

by Bill Sanders

Double takes will be the standard reaction for the first month Dodge's new Challenger is on the road, as heads snap in unison to see what that "strange" car was that just passed. And rightly so. The Challenger is styled for right now. It has a certain wide, heavy GT flavor that hits your vision immediately. Even the name is indicative of the endeavor. Dodge has never had a pony car so they've never reaped any of the fantastic sales that have come and gone since the beginning in 1964. Even in the racing arena Dodge hasn't tagged onto the fast rising star of Trans-Am or the Baby Grands of NASCAR, even though the division is totally committed to racing. But the new offering should definitely be a challenger in every area, from sales to racing. The only hangup may be in sales, where it really counts. Sales of pony cars have slowly been ebbing away recently, with people moving into intermediates, imports and other models. Bringing out an entirely new car costs a lot of loot, and being one of the last entrants in an aging class of cars could cause some problems. Also, competition in the pony class will get a little more rigorous about March of 1970 when the completely new Camaro and Firebird hit the market. Having personally seen those two, we can attest to their eye-catching styling and the appeal they will undoubtedly have. But, the Challenger is here and the stylists and engineers have done a credible job of putting an honest-to-goodness American-type GT car on the road. *Motor Trend* had an opportunity to give a Challenger an early road test around the countryside of Michigan, and if the comments of gas station attendants, small-town high school kids and assorted vacationers are an indication of Challenger success, the future seems pretty bright.

A New Concept Within a Concept

Dodge has had a few years to observe what's been going on in the pony car field and has incorporated many of the good features of the breed in the Challenger. It has the long hood, short deck theme, but is much lower and wider than many contemporaries. It has a 110-inch wheelbase with a 59.7-inch front tread and a 60.7-inch rear tread that definitely gives it a wider-than-usual stance. Overall length is 191.3 inches; width is 76.4 inches and height is 51.4 inches. Trunk space is unusually good for a pony car. The Challenger is available in either hardtop or convertible models. It's broken down into two price classes, the Chal-

Dodge's sensational GT has an exciting flair that's all new, aimed at an all out sales and racing challenge in the pony car class. It's appropriately known as the

CHALLENGER

lenger and Challenger R/T. In addition, in either model, a formal SE (Special Edition) hardtop is an available option. The SE features a vinyl roof that has a padded, smaller rear window. The small rear window seemed strange at first, sort of a hark back to the '20s and '30s, but we soon got used to it and dig the feeling of privacy. There doesn't seem to be as much glare from headlights either, but some safety expert will probably take it to task sooner or later. The SE also includes leather upholstered seats and an airplane-type overhead console with warning lights for "door ajar," "seat belts" and "low fuel." On the dash, a speedo, amps, fuel and temperature gauges are standard. With the R/T option you get a rallye cluster that includes a tach, clock, trip odometer and an oil pressure gauge. Our test car was an R/T—SE so we lucked out on everything. The speedometer is just left of the steering column center and the tach is right over it. Both are in an excellent location for viewing. To the right is a dial with the four engine gauges and to the right of that is the clock. The dash has a good, all around layout. Wiper, headlight, panel light and rear window defogger controls are all toggle switches and easy-to-operate. Both the glovebox and ash tray are large.

Real leather seats add mucho class and posh to the car. The high-back bucket seats with integral head restraints offer excellent comfort for any type of driving, around town or on lengthy trips. Our test car had the optional six-way manual adjustment for the driver's seat and it is a must. With added interior room, the Challenger bucket seats have a 5½-inch range of fore and aft adjustment, enough for even the tallest. Unfortunately, rear seat leg room is bad regardless of the position of the front seats. Rear seat headroom is also restricted. A newly designed seatback release is easy to reach and is spring-loaded to permit the seatback to be folded forward without pressing the button throughout the movement. You only have to bend over once.

A Ride That's Steady, But Don't Drift on M-24

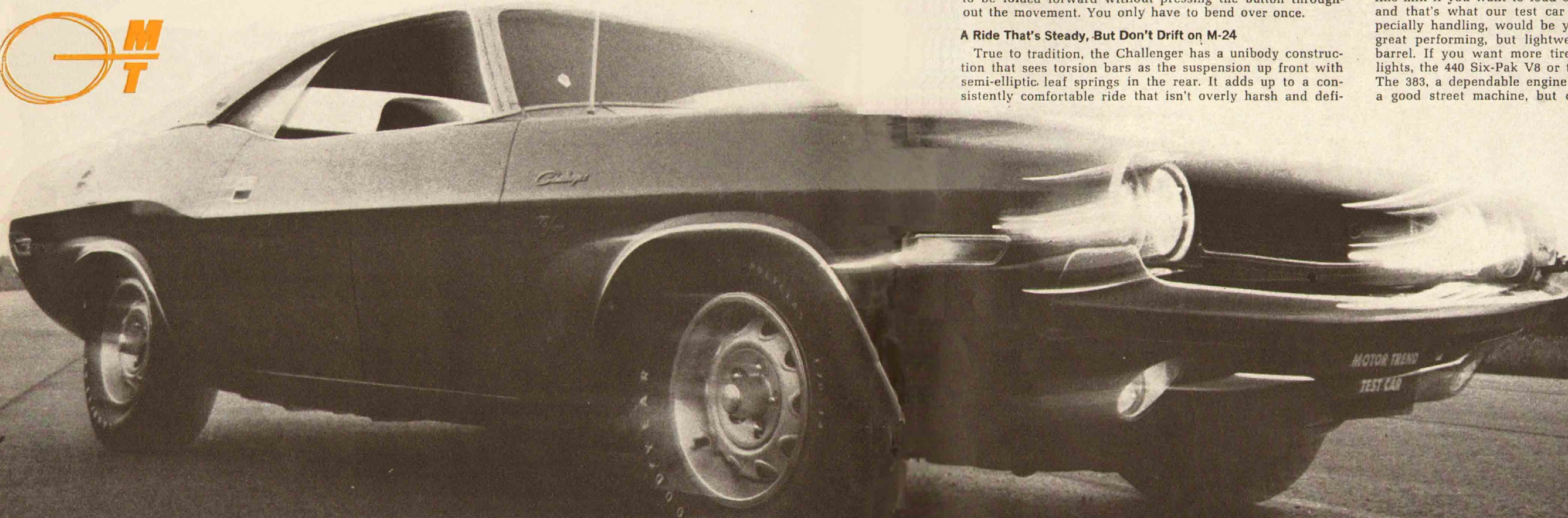
True to tradition, the Challenger has a unibody construction that sees torsion bars as the suspension up front with semi-elliptic leaf springs in the rear. It adds up to a consistently comfortable ride that isn't overly harsh and defi-

nitely never mushy. Spring rates may seem fairly high on back country roads or in town, but on the highway at top speeds, the Challenger hugs the road with precision for a highly comfortable ride. We took our test car to Lapeer, Michigan, and Mike Vakula's Lapeer International Dragway for testing. Going through corners, it tended to understeer and get a little hypersensitive in the rear. However, the car was equipped with air conditioning, power steering, power brakes and power everything else. It actually handled quite well considering all the extra weight hung on the front of the mill. Front end roll was evident in the very hardest turns and the car didn't drift easily. F70x14 tires and the wide track help keep it steady, though, and even with all the extra weight under the hood, handling was passable. Power steering was typical Chrysler Corporation and tended to pulsate rather noticeably at full lock, but it wasn't as loose feeling as the intermediate and bigger cars. One new feature on the Challenger can be uncomfortably annoying. The inside door locking button is now a toggle lever located in the hand grip recess of each armrest. When you close the door, if you don't depress the lever and lock the door, the lever sticks up at the exact spot your elbow touches the armrest; result, sore elbow unless you lock the door. But, maybe Chrysler engineers designed it that way for just that purpose.

Powertrains And Performance

With optional equipment as the key to everything else, you couldn't expect less when it comes to engines. You can make your Challenger go with anything from a 225-cubic-inch six-cylinder engine up to the heavy, heavy Hemi. In between there is a lot of equipment to choose from. Standard on the R/T is the 383-cubic-inch four-barrel, a good middle line mill if you want to load on the extra power equipment, and that's what our test car had. Better performance, especially handling, would be your thing if you selected the great performing, but lightweight, 340-cubic-inch V8 four-barrel. If you want more tire smoke away from the stop lights, the 440 Six-Pak V8 or the Hemi are obvious choices. The 383, a dependable engine with good torque, makes for a good street machine, but don't expect e.t.s in the 13.0

continued



photography: Fred Enke

If you dig stereo, acoustics in the Challenger are great



Interior design of the SE version is plush and well planned. Leather seats add distinctive touch. Instrumentation's good.



At Lapeer Dragway, 383 performed well, despite air conditioning and numerous power options. The 340 proved better.



1970 Challenger R/T - SE: Optional equipment as tested - prices not available at time of test. 1. Leather bucket seats 2. Light group 3. Power brakes - front disc 4. Center console 5. Left side 6-way manual seat adjustment 6. Automatic transmission 7. Sure-Grip differential 8. 383 4-bbl. V8 engine 9. Tinted glass 10. Left remote-control mirror 11. Rear window defogger 12. Air conditioning 13. Bumper guards 14. Automatic speed control 15. Power windows 16. Rear speaker with stereo 17. Radio-multiplex AM-FM stereo 18. Power steering 19. White vinyl roof 20. Rallye wheels.

range. It isn't happening. Performance wasn't terrible with the car we tested, even considering it had the standard axle ratio of 3.23:1. Step up axle options are 3.55:1 and 3.91:1, either one of which would help the 383.

Our test car had another option for transmission: automatic with a floor-mounted selector. The Challenger center console is attractive and the shifter is located well back for easy manual shifting. The console-mounted shifter features a new shift gate control for '70 that is supposed to make positive stops at second gear and drive, and allow speed shifts without overshooting gears. It didn't work that way in our test car. Hopefully, the transmission or the gate was just out of adjustment. On some quarter-mile runs, the selector would move to second as prescribed, but the transmission wouldn't shift out of low, forcing the tendency to easily overrev. At other times when manually shifting, it would go directly to drive from low without even stopping at second, or collecting \$200 for that matter. The latter action caused the transmission to shift below optimum shift points and cut e.t.s and speed.

On the few good manual shifts we were able to get in, the 383 ran as good or better than anticipated, with a quarter-mile e.t. of 15.7 seconds and a speed of 90.0 mph. A 0 to 60 time of 7.8 seconds is also good, again considering the extra power equipment we were pulling.

Braking distances were about average or a little below for a car this size. Equipment included power brakes with discs up front. From 30 mph, stopping distance was good and stability excellent. From 60 mph, our car became a little unstable as the left rear brake locked up before the others.

In Retrospect

Some compelling new ideas have been accepted and applied to the Challenger, from the flush outside door handles to the uniquely flocked headliner to the unseen safety features that abound. But, we noticed that quality control was somewhat lacking in our test car, even though it was a production model. We noticed numerous rattles in the body. Our car had power windows, and one of the rear windows stuck and refused to move. The speedometer was about 17 mph off. Many of these defects can probably be remedied without difficulty. We hope so.

Loaded as it was with extras, our car had to have FM stereo, right? Many factors must contribute, including the radio itself, to placement of the speakers and interior acoustics, but the Challenger has one of the most perfect stereo tonal effects of any car we've been in. With windows up, the stereo was beautiful. If you dig stereo, the car would be worth it on that point alone. /MT

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: 90°OHV V8. Bore & Stroke: 4.25 x 3.38. Displacement: 383 cu. in. Hp: 335 @ 5200 rpm. Torque: 425 lbs.-ft. @ 3400 rpm. Compression Ratio: 9.5:1. Carburetion: 1 4-bbl. Transmission: Automatic. Final Drive Ratio: 3.23:1. Steering Type: Power. Ratio: 15.7:1. Turning Diameter: 39.9 ft. curb-to-curb, 3.5 turns, lock-to-lock. Tires: F70 x 14. Brakes: power front disc, drum rear. Suspension: Front: Torsion Bar. Rear: Semi-elliptic leaf springs. Body/Frame Construction: Unibody. Dimensions, Weights, Capacities: Overall Length: 191.3 ins. Overall Width: 76.4 ins. Overall Height: 51.4 ins. Wheelbase: 110 ins. Front Track: 59.7 ins. Rear Track: 60.7 ins. Curb Weight: 3590 lbs. Fuel Capacity: 18 gals. Oil Capacity: 4 qts.

After road testing the Challenger 383, Motor Trend had an opportunity to track test a Challenger 340 with four-speed manual transmission and a 3.55:1 axle ratio. This car had no power options or air conditioning.

PERFORMANCE

	340	383
Acceleration: (2 aboard)		
0-30 mph	3.2	3.0 secs.
0-45 mph	4.8	5.2 secs.
0-60 mph	7.4	7.8 secs.
0-75 mph	10.6	11.4 secs.

Standing Start, 1/4-mile: 91 mph, 14.9 secs. / 90 mph, 15.7 secs.

	340	383
Passing Speeds (3rd gear)		
40-60 mph	3.6	4.2 secs.
50-70 mph	4.0	4.8 secs.

SPEEDS IN GEARS:

	340	383
1st	40 mph @ 5000 rpm	48 mph @ 5200 rpm
2nd	55 mph @ 5000 rpm	84 mph @ 5200 rpm
3rd	78 mph @ 5000 rpm	90 mph @ 5200 rpm
4th	109 mph @ 5000 rpm	-
MPH per 1000 RPM:	21.8 mph	22.5 mph

STOPPING DISTANCES:

	340	383
from 30 mph	26.2	33.7 ft.
from 60 mph	130.9	141.8 ft.