

Best Supercar

HEMI CHARGER 500

CLASS WINNER for Supercars is an easy pick. Supercars are supposed to be fast. We tested two Dodge Charger 500s, both with fabled Hemi engine, and both were very fast indeed. One Charger carried a four-speed manual transmission and drag-strip gears. It was the quickest production car tested during the year—with a 13.68-sec. quarter-mile. And the second, with automatic transmission and normal gearing, was third (behind the Mustang Mach 1).

The Charger 500 is a limited-production car, with changes aimed at racing. Back when the model was a fastback, the NASCAR racers discovered that the shape produced rear-end lift at speed. They added a spoiler, to keep the back down, and began that styling trend in this country. The 1969 Charger 500 keeps the tradition alive. The cars come off the standard assembly line and are shipped to a special line,

where they get new rear windows, flush with the roof pillars, and grilles moved forward to the leading edges of the front fenders. Dodge officials were quite frank about it. Their tests showed that the changes made the Charger sleeker, thus faster, and thus more likely to keep the factory competitive on the superspeedways. Racing rules require that 500 of each model be built to qualify it as a production car. That's how many were built, and that's why it's named the Charger 500.

As a racing-oriented car, it was natural to test the Charger 500 with racing-born engine, the Hemi. The current Hemi V-8 is the second generation Chrysler Corp. engine to use the hemispherical combustion chamber that gives the engine its name, and it's been sold as a street engine for five years. It may not be the most powerful racing engine anymore, but those

five years have been put to good use. Both test cars idled smoothly and camshaft timing was such that it spread the torque over a useful rpm band. The Hemis never stumbled, never fouled a spark plug in traffic, and kept the testers pinned to their seatbacks all the way to redline. The 1969 model year also saw a marked decrease in letters from Hemi owners asking for help finding mechanics who can tune the engine. Dodge engineers say the Hemi isn't the temperamental beast it once was, and the lack of testimony to the

contrary seems to bear them out on it.

Power, even smooth dependable power, isn't enough to make a Supercar the Supercar. The racing heritage shows again in the Charger 500's suspension. No tricks, just development. The test cars have combined spring and shock absorber rates, fore and aft weight balance and suspension geometry to make the Charger as close to a racing car in handling as it is under the hood. The testers charged around the test track at speed, in close company, free to concentrate on driving the cars because they didn't have to worry about the cars taking control at mid-turn. Skid-pad tests show the Charger has cornering power equaling the best of the sporting imported sedans. Response and predictability, which are separate qualities at least equally important in a high-performance road car, are so good that the testers could pitch the cars into corners on the brakes, or drive through,

or come out of the turns under power with the back end out at any angle the driver chose. Sportscar types who expect to make up on the corners what they lose on the straights are in for a rude awakening. The Charger will hang right in there on the twisty sections, and the speed of its passing on the straight will melt the stoutest badge bar.

The interior was average. All the instruments the engine deserves, as much leg room and so forth as any Intermediate, upholstery and trim in keeping with the price tag. The bucket seats were a bit too flat to provide much lateral support during hard cornering, but that was compensated for by the six-way power adjustment on one car, and a single nut and bolt mechanism on the other.

An unexpected bonus from the use of a tamed racing engine rather than a souped-up passenger car engine was that the required power came without

radical camshaft timing. The cars idled well. Good. Better than that was that the engine develops plenty of vacuum at low rpm, so there's power for a brake booster, and the factory can fit discs in front. Both test cars recorded better-than-average test stops, and neither showed a sign of fade. While several other factories are working on mechanical systems to increase braking-foot power, or offer cooler cams so they can use power-assisted discs, Dodge already has an answer and the braking system that cars as fast as the Chargers should have.

The something for nothing didn't show up on the test track. The man who buys a Hemi expects the thing to run. The boggler to us was that the Chargers were happy doing dull things like being driven in traffic or cruised along the freeway at the legal limit and half the car's top speed. No other NASCAR-in-disguise does both things so well.

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	117	Brakes: Power assisted disc front, drum rear	
Overall length in.....	208	dia. x width, F/R.....	11.04/11.0 x 2.5
width.....	77	total swept area, sq. in.....	387.8
height.....	53	Engine: V-8	
No. of passengers.....	5	Bore x stroke, in.....	4.25 x 3.75
Price, basic.....	\$3591	Displacement, cu. in.....	426
as tested.....	\$5261	Compression ratio.....	10.25:1
Frame type: Unitized.		Rated bhp @ rpm.....	425 @ 5000
Front suspension: independent by s.l.a.,		Clutch: Single dry plate Borg & Beck.	
torsion bars.		diameter, in.....	11
Rear suspension: Hotchkiss live axle, multileaf		Transmission: Four-speed manual.	
springs.		Gear ratio 4th (1.00:1) overall.....	3.55:1
Steering: Integral assist, recirculating		3rd (1.39:1).....	4.94:1
ball gear.		2nd (1.93:1).....	6.86:1
overall ratio.....	18.8:1	1st (2.65:1).....	9.40:1
turns, lock to lock.....	3.5	Lb./bhp (test weight).....	10.3
turning circle, ft. curb-curb.....	40.9	Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....	21.8
Curb weight.....	4025	Engine revs/mile (60 mph).....	2755
Tires: Goodyear Polyglas F70-15.		Piston travel, ft./mile.....	1720
		CAR LIFE Wear Index.....	47.3

ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph.....	30.7	Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	4.4
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph.....	60.0	Braking: Maximum deceleration rate	
Top Speed (6100).....	134	ft./sec./sec.....	28
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.....	no time given	No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. inter-	
0-40 mph.....	3.3	vals) before 20% loss in deceleration	
0-50 mph.....	4.4	rate.....	8 no loss
0-60 mph.....	5.7	Control loss: Slight	
0-70 mph.....	6.8	performance.....	very good
0-80 mph.....	8.4	Fuel consumption under test conditions,	
Standing ¼-mile, sec.....	13.68	mpg.....	8.5
Speed at end, mph.....	104.8	Normal cond., mpg.....	13-14.5

THE BEST CARS OF 1969

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