

## THE BEST CARS OF 1969



PHOTO BY DAVID GOOLEY

## Best Intermediate

# OLDS W-31

**T**HE AD CAMPAIGN for Oldsmobile's W-machines got our attention, but we didn't begin to appreciate the W-31 until test day, when it and a flock of humdrum cars were at the track together.

From the outside, the W-31 was one of the pack. The other cars, collected for a comparative test of intermediates, were much the same. Mid-range engines, automatic transmissions, the usual variation of options and accessories.

The W-31 was two steps better. In Olds' terms, the W stands for cold air, fed by scoops cunningly concealed beneath the front bumper. The W-31 has the mid-range 350-cid V-8, zoomed to an honest 325 bhp by new cylinder heads, a big four-barrel carburetor

and a wild camshaft. The suspension was option FE-2, developed for the 4-4-2 but now available on any two-door Cutlass. Shocks and springs are stronger, and there's a rear anti-roll bar to reduce body roll on turns.

The group test cars were supposed to be compared against each other, a laudable intention that kept escaping us. During almost every phase of the testing, all the routine cars were compared to the W-31. They fell short.

When the factories first issued performance versions of the mid-range engines, we called them semi-Supercars. Cranking extra horses out of the smaller engines is a rewarding exercise, but the result wasn't supposed to be a Supercar; not enough power. The W-31 had the power, though, and

turned acceleration times in the Supercar bracket. The modifications needed to do it weren't such that the engine became a racing engine, in the way a Z/28 Camaro is. Plenty of low-end torque left, and the W-31 pulled strongly from idle.

And it wound, and wound, and wound. The engine still has hydraulic lifters, the first items usually replaced when the horsepower peak moves up. The W-31 peak power rating is 5400 rpm. We shifted at 6200, where the power curve began to fall off. With 3.91:1 final drive gears, we'd expect the top speed to be limited, but the engine was still winding when we ran out of straightaway. Off to the desert, for a genuine top speed test. There it was, 6600 rpm in high gear, and 128

mph. The old hands around the office brought the test data panel back, with questions like, "This says hydraulic lifters and 6600 rpm. Are you sure about that?" Yes, we are. We don't know how the mad doctor did it, but the W-31 has those nice, quiet lifters and it winds and winds.

The handling was better still. The anti-roll bar in back is the secret. It only works when the body leans. On the road, just cruising along, there's no hint of a handling package. A little more jar over a seam in the pavement, and a little less travel for each bump, but that's all. The group test cars soak up bumps, and travel further, and we called ride comfort a tie. On the twisting section, the W-31 was the leader. It answered the helm when the others were plowing off course, and it could be snapped from left to right and back while the family-car drivers were busy making their mounts turn left. Drifting the high-speed turns or powering through the tight sections with the throttle were the best part of the W-31's day. We didn't try it with the others—the return of unbent test cars is our specialty.

True, the W-31 had a few little flaws. The automatic transmission was fresh from the lab, and it had been prepared for performance work.

It went from gear to gear at full power with the speed of light and a satisfying chirp from the tires. Under part throttle, it kept on making instant shifts, with a snap that drew attention from passengers who hadn't known until then that they were riding in a performance car.

The brakes were standard front discs, but they weren't production. The hot cam doesn't produce enough low-speed vacuum to power a booster, which discs need. Pedal effort was very high. It might have been a benefit from high speed. Controlling the amount of pressure going to the brakes was easy. In town, it took both feet

to keep the W-31 from idling through red lights. We quickly learned to pop the transmission into neutral. We'd pick the discs anyway, but we expect Oldsmobile will have a fix in production by the time this is printed.

At the end of the Intermediate group test, we made some smart remark, to the effect that we'd build our own car, with the engine from one, the suspension from a second, brakes from a third and transmission from a fourth. Had we been talking about what Intermediate we'd want, we would have ignored all the cars in the

group, and gone for the W-31. Flatly.

Driving behind a mid-range engine with performance to match several highly touted big-inchers is satisfying, as is handling a sedan with cornering power and controllability to match the sports and imports crowd. Keep the Cutlass' tasteful interior, and a ride that adjusts itself for driving conditions, and you have daily transportation in a sporting manner. Dr. Oldsmobile makes good medicine. Certainly he worked overtime making the W-31. But a more intriguing question remains. What will be his encore?

### SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.....	112	Brakes: Unassisted disc front, drum rear.	
Overall length, in.....	201.9	dia. x width, F/R.....	10.8 x 1.9/9.5 x 2.0
width.....	76.2	Total swept area, sq. in.....	335.5
height.....	52.8	Engine: V-8	
No. of passengers.....	6	Bore x stroke, in.....	4.06 x 3.39
Price, basic.....	\$2838	Displacement, cu. in.....	350
as tested.....	\$4212	Compression ratio.....	10.5:1
Frame type: Perimeter.		Rated bhp @ rpm.....	325 @ 5400
Front suspension: Independent by s.l.a., coil springs		Transmission: Three-speed automatic with torque	
telescopic shock absorbers, anti-roll bar.		converter.	
Rear suspension: Live axle, two trailing arms, coil		Gear ratio 3rd (1.00:1) overall.....	3.91:1
springs, telescopic shock absorbers, anti-roll bar.		2nd (1.52:1).....	5.94:1
Steering: Integral assist recirculating ball gear,		1st (2.52:1).....	9.85:1
parallelogram linkage behind wheels.		Lb./bhp (test weight).....	12.1
overall ratio.....	20.7:1	Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....	19.3
turns, lock to lock.....	4.3	Engine revs./mile (60 mph).....	3100
turning circle, ft. curb-curb.....	40	Piston travel, ft./mile.....	2100
Curb weight.....	3640	CAR LIFE Wear Index.....	65.2
Tires: Goodyear Polyglas F70-14.			

### ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph.....	30.6	Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	5.1
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph.....	59.6	Braking: Maximum deceleration rate	
Top Speed (6600).....	128	ft./sec./sec.....	30
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.....	3.0	No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. inter-	
0-40 mph.....	4.1	vals) before 20% loss in deceleration	
0-50 mph.....	5.2	rate.....	8-no loss
0-60 mph.....	6.6	Control loss: Moderate.	
0-70 mph.....	8.1	performance.....	very good
0-80 mph.....	10.2	Fuel consumption under test conditions,	
Standing 1/4 mile, sec.....	14.9	mpg.....	8.2
Speed at end, mph.....	96.0	Normal cond., mpg.....	10-13