5 SPECIALTY CARS

MERCURY COUGAR · FORD MUSTANG
CHEVROLET CAMARO
AMERICAN MOTORS AMX · PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

What's so special about a specialty car? Detroit's idea of sporty style, mainly. Specialty cars are jaunty hardtops, most of them, with a long hood, a low roofline, a bob-tailed rear end and bucket seats. Their sporty bodies are different—sometimes very different—from those of the sedans on which they're based. And their promotion implies the kind of acceleration, handling and braking that would let you match sporty driving to sporty appearance.

The actual combination of looks and performance that you get varies from car to car, of course. But whatever it is, you pay for it—and not only in money. These cars typically have a rear area that few adults would want to sit in for long. So despite some manufacturers' claims to the contrary, you should consider the specialty car as basically a two-seater. You may find that limitation acceptable if you're single, if you have no children or one or two small ones, or if you're buying a second or third car.

Three of the five specialty cars tested for this report—the compact-based *Mercury Cougar XR-7*, *Ford Mustang* and *Chevrolet Camaro*—are pretty much birds of a feather despite their differences in comfort and road behavior.

The other two—the *American Motors AMX* and the *Pontiac Grand Prix*—differ from them and from each other in appearance and behavior. The *Grand Prix* is a luxury personal car of the same genre as the *Ford Thunderbird* and the *Buick Riviera*, though the *Grand Prix* is smaller, nimbler and less expensive. The *AMX*, a real two-seater, looks more like a sports car than the others, but it did not deal competently with its own power and was beastly uncomfortable nearly all the time it was on the road.

Adults wouldn't be significantly more comfortable in the rear of one of the Ford Motor Co. or General Motors specialty cars than he would in the rear area of the *AMX*. And neither would anyone in the front of those other cars be very comfortable when there were adults in the rear and luggage in the trunk. With all five cars, the fully loaded ride was judged poor. So we've concentrated on judging the ride with the kind of light load you might normally be carrying—driver and passenger, with another 150 pounds to represent luggage or a couple of kids in the rear.

The designers of four of this month's cars have chosen to accent their designs with sharp projections in front, posing special dangers to the lives and limbs of pedestrians or cyclists. Above and below the grilles of the *Mustang* and the *AMX* are two sharp, pointed beaks. The *Camaro* has beaks too, but they're a little less hostile. The *Grand Prix* sports a somewhat softened version of the now-familiar *Pontiac* jutting snout. To its credit, the *Cougar* is reasonably smooth in front.

Except for those style-based hazards, CU judged the safety characteristics of these specialty cars to be just about the same as those of the more commodious and sedate conventional models on which these cars are based.

A wide choice

If a specialty car is what you want, your range of choice is wide indeed—from a basic *AMC Javelin* at under $2600 to a fully equipped *Lincoln Continental Mark III* or *Cadillac Eldorado* at about $8000. Sales of specialty cars have leveled off these days at an impressive segment of the market—nearly one out of every eight U.S. cars sold. But actually the sports-image car is even more important in the marketplace than that one-in-eight figure would indicate. That figure doesn't include sales of the so-called action cars—usually hardtop versions of intermediate sedans sold with powerful V8 engine options. Such cars (the *Road Runner*, the *Judge*, the *Torino Cobra*, the *SS 396*, the *4-4-2* and the *Coronet Super Bee*, for example) give rear-seat passengers a little more room and a little more comfort than the all-out specialty cars, but they're specialty cars in spirit.

The compact-based cars we tested ranged in price from about $3100 to about $3700, equipped with V8 engine, power steering and, except for the *AMX*, with automatic transmission. Consider those prices carefully, keeping in mind that comparably equipped compact sedans are priced up to $1000 lower. In about the same price range as the compact-based specialty cars are the most expensive sedan versions of the intermediate *Dodge Coronet* or *Ford Torino*, comparably equipped. And those intermediates will carry two or three more adults in reasonable comfort, and two or three more pieces of luggage, than any specialty car. On the other hand, the compact-based specialty car is conveniently small, about a foot or so shorter and a few inches narrower than most intermediates. So maneuvering on crowded roads and in parking lots should be significantly easier.

All the tested cars, and especially the *Grand Prix*, have one unfortunate characteristic—large blind spots in the rear quarters, due to wide panels that are closer to the driver's eye than such paneling in sedans. As a result,

the right-rear-diagonal view is largely blotted out. Lane-changing to the right, and entering a road obliquely from the left, may require some contortions and guesswork.

The options

The grab bag of options available for the specialty cars is a full one, and you should dip into it only after careful study of the kind of car you want. For the *Mustangs*, for example, the engine packages range from a sedate but adequate 200-cubic-inch Six plus standard suspension up to a 429-cubic-inch V8 combined with special wheels, tires, brakes and suspension. Options with similar potential for transformation are available on the General Motors, American Motors Corp. and Chrysler Corp. cars as well.

We recommend automatic transmission (as we do for any U.S. car) plus power steering and disk brakes for these specialty cars if they're V8-equipped. We think a heavy-duty suspension usually adds nothing to the handling qualities of a car whose standard suspension tests out to be satisfactory, as did the standard suspensions on this month's cars. Our *AMX* came with heavy-duty suspension as a part of its engine-option package. But we think the *AMX* would be a far more useful car if it were equipped with its standard suspension, which is similar to the one we tested last year in the *AMC Javelin V8*.

Quality control in the American automobile remains below par. With the exception of the *Mustang* and the *Cougar*, this group of specialty cars exhibited about as many assembly defects as the other 1969 cars we've tested. The *Mustang* was put together somewhat better than the general run, as it has been in past years. But no matter what car you buy, some evidence of sloppy assembly at the factory and inadequate dealer preparation will certainly show up, although the number and nature of the defects you find may not match those on our cars. So count on spending some post-delivery time at your dealer's, jockeying for an appointment in the service shop and trying to work their repair schedule into your own daily routine.

Three compact-based specialty cars

MERCURY COUGAR XR-7

Last tested by CU in 1967, the *Cougar* has enough new about it (the body and many chassis components, including the engine) so that the old test results are no longer valid. Our 1969 *Cougar* is an *XR-7* model, the *XR-7* being a trim package that adds about $300 to the basic *Cougar* price. The package includes such items as extra gauges and switches and leather upholstery.

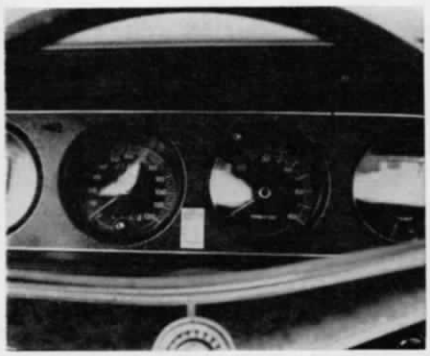
You may like the way the *XR-7* package looks, but you'll pay for the appearance in loss of comfort as well as in money. We judged the leather-trimmed bucket seats less comfortable than the standard seats, which are essentially the same as the standard seats on the *Mustang* we tested. The *XR-7* seats have extra padding, but in all the wrong places. And there's a hard lump across the upper part of the seat back that makes you sit up too straight and leaves the lower part of your back with inadequate support. With or without the *XR-7* package, tall drivers may feel cramped.

As in 1967, the *Cougar* turned out to be the best riding of the small specialty cars. Lightly loaded, it rode softly and smoothly, well-controlled over most bumps but not too firm. Sometimes, though, over sharp bumps, the suspension would hit the bottom of its travel. And on washboard roads the car would shake. The car itself was commendably quiet, but it did let in a lot of road noise. And it would give a peculiar clunk in front whenever we accelerated gently from rest.

The standard 1969 *Cougar* engine is Ford Motor Co.'s new 351-cubic-inch V8. We bought the regular-fuel version of that engine, and it started and ran fairly well when it was properly adjusted. As the Facts and Figures on page 325 show, our *Cougar* accelerated amply. We see no need to buy any of the optional engines—a premium-fuel version of the standard V8, a 390-cubic-inch V8 and a 428-cubic-inch V8.

Fortunately, most owners don't usually put a car through such paces as we do during our track tests, where the new *Cougar's* less-than-crisp emergency handling showed up. In really hard, sharp turns, the *Cougar* seemed reluctant to make the turn, understeering and responding progressively more slowly. We found a sharp contrast to the good high-speed handling of the 1967 *Cougar*. In fact, the 1969 *Cougar* acted very much like the 1969 *Ford Galaxie* CU reported on in January. In normal driving the *Cougar* did much better.

In the *Cougar*, Ford's three-speed automatic transmission performed well. And its second-gear start was welcome in the winter; on a car with the *Cougar's* substantial power and forward-



The concave dial lenses on the Cougar XR-7 catch the light in such a way that the driver finds the dials hard to read

In high-speed turns at the test track, the Cougar handled less than crisply, seeming reluctant to negotiate the turns at all

biased weight distribution, wheelspin can be a problem.

We bought the power disk-front/drum-rear brake option ($65) now being ordered on well over half of the *Cougars* sold, and we recommend it. We could control the amount of braking easily, there was no measurable fade, and we needed to make little steering correction for a very short stop from 60 miles per hour.

The *Cougar's* dashboard is very badly designed—inexcusably so, in CU's view—and will give most drivers trouble. It's located rather far forward of the driver's seat. Properly shoulder-belted, all CU's drivers had trouble reaching the ignition switch, the light switch, the wiper/washer switch and the heater/defroster controls, as well as the parking-brake release. We therefore suspect that few *Cougar* drivers are likely to use those vital shoulder belts. The cigar lighter, which is mounted on the console in the *XR-7*, is well within reach of the belted driver, but not visible unless you bend forward and look backward. We think most drivers would be unable to use it safely.

In addition, the heater/defroster labels are all but illegible from the driver's position. The high-beam indicator on the *XR-7* is squarely behind the steering-wheel rim, and thus invisible to many drivers. And on the *XR-7* package the concave instrument lenses shimmered with reflected light in the daytime, making the instruments hard to read. One additional annoyance with the controls: The headlight-dimmer button is so close to the fresh-air intake grille that the edge of the driver's shoe often hung up on its projecting louvers when he tried to step on the button.

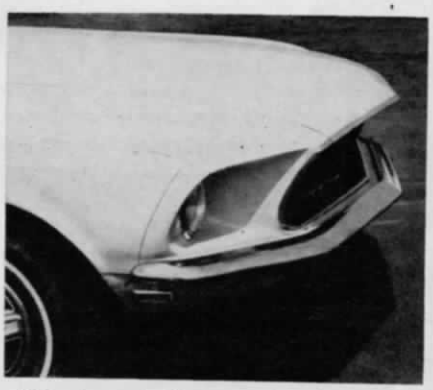
Although our *Cougar* arrived with fewer assembly defects than most of this month's cars, it gave its share of trouble. The engine was in a sorry state of tune. Retarded ignition timing, a rough idle and improper choke adjustment were bad enough. But there were also some more-persistent carburetor ailments. The engine wouldn't idle properly. And it often stalled at about 30 miles per hour; that can be especially disconcerting when you're crossing an intersection. We encountered the familiar misaligned front end, incorrect tire pressures and misaimed headlights. The low-fuel warning light on the fuel gauge winked on when the tank was nearly half full. The fuel-tank drain plug was loose and dripped gasoline. The defect total was only 20, but most of those 20 defects were irritating.

FORD MUSTANG

The *Mustang* and the *Cougar* share their basic body shells, as well as many of their innards, so the *Mustang* is also largely new for 1969. *Mustangs* can be ordered with a seemingly infinite variety of engine/transmission choices, and in several body types, including coupes, fastbacks and convertibles. Our test car was a hardtop coupe with a 302-cubic-inch V8 engine (the standard *Mustang* V8), automatic transmission, power steering and nonpower brakes—a common package for this pioneer among latterday specialty cars.

Ford added a little sorely needed leg room to that in last year's *Mustang*, but still not enough to satisfy a tall driver. The front bucket seats were judged fair-to-good on CU's comfort scale, better than those in the other compact specialty cars. The *Mustang's* bucket seats let you lean back more than you can in the *Cougar*, and they support you a little better at the sides; but the cushions were too firm and support at the lower back was poor. All but CU's tallest drivers liked the driving position, but the nonpower brake pedal was so high that you could hit your thigh on the steering wheel when you went to step on the brake.

The *Mustang's* light-load ride was only fair. Except on smooth roads, our testers were jogged up and down, and the rear suspension occasionally bottomed. Front and rear, the suspension was less competent at soaking up the bumps than that on the *Cougar*. On washboard surfaces the *Mustang* shook violently and would skitter off to the side. It shared the *Cougar's* high level of road noise over coarse roads, and added some power-train noise of its



This dramatically aggressive front end on the Mustang (the AMX's is similar) poses a threat to a pedestrian's safety

In both Mustang and Cougar, many vital operating controls are beyond the reach of drivers wearing shoulder belts

The Mustang handled much better in high-speed turns than the Cougar, understeering less and responding better

The Mustang's glovebox is ridiculously small; it barely accommodates the owner's manual, and that is about the limit

own. Still, it was fairly quiet overall.

In normal city or country driving, the *Mustang* steered and handled quite well. The power-steering effort was low, but you could still feel the road. In CU's high-speed tests, the steering response remained fairly predictable. There was some understeer. It changed smoothly to controllable oversteer as long as the road surface was smooth, but bumps would make the car oversteer suddenly in a hard turn.

Our *Mustang's* standard, regular-fuel, 302-cubic-inch V8 was the smallest engine in the group, but it came up with plenty of acceleration and with the best fuel economy. More-powerful optional engines are very popular on the *Mustang*, but we can see little need for them. Three-quarters of the *Mustangs* sold have the automatic transmission—and we recommend it. Ours was smooth, and it allowed second-gear starts.

Although it's fairly common for people to buy the *Mustang* with nonpower brakes, as CU did, we'd advise against it. In our hard-stop tests, the rear wheels locked prematurely, so that the driver had to work hard to keep the car in a reasonably straight path. And in normal driving the brake-pedal effort was a bit too high. So, as with the *Cougar*, we recommend that you spend the extra $65 for the optional disk-front/drum-rear power brakes.

When designers come up with as poor a dashboard as the *Cougar/Mustang* versions, one hopes it will have a short life. We can't predict how long Ford will continue to use this layout but we *can* say that we found it in both Ford cars tested for this month's issue. There are a couple of minor differences between the *Cougar's* instrument layout and the *Mustang's*. The *Mustang* exchanges accessibility of the ash tray and cigar lighter for better visibility of the high-beam indicator. But, overall, the two setups are equally ill-conceived.

The *Mustang* continues to be better assembled than any other U.S. car, at least in CU's limited experience. But over the long run it will probably make as many trips to the shop as you'd expect with most other cars (its Frequency-of-Repair record is average). We did find *some* problems, though—a total of 18. For example, the engine was out of tune, although less seriously than the *Cougar's*. The wheels were unbalanced, so that the whole car shook at highway speeds. The right-front wheel bearings were too loose. And the heater-fan bearings rumbled.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

The *Camaro*, too, is new for 1969, but it tested out about the same as CU's 1967 model. We describe our *Camaro* as having bucket seats because that's what the specification says, but we noticed little that's bucket about them. They're thin-shelled, narrow slabs with no support at the sides and with a hard, flat seat and back. You sit tilted far back—if you can manage to stay seated at all. Combined with exceptionally slippery vinyl upholstery, the seat construction tends to make driver and passenger slide slowly and inexorably forward. And unless the lap belts were uncomfortably tight, they tended to ride up on the abdomen, which could be dangerous.

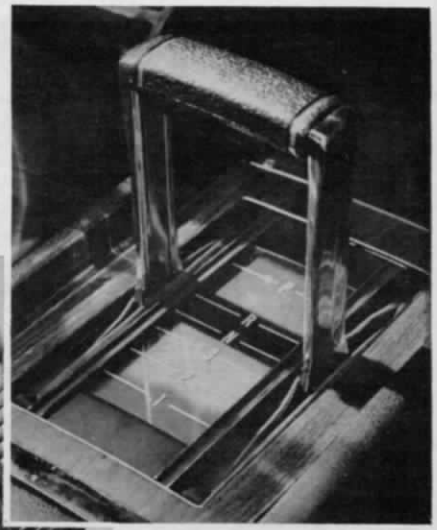
The driver is likely to have problems with the accelerator and the brake pedal, too. The accelerator required an uncomfortably long reach forward—and the cushions provide no support for the thighs. That arrangement would allow the driver's knee to flop over against the console for support, so that his foot became contorted on the accelerator pedal. The nonpower brake pedal is too high and too close to the steering wheel, in our view. If you're long-legged, you have to come at the brake pedal from the side to keep from jamming your knee up into the steering wheel.

The *Camaro* jogged and jarred up and down like a bouncing brick, except over smooth roads. And the car was very stiff in roll; it rocked quickly from side to side over irregular road surfaces. No matter how firmly we held the steering wheel, the car would wander slightly off its intended course when it went over small bumps.

The *Camaro* didn't generate much noise of its own. But it did allow in a lot of road noise over roads that weren't perfectly smooth.

We bought our *Camaro* with variable-ratio power steering—as do well over half of *Camaro* owners. We've praised the feature on other General Motors cars, but on the *Camaro* the ratio was just too quick for normal driving. We did give the *Camaro* top marks for high-speed emergency handling, but we judged that ultraquick ratio a sort

A fairly tall, long-legged man in the rear seat of the Camaro—or any of this month's tested cars—is in for a hard time. The seats are inhospitable, to say the least, and he just doesn't have enough room



The selector lever on the Camaro is handy to grasp. But which gear are you really in? The selector doesn't line up right with the gear-position markings

of overkill; we think the ratio could be slower without losing much in steering response. By the way, an even quicker variable-ratio option is available.

When we bought our *Camaro*, the basic V8 was a 210-horsepower, 327-cubic-inch engine. About halfway through the model year, General Motors substituted a 200-hp 307-cubic-inch V8. The two should be about the same in performance and economy. Our engine ran well on its normal diet of regular fuel and performed almost exactly the same as the basic V8 in the *Mustang*. The three-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic automatic transmission worked well, except for a whine in first gear. But the indicators on the console-mounted shift lever didn't line up properly, and the linkage developed enough slack so that we could occasionally start in reverse.

As with the *Cougar* and the *Mustang*, we'd recommend power disk-front/drum-rear brakes ($64 on the *Camaro*). The nonpower drum brakes we did have were unimpressive. As with the *Mustang's* nonpower brakes, you'd have to come down with a heavy foot. And although the *Camaro's* brakes didn't fade much, they took a long time recovering from whatever fade did occur. Another advantage with the power brakes: a lower pedal.

Chevrolet provides excellent distinction of operating controls in the *Camaro* with a round, push-pull light switch and a rectangular, sliding wiper/washer switch, both to the left of the steering column. Major controls are within reach of the shoulder-belted driver, but the ash tray and the parking-brake release are hard to reach, the cowl-vent control impossible.

CU found two problems with the instruments themselves: The high-beam indicator was distractingly bright, and the green speedometer numbers were hard to read in the daytime against their black background.

Expect to take the *Camaro* to the shop frequently—in the beginning as well as later. Our car presented us with 27 assembly deficiencies, and many of them were significant. For example, the tires weren't balanced, so that the car shook strongly at turnpike speeds. The engine ran on when the key was turned off. A vacuum hose was misrouted, jamming the choke open and keeping the throttle from returning to idle. There was a leak at the junction of the exhaust manifold and the exhaust pipe. And when we went to open the trunk lid, the spring balance came apart and the lid fell down.

A two-passenger specialty car

AMERICAN MOTORS AMX

Take the *AMC Javelin*, a compact-based specialty car, remove 12 inches just behind the driver's seat, and you have what amounts to an *AMX*—American Motors Corp.'s two-passenger "sports car."

Its bucket seats are wider and have more side support than those in the *Mustang* or the *Camaro*. But they still weren't very comfortable. Worse is the lack of headroom. Even when you're belted, your head is likely to strike the headliner often. And if you're tall, your head will probably be in contact with it all the time. You can get a little more headroom if you recline the seat back, but the reclining mechanism is badly designed—worse than on many economy imports—and it required an awkward, two-handed operation. If you often change drivers—and reclining position—you'd probably accept the discomfort of minimal head room rather than fight the mechanism.

Assuming you can attain a satisfactory driving position, you'd still have several problems. Our car had a four-speed manual transmission and power disk brakes. The clutch pedal was higher than the brake pedal, a minor annoyance. And the space between the clutch pedal and the parking-brake pedal was so narrow that we often got our foot caught under the pedals, as the photo below shows.

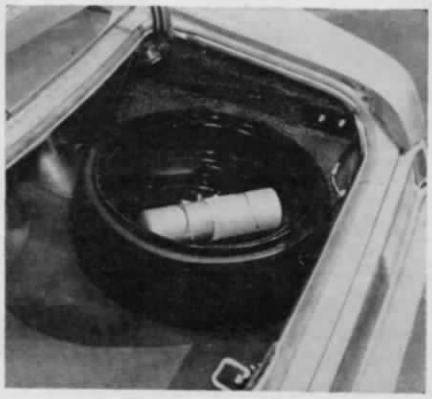
The trunk space is ample for a two-passenger car, partly because of a space-saving collapsible spare tire. And the open, carpeted area behind the front seats will hold extra suitcases below the window level.

Not that you'd want to take the *AMX* on a long trip. Its ride is punishing. Our *AMX* had one of the popular "go" packages—a high-performance engine plus a heavy-duty suspension, front and rear. Even the patches and expansion joints on smooth roads gave the passengers sharp thumps. And on bumpy roads, the *AMX* hopped about so much that it often lost directional control for a moment.

The *AMX* did give us fast straight-line acceleration. Since it's promoted

At least the AMX had good brakes to help keep a leash on its big engine. The car stopped short and in control

Above: Once you let your left foot get down below the AMX's parking-brake pedal and clutch pedal, you may have trouble getting it out when you need it



Left: The AMX's collapsible spare tire saves space in the trunk. You blow it up with a can of compressed gas

as a sports car, we bought ours equipped with the hottest engine available, a 315-horsepower, 390-cubic-inch V8. With that engine and the standard, four-speed manual transmission, the rear-axle ratio of the *AMX* is 3.54. The throttle was very responsive, but all those rpms made for a lot of noise at freeway speeds. And fuel economy wasn't good. You'd get better mileage with a calmer engine, and still have plenty of zip.

The *AMX* certainly didn't handle like a sports car, which should take just about anything in stride, at any speed. A few bumps or a little rain should pose no problems to a true sports car, but under such conditions our *AMX* ran into trouble. Around smooth corners on our test track, it understeered mildly, then changed rather suddenly to controllable oversteer. But where the road surface got rough, or if we applied power, the rear end oversteered and made the car difficult to manage.

Good steering would have helped compensate for the poor suspension, but the *AMX* just didn't have it. We bought the car with nonpower steering and found it unsatisfactory. It was heavy going to park or make low-speed turns, and the steering wheel required so much winding that our drivers couldn't correct fast enough for the car's erratic behavior on rough roads. When we added power steering later on, the steering became much lighter. Actually, it was almost too light, so that we could hardly feel the road at all, but at least the power steering was fast enough to contain the car's tendency to skitter.

Fortunately, the *AMX* had at least some stop in its "go" package. With its power disk-front/drum-rear brakes, even the hardest stops were straight and short. No type of stop required too much or too little effort, and fade was negligible.

Unlike the other cars tested for this report, the *AMX* has some major operating controls that aren't well differentiated. The switches for the lights and for the wiper/washer are almost identical, and one is set right above the other. It would be easy to turn off your headlights when you were groping for the wiper. You can reach the major controls with your shoulder belt on. However, you'd have to stretch for the radio and the ash tray when belted, and you couldn't reach the cowl-vent control at all.

Our *AMX* suffered from 27 assembly defects. The windows fitted so badly that rain poured in and wind noise was very loud. Gear whine from the transmission and the rear axle added to the cacophony. The engine was out of tune. The tachometer failed at 142 miles. We were treated to assorted squeaks and rattles. And the seat-back recliner, poorly designed to begin with, didn't work properly on the driver's side; it wouldn't catch in the first notch.

RATINGS OF SPECIALTY CARS

Listed by types; compact-based cars listed in order of estimated overall quality. For basic dimensions, weights, specifications, test data and prices of the

ACCEPTABLE	Accommodations and comfort	Ride	Performance
Compact-based specialty cars			
The following models were judged very close in overall quality.			
MERCURY COUGAR XR-7	Comfort, fair for two in front, poor for two in rear. Driving position, satisfactory.	With light load, fair-to-good; with full load, poor. Quiet except for road noise over coarse road surfaces.	Engine: smooth and quiet. Highway acceleration reserve: ample. Automatic transmission: 3-speed, smooth-shifting and quiet. Will start from rest in second gear ("2" on selector lever), a help on slippery surfaces.
FORD MUSTANG	Comfort, fair-to-good for two in front, poor for two in rear. Driving position, satisfactory.	With light load, fair; with full load, poor. Fairly quiet.	Engine: smooth and fairly quiet. Highway acceleration reserve: ample. Automatic transmission: 3-speed, smooth-shifting and quiet. Will start from rest in second gear ("2" on selector lever), a help on slippery surfaces.
The following model was judged significantly lower in overall quality than those preceding.			
CHEVROLET CAMARO	Comfort, fair-to-poor for two in front, poor for two in rear. Driving position, unsatisfactory.	With light load, poor; with full load, poor. Fairly quiet except for road noise over coarse road surfaces.	Engine: smooth and quiet. Highway acceleration reserve: ample. Automatic transmission: 3-speed, smooth-shifting and fairly quiet.
Two-passenger specialty car			
AMERICAN MOTORS AMX	Comfort, fair for two in front; no rear seat. Driving position, satisfactory; has more leg room than the other cars but less headroom.	With light load, poor; with full load, poor. Fairly noisy.	Engine: smooth and fairly noisy. Highway acceleration reserve: more than ample. Manual transmission: 4-speed (a 3-speed automatic is available at $118).
Intermediate-based specialty car			
PONTIAC GRAND PRIX	Comfort, fair-to-good for two in front, poor for two in rear. Driving position, satisfactory.	With light load, fair-to-good; with full load, poor. Quiet.	Engine: smooth and quiet. Highway acceleration reserve: more than ample. Automatic transmission: 3-speed, smooth-shifting and quiet.

An intermediate-based specialty car

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

The *Pontiac Grand Prix* is a completely new car this year. No longer a *Catalina*-based hardtop with special styling and trim, it's now a full-fledged new entry in the intermediate-based specialty-car field. It is smaller outside than such luxury specialty cars as the *Buick Riviera* and the *Ford Thunderbird*, and it sells for almost $1000 less. But it competes with those more-expensive cars in advertising and other image-making efforts.

If you accept the premise that a specialty car is basically a two-passenger car, the *Grand Prix* has a lot to offer. It combines distinctive styling, smooth, quiet, powerful performance and very good handling in a package of reasonable size. And it supports its pretension to luxury status with some new features, such as a wraparound instrument panel, a radio antenna of fine wire laminated into the windshield (it's included in the radio price and the combination worked well), and a rear window that's heated electrically by current running through fine stripes of conductive paint applied in a grid pattern to the inside surface (it cost $47 and didn't work well).

Like the bucket seats in the *Mustang*, those in the *Grand Prix* were pretty comfortable—rather firm but fairly well contoured. The driving position was satisfactory for most of our drivers, though some felt that the whole driver's seat was tipped too far backward.

Under a light load, the *Grand Prix* gave a ride that was really quite creditable. It was smooth and stable most of the time, though sharp bumps could snap down the rear of the car, making the suspension hit bottom sometimes, especially at high speeds. The car shook somewhat on rough roads and rocked sharply from side to side, but it always maintained its equilibrium. And it was very quiet. Note that if you did fill up the *Grand Prix* with its full rated load, you'd only have about 2½ inches of ground clearance.

The drive train of the *Grand Prix* is so smooth that you may not feel its power. As the Facts and Figures on page 325 show, our standard 400-cubic-

tested models, see page 325. Test models were 2-door hardtops with V8 engine, power steering and bucket front seats. Except for the American Motors AMX, all came equipped with automatic transmission. The Pontiac Grand Prix was also equipped with the factory-installed air-conditioning option.

Steering and handling	Brakes	Frequency-of-Repair record	Probable dollar depreciation
Power-steering effort in parking and driving, acceptably low. Handling in normal driving: good; steering response, fairly quick and predictable; directional stability, fair-to-good. Handling in high-speed emergency maneuvers: fair; steering response, fairly slow and fairly predictable, with considerable understeer.	Power disk-front/drum-rear brakes, very good; pedal-effort range, moderate; fade resistance, very good.	Has dropped to worse than average.	Average.
Power-steering effort in parking and driving, acceptably low. Handling in normal driving: good; steering response, fairly quick and predictable; directional stability, fair-to-good. Handling in high-speed emergency maneuvers: fair-to-good; steering response, fairly quick and fairly predictable, with some bump-induced oversteer.	Nonpower drum brakes, fair-to-good; pedal-effort range, moderate-to-high; fade resistance, very good.	Has improved to average.	Less than average.
Variable-ratio power-steering effort in parking and driving, acceptably low. Handling in normal driving: fair-to-good; steering response, too quick and fairly predictable; directional stability, fair-to-good. Handling in high-speed emergency maneuvers: very good; steering response, quick and predictable.	Nonpower drum brakes, fair-to-good; pedal-effort range, moderate-to-high; fade resistance, good; but recovery, slow.	Has dropped to worse than average.	Less than average.
Power-steering effort in parking and driving, low. Handling in normal driving: fair; steering response, quick and fairly unpredictable; directional stability, poor except on smooth, dry roads. Handling in high-speed emergency maneuvers: fair; steering response, fairly quick and fairly unpredictable, with sudden onset of oversteer.	Power disk-front/drum-rear brakes, very good; pedal-effort range, moderate; fade resistance, good.	Insufficient data	Not yet established.
Variable-ratio power-steering effort in parking and driving, acceptably low. Handling in normal driving: very good; steering response, quick and very predictable; directional stability, good. Handling in high-speed emergency maneuvers: very good; steering response, fairly quick and predictable.	Power disk-front/drum-rear brakes, fair; pedal-effort range, moderate; fade resistance, fair; recovery, slow.	Not yet established.	Not yet established.

inch, premium-fuel V8 accelerated the car's two-tons-plus almost as nimbly as the performance package did the lighter *AMX*. And there are still-hotter, 428-cubic-inch engines available—alone, or as part of the $316 *SJ* package. (The *SJ* package also includes front disk brakes, automatic leveling control for the rear suspension, G78x14 Fiberglass-belted tires and some lesser items.)

Our car's optional three-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic transmission was a worthy component of a very competent power train. Second gear would take us all the way up to 84 mph; such capacity allows for very snappy passing on the highway. And does such performance take fuel? You bet—especially at high speeds. But you could cut fuel cost by ordering the regular-fuel version of the 400-cubic-inch engine, available as a no-cost option with Turbo Hydra-Matic. Its lower rear-axle ratio (2.93 as against 3.23) would also lower the already-low noise level and still give you plenty of power. CU believes that option makes sense.

Steering and handling of the *Grand Prix* matched its muscle; it behaved well in both normal driving and emergency maneuvers. Like most owners of the 1969 *Grand Prix*, we bought ours with G78x14 fiberglass tires ($66). The variable-ratio power steering was always quick and predictable, and directional stability was well-nigh unshakeable. The steering provided road feel despite a low level of effort.

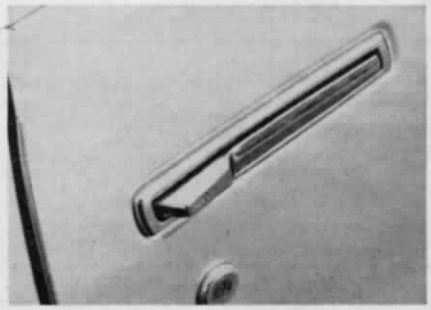
The power disk-front/drum-rear brakes weren't what they should have been. They were effective and directionally stable, and it was easy to apply the appropriate amount of pressure. But the brakes faded badly and were slow to recover. They didn't return to normal even after several cooling laps around the test track. Compared with the fine fade resistance of the disk brakes on such high-performance cars as the *Dodge Charger* (CONSUMER REPORTS, July 1968) and this month's *AMX*, the *Grand Prix* was disappointing. And it demonstrated a lack of reserve capacity for long, steep hills or for repeated stops from high speeds.

What can you do about it? As of now, very little. The brakes we bought (now standard on the *Grand Prix*) are the best available for that car. If you bought an engine hotter than ours, you could expect even less braking reserve when you used its power.

You can easily tell the controls apart, except for the very similar, side-by-side rocker switches for the windshield wiper and the rear-window defogger. And most fall easily to hand for the shoulder-belted driver, thanks to the wraparound instrument panel. Only the parking-brake release and the window crank take a bit of stretching.

The *Grand Prix* has nearly flush pop-out exterior door handles. We found them annoying to operate—and worse, they repeatedly froze closed during the winter. The *AMX* has completely flush door handles. They worked well.

For an early sample of an all-new car, our *Grand Prix* presented us with few *serious* assembly defects, though the total came to 24. Aside from the engine being somewhat out of tune, the most serious defects were an inaccurate speedometer (it read 67 mph when the car was at 60), a bad window fit that created a wind whistle, and incorrect front-wheel alignment. The engine knocked mildly on premium fuel—unusual for a *Pontiac V8*.



The pop-out door handles on the Grand Prix were annoying to use and, worse, froze up repeatedly during the winter

The wide rear-quarter panels on all this month's cars, and especially on the Grand Prix, cut off much rear vision

Conclusion: Three did well

After you close your eyes to specialty-car razzmatazz, the time comes to make a hard decision based on practical realities—cost, for example, and your transportation needs. In view of those, you may not want a specialty car at all.

In any event, CU doesn't think you'll want the *AMX*. We could find little rationale for buying it, with its grossly uncomfortable ride, high noise level, touchy handling and directional instability. A sports car it isn't. But if you like its looks, consider the *AMC Javelin*. It has few of the same faults, and we rate it very close in overall quality to the two Ford Motor Co. specialty cars tested.

Those two—the *Mercury Cougar* and the *Ford Mustang*—look alike and acted alike. You may like the looks of the *Cougar's XR-7* package, but remember that we found the standard seats more comfortable than the *XR-7* seats. The basic *Cougar* costs about $280 more than the basic *Mustang V8*, and for that you get a smoother ride and less noise from the power train. Both cars offer competent transportation for two adults, but either may cramp tall drivers.

The *Camaro* is another story. Its ride is too punishing for everyday transportation, in CU's view. Add its uncomfortable front seats, and the car's good points—crisp emergency handling and smooth power train—seem to pale, in our view. The *Pontiac, Firebird*, a body twin to the *Camaro*, shares the *Camaro's* faults.

If you're out for more car, you'll probably like the *Grand Prix*. It handles nimbly and moves smoothly and quickly about its business, but its brakes are not all they should be. It's bigger outside than the *Mustang* or the *Cougar*, so it won't fit as easily into tight traffic patterns or parking spaces. But it is a little roomier inside, which could make a difference to drivers, especially if they're tall. And it's sensibly smaller outside than luxury specialty cars, yet it gives you similar luxury features and appointments inside. You could do far worse for considerably more money.

FACTS AND FIGURES GUIDE

MFR'S SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE. Includes Federal tax and dealer preparation charge but not local taxes, freight, or optional extras, except as noted.

ROAD CLEARANCE. Distance from level road surface to lowest part of car likely to strike road.

TURNING CIRCLE. Diameter of the path of the outermost tip of front bumper with wheels turned all the way left.

STEERING FACTOR. Number of turns of the steering wheel for right-angle turn of 30-foot radius.

CURB WEIGHT. Measured weight of CU's car full of gas, oil, water.

TIRE RESERVE CAPACITY. The tire capacity as specified by the Tire and Rim Association for the front and rear tires at normal inflation pressures, minus the curb weight of CU's test car carrying its maximum rated load distributed between front and rear. A minus number indicates tires are overloaded and must be inflated to higher pressure, or oversized tires should be used.

ENGINE REVOLUTIONS AND PISTON TRAVEL PER MILE. A lower number means, in general, less engine wear, less noise, less acceleration in high gear and better fuel economy.

ACCELERATION. 0-60 mph and ¼-mile runs with engine idling at start and transmission gears selected for optimum performance; 45-65 mph passing test with accelerator pedal floored and transmission shifting automatically. Times to nearest 0.5 second.

ECONOMY. Constant-speed, level-road tests are corrected to 60°F outdoor temperature and offer a controlled comparison between test cars. Since gas mileage in actual use will be much lower, the range of mileage to be expected is shown. Low figure is for short-range stop-and-go traffic; high figure is for open-road, constant-speed trips. Miles per gallon to nearest 0.5.

BRAKING. The minimum-distance controlled stop is made from 60 mph and represents the shortest distance (to nearest 10 feet) achieved in several attempts, with the car stopping in a straight line and no uncontrolled skidding. Actual distances apply only to CU's test conditions including its road surface; but the relative ranking is unlikely to change. The fade test consists of 10 moderate stops from 60 mph repeated at 1/3-mile intervals. The difference in pedal effort between the first and 10th stops represents the degree of fade. Pedal effort is to nearest 5 pounds.

FACTS AND FIGURES

	Mercury Cougar XR-7	Ford Mustang	Chevrolet Camaro	American Motors AMX	Pontiac Grand Prix
MFR'S SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE					
for a 2-door hardtop with V8 engine, automatic transmission, power steering and AM radio.	$3746 [A]	$3097	$3100	$3807 [B]	$4287 [C]
DIMENSIONS					
WHEELBASE (inches)	111	108	108	97	118
OVERALL LENGTH (inches)	194	187	186	177	210
OVERALL WIDTH (inches)	74	71	74	72	76
OVERALL HEIGHT (inches)	52	51	51	52	52
ROAD CLEARANCE: no load (inches)	5.9	5.8	6.2	6.0	4.9
with maximum rated load (inches)	3.4	3.3	4.2	4.7	2.6
TURNING CIRCLE DIAMETER (wall-to-wall in feet)	41	39	41	37	45
STEERING FACTOR: Power	0.97	0.94	Variable	0.79	Variable
ADVERTISED FUEL TANK CAPACITY (gallons)	20	20	18	19	21.5
LUGGAGE CAPACITY (2-suiters + week end cases)	2+3	3+2	2+2	3+1	4+3
WEIGHT AND TIRES					
CURB WEIGHT (pounds)	3467	3076	3236	3331	4139
PERCENT WEIGHT, front/rear	57/43	57/43	57/43	56/44	56/44
TIRE SIZE (inches)	E78x14	7.35x14	E78x14	E70x14	G78x14
TIRE RESERVE CAPACITY AT MAXIMUM LOAD (pounds)					
Front tires	+380	+484	+441	+432	+261
Rear tires	+338	+405	+233	+497	+170
ENGINE [D]					
TYPE	V8	V8	V8	V8	V8
DISPLACEMENT (cubic inches)	351	302	327 [E]	390	400
COMPRESSION RATIO & FUEL REQUIRED	9.5 R	9.5 R	9.0 R	10.2 P	10.5 P
MAXIMUM ADVERTISED HORSEPOWER AT RPM	250 @ 4600	220 @ 4600	210 @ 4600	315@ 4600	350 @ 5000
ENGINE REVS PER MILE, HIGH GEAR	2190	2235	2190	2820	2420
PISTON TRAVEL PER MILE, HIGH GEAR (feet)	1280	1120	1420	1540	1510
AXLE RATIO	2.75	2.79	2.73	3.54	3.23
ACCELERATION					
ON LEVEL ROAD					
0-60 mph from rest (seconds)	9.5	10.5	10.5	7.5	8.0
¼ mile from rest (seconds)	17.5	17.5	17.5	15.5	16.0
Speed at end of ¼ mile (mph)	84	81	80	90	87
45 to 65 mph (seconds)	6.0	6.5	6.0	4.5	4.5
ECONOMY					
CONSTANT-SPEED GAS MILEAGE					
at steady 30 mph (mpg)	22.5	26.0	24.5	21.0	17.0
at steady 40 mph (mpg)	21.0	25.0	22.5	19.0	16.5
at steady 50 mph (mpg)	18.5	22.0	21.0	16.0	15.0
at steady 60 mph (mpg)	18.0	20.0	18.0	14.5	14.5
RANGE OF GAS MILEAGE TO BE EXPECTED IN NORMAL USE (mpg)	10-18	11-21	10-20	10-15	8-15
BRAKING					
LEVEL BRAKING FROM 60 MPH					
Minimum-distance controlled stop (feet)	150 [F]	160	150	140 [F]	150 [F]
FADE TEST: Pedal effort for initial ½g stop (pounds)	45	70	80	45	45
Effort for 10th repeated stop (pounds)	45	75	100	55	90

[A] *Includes $298 for XR-7 package and $65 for power disk brakes.*

[B] *Four-speed manual transmission. Includes $311 for 390 "go" package and $43 for visibility group (electric wipers and windshield washers, among other things).*

[C] *Includes $72 for power disk brakes, $465 for air-conditioning and tinted glass, $47 for electric rear window defogger and $66 for Fiberglass tires.*

[D] *From manufacturers' specifications.*

[E] *Late-production cars have 307 cubic-inch V8 as standard.*

[F] *Power disk-front/drum-rear brakes.*