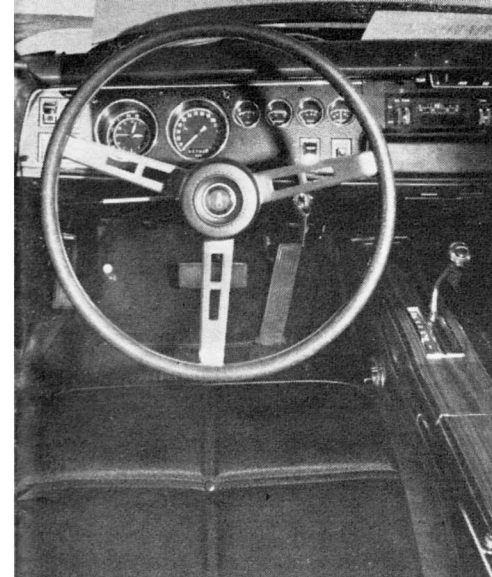
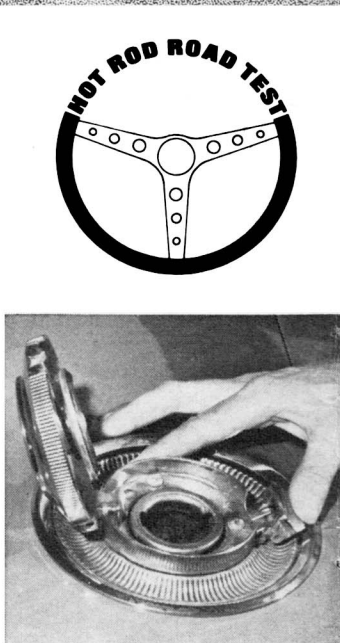
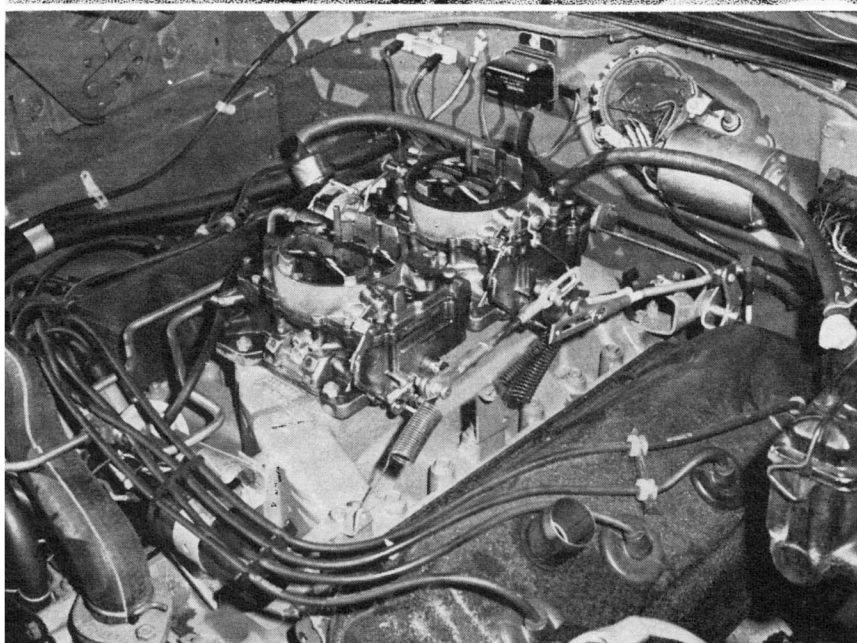


We were a bit early (two months) for the Riverside-Motor Trend 500, but it worked out better that way. Good-handling street runner can use help before serious racing.



Twin Carter-carbed 426 cu. in. hemi is surprisingly docile on the street circuit. Comes on hard in racing, with proper refinements. Stock equipment includes anti-smog hardware, though not pump. Fuel fill, right, is snap-open "racing" type. It's too handy here and should be fitted with a lock.



FAR LEFT — Dash is a bit of all right. Gauges are well-placed, easy to view, and angled toward driver. Excellent interior comfort and room is part of the bargain. NEAR LEFT — Hemi-engined MoPars with automatics have trans coolers in standard form.



Body shape is a real wind-cheater. Air-traps have been designed out. Wait till a 500 gets on a super-speedway: half-a-foot lower and half-a-light-year faster.

photography:
Eric Rickman

SHOWROOM RACER

SBY STEVE KELLY ■ It's doubtful that I'd ever want a hemi-engined Dodge Charger 500 for my street machine, but if I did, it would be an assembly-line copy of the kind of car used in 17.4 NASCAR action. If it was a tunnel-port 427 Torino that interested me, I'd still be searching for one. You've got to hand it to the Chrysler guys; if they race it, they also sell it. That really doesn't make them heroes, but it does help promote the image of stock car racing. When you can buy your race car, or at least the basics of one, through a dealership, you're a lot closer to racing real stock cars.

Charger 500's are specially outfitted models of Charger R/T's. The differences lie in the same body revisions that contribute to better aerodynamics, primarily to give the stock car racers a better break. This is a limited-edition car right now, since five hundred or so must be built in order to comply with the F.I.A. description of "stock." But if they catch on with the buying public, that's fine, and more will be built.

The grille, normally inset, is moved forward, flush with the leading edge of the frontal sheet metal. This eliminates the air trap of regular Chargers. In back, the rear window is angled sharply and set in new metal stretched between the sailfins. Standard production Chargers have a near-vertical rear glass, set almost even with the rear seat back. With the 500 config-

uration, there's a lot more room for a package tray, but almost none for a deck-lid. There is one, but it's about as big as a glovebox door. As much grain as you'd care to pour into the trunk can be carried, but suitcase size is restricted to ultra-slim designs. With a little jockeying, though, you can fit a lot in there, but nonetheless it's not an easy job. Okay, it may be a gripe, but Buddy Baker, Charlie Glotzbach, or Bobby Isaac will probably never care about it, or how handy the map pockets are in the doors. They travel light, and always on the same road.

In essence, that is what this car is designed to do. It just happens that you can also buy it. Part of the reason is that although Chrysler Divisions may be making money, they're not exactly floating in the green stuff. If they can sell a few of their race car-type machines, it helps cover designing costs. In most instances, Chrysler has had to work the reverse by racing facsimiles of production cars. Now they've followed the competition by building "special edition" hardware and furthered this by putting them up for retail purchase. We'll find out later how this marketing philosophy works.

Charger 500 power is by either a 440 cubic inch "wedge" developing 375 horsepower, or by the optional 425-hp, dual-four-carbureted hemi. In both instances, the transmission choice is between a four-speed manual and a TorqueFlite three-speed automatic. Rear gearing is 3.23:1, standard for the automatic,

You don't have to wear a driving suit, crash helmet, or goggles in this Dodge à la NASCAR stocker — but if it makes you feel better, go ahead

and 3.54:1, standard with four-speed. Lower ratios (higher numbers) can be had through dealers' parts counters and are absolutely necessary for anything but street operation. Let's face it: If you've got a hemi in anything, it's going to be for more than street use.

Each 500 in use for this test was hemi-equipped. Three of 'em were readied for us, but we used only two. One of them, the first four-speed car, was "borrowed" (by person or persons as yet not convicted) and most of the parts liberated. Due to this unexpected car loan (that's not what the police termed it), we spent most of our time with the automatic car. Given the choice, that's the way I'd have it, anyway. Four-speeds are nice, and generally a little quicker; but the TorqueFlite's the way to go on the street, and it's certainly no slouch on the track (unless the track has bends in it, and then there's no way an automatic will work there).

Driving ranged from in-town, bumper-to-bumper conditions to high-speed (well, not real high) runs across the desert. We covered a good bit of the Southwest, including Riverside International Raceway and Orange County International Raceway. This is the kind of car you make excuses to drive. Other than its altered roof and grille, it is a Charger, and everything said here applies to "production" Chargers too.

Equipped as it was, the automatic car is easily one of the

best high-speed stockers we've sampled, and quite a few of them have been put in our hands too. We get irritated at cars that are too quiet, and that sometimes diminish handling for the sake of comfort — or cars that are extremely noisy, handle well, but give you an earache within an hour. Handling without earaches is an apt summation of the Charger. One other thing: The wind glides around this car so smoothly it hardly makes a sound. Keeping a vent window open at 70 or thereabouts is rough, but it proves that a good amount of wind is directed alongside the car, the correct path for it to assist stability.

Steering and braking are good at all speeds. Both cars had power steering and power-assisted front disc brakes, all of which are optional. Low-speed maneuvers produced predictable wheel directing, though washout (or front-tire roll-under, if you prefer) is easy to get if you push the car hard 'round a tight bend. On top end, there's no absence of road feel. Earlier MoPar power steering tended to relieve the driver of contact with the front wheels, but that's all been remedied. Standard brakes are drum-type, and of fairly good size for hemi cars, but we wouldn't have one without front discs for street driving; that's a lot of weight out in front. Discs are mandatory. They worked repeatedly in 100-plus mph to zero stops, without complaint or loss of stopping power.

(Continued on following page)

SHOWROOM RACER

Interior dimensions satisfy the requirements of a six-footer, and that's getting harder to accomplish on intermediate-size cars each year. Rear leg and head room is generous, and this is one of the few cars we've tested lately with more seat adjustment than we could use. A neat item for the '69 Dodge is a manual bucket-seat adjuster, which costs just under \$40 and allows both vertical and tilt adjustment. There're six variations of it, plus the ten positions of the regular fore-and-aft adjuster. Since Chargers aren't available with tilting wheels, this item makes comfortable seating possible for drivers of all sizes.

Beginning this year, stock car racing under F.I.A. sanction prohibits use of more than one carburetor, which means Chrysler will be dragging out all their old non-stock, single-four intake manifolds for hemis. They've been using these ever since a ruling forced the removal of the stock dual-four intake and replacing it with the singles. Sometimes it doesn't pay to be too fast. However, drag racers will make out okay, since the two-fours are still stock and therefore legal.

But it takes more than a pair of four-throat Carters to make a hemi work right. Getting one in the 13's for a quarter-mile, in stock clothing, is about all one can ask for. Well, we got it that far, but we had to revert to open headers in order to do so. An open-header 426 ought to catch high 12's, but this was the 3.23-geared automatic, with street plugs (N-10Y Champions), no carb rejetting, ignition at 12 degrees Before Top Dead Center on the crank, and total advance not cutting in until past 3000. With an automatic having a sub-2000-rpm stall speed, this is like running with one flat tire. The mere fact that it bested 100 mph in this form calls for a Purple Heart. A top e.t. of 13.80 seconds and a speed of 105.01 mph was the result of this mediocre effort.

We got down to cases with the four-speed. Norm Thatcher put in time here, slipping in a 4.10:1 limited-slip rear gear set and recalibrating the distributor to

VEHICLE

Charger 500 coupe

PRICE

Base (440 engine, std.) \$3591.00
As Tested
(Hemi: \$648.20, extra) \$5261.00

ENGINE

Type OHV V8
Cylinders 8
Bore and stroke 4.25 x 3.75 in.
Displacement 426 cu. in.
Compression ratio 10.25:1
Horsepower 425 @ 5000 rpm
Torque 490 lbs.-ft. @ 4000 rpm
Valves: Intake 2.25-in. dia.
Exhaust 1.94-in. dia.
Camshaft:
Lift490-in. intake; .480-in. exhaust
Duration 284° intake and exhaust
Tappets Mechanical, .028 lash
Carburetion Dual Carter AFB series 4-bbl
Exhaust Dual, low restriction

TRANSMISSION

Type Manual: Floor-mounted shift, synchro all forward gears
Auto: Torque converter with automatically operated planetary gear transmission
Ratios:
Automatic 4-speed
1st 2.45:1 2.65:1
2nd 1.45:1 1.93:1
3rd 1.00:1 1.39:1
4th 1.00:1
Clutch 11-inch diameter, dry-plate Borg and Beck. 2523-lb. total spring load

DIFFERENTIAL

Type Separable type unit, friction-bias limited slip with 8.75-in.-dia. ring gear, on automatic. Unitized housing and 9.75-in.-dia ring gear, 4-speed
Final drive ratio 3.23:1, TorqueFlite 4.10:1, 4-speed

BRAKES

Type Front disc/rear drum with power assist. Floating-caliper design
Dimensions:
Front Disc, 11.04-in. dia.
Rear Drum, 10-in. dia.
Total effective area 131.6 sq. in.
Percent brake effectiveness,
front 60%

SUSPENSION

Front Independent, lateral, nonparallel control arms with torsion bars
Rear Parallel, 58 in. x 2.5 in., longitudinal semi-elliptic rear springs. One piece-type axle housing
Shocks Tubular, double-acting, 1.0-in. piston dia.
Stabilizer Front only, .094-in.-dia.
Tires F70 x 15, 4-ply rated, belted
Wheel rim width 6.0 in.
Steering:
Type Chrysler. Recirculating ball with integral power assist
Gear ratio 15.7:1
Overall ratio 18.8:1
Turning circle 40.9 ft., curb to curb
Wheel diameter 16.0 in.
Turns lock to lock 3.5

PERFORMANCE

Standing-start quarter-mile
(Automatic): 13.80 sec., 105.01 mph
(4-speed): 13.48 sec., 109.00 mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION

(TorqueFlite-equipped car only)
Best reading 14.51 mpg
Poorest 7.3 mpg
Average 11.05 mpg
Recommended fuel Premium

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase 117.0 in.
Front track 59.5 in.
Rear track 58.5 in.
Overall height 54.2 in.
Overall width 76.7 in.
Overall length 206.6 in.
Shipping weight 3305 lb.
Test weight 3740 lb.
Body/frame construction Unit
Fuel tank capacity 19 gal.

49° total, all of which were at work by 2500 rpm. In short, it was prepared for quarter-miling. Orange County International Raceway management consented to let us burn off some more tire rubber, and we did a good job of it.

With the automatic car, we moved the lever as the tach needle passed 5500 rpm. Stock TorqueFlites have a slight delay, so the actual shift took place at 5700-5800 rpm. We buzzed the stick car to six grand for each shift. The 4.10 gear brought us through the traps in high gear at 5200 rpm, using a 29-inch-diameter tire. A lower gear would certainly help, but the 4.10 is just about the steepest you can use and still get decent street operation. Best time with the stick-shift machine was 13.48, and 109 mph. As we said, a hemi will go in the 12's with external touching-up, but a really good teardown—and money—will put a hemi-stocker at the 11-second break-even mark.

A Borg & Beck dry-plate, 11- by 7-inch disc clutch assembly is used for both 426 and 440 powerplants. It does a better-than-average job too, producing longer-than-expected service before needing a rest. Any clutch that'll continue to stick after 10 or 12 successive runs while a 490-lbs-ft engine is thrashing against it can't be all bad. The Hurst linkage used here is a welcome addition to ease the shifting task.

If the photos suggest a rather high ground clearance here, it's due to the 15-inch wheels and F70 tires supplied with hemi-equipped Dodges. We also had a little trouble getting used to their appearance, but a good tire is worth a lot more than low riding height. Dropping the car is comparatively easy. Large-diameter front tires are no longer a drag racing speed secret, so they're worth having.

More than 2500 miles of driving went by during our Charger time. Didn't mind a bit of it, either. So what about the trunk? It'll still hold a lot of wheat, right? Just pour it in. We may not be planning to buy a Charger 500, but it won't be because we don't like them. It has more to do with practicality. The older you get, the more practical you're supposed to be. Right now, we're busy makin' everybody see how practical we are. Soon as we've done that, then we can go buy a hemi-engined something-or-other. ■ ■