (4040) lbs
Weight distribution, F/R: 56.0 (54.5)/44.0 (45.5)%
Battery capacity: 12 volts, 61 amp/hr
Alternator capacity: 444 watts
Fuel capacity: 21.5 gal
Oil capacity: 5.0 qts
Water capacity: 18.7 (17.5) qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., unequal length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle, trailing arms, coil springs

STEERING

Type: Recirculating ball, variable-ratio power assist
Turns lock-to-lock: 2.8
Turning circle curb-to-curb: 42.7 ft

BRAKES

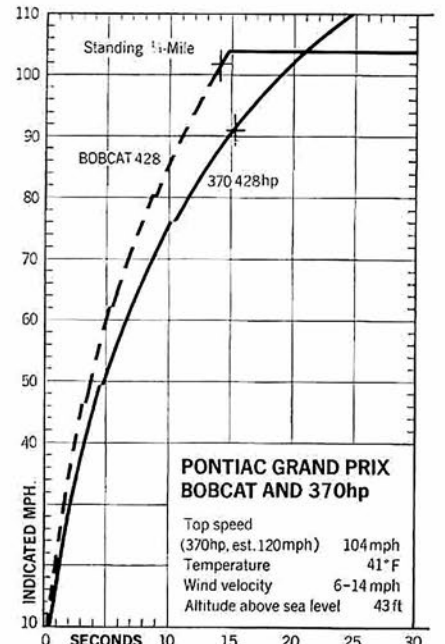
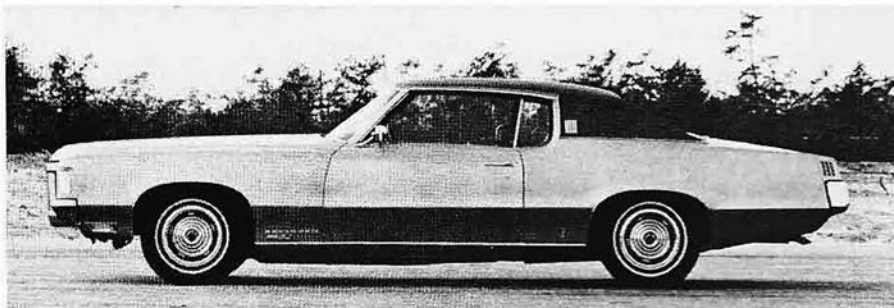
F: 11.0-in vented disc, power assist
R: 9.5 x 2.0-in cast iron drums, power assist

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size: 14 x 7.0-in
Wheel type: Stamped steel (styled stamped steel)
Tire make and size: Goodyear G78 x 14 (Goodyear G70 x 14)
Tire type: Polyglass, bias-belted
Test inflation pressures, F/R: 24 (30)/24 (30) psi
Tire load rating: 1380 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	2.3 (1.8)
40 mph	3.5 (2.7)
50 mph	5.1 (4.1)
60 mph	6.9 (5.4)
70 mph	8.9 (7.1)
80 mph	11.7 (9.0)
90 mph	15.0 (11.2)
100 mph	19.2 (13.5)
Standing 1/4-mile @ 91.0 (102.1) mph	15.3 (14.0) sec
Top speed	120 (104) mph
80-0 mph	318 (285) ft 0.67 (0.75) G
Fuel mileage	7-12 (7-11) mpg on premium fuel
Cruising range	150-285 (236) mi



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TWO PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

(Continued from page 34)

rpm. As it was, the top speed was limited to 104 mph which occurs just past the end of the quarter mile—no coincidence.

Lustiness, of course makes more of a demand on the driver. The 428 surges at part throttle alternately winding and unwinding the engine mounts and rear suspension bushings so that the whole car oscillates axially, keeping the beat to its own time. And although the smooth Muncie gearbox combined with a Hurst shifter encourages vigorous shifts, the actual location of the lever doesn't. Third gear is so placed that prints of the radio tuning knob on your knuckles cannot be avoided in the heat of squeaking out a good ET—which is why Royal does its thing to these Bobcats in the first place. A reshaped lever is the answer.

The automatic transmission in the standard Grand Prix had Pontiac's new console shifter—which in principle is great, but in fact worked no better than the usual vague device. This mechanism, exactly like the one that worked so well in The Judge (C/D, January), is intended to eliminate the chance of moving up more than one gear at a time when manually upshifting. Very simple in operation, the driver merely pressures the lever to the right where it engages a series of saw-tooth ramps—one for each gear. Successive upshifts cannot be made without releasing the lever after each one. In the GP, the adjustment dictated that when the transmission was in second gear, the lever was still engaged in the 1-2 ramp, effectively preventing a 2-3 upshift if the driver tried to make use of the positive, one-shift-at-a-time feature. Even with this defect, the mechanism can still be shifted in the normal manner.

Performance of our luxury GP is pale by comparison to the Bobcat's but still quite acceptable. It runs a standing quarter in 15.3 seconds at 91 mph, never losing composure or even breathing hard. It does have a noticeable torque-steer problem, however, requiring left turn on the steering wheel to maintain a straight path during full throttle in the lower gears.

Neither car fared well in the braking test, but once again our plush Model SJ finished a poor second. Both cars were equipped with the optional power-assisted disc front/drum rear system and both suffered from premature rear lock-up which reduces directional stability to a hazardous level. The luxury GP, equipped with narrower tread G78 x 14 Goodyear Polyglas tires, was further hampered by lock-up of the right rear wheel and resulting billows of smoke which poured off the tire at little more than a touch of the pedal. With this car 318 feet (0.67G) was required for an 80 mph panic stop. A dismal performance. The Bobcat stopped in 285 feet (0.75G) by virtue of its wider G70 x 14 Polyglas Goodyears and, even more

important, both rear wheels locked simultaneously, even if too soon.

Rear wheel lock-up presents a dilemma to a driver trying to make a minimum distance stop. When the rear wheels are locked but the front wheels are turning, the car will usually skid sideways. Maximum braking effort is generated when the wheels are in impending lock-up—rolling but at less than road speed. If the rear wheels lock first, the driver has the choice of backing off the brakes to let the rears roll slightly or standing on the pedal to lock all four wheels. If he is traveling at high speed, chances are that the car has already started to skid before he can lock the fronts and trouble is on its way if he doesn't have lots of room. Because fully locking the brakes at 80 mph hopelessly flat spots the tires, we try to avoid that alternative during testing.

Both of the GPs can be classified as reasonable handling cars. The luxury GP understeers with modest body roll and the tail can be brought out with power. The shock absorbers, particularly in front, allow an uncomfortable bobbing motion which occurs even while cornering on a smooth road. Much the same characteristics can be attributed to the Bobcat, differing only in degree. The heavy duty suspension produces much flatter cornering and the engine's surplus power allows the tail to be hung out in show-off fashion. The front's bouncing motion, although further damped, is not eliminated.

Although both cars are remarkably free of road noise (even with the fiberglass-belted tires), they do suffer occasional lapses in road manners. In addition to its bouncing habit, the luxury GP launches into a lateral rocking motion when the going gets rough. Such quirks are much less noticeable in the Bobcat, but even it has a very noticeable lateral shake at cruising speed. Shock absorber tuning and tire characteristics are probably to blame.

Both of the test cars were equipped with GM's variable-ratio power steering which is second to none. With a rapid 2.8 turns lock-to-lock, it allows the long-nosed GPs to be threaded through traffic with very little need to change hands on the wheel. The beauty of the variable-ratio feature is that the steering is still slow enough on center so that twitchiness is never a problem. It is such a good idea that everyone in the industry should have it within a few years but until then GM clearly has an advantage.

When you are a styling leader like Pontiac, all manner of Apollo 5 trickery is acceptable and even encouraged in the interior. Anything that can be done to make the driver's corner seem more like a cockpit is fair game. It is part of the luxury/personal car's strong character image. With this in mind, Pontiac has compartmentalized the front seating area of the Grand Prix, half for the driver and half for the

passenger. The instrument panel is ostensibly of a wrap-around design until you really analyze it. A full complement of gauges, with the exception of an ammeter, is standard on the SJ and optional on the J—and Pontiac's familiar hood tach found its way on to the Bobcat. The instrument cluster consists of three circular dials, visually identical to those of a GTO, positioned directly in front of the driver. They are all well located and easy to read but they don't really wrap around anything. On both sides of the cluster are panels containing air vents, and on the right side, heater controls and the radio. These panels angle rearward, flaring into the door on the left and dropping down into a center console on the right. This console does not extend high enough above the seats to be useful as a center armrest, but the implication is that it is intended for the driver only since the ash tray is inconveniently located for the passenger. The cockpit effect results not so much from instrument panel shape, but from the narrow width between the inner door panels which confines both the driver and passenger on their respective sides of the console.

Every interior surface is covered with padding in large sections so that the interior has a very smooth-fitting appearance and the seams are located well out of the normal line of sight. This finished look in interior padding is an area where the luxury American cars frequently outshine their expensive, handmade European competitors and the Grand Prix is a very good example. The Bobcat also had the optional leather which covers the seats with a wide, lateral pleat design. As expected, this \$199.05 option adds both comfort and visual impact to the inside of the Pontiac—but mass production has removed all but the final traces of the glorious leather smell. Contrary to what you might expect, both the J and the SJ have identical trim right down to the plastic wood that adorns the lower portion of the dash.

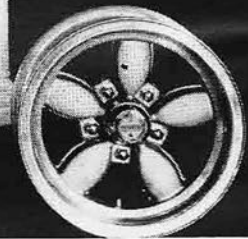
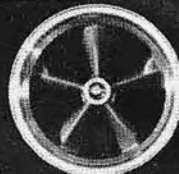
The success of Pontiac's new Grand Prix depends entirely on public acceptance of its styling. Does the world want a low-priced Eldorado? As a luxury car it performs acceptably but without distinction, and will be ruled out by many who may want to carry five people at one time. As for the Bobcat, we think it unlikely that anyone interested in a Super Car would consider building a projectile from a Grand Prix. But if the new GP styling catches on—and it may well—there will be a good number of respectable citizens who will give way to the competitive urge. The Bobcat is their obvious choice. Other than the Charger R/T there is not another specialty car on the road that could stay within two bus lengths in a wheel-to-wheel contest—and that is a distinction. The Grand Prix may look like a junior Eldorado but it doesn't have to act like one. That is known as "broad appeal" in Detroit, and Pontiac hopes it will be enough to sell twice as many GPs as ever before. ●

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