



PHOTO BY STEVE SKRITSKI

Best Personal Car

GRAND PRIX SJ

CAR LIFE'S ENGINEERING award went to the Pontiac Grand Prix SJ earlier in the model year for the same reason the car wins the Best Personal Car class now: It's a luxurious personal car, for enthusiast drivers.

Pontiac has long hankered after its own personal car, like the Buick Riviera, Oldsmobile Toronado and Cadillac Eldorado, but General Motors couldn't see letting still another division have a try at the body used by the other three. Instead, when Pontiac submitted a proposal to build its own car, with its own components, GM said yes.

The designers formed the Grand Prix by adding six inches to the Tempest. The added length went in just

aft of the front suspension, so the engine moved back in relation to the rear wheels. Good thinking. For a bit more change, the engine in the Grand Prix was moved back, which improved the balance. The extra inches also took the Grand Prix out of the Intermediate class, and the GM ban on more than 400 cid in the mid-range cars no longer applied. In went the 428-cid V-8 from the big Pontiacs. One move, and the Grand Prix SJ had more power than a GTO and less weight than a Catalina.

The most discussed, but least visible innovation in the Grand Prix is the hidden radio antenna, tiny wires inside the windshield. Much neater, from the owner's view, and the idea won an award from the car wash as-

sociation. (The Streetfighters and Vandals of America probably will boycott Pontiac.)

The Grand Prix instrument panel was the most rational we've seen. The panel wraps around the driver, with controls in reach even when the shoulder harness and seat belt are fastened. Those few controls that the passenger has any right to tamper with, notably the heater/air conditioner and radio, are to the driver's right, so both he and the rider can reach them. We tested another car during the model year with the radio at extreme left and the headlight switch where the passenger could reach it and the driver couldn't see it. When we praise the Grand Prix, we do not praise the obvious.

Grand Prix suspension is, like the other features, conventional but beautifully executed. The live rear axle has coil springs serving only as springs. Axle location, the dividing line between sloppy and precise handling in a domestic performance car, is done with upper and lower trailing arms. The lower arms come straight back, while the upper arms are angled toward the center line of the car, so the axle can't move sideways in relation to the body.

Notice this award is to the Grand Prix SJ, not the Grand Prix. The SJ designation stands for a handling package: stiffer springs and shocks and wider wheel rims. We drove examples of both plain J and SJ. The regular car handles about the way we'd expect a personal car to handle. Comfortable, safe, but not suited to spirited driving. Like the other personal cars tested this year handled. Fine for those who spend their time behind the wheel just sitting there. The SJ package didn't harm the ride, or comfort. You'd never know the added strength was there until the car goes through a turn at speed, and it doesn't lean. Into the curve, cranking in enough lock to put the car on the

right line, then power, and out it comes, in a fine drift. The Grand Prix was the only personal car tested this year in which the tester who *won* the toss got to drive the car on the handling course.

Same for the acceleration runs. The competition will keep up with traffic, maybe even put down an upstart family car. The Grand Prix SJ, with the optional 390-bhp engine, was the quickest personal car, quicker than the power cars or family cars and most of the Supercars. It would lose a match race with the Ram Air IV-equipped Firebird 400 we drove this year, by less than one length over the quarter-mile.

Styling deserves some mention, on grounds that the personal car is sup-

posed to attract at least a modicum of well-bred attention. The silhouette and rear panels are attractive, we think, and the roofline is beautiful. Look for it, and its imitations, on other models in the Pontiac family out during the next year or so. The grillework jutting in front of what Pontiac is pleased to acclaim as the longest hood in the industry does not win everyone who sees it.

But as a designer/critic told us, style in these bland times must make a statement. That the Grand Prix does. And we were present at another factory when a Grand Prix motored past. Green City. When a styling studio can make the buyers want the car, and make its rivals wish they had done it first, they've done their job. ▶

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	118	Brakes: Power assisted front disc/rear drum.	
Overall length, in.....	210	dia. x width, F/R.....	10.94 x 1/9.5 x 2
width.....	76	Total swept area, sq. in.....	351
height.....	52	Engine: V-8.	
No. of passengers.....	5	Bore x stroke, in.....	4.12 x 4.00
Price, basic.....	\$4003	Displacement, cu. in.....	428
as tested.....	\$6095	Compression ratio.....	10.75:1
Frame type: Perimeter.		Rated bhp @ rpm.....	390 @ 5200
Front suspension: Independent by s.l.a., coil springs, anti-roll bar.		Transmission: Three-speed automatic with torque converter.	
Rear suspension: Live axle, four control arms, coil springs.		Gear ratio 3rd (1.00:1) overall.....	3.55:1
Steering: Saginaw variable ratio, power assisted.		2nd (1.48:1).....	5.25:1
overall ratio.....	13:1-16:1	1st (2.48:1).....	8.80:1
turns, lock to lock.....	2.9	Lb./bhp (test weight).....	11.2
turning circle, ft. curb-curb.....	39.3	Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....	22.3
Curb weight.....	4180	Engine revs/mile (60 mph).....	2690
Tires: UniRoyal belted-bias G78-14.		Piston travel, ft./mile.....	1793
		CAR LIFE Wear Index.....	48.3

ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph.....	28.4	Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	5.4
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph.....	57.1	Braking: Maximum deceleration rate	
Top Speed (5800).....	129	ft./sec./sec.....	25.0
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.....	2.9	No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. intervals) before 20% loss in deceleration rate.....	8-12%
0-40 mph.....	4.1	Control loss: Slight.	
0-50 mph.....	5.3	performance.....	good
0-60 mph.....	6.7	Fuel consumption under test conditions,	
0-70 mph.....	8.3	mpg.....	8.6
0-80 mph.....	10.1	Normal cond., mpg.....	10-13
Standing 1/4 mile, sec.....	14.1		
Speed at end, mph.....	95.3		