



# Gaining Respect on Woodward Avenue

by Daniel A. Jedlicka

*...in the evening, usually around nine, when Detroit's hottest new models meet to flex their muscle*

One by one, the frumpy-looking four-door sedans with skinny taxicab tires and Super Econo six-cylinder engines are being slipped into low gear and pointed toward the edge of an abyss. In pairs, fat-cat status cars with marshmallow suspensions and bloated bodies are being set on the same course, their over-muffled exhausts rumbling in subdued protest. But hardly anyone is listening. One of the greatest revolutions in the history of the American automobile is underway, and few are aware of it.

The auto makers are listening, though, as I found out when I was waiting recently for admittance to the offices of big-league Detroit executives. Car-buff magazines were stacked in the metal in-trays of their secretaries. These weren't, mind you, conservative publications like *Motor Trend*; they were the really hard-core hot-rod stuff: *Speed and Supercar*, *Car Craft*, *Hot Rod*, *Super Stock & Drag Illustrated*. On their covers in big, bold type were article blurbs: "Blueprint the Quadrajet," "Hot Parts by Chevrolet," "Super Street Tires," "Keith Black and his Slider Clutch," and "Ford's New 'Shotgun Motor.'"

The *performance car*, once the province of greasy-fingered, mechanical types in blue jeans and torn sweat shirts, has come of age. More than anything else, it is influencing Everyman's future automobile. And its influence is just beginning. In Detroit, they've begun to refer to this type of car as a "muscle car" or, more popularly, a "supercar." In what's called "out of the box" (showroom) form, these automobiles, though almost as docile as a bread-and-butter sedan, deliver orgiastic acceleration that will leave any young, tuned-in American female screaming with the proper mixture of delight and awe. Their heavy-duty suspensions will get you around a corner quicker and safer than a conventional model's, and their brakes will stop you in a shorter distance. With bulging hood scoops, rear spoilers, fat, sexy-looking tires and other performance styling "cues," there's no questioning the fact that if you're driving one, you're very hip indeed.

Anyone who's kept his eyes open for the past few years will have noticed an increasing number of these supercars. If he's looked a little closer, he has seen that only a few are being driven by nutball kids. Conservative-looking middle-aged men and clean-cut kids drive most of them. As auto editor of *The Chicago Sun-Times*, I've had numerous press

*The new "muscle cars" or "supercars" (the one at left is American Motors' Javelin SST) deliver orgiastic acceleration...*

releases cross my desk on supercars, all sent by auto makers in the fervent hope that they'd get plenty of play—Ralph Nader notwithstanding.

I recall talking with Roy D. Chapin Jr., board chairman and chief executive officer of American Motors Corporation, a soft-spoken Yale graduate who completely dropped his executive pose when discussing his company's Javelins and their performances in the last Trans-American Championship sedan races. With unabashed delight, he related how Rambler dealers, men who had spent years pushing six-cylinder granny cars, snapped up the new A.M.C. racing jackets.

All across the country, old-line A.M.C. stockholders were going into shock after opening the 1968 A.M.C. financial report and seeing pictures of tough-looking red-white-and-blue Trans-Am Javelins and board-chairman Chapin in earnest discussion with his racing personnel. But on the next page were columns of fiscal year results showing that A.M.C.'s automotive division had a \$4,790,000 profit, compared with a \$66,768,744 loss in the previous year. "There was no question that American Motors had returned to the world of racing, where performance is the key," said the report. "It was a part of change, reflecting a new way of business life. . . . In 1969, and the years beyond, there will be more of this new way of life."

In Pontiac, Michigan, just a short walk on Oakland Avenue from Wide Track Drive, is the former office of John Zachary DeLorean, who, when I interviewed him, was still Pontiac Motor's general manager, weeks away from being promoted to head General Motors' Chevrolet Division. As Pontiac's chief engineer in 1963, he stuck

a big, hairy 389-cubic-inch engine into a small Pontiac Tempest hardtop for his personal use—really just for the hell of it. That car, in mass-production form the following year as the GTO, started the whole supercar revolution.

DeLorean stretched his six-foot-four-inch frame into a massive black-leather chair in his office and described the car: "It was an exciting automobile to drive but, more important, it was useful for everyday driving. Everyone who drove it loved it, and we decided to market it as the GTO. Our sales manager bet me that we'd be lucky to sell 5000 of them. We sold 31,000 and it was the best-selling first-year car Pontiac ever had. Most people want distinctiveness. In these cars, you combine unique appearance and performance. Their market is here to stay. Too many people like to drive them for it to disappear."

In a sense, it took a flashy, unconventional auto executive like forty-four-year-old DeLorean to get the ball rolling. DeLorean owns ten percent of the San Diego Chargers, shoots seven-handicap golf, has dated Nancy Sinatra and is now married to a twenty-year-old swinger, the former Kelly Harmon. Until his GTO was introduced, the only hot-performing American cars were being put together out of conventional models by right-thinking, red-blooded American boys in damp garages across the country. Detroit had made a few abortive attempts in the middle Fifties: Chrysler's 300; Dodge's D-500; Studebaker's Hawk, Plymouth's Fury. But what was really needed—the main force behind the supercar revolution and the reason it is gaining momentum daily—was the maturation of the World War II babies into moneyed, car-loving consumers.

The influence of these kids, highly sophisticated car buyers who

reject the autos driven by their parents, is astonishing. "Everything we do is controlled by the kids because they're going to be our customers for quite some time," says Jacque Passino of Ford's product-development group.

Detroit's auto makers are obsessed with the fact that the average age of America's car buyer is going down fast. On July 1, 1968, half of America's population became 27.7 years of age or younger. Detroit had seen the wave building; the burgeoning sales of supercars introduced several years before proved that there was a lot of money in this market.

Ralph Peters, Lincoln-Mercury's market product-planning manager, typifies the youth-market-conscious executive. Peters is a conservative-sounding guy who looks as if he could play the Fred MacMurray fatherly character to a trio of sons. But Peters is hip. He carries around a black plastic-covered notebook jammed with figures on where the supercar market is going to be years from now. "By 1973," he said, "twenty-nine percent of the household heads will be in the eighteen-to-thirty-four age group. This group will account for forty percent of new-car sales by then, and that's up from twenty-seven percent in 1963." Peters watches to see if this is sinking in. "Right now, new-car sales to buyers under twenty-five represent one million units. The typical young buyer looks for styling and performance. He's well-educated, single and making good money."

About 700,000 supercars were sold in the 1968 model year, an impressive figure since it comes close to representing ten percent of last year's domestic new-car market. It's even more impressive when you consider that this market is split into a seemingly endless

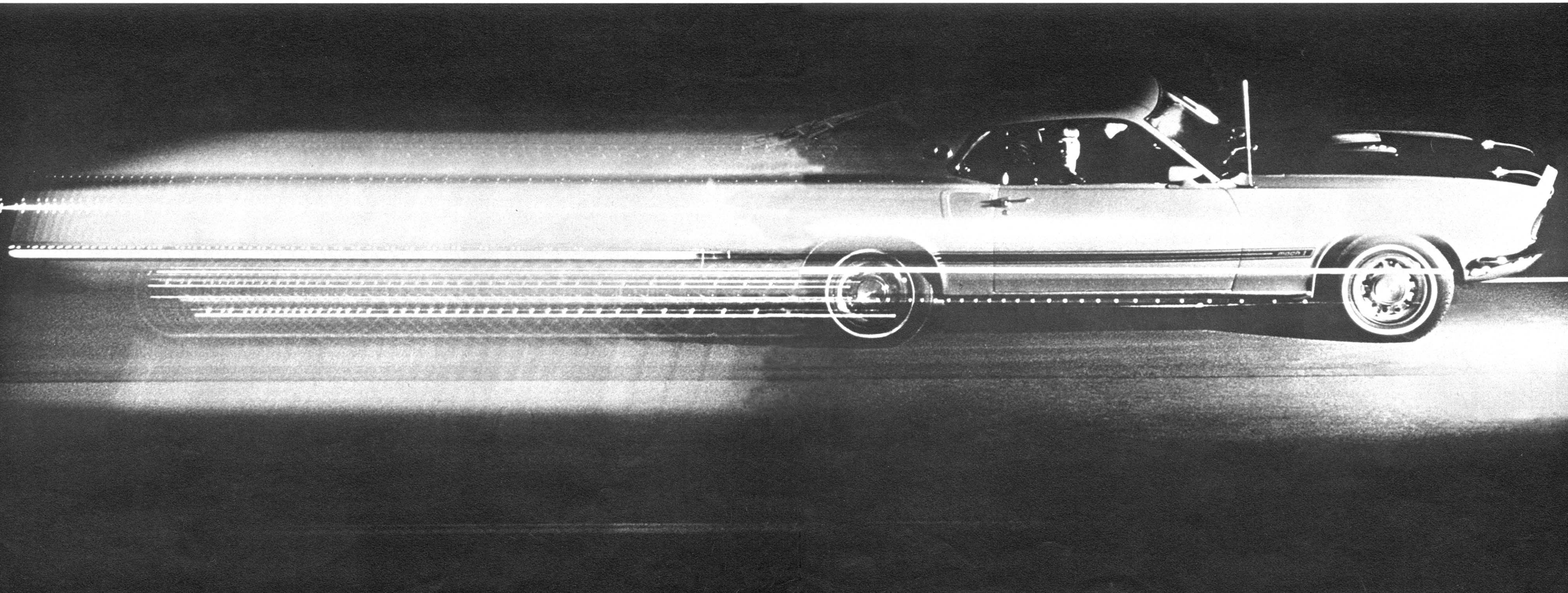
number of submarkets as the scale is climbed from super economy to super luxury and that Detroit is frantically spending millions of dollars to produce minicars, like Ford's new Maverick, to compete with the imports—which took ten percent of the 1968 market.

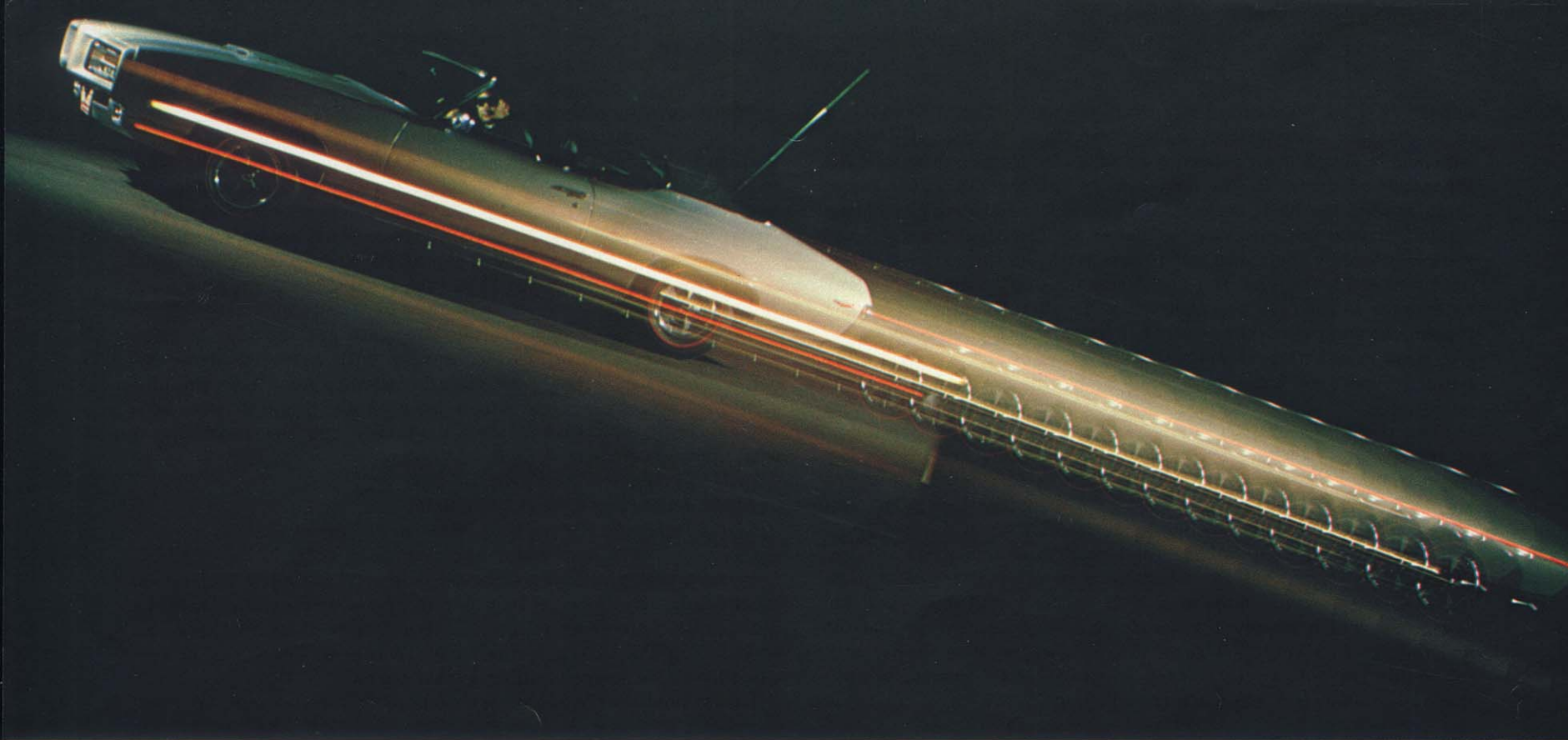
With Detroit's \$600 average gross profit per car, the 1968 supercar gross profits would have totaled roughly \$420,000,000! But this isn't the whole story. A supercar buyer must purchase his auto with standard heavy-duty suspension, bigger brakes and tires, beefed-up or special transmissions—all expensive items included in the car's cost. William S. Pickett, American Motor's vice-president of sales, told me back in early 1968 that he'd be happy if only 10,000 of the company's new AMX's were sold in that model year. Why? "They represent pretty good money," he said. "Our dealers love 'em." E. M. "Pete" Estes, vice-president in charge of G.M.'s car and truck group, added, "I don't think it's any secret that selling supercars is a profitable operation."

What can't be accurately measured is the effect that a performance image has on sales of conventional models. It's a potent force nevertheless, as evidenced by A.M.C.'s turnaround last year when its supercar Javelin SST's and AMX's were introduced. "If you're not in the performance market," says Peters of Lincoln-Mercury, "you're not with it."

Detroit is continually throwing more supercars into the market. This year, a buyer can choose from at least thirty-six models: Ford's Fairlane Cobra, Torino G.T. and Talladega; Chevrolet's Chevelle SS 396 and Chevy II Nova SS; Dodge's Charger R/T and 500, Coronet R/T, Super Bee, Dart GTS, and Swinger; Plymouth's GTX and Road Runner; Buick's GS 350 and 400; Oldsmo-

... their brakes will stop you in a shorter distance (as here with Ford's Mustang Mach I)...





...they come with fat, sexy-looking tires and other performance styling cues (the Pontiac GTO, above)...

...and their heavy-duty suspensions will get you around a corner fast and safe (as demonstrated by Plymouth's Road Runner).

bile's 4-4-2 and Cutlass S W-31; Mercury's Cyclone CJ and Spoiler; and the GTO. In the compact category, there are: Ford's Mustang Mach I, Boss 302 and Boss 429; A.M.C.'s Javelin SST and SC/Rambler; Chevrolet's Camaro SS and Z/28; Plymouth's 'Cuda; Pontiac's Firebird 400 HO and Trans-Am; Mercury's Cougar XR-7 and Eliminator; and Shelby Cobra G.T. 350 and G.T. 500. Chevrolet's Corvette and A.M.C.'s AMX also qualify, though they are both two-seaters and regarded more as sports cars.

Peters tells of a twenty-five-year-old gas-station attendant he talked with while on a trip. The attendant, it turned out, had owned four supercars since his twenty-first birthday. In an affluent economy, today's car buyer, especially the younger ones who covet the latest in styles and engines, isn't likely to keep his car for years—religiously polishing the dead paint on weekends and waiting until it rusts out. The Depression-age mentality, which engendered this longevity of car ownership, is dying.

Also important is that when today's supercar buyer later on acquires a growing family and has a wife bitching about loud exhaust pipes, he'll look for a more conservative automobile. Few auto executives think he'll buy a four-door, six-cylinder sedan—not after what *he's* been exposed to; he'll purchase a conservative facsimile of his former car. Its engine may be tamer, its exhaust quieter, but you can bet his new "family car" won't be like his father's. The blind loyalty to a particular make of car that once was handed down from father to son is fast disappearing. If a car can't cut it on the street or drag strip today, young buyers are looking elsewhere.

What has apparently surprised Detroit is that supercars are being increasingly snapped up by middle-aged men, though it's the kids they're primarily designed for. Half the more than 90,000 GTO's sold in 1968 were purchased by middle-aged buyers. One of the country's top-selling Dodge dealers reports that lawyers, physicians, even stockbrokers are lining up to buy Charger R/T's. Sure, they load them with extras like air conditioning, but they're still Charger R/T's. All this has led to a significant change in Detroit's definition of the youth market. It is defined no longer strictly by age, but by attitude. A Camaro SS ad reads: "... don't think for a minute that we won't sell you a Camaro if you're over thirty. After all, it's not how young you are. It's how old you aren't."

Ford Division's market product-planning manager, Norman Krandall, has a theory about the supercar's growing universal

appeal. "I think it's damned important to realize," says Krandall, a little guy who likes to wave a big cigar when he talks, "that this supercar business is an extension of attitudes that have existed for thousands of years. People have always had the desire for something beyond the basic essentials. You used to have royalty riding around in gold-trimmed coaches pulled by beautiful horses. They were reinforcing their own self-image. With the fantastic economic improvement we've had, the guy who's making money now wants to express himself in the same way. In this market, you've got people who want cars that go like hell and sound that way, or people who want cars with performance styling even if they never use the power. Supercars have just about put the convertible out of business."

Even though executives like Krandall now have an appreciation of the high-performance phenomenon, to a significant degree it's the members of what is known as "the underground" who are keeping the auto makers in touch with what the kids want and expect. Undergrounders are men who spent a good part of their youth fooling with hot rods in the late Forties and early Fifties. Some of them now wear three-button suits and hold top-level positions with the auto companies. Others head multimillion-dollar companies which supply high-performance equipment to Detroit and the aftermarket. They're invaluable men because they're still tuned into the auto youth market, which, after all, has existed out there in smaller, less affluent form all along.

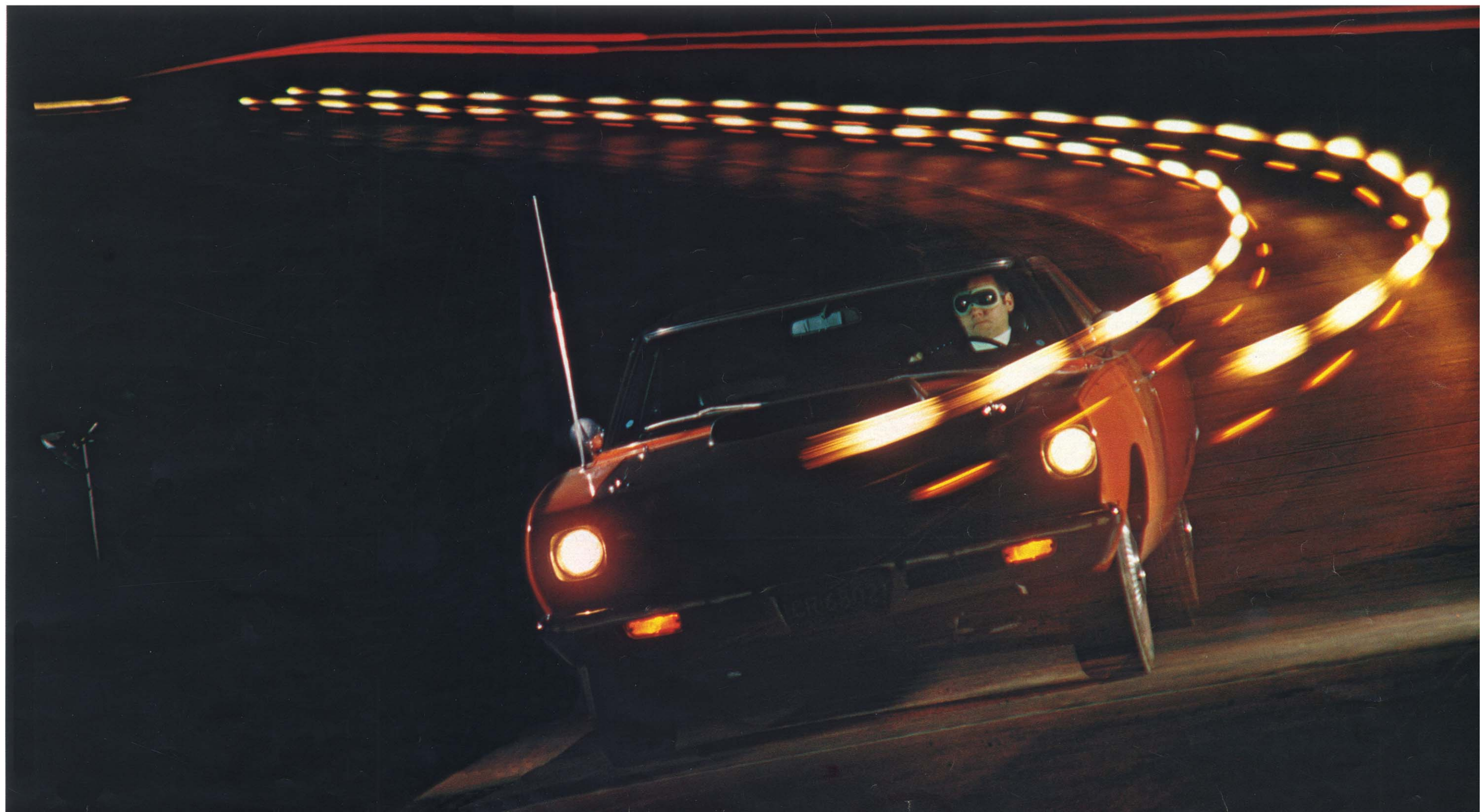
The unquestioned king of the undergrounders is Jim Wangers, an eternally enthusiastic, baby-faced guy in his early forties. Wangers gave his friend DeLorean the idea of building the GTO in the first place. Though ideas are all that Wangers has ever really owned, he is said to have invented Detroit's supercar market almost single-handedly. He is now special supercar consultant at Campbell-Ewald, Chevy's ad agency, and one of the most shrewd and dedicated promoters in Detroit. "I'm just a kid who never grew up," he says.

Before the GTO's introduction, Wangers got the idea to flood rock-music stations across the country with a record about the car. He lined up a New York record company, gave them the idea and they sent him lyrics which he rewrote. Sung in the then-popular California surfing style by Ronny and the Daytonas, it sold 1,200,000 copies:

*Little GTO, you're really lookin' fine,  
Three deuces and a four-speed, and a 389,  
Listen to her tachin' up now, listen to her whine,  
Come on turn it on, wind it up, blow it out, GTO.*

It was pure grass-roots supercar language, instantly understood by the kids. Disc jockeys still play it whenever they slip an "oldie but goodie" into their program. "It did more than anything else to build up the GTO's image," says Wangers. "It was a protest car, though we weren't calling it that then."

Understand that Wangers isn't one of (Continued on page 44)



(Continued from page 117) those sharpie promotion guys. His love of cars goes back to cutting pictures of them out of *The Saturday Evening Post* when he was a child. As a Campbell-Ewald copywriter, he launched Chevrolet into the high-performance field. In late 1954, that G.M. division was introducing a hot little 265-cubic-inch V-8 engine. Wangers tore his hair out trying to convince

his superiors to give the engine performance promotion. But no. A high-performance Chevrolet? So Wangers went to the old Daytona Speed Week and took notes as Chevrolets broke more than a hundred records! With the new engine. The newspapers picked up the results, and Chevrolet was flooded with requests for information. Fortunately, Wangers was prepared for it with a fifteen-page

report and the day was saved.

Later, working with Pontiac, Wangers became a racing driver. The driver for Pontiac's semiofficial drag-racing team cracked up a car on a high-speed run and was fired. Wangers took his place, captured the National Hot Rod Association's prestigious Super Stock and Top Stock eliminator titles and "didn't climb out of the car till four years later."

It was Wangers who set up the Royal Pontiac dealership, in De-

troit's suburban Royal Oak, as Pontiac's unofficial high-performance center. Royal has set the pace for other G.M. car divisions, stymied as they are by the corporation's 1963 ban against racing and performance-oriented advertising. The pattern is that racing is emphasized only at selected dealerships.

On the surface, Royal is a conventional-looking brick-and-glass dealership with the old Pontiac chief-tain's head still adorning a few poles on its used-car lot. But it has a huge performance-parts inventory and a performance club whose members get the latest parts lists and new performance ideas "for street or strip." Royal sells everything from Royal Bobcat performance kits to a "completely blueprinted N.H.R.A. C/ Stocker" that will turn a hundred miles an hour or better in the quarter mile. The dealership is an invaluable source of "feedback" to Pontiac's top executives.

Wangers walked into Royal one day recently wearing a blue pinstriped suit and a hat at least five years out of style—even for Detroit. He steered me over to Royal's drag-race car, a bright-orange Firebird, a mean-looking car with bulgy tires and stickers plastered over every available inch of its rear windows—Sun Tach, Lakewood Industries, Valvoline Racing Oil, Champion Spark Plugs, Mal-lory Ignition.

"That car is too specialized. It's set up strictly for the drags. Now, *this* car" (a Royal Bobcat GTO with a crystal-turquoise custom paint job, white racing stripes and big, black Goodyear G-70x14 tires) "gives high performance both on the street and strip. Pontiac can't build 'em like this because the first thing an average buyer will do is put in regular gas which will burn a hole in a piston."

Wangers compares the Bobcat with the very best high-performance European sports cars, like Maseratis, Ferraris or Lamborghinis. But what the Bobcat really is meant to be is a Super Street Racer. It's not coincidental that the GTO was behind the first big wave of drag racing on the city streets. The car is being outperformed now by other supercars, but it still has solid credentials as king of the streets. Totally aware of this, Wangers pulled one of his most recent coups by setting up a big, two-page ad with a picture of the 1968 GTO, the words "The Great One" underneath it, and the street sign "Woodward Avenue" in the background. It was the subtlest navigation of G.M.'s racing ban ever devised.

Woodward Avenue. It stretches from the area of the 1967 Detroit riots into the plushy suburbs of Royal Oak, Bloomfield Hills and Birmingham, and many of the top auto executives drive it daily into the city, along with everyone else. But at night, when all the drive-ins along it start clicking on their lights and self-respecting white-collar workers are at home

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playing with the baby, Woodward Avenue becomes the street-racing capital of the world. Here, in the hot little fingers of teenage drivers, a large part of the future of the American automobile is being determined. If a car is respected on Woodward, it will be a best seller in the youth market anywhere. The auto makers know this. If you're looking, you'll find some high-ranking auto-company boys out there driving casually, taking it all in—and racing.

Auto makers know that if they can produce a hot street racer, they're in, from New York to California. They're aware that the raciest-looking car in the world, given topflight promotion and sold cheaper than competing cars, is a sure money loser and image killer if it gets beaten from the stoplight. "It's amazing," says one auto executive, "how fast the word gets around when you've got a dog." So, without bothering to ask anybody at the top, the factory

boys are out there on Woodward to see how the kids react to the performance given by, say, a new carburetor setup or styling feature. "When you're on Woodward," says G.M.'s Estes, "everyone is watching." Dick Teague, A.M.C.'s vice-president of styling, often sits in the passenger's seat of his white AMX with "sidewinder" exhausts and red racing stripes when his son takes the car to Woodward.

Drag strips, which were built

throughout the country during the Fifties, have become more and more crowded. A kid today who takes the trouble to drive out to a strip after a week of preparing his car may get only one run for a cheap tin trophy. But there's always a Woodward Avenue, where he can run every night, maybe fifty times, and sometimes for hard cash. There are Woodwards on a smaller scale across the country. Even Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has a problem with street racers tearing up and down Front and Second streets within walking distance of the Capitol building. But the action there, and in the Los Angeles, Miami and Long Island areas, is minor league — nothing — compared with Woodward.

On any given night, you'll find nearly two thousand supercars on Woodward, their owners sizing each other up, pairing off at stoplights and drive-ins. Road Runners, Chevelle 396's, 'Cuda 383's, Cobras, 4-4-2's—many with slick paint jobs, gigantic hood scoops, jacked-up suspensions, mag wheels and black tires that look like they belong on a semi. There's a definite pecking order. You'd better be piloting a pretty hot piece of machinery before you tackle a Road Runner with the "hemi" engine, or a Royal Bobcat. There are always a few kids driving "Daddy cars," like Buick Electras, but they're ignored because they are "strokes" — not really with it.

Woodward has a regular cast of racers. There's the Nun, who drives a black Chevelle 396; the Bird, in a Camaro SS; Peanuts, who pilots a ratty-looking (but fast) GTO and the factory boys who strive to remain nameless. One of the factory men told me he had some of the big-league racers fooled for about three months last summer. He'd hit the drive-ins systematically in his black hardtop and say it was a going machine, though it had bad engine valves. The word got around, and he received quite a few challenges. On the way out to I-75, though, he'd switch to an identical car which had a "blueprinted" engine and win the races hands down. On the way back to Woodward, he'd switch to the original car.

The Cheater never was fooled, though. He will remain nameless because he's also a factory boy. Suffice it to say he knows the ins and outs of Woodward like the inside of his engine. His feedback to management is priceless; he's a pro in a very complicated, demanding market.

"You won't find many punks, or drinking and drugs out here," says The Cheater. "The suburbs are affluent, and the kids racing are clean-cut. They run high-priced equipment which they know how to handle."

Jack Barnes, owner of the Big Town Drive-in in Royal Oak, says he's never had any problems with punks. "All they do when they come here is talk about cars," Barnes adds. "You know what,



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though? I feel sorry for the girls. They're ignored."

It was after midnight and I was sitting with The Cheater in the Big Boy drive-in, located on Woodward in Royal Oak. The Big Boy is at the south end of the street race circuit. From there you make a U-turn and head north on Woodward to Ted's Drive In, in Bloomfield Hills. Along the way you may stop at the Big Town or Maverick's and see the really hot cars pulled into parking

slots, their drivers, with a carload of buddies or girls, munching hamburgers and listening to rock stations like WKNR or CKLW and eyeing what's pulling in. If they're in a GTO, a challenger might say, "Will that thing run?" or "Goats [a GTO nickname] are pigs!" If you want to race, you'll reply, "Want to take a shot?"

There is no hard, hundred-mile-an-hour-plus racing on Woodward anymore. That's done on I-75, I-94

or I-696 after leaving a drive-in. The cops, who used to have a good thing going by collecting a thousand dollars and more each night in fines, have gotten even tougher, and the pros are careful. What you will find on Woodward, though, is racing up to forty or fifty from stoplights or from twenty to fifty miles an hour. Woodward's "race circuit" is eight lanes with a forty-mile-an-hour limit and few houses nearby, so this just naturally is the form of racing there

now, and the type most popular for supercars throughout the country.

Ironically, it is Ford, darling of the street racers in the Forties and early Fifties, and the Southern moonshine runners even before that, which is trying to win back the kids. It's no secret that while Ford was tearing up the race tracks in the mid-Sixties, it was offering a performance engine that was, to put it politely, a real slug on the streets. But Ford has been gaining ground since introducing in mid-1968 its 428-cubic-inch Cobra Jet engine. A 1968 Cobra Jet Mustang last year was called the "fastest running Pure Stock in the history of man" by *Hot Rod* magazine, which is the same as saying it was dubbed that by Divine Providence.

But there's still the terrifying Chrysler "hemi" to deal with, so Ford this year introduced a 429-cubic-inch engine which it hopes will provide the final punch. "We feel very good about the 429," says Semon E. Knudsen, Ford's president. "We have high hopes." This engine was introduced as the 1968 Ford Thunderbird's power plant. Suburban matrons have been tooling around with it under the hood for over a year now without the faintest realization that they have what Ford considers the Golden Key, in factory-modified form, to the supercar market.

I asked James M. Roche, G.M.'s board chairman, what he thought about dropping the G.M. racing ban, and he replied, without blinking an eye, "The best proving ground is our own test facilities." But Roche is an old pro and well knows what a target the giant G.M. would make if they entered the "immoral" arena of racing. So, meanwhile, Ford has a leg up. In 1968, it captured the NASCAR, U.S.A.C. and A.R.C.A. championships, with a Cobra Jet Mustang starting the year off right by winning in January an N.H.R.A. Super-Stock Eliminator title. Low-slung Ford GT40's won the 1968 World Manufacturer's Championship, which included a third straight win at the Le Mans twenty-four-hour race in France.

The most significant victory, of course, was the N.H.R.A. win because, as Knudsen puts it, "I doubt the average youngster knows much about Le Mans." Ford discovered that fifty-eight percent of supercar buyers had seen a drag race in the twelve months before they purchased a car, so it is sponsoring two drag-race teams, which, in turn, will help form a series of dealership-sponsored Ford Drag Clubs.

"Yes, we're working *very* desperately on drag racing," says Jacque Passino, who heads Ford's motor-sports and performance activities. He feels the Le Mans victories have been strong accomplishments, but adds, "The kids always were aware that we had engineering smarts but that we were too stupid to get a good supercar in the market place." When

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the Mustang Cobra Jet was introduced, Passino remarked that Ford finally had an entry in the "Woodward Avenue Grand Prix."

Ford is working hard to familiarize its dealers with the high-performance language, an industry-wide task. It is setting up "Performance Corners" in showrooms from coast to coast where its supercars will be displayed and where Ford racing jackets can be bought. Dealers are being sent a booklet explain-

ing that the 1969 supercar volume will be larger than that of the luxury market. "It's big business," says the booklet. "And it's not only the size of the market that's important. It's the influence that these . . . buyers will exert on the . . . other buyers that is crucial."

A number of dealers already have the message. Matt McLaughlin, a Ford vice-president and Lincoln-Mercury's general manager, notes that some tuned-in dealers and dis-

trict sales managers are having a strong influence on the design of the supercars themselves. Mercury's new "Cyclone Spoiler" model was first proposed by Lincoln-Mercury's Atlanta, Georgia, district sales personnel. It began when driver Cale Yarborough was on his way last year in a Mercury Cyclone to becoming the biggest money winner in stock-car racing history. Of course, everyone in the South was pretty turned on by it all, and the Atlanta district

said, "Why not build a street Cyclone that is painted like Cale's car with a spoiler on it?" A spoiler is a wing-like airfoil mounted on the rear of a car's body. It increases road-holding ability because it breaks the lift effect air has while passing over the trunk. The good old boys down South are waiting in line to get the car now.

"In a way," says Frank Zimmerman, Lincoln-Mercury's general sales manager, "we're force-feeding the whole market with supercar features

like disk brakes, but the spoiler really came from a grassroots demand." Al Turner, a thirty-seven-year old undergrounder who remembers racing on Woodward Avenue in his youth and who helped Wangers set up the Michigan Hot Rod Association, predicts that most innovations will first appear on supercars. He points to a two-speed rear axle on the Eliminator, the Cougar supercar show automobile. The experimental axle has separate settings for city acceleration and highway cruising. One supercar feature already exerting tremendous influence on the conventional auto is tires. Clark E. Stair, Firestone Tire and Rubber's tire development manager, is excited about a supercar-type tire which Firestone will sell to the major auto makers for use on their conventional 1970 models. This tire is even wider and squattier than many tires on existing supercars, he says, adding that Detroit stylists now feel "the total tire package—tire, wheel, hubcap—directly affects the styling and appearance of cars."

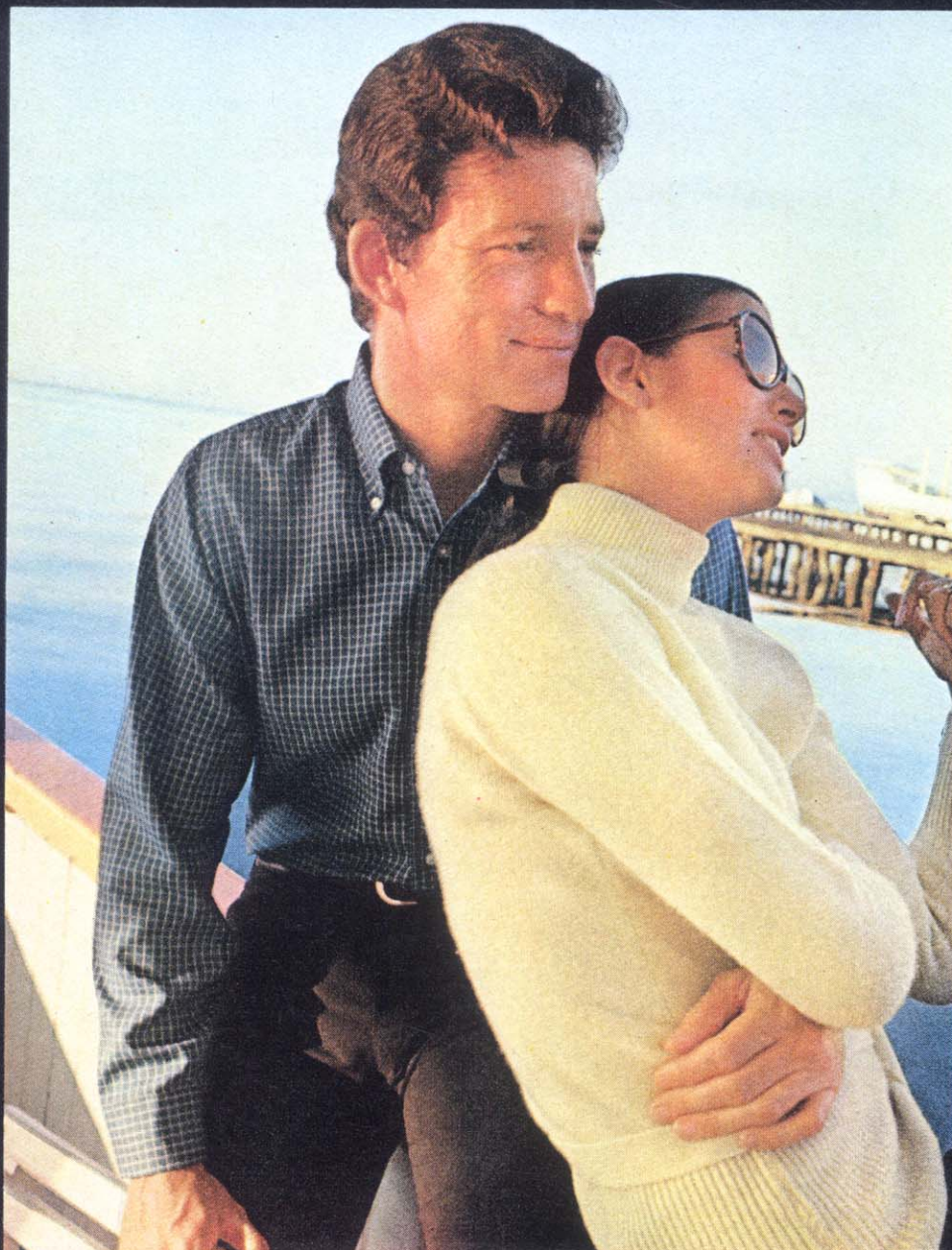
Stair leans back and laughs at mention of the youth market. "I'm in my forties and I'm looking to buy the same kind of high-performance car the kids buy. Supercars have made the tire business a lot more interesting than it was in the early Sixties. We're always amazed here at the young people who come into our stores with \$200 and \$300 for special supercar tires and wheels."

At Chevrolet, the supercar-motivated clean-design school is influencing the styling of models. Pete Estes, who, when interviewed last January, was still general manager of Chevrolet, pulled me over to a painting on his office wall. It showed a Camaro SS leading the pace lap of the 1967 Indianapolis 500. "Chevrolet designers first style all our cars with a supercar appearance foremost in mind." He pointed to the Camaro's racing stripe, which extends around the grille. "We designed the front end of the car to take the stripe. We merchandise the car in our SS supercar group with the stripe and simply as the Camaro without it. You don't have to worry when you design them first in supercar style because then you've got the basic shape of the car right. It's a shape a performance buyer instantly recognizes."

Estes, now one of G.M.'s top automotive executives, is a gregarious man with a thin moustache. When he was in-

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terviewed last January, his personal cars were a Corvette, a Z/28 Camaro and a Chevelle SS-396. He makes no bones about not driving home on Woodward in grandmother style: "I don't want them saying when I leave here at night, 'There goes that old stodgy guy.'" He respects the market: "Loyalty is to the winner, not the make." And he knows the market: "A supercar's reputation gets around by word of mouth. One of the influential factors are the buff books. I read them avidly and whenever Chev-

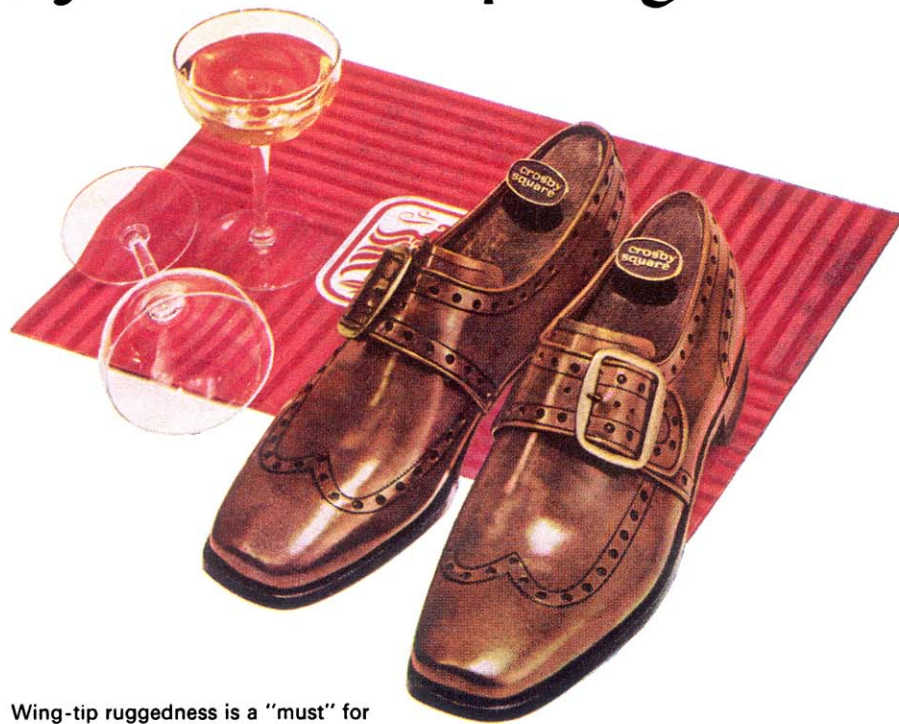
rolet is mentioned, I want to see something good."

Chevrolet's Z/28 Camaro is creating a large market for small-engine supercars. With its 302-cubic-inch V-8, it's a close sister to the Camaro which swept the 1968 Trans-Am series. Trans-Am racing, done on road courses, is becoming popular with the kids and is giving them an excuse to buy a small engine, thus avoiding the high-insurance premiums which come with a giganomotor.

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Actually, the small-engine supercar can hold its own with its big brothers. Chuck Kelley, Dodge's white-haired product-planning manager and chief engineer, says Dodge's 340-cubic-inch supercar engine is very popular. Though the 340 is rated at 275 horsepower, the kids on Woodward will tell you it's actually pumping out over 300. Kelley just smiles. What's happening is that Detroit, becoming more sophisticated in the battle of the supercar market, is *underrating* the horsepower in its supercar engines.

A supercar dealer nicknamed "Mr. Norm" feels there's room for all kinds of engines. He's Norm Kraus, part owner of Grand-Spaulling Dodge in Chicago. With his father, Harvey, and his brother, Lennie, Norm opened the dealership in 1962, and though Grand-Spaulling sells high-performance cars mainly, it ranks among the top twenty in overall car sales with Dodge's 3000 dealers. The company presages the "pure" supercar dealer of the future. Up until this year, it was the only dealer selling the Dart GSS with a 440-cubic-inch engine (the model is now available from the factory).

Mr. Norm also has the title "Mr. Outside" because he annually travels 150,000 miles with the dealership's drag-race car. Lennie, known as "Mr. Inside" because he sticks close to Grand-Spaulling recently was pacing around his office in a rock-band-style gold sports coat, explaining, "We've been so successful because we knew the market's potential and grew with it."

Grand-Spaulling salesmen aren't allowed to talk with a customer until they know the supercar market backwards and sideways. A customer is asked immediately how his car will be used: on the drag strip, the street or a combination of both.

"We have parents come in here with their kids and say 'I don't want him to have this or that,'" Mr. Norm says. "Later they come back and thank us for selling their son a car. They say, 'I know where he is now. He's working on the car.' The kids stop here before they go home after coming back from Vietnam."

One of the hottest selling big-engine supercars is Plymouth's Road Runner, well on its way to becoming a legend. With its "beep-beep" horn and decals of the popular Road Runner bird seen perpetually trouncing a coyote in Warner Bros.-Seven Arts cartoons, this car has started a trend toward "gimmicky" supercars like the GTO "Judge."

Joseph Sturm, Plymouth's product-planning manager and chief engineer, says that before its introduction in 1968, only about 5000 Road Runners were expected to be sold; a total of 44,535 were purchased.

About forty-five percent of Plymouth's intermediate-size cars will be Road Runners or GTX's in 1969 — impressive considering that Plymouth is basically an intermediate-market car.

"One of our guys came up with the Road Runner gimmick," Sturm recalls. "He told me to go home and watch the cartoon on TV. The whole project became a fun thing to do. The car has brought us a young market, the youngest we've ever seen. It has created an *esprit de corps* around here. Everyone is turned on by this thing."

Plymouth's supercars have a zany advertising campaign. They are pictured in cartoon-style with exaggerated tires and hood scoops. The copy reads: "Yoddenbrrowww rumpety-rump-rumpety rump-rump-rup-rup yod-

denbrrowww bradden-bradden bradden-bradden bradden-bradden eeeeeppp."

"Well, why not?" says James Ramsey, creative supervisor for Plymouth high-performance advertising at Young & Rubicam in Detroit. "I got the idea for it with our art and creative directors while sitting at the N.H.R.A. Summernationals drag races. We always were aware that the cosmetics of performance include performance sounds. We thought it would be fun to capture the sound of a supercar engine revving up. With the cartoons, you run into the same rationale. There's much about a supercar that can't be captured with photography. The kids love cars with big, wide tires, so we wanted to let them know we're aware of this, and that we also thought these tires are groovy. We're trying to capture the essence of what high-performance cars are all about."

At American Motors, where they are still a bit wide-eyed about the whole thing, executives who aren't performance buffs are soon converted. When the AMX was introduced to the press last year at Daytona International Speedway, William V. Lunenburg, president and chief operating officer, scoffed at the idea all the way to the track. An A.M.C. executive finally got him to consent to have a professional driver take him for a ride around the speedway. "They circled at 130 miles an hour," the executive said, "and I expected Bill to get out of the car pretty angry. But he wouldn't get out, he wanted to go around again. Then I took him to a NASCAR racing car parked there. He looked the car over carefully and said, 'Why, we can build one like that.'"

Oldsmobile has much the same youth-market identity problem as American Motors, though its 4-4-2 has been around since 1964. The trouble was that Olds advertised the car with too much emphasis on its road-holding characteristics. Then, Olds put the car in engine-oriented ads featuring "Dr. Oldsmobile," who comes on with a white smock, Edwardian moustache and striped pants. Sales of the 4-4-2 jumped from 25,000 in 1967 to 37,000 in 1968.

Olds received a shot in the arm when Ron Garey last year took a Stock Eliminator title at the N.H.R.A. Springnationals drag race. "If an Olds wins," says John Beltz, former chief engineer at Oldsmobile, "it's like *ten* Chevrolets winning."

Beltz, forty-three-years old and recently named Olds general manager, is another DeLorean, with a little less Hollywood glamour. He admits that Olds has been in real trouble with the kids, with most buyers lining up for the Olds 88's and 98's. But things are happening. The Smothers Brothers Racing Team has selected several Cutlass S models for its drag-race team, and dealers are receiving booklets on the supercar market along with order forms which facilitate ordering a high-performance Olds. Ted Louckes, an Olds engineer, has organized a group of Olds advertising, engineering and sales personnel into a performance club. And, working with Hurst Performance, Inc., Olds has developed the Hurst Olds, a custom 4-4-2 with a big Toronado engine and, of course, a Hurst Dual-Gate-equipped automatic transmission. Almost a thousand of these cars will be sold this year.

George Hurst at the age of forty-two is a legend in the supercar market. His company, based in Warminster, Pennsylvania, supplies those





click-click, knife-through-butter precision shifters to Pontiac, Olds, Buick, Chevrolet, Dodge and Plymouth, and also to the aftermarket. He has a new, 33,000-square-foot factory near Detroit where the drag race AMX's and supercar Ramblers are being partly built along with the Oldsmobiles and Plymouth's special, big-engine Barracudas. Hurst vans are found at all the big drag races supplying free conveniences for the racers. Hurst is there, too, getting

information he'll feed back to the auto makers. "I'll say, 'What do you want in the way of performance automobiles?' They say, 'George, why don't you do this or that to a hood or an engine.' They won't talk to the factory guys that way."

Then, too, Hurst performance has Linda Vaughn, a twenty-five-year-old statuesque blonde ("She wears a 42 double B, do you want me to go on?" says a Hurst spokesman). Linda is from Dalton, Georgia, and

wears a gold-lamé outfit while hanging onto a giant simulated Hurst shifter which is brought to all the races. Officially she is billed as "Miss Hurst Golden Shifter," but she's also, Hurst says proudly, "the First Lady of Drag Racing."

Hurst has limitless confidence in the supercar market. "Look at Pontiac's hottest selling new car, the Grand Prix. It's a supercar in plushy form. Look at all the conventional cars with mag wheels."

Even plushy old Buick is in the game, offering Stage I and II performance kits for its GS supercars, with the latter kit recommended strictly for *drag racing*. "Racing doesn't do the Buick image any harm," says Wesley Brush, Buick's marketing director. "There is a certain connotation that goes with racing—safety, good handling..." At the same time, Brush talks a lot about "black leather jacket" supercar buyers and adds rather stuffily that it is, just naturally, the *older* supercar buyer who goes after a Buick GS. Yet he admits that "these young people are becoming so influential, I don't think we can ignore their demands. We've got to have excitement now to appeal to everybody." Buicks are now seen roaring across the television screen to the music of *Light My Fire*.

As perhaps the ultimate indication of the way things are going, the Coca-Cola Company is laying on its big hand of All-American respectability by sponsoring a national drag-race program with Lincoln-Mercury, Chevrolet, Dodge, Plymouth, Pontiac and American Motors cars competing at strips across the country along with their hero-status drivers. The program's idea officially came from The Gold Agency, Inc., a division of Ben Crist Enterprises, one of the country's largest operators and managers of drag strips. But the program is really the baby of Gold Agency's Ira Lichey, a sixty-one-year-old, short, enormous man who's "Uncle Ira" to the drag-race fraternity.

Uncle Ira says the Coke program is a very big deal because it marks the first time a major, nonautomotive company is pouring a lot of money into drag racing. "They checked out the sport very thoroughly, very thoroughly, before committing themselves. I'm guiding them because they don't know anything—nothing—about drag racing."

Uncle Ira is intensely involved in the sport and it bothers—genuinely hurts—him that more newspapers don't give publicity to drag racing. He recalls trying to phone in a race's results to a sportswriter. "He just wanted one or two names, just the local guys. Can you imagine? We had national heroes out there. He didn't understand."

But the day is coming, says Uncle Ira, when there will be a world series of drag racing with cars from regional leagues competing. "We envision something spectacular. We're working on it now. Within the next five years, with more supercars flooding the market, races will be held in midtown stadiums. Some day there will be regular betting on the cars."

You watch the spiraling supercar sales figures, talk with the top auto company decision makers, spend a week on Woodward where not one fusty old Super-Econo six-cylinder sedan is in sight, and, yes, even that seems possible. #

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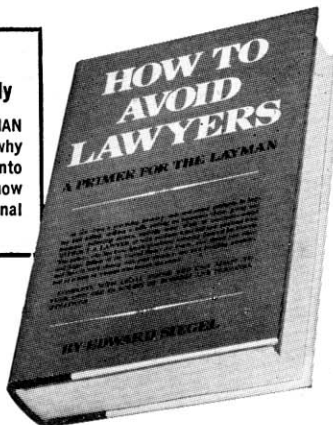
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