

PORSCHE 928S, OMNI GLH TURBO, ISUZU IMPULSE TURBO

CAR DRIVER[®]

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Twin Engines!

Hubba Hubba
Honda Honda



PROJECT CR-X²

THE BEST SPORTS COUPE

Audi Coupe GT, Camaro Berlinetta, Laser XE,
Mustang SVO, Merkur, Starion, 300ZX, or Supra?



Having It All

*Ten cars and 700 miles later,
the best sports coupe in America is . . .*

• Think of this test as the answer to what to do when you're caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock is your enthusiasm for things automotive: the tingle you feel in your gut when a Ferrari whistles by. The hard place is what you face each morning as your dreams fade and your baby blues pop open: mortgage payments, career goals, and a couple of yelping rug rats to feed. We know it's hard to accept, but what you need in the garage these days is something *practical*.

Not to worry, bub. This is one of life's headaches that *can* be resolved happily. You *can* have it all—and without huge outlays of cash. Just listen closely to your friendly doctors at the *Car and Driver* automotive clinic.

Your prescription for over-the-road happiness comes from the amorphous market segment known as sports coupes. A sports coupe marries the élan and the intimacy of a sports car to the practical attributes of a sedan—though the proportions of utility and gusto can vary widely. To us, "sports coupe" means a car that rolls off the assembly line with racy sheetmetal, exciting mechanicals, two doors, and at least a vestigial back seat.

As definitions go, however, that one's got holes big enough to drive Mr. Davis's Suburban through. For one thing, it describes dozens of cars—large, small, expensive, and otherwise. Second, it raises the knotty problem of distinguishing between sports *coupes* and sports *sedans*. Is a car a coupe if your mother-in-law can squeeze into the back seat? Is it a sedan just because it isn't a fastback? You've got us.

Since some of these distinctions are so blurry they'll never be resolved, this is where we make two executive decisions. For the purposes of this test, we will focus on the best sports coupes you can buy for about \$15,000—give or take a few grand. You can get sports coupes for less, but this kind of money will put you into some pretty impressive machinery. And cars that require you to remortgage your house are definitely not in our program.

Parameter number two is that the cars in this test are all outfitted in the European tradition. In other words, no V-8s. As much as we love Z28s and Mustang GTs, this was not to be a test of the big thumpers. Sports coupes built anywhere in the world and

sold here were eligible as long as they had fewer than eight cylinders.

Winnowing the vast array of candidates down to a manageable few was a matter of a simple staff vote supplemented by well-timed personal threats. When the snarling and the baring of canines finally subsided, eight contenders emerged—three from America, three from Japan, one from Germany, and one German-American hybrid.

We had already had first-hand experience with seven of the contenders: the Audi Coupe GT, the Chrysler Laser XE, the Ford Mustang SVO, the Merkur XR4Ti, the Mitsubishi Starion ESI, the Nissan 300ZX two-plus-two, and the Toyota Supra. The eighth, a Chevrolet Camaro Berlinetta V-6, was added as the promoter's option because we suspected that this unknown quantity might have some hidden potential. Two cars that might well have made the cut, the Pontiac Firebird S/E V-6 and the Isuzu Impulse Turbo (seen elsewhere in this issue), were unfortunately not available at the time of this test.

The first step in coming to grips with this distinguished group was a thorough shake-down at the test track. Each contestant was put through the full spectrum of *C/D* acceleration, braking, and handling tests by the tech department (see sidebar). The performance results are impressively close when you consider the great diversity of powertrain layouts, engines, and suspension designs. As you can see from the charts, these cars are plenty athletic enough to entertain a serious driver.

If you really want to separate the wheat from the chaff, though, you've got to hit the road. We did, and with a vengeance. Seven editors, one photographer, and one able-bodied assistant herded our eight test cars up and down the California coast for three long days. Our 700-mile excursion took us from L.A. to Carmel and back on every conceivable type of road, from mountain switchbacks to straight-shot freeways. We're happy to report that everyone made it back safe and sound—sans speeding citations.

If only the cars had fared so well. We experienced an annoying number of engine failures—more, in fact, than we'd seen in the past five years. The 300ZX expired suddenly with a broken valve stem a few days



AUDI COUPE GT



MERKUR XR4Ti



CHEVROLET CAMARO BERLINETTA



CHRYSLER LASER XE



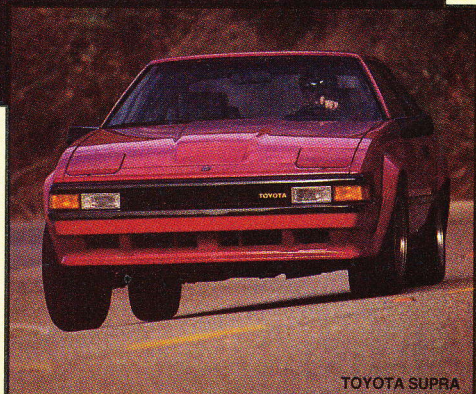
FORD MUSTANG SVO



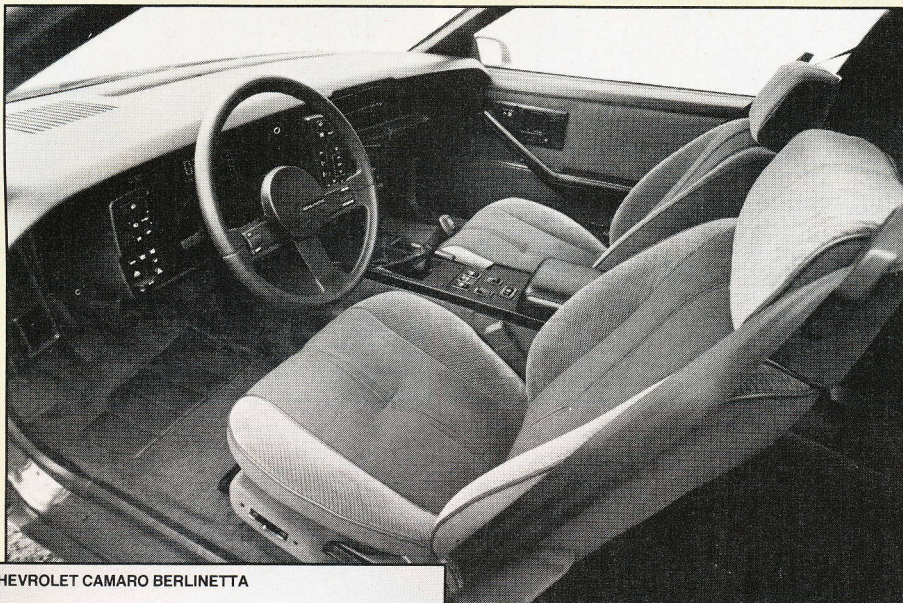
MITSUBISHI STARION ESI



NISSAN 300ZX 2+2



TOYOTA SUPRA



CHEVROLET CAMARO BERLINETTA



after top-speed testing. Fortunately, it was replaced with a fresh two-plus-two a few hours before our road drive. The Starion ESI went into terminal rod knock just after the first leg of mountain-road thrashing and seized up moments later. Despite the heroic efforts of the Mitsubishi public-relations department, the Starion's replacement missed most of the hard-charging two-lane stuff.

Mechanical failures weren't the only surprises, as you'll see when you examine our voting results. Deciphering the numbers is easy. Each editor rated each car in eleven categories on a one-to-five scale. If, say, a car's handling was great, it earned a five. If it was bad, it got a one. And so on. Ties between cars were allowed. (Two or more cars could each earn a five for handling, for instance.) The results represent the total number of votes each car earned in each category. The scores in the "overall rating" column—our bottom line—were awarded in the same fashion, rather than by averaging the scores in the individual categories.

So, without further ado, it's time to tell you what it was like out there and exactly how the King of the Sports Coupes came to earn its crown. The finishers, in reverse order, are:

Chevrolet Camaro Berlinetta 8th Overall

Maybe Next Year

It's clear from our Berlinetta experience that Chevrolet's interest in sporting Camaros stops with the Z28. The Berlinetta V-6 proved to be a Percheron among quarter horses in this comparison, destined to go through life with too little motor, run-of-the-mill rubber, and an underachiever suspension.

power, along with Z28-quality chassis pieces, would allow the Berlinetta to run with this herd. (On paper, some of this good stuff is already available on the Firebird S/E, but it too is saddled with the 2.8 V-6.) For now, a true driver's Berlinetta is still off somewhere in the wings. Maybe next year . . .

Chrysler Laser XE 7th Overall

Power Isn't Everything

The Laser's seventh-place finish is a clear message to sports-coupe makers the world over: strong performance is no longer enough to keep a car in the front ranks. It takes more.

There's no arguing with the power provided by the Laser's 146-hp, 2.2-liter turbo four-cylinder. It peels off 0-to-60 runs in 8.1 seconds and tops out at 117 mph. In real life there's an abundance of power underfoot in the four lower gears and little turbo lag.

The Laser is more than a straight-line specialist, though. It grabs onto twisty roads, and it means business. The steering cuts well, and its good straight-ahead sense makes the XE very stable on the highway.

Still, the Laser has one glaring fault that is magnified in the context of this elite group. Its logbook is full of comments like "cheap," "junky feeling," and "crude." The magic ingredient the Laser lacks is, in a word, refinement.

The most prominent offender is the drivetrain. What good is a willing engine if it drones all the time? On top of that, the fun of stirring your own gears is diminished by a clunky shift linkage.

There's nothing sophisticated about the Laser's suspension tuning, either. Around

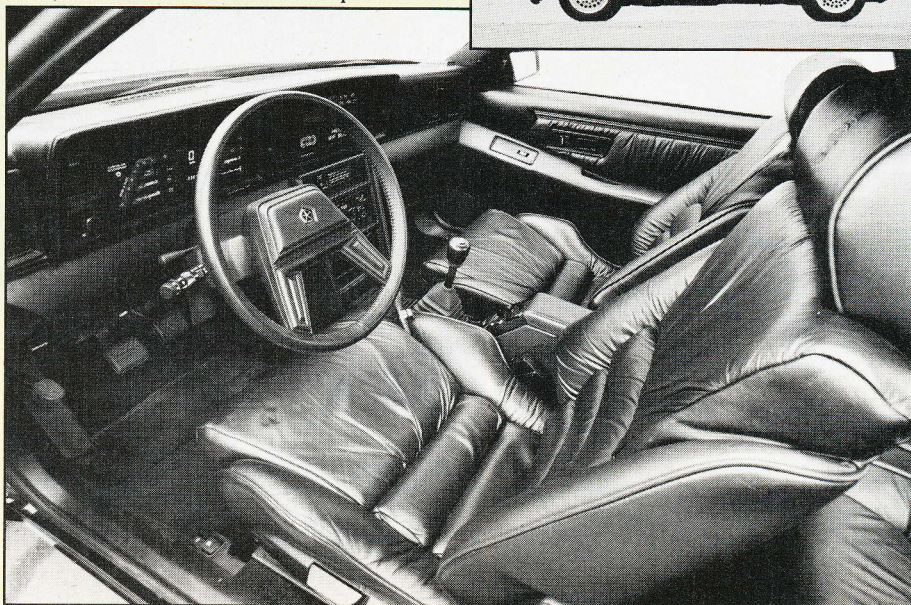
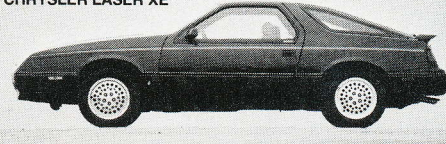
We know how good Camaros can be, and we've seen how sweet GM's port-injected 2.8-liter V-6 is in other cars—but here the two make no music together. At 135 hp, the V-6 has about twenty percent less power than it needs to move the Berlinetta with authority, and it's surprisingly coarse in the upper rev ranges. More noise comes up through the five-speed's shift boot.

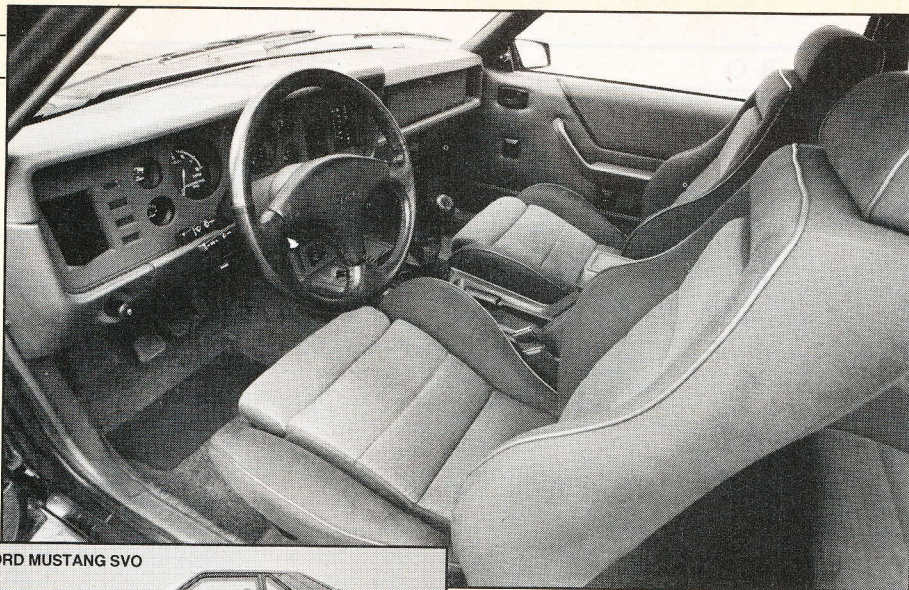
The Berlinetta's ride isn't bad, but on racer roads, the boulevard-soft suspension lets the car bob and buck enough to make even experts slow down.

There's little salvation in the cockpit. The Berlinetta's digital tack is impossible to read, and its electronic controls and computerized radio are annoyingly difficult to operate.

We picked this Camaro for our test because we thought it had the potential to be tomorrow's Z28. In spite of its lackluster showing, we still do. A punched-out 3.2-liter version of its V-6 with 165-plus horse-

CHRYSLER LASER XE





FORD MUSTANG SVO



town the ride is stiff. Burning along on serpentine roads, it turns downright choppy.

The XE premium trim package does nothing but exacerbate the Laser's problems. The leather upholstery lets you slide around in the turns. The electronic dash is hard to read and contributes a lowball look that this car doesn't deserve. The Laser may be a runner, but at this price (\$14,399) there are other cars that treat you better.

Ford Mustang SVO 5th Overall (tie)

The Schwarzenegger Approach

Body builders pump iron. Mustang SVOs pump boost—fifteen pounds of it, to be exact. That's enough to make the once lowly 2.3-liter four-cylinder bulge with 200 hp, 25 hp more than last year. (These figures may be revised slightly by the time you read this: we tested a prototype a few months before the beginning of production.) There are also some minor upgrades for 1985, like flush headlamps, but brute force is this year's real story.

The SVO is Ford's Porsche 930 Turbo, an old design that's kept vital with large doses of technology administered by dedicated engineer/racers. This strategy works well for the German firm, but it's a double-edged sword for Ford, where the engineers have had their hands full trying to make an old car act new.

Ford has certainly gotten the SVO's looks right, and its performance is truly potent. It's the hottest car in this test by far. Fire it down a test track and you'll see 60 mph in 6.8 seconds, a top speed of 129 mph, and a 0.79-g cornering limit.

The SVO also handles itself well on both highways and byways. It likes to be driven briskly on meandering roads. The steering feels direct and sure when you bend into corners. The ride is taut but not too tight. The fat steering wheel feels good, and the short-throw shifter is racer-sharp.

But when you push deep into the SVO's throttle—nothing. A second goes by, and still nothing. Then, whoosh! All of the horses wake up at once, and the SVO snaps your head back. That's what is known as boost lag.

Keeping the turbo on the boil means keeping the revs up, and that translates into a ton of engine noise—all of it the wrong kind. Between the lack of power at low revs and the high-rpm assault on your ears, the SVO is never really happy. It's enough to make you wish for the 4.9-liter V-8 from the GT.

Then there are the minor annoyances: a seat that felt subpar to some of us, a behind-the-times dash, and a silly 85-mph speedo. All this leaves us wanting more from the SVO. We're glad Ford builds it, but we hope the company can give it the refinement it so dearly needs. Big biceps just aren't enough.

Nissan 300ZX 5th Overall (tie)

You Gotta Have a Gimmick

The 300ZX two-plus-two is the polar opposite of its fifth-place partner. Where the

Mustang SVO is all aggression and rough edges, the 300ZX is civilized and polished. The Mustang is a charger. The 300ZX would rather cruise.

We're of the mind that the 300ZX is a good car for people who are decidedly *not* serious enthusiasts. In most respects it's quite pleasant. The three-liter V-6 is one of the slickest powerplants in this test or anywhere else—wonderfully smooth and quiet, with enough oomph to get the job done. The five-speed gearbox shifts crisply, making for a very refined powertrain.

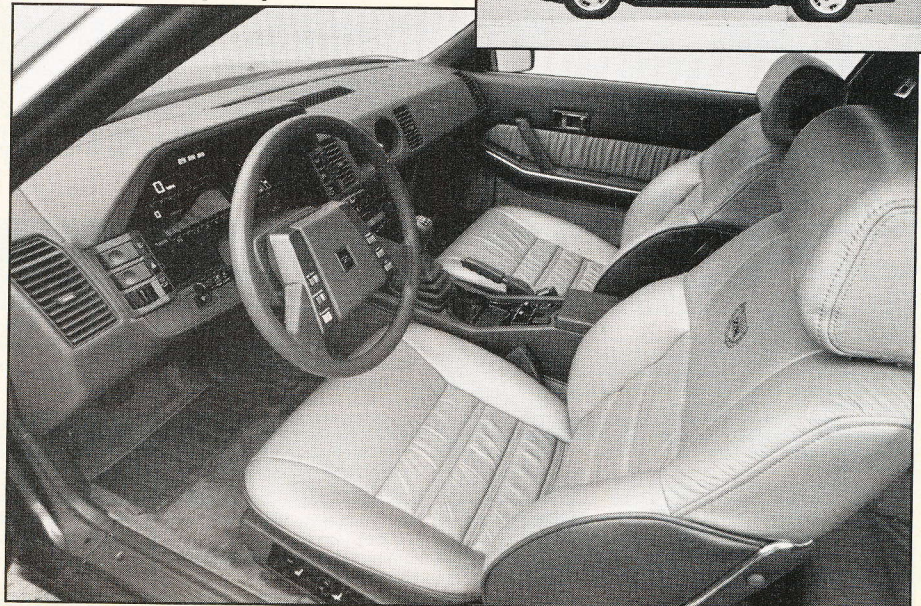
In most day-to-day situations, the 300ZX drives well enough. When you start haring around, though, the ride gets pitchy, the steering goes vague, and you notice that the seat has let you down badly.

Worst of all, we can't imagine why anyone would want to deal with the ZX's wild-and-crazy optional digitronic instruments and controls. It's as if Nissan had said to itself, "Since this car isn't an all-out performance model, it's gotta have a gimmick."

Make that a couple dozen gimmicks, none of which work out too well. The radio and the climate-control switch gear look as if they were straight out of Mission Control. You'll need a thorough preflight checkout to operate them. The electronic instruments, which include a pulsating tach, are high on entertainment value but low on ability to deliver information at a glance. All of the other stuff, from the seat's pump-up thigh support to the acceleration-and-braking g-meter, gets old fast.

None of this seems like much to fret about until you check the price sticker. The 300ZX starts at a whopping \$18,399—*gulp*—and our test car went out the door for almost twenty-one grand. Now *that's* some gimmick.

NISSAN 300ZX 2+2





MITSUBISHI STARION ESI



Mitsubishi Starion ESI
4th Overall

Getting with the Program

Good things have happened to the Starion since we last checked on it—enough of them to push this car smack into the top echelon of sports coupes. The lat-

est version looks better, handles better, and goes better. No doubt about it, Mitsubishi is really getting with the program.

Right off, the Starion looks tastier. Before Chrysler started selling its version, the Conquest, it cooperated with Mitsubishi on cleaning up the design. Now the Starion has the tidy look and the classy detailing of a driver's car.

This year's new performance model is the ESI. The big improvement is intercooling, which bumps the power peak of the 2.6-liter four-cylinder turbo up to 170

hp—a 25-hp improvement. Best of all, this powerplant retains its torquey, big-engine feel. In most situations the throttle response is so sharp that downshifting is optional. When you call for full boost, it's up in a flash. On balance, this is one of the sharpest turbo setups around.

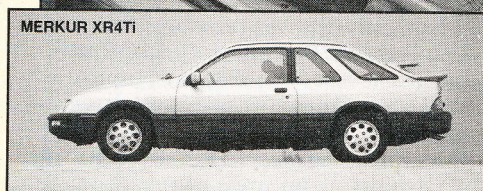
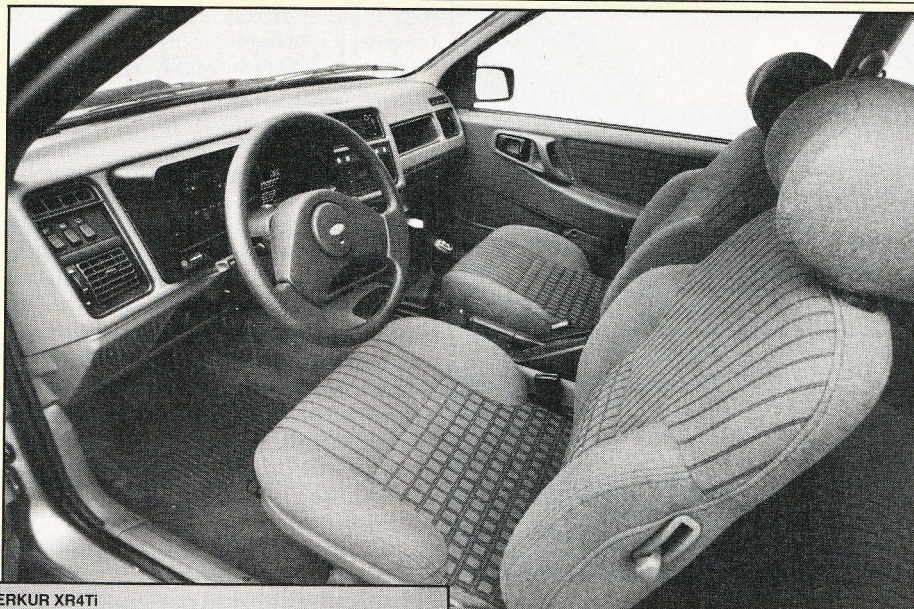
Add suspension that works better than before, and this coupe's fun-to-drive rating is up with the best of them. The Starion's body movements are tied down tightly now, but not to the point where the ride gets miserable. The tuning makes it an ace in the mountains. The steering is secure, the cornering is stable, and there's great power for digging out of the turns. All that's left is to improve this car's on-center steering feel and straight-line tracking.

We do have mixed emotions about the Starion's accommodations, though. The driver's seat is quite good, the driving position is comfortable, and the analog gauges are easily readable. On the other hand, the controls look and feel tacky. The black vinyl that covers most of the cabin is so shiny it makes the interior look like a proving ground for Armor All. We were split on how well the steering-wheel-mounted radio controls work. The touch switches for the heater and the air conditioner can be recalcitrant as well.

Nevertheless, we like the latest Starion just fine. Mitsubishi has transformed it into a sophisticated driver's car, and—more important—it's a whale of a good time. That's really what a sports coupe should be all about.

Vital Statistics

	price, base/as tested	engine	SAE net power/torque	dimensions, in			
				wheel- base	length	width	height
AUDI COUPE GT	\$15,250/\$16,125	SOHC 5-in-line, 136 cu in (2226cc), iron block and aluminum head, Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection	110 bhp @ 5500 rpm/ 122 lb-ft @ 2500 rpm	99.8	177.3	66.3	53.1
CHEVROLET CAMARO BERLINETTA	\$11,060/\$13,741	V-6, 171 cu in (2837cc), iron block and heads, GM electronic fuel injection	135 bhp @ 5100 rpm/ 165 lb-ft @ 3600 rpm	101.0	192.0	72.8	50.3
CHRYSLER LASER XE	\$10,362/\$14,399	turbocharged SOHC 4-in-line, 135 cu in (2213cc), iron block and aluminum head, Chrysler electronic fuel injection	146 bhp @ 5200 rpm/ 168 lb-ft @ 3600 rpm	97.1	175.0	69.3	50.3
FORD MUSTANG SVO	\$15,000/\$15,000 (estimated)	turbocharged and intercooled SOHC 4-in-line, 140 cu in (2300cc), iron block and head, Ford electronic fuel injection	200 bhp @ 5000 rpm/ 240 lb-ft @ 3200 rpm	100.5	181.0	69.1	51.9
MERKUR XR4Ti	\$16,361/\$17,105	turbocharged SOHC 4-in-line, 140 cu in (2300cc), iron block and head, Ford electronic fuel injection	175 bhp @ 5000 rpm/ 200 lb-ft @ 3000 rpm	102.7	178.4	68.0	54.8
MITSUBISHI STARION ESI	\$15,279/\$15,279	turbocharged and intercooled SOHC 4-in-line, 156 cu in (2555cc), iron block and aluminum head, Mitsubishi electronic fuel injection	170 bhp @ 5000 rpm/ 220 lb-ft @ 2500 rpm	95.9	173.2	66.3	50.2
NISSAN 300ZX 2 + 2	\$18,399/\$20,799	SOHC V-6, 181 cu in (2960cc), iron block and aluminum heads, Nissan/ECCS electronic fuel injection	160 bhp @ 5200 rpm/ 174 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm	99.2	178.5	67.9	49.7
TOYOTA SUPRA	\$16,558/\$17,843	DOHC 6-in-line, 168 cu in (2759cc), iron block and aluminum head, Nippondenso electronic fuel injection	161 bhp @ 5200 rpm/ 169 lb-ft @ 4400 rpm	102.9	183.5	67.7	52.0



Merkur XR4Ti
3rd Overall

Aesthetics over Athletics

A quick look at the ballot sheet will explain how the XR4Ti nipped into third place ahead of the Starion: athletics took a back seat to aesthetics. The look and the

feel of this car are intoxicating enough to balance its few mechanical drawbacks.

Don't get us wrong. The XR4Ti is a solid performer in all respects. As our test results show, it can turn on the speed. It also holds its own in the zigs and zags.

Its greatest strengths lie elsewhere, however. As you can see from the voting, we think the Merkur's futuristic shape looks terrific. To Ford's credit, you can't tell it from the European Sierra.

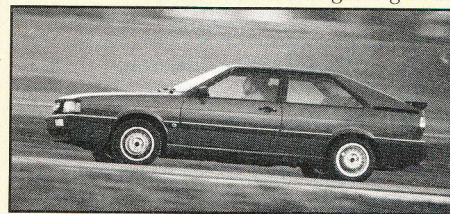
Inside, the Merkur earns high marks for its swoopy interior design and good ergonomics. Its seats are Germanically—and

we think correctly—firm. They aren't adjustable in twelve dozen ways, but you don't miss that at all. The dash is busy, but the gauges are easy to read, and all of the important controls fall readily to finger tips. Even the soft-molded steering wheel feels just right. Sitting in this car is good for your outlook on life.

Driving it is no bad thing, either. The ride is supple, just the way you want it around town. The steering is accurate. The motor, a 175-hp nonintercooled version of the SVO powerplant, suffers only minimal turbo lag—though it doesn't feel nearly as potent as the engines we sampled earlier in prototypes. Ford claims no power loss since our last test, but our sources report that the spark curve was dialed back after some durability questions arose. In any case, the production Merkur is almost a full second slower to 60 mph, and its top speed is down by 6 mph.

Although the XR4Ti suffers from no great inadequacies, there is room for improvement in several areas. Our test Merkur's engine was coarse enough in the midrange and above to buzz the shifter (previous examples were buttery-smooth right to the redline), and there was some full-throttle surging we hadn't felt before. The steering lacks a strong on-center feel. Whereas the suspension tuning is excellent in most situations, it's a tad floaty during canyon acrobatics. You SCCA racers in the audience will also notice significant lift-throttle oversteer and nonlinearity in the brakes. Such traits take a little getting used

curb weight, lb	weight distribution, % F/R	suspension		brakes, F/R	tires
		front	rear		
2490	64.5/35.5	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rigid axle integral with 2 trailing arms and an anti-sway bar, coil springs	vented disc/drum	Michelin MX V, 185/60HR-14
3180	55.3/44.7	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rigid axle, 2 trailing links, Panhard rod, torque arm, coil springs, anti-sway bar	vented disc/drum	Goodyear Vector, P205/70R-14
2800	60.7/39.3	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rigid axle integral with 2 trailing arms and an anti-sway bar, coil springs	vented disc/drum	Goodyear Eagle GT, P195/60VR-15
3140	56.7/43.3	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rigid axle, 4 trailing links, 2 leading hydraulic links, coil springs, anti-sway bar	vented disc/vented disc	Goodyear Eagle VR50, P225/50VR-16
2920	53.4/46.6	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	ind, semi-trailing arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar	vented disc/drum	Pirelli P6, 195/60HR-14
3020	53.0/47.0	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	vented disc/vented disc	Yokohama Radial 352, 215/60VR-15
3210	49.8/50.2	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	ind, semi-trailing arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar	vented disc/disc	Bridgestone Potenza, P215/60R-15
3060	53.6/46.4	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	ind, semi-trailing arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar	vented disc/vented disc	Bridgestone Potenza, 225/60HR-14



COUPE COMPARO



TOYOTA SUPRA



to before you can really fly in an XR4Ti.

Just the same, there's a whole lot to like about this car. Not only does it drive well and look great, but it also offers comfortable seating for four adults, plus the versatility of a hatchback and a fold-down rear seat. Just because you're an automotive aesthete, you don't have to leave your family behind.

Toyota Supra 2nd Overall

The Japanese Bimmer

This is becoming a pattern. We keep putting Supras in tests—a road test, a 30,000-mile test, a handling test, and now this comparo—and they keep doing remarkably well. The Supra was talented right at the start, and it hasn't lost a step in four seasons.

The Supra hasn't needed much help to

keep pace, either. Last year, the power output was boosted to 161 hp. This year, there's a new rear spoiler, a slight change in the gearing, and minor paint revisions, but that's about it.

The Supra's design—nothing you'd ever call stunning—has aged with surprising grace. Its interior layout remains one of the best in the sports-coupe division. The clean, simple analog-instrument cluster still gets rave reviews. The seat, the driving position, and the pedal placement continue to rate high. We only wish Toyota would simplify the sound system's controls and fit the Supra with a steering wheel commensurate with its station in life.

The big reason we love this car is that it does everything elegantly and never seems to breathe hard. Around the burbs and out on the freeway it coddles you with a ride that's cushy but never wobbly. Its straight-line stability is laser-keen. Lane changes are sharp. The twin-cam six is pure velvet. There is some wind, road, and rear-axle noise, but it's less than disturbing.

When you want to boogie, the Supra is

right there to be your partner. The engine howls as if it believed it's in a BMW. Come to think of it, the whole driving experience is what you'd expect from a big Bimmer coupe. The difference is that we mere mortals can afford the Supra.

This car's footwork is nearly flawless. It's absolutely at home clawing along the jagged coastal highways at go-to-jail velocities. Its steering accuracy and feel rival the big-name brands'. And when you make a mistake, the Supra covers for you.

So once again we find ourselves crazy about this big Oriental coupe. Its virtues are great, and its vices are small—which sounds like the very definition of a winner. There is, however, one sports coupe that does it all a little bit better . . .

Audi Coupe GT 1st Overall

The Natural

Not only are we crowning the Audi Coupe GT the Best Sports Coupe in America, but it also wins Biggest Surprise of 1985. The Coupe GT is this year's secret car, folks. The masses don't know about it. Even if they did, you'd never see Coupe GTs cluttering up street corners, because Audi brings in only about 4000 a year.

Driving this car is a rare treat. No matter what you throw at it—city traffic, mountain twisties, Interstates—it never sweats. What we have here is the automotive equivalent of the natural athlete.

You wouldn't know that by checking the Coupe GT's performance stats. It's not particularly speedy (0 to 60 in nine seconds flat and a top speed of 115 mph). Nor is it great on the skidpad (0.77 g) or in the slalom (57.0 mph, strictly mid-pack).

Nope, the Coupe GT's magic lies elsewhere. When we leaf through the logbook we kept on this car, we're almost embarrassed. Supposedly hardened road testers bubble like wide-eyed kids:

"This must be the most expensive car here. It *feels* like money."

C/D Test Results

		acceleration, sec					top speed, mph	braking, 70-0 mph, ft	roadholding, 300-ft skidpad, g
		0-60 mph	0-100 mph	¼-mile	top gear, 30-50 mph	top gear, 50-70 mph			
AUDI COUPE GT		9.0	34.1	16.6 @ 80 mph	9.2	10.1	115	209	0.77
CHEVROLET CAMARO BERLINETTA		10.0	30.7	17.0 @ 81 mph	15.6	16.6	116	242	0.74
CHRYSLER LASER XE		8.1	25.1	16.0 @ 84 mph	16.0	13.4	117	206	0.77
FORD MUSTANG SVO		6.8	19.5	15.1 @ 90 mph	16.3	11.0	129	197	0.79
MERKUR XR4Ti		7.9	25.9	16.1 @ 85 mph	12.6	9.3	123	208	0.76
MITSUBISHI STARION ESI		8.0	25.2	16.1 @ 85 mph	9.6	8.2	126	184	0.80
NISSAN 300ZX 2 + 2		9.2	29.4	16.8 @ 82 mph	11.4	11.9	124	188	0.77
TOYOTA SUPRA		8.4	25.8	16.1 @ 85 mph	9.4	10.4	125	209	0.77

*incomplete mileage due to engine failure

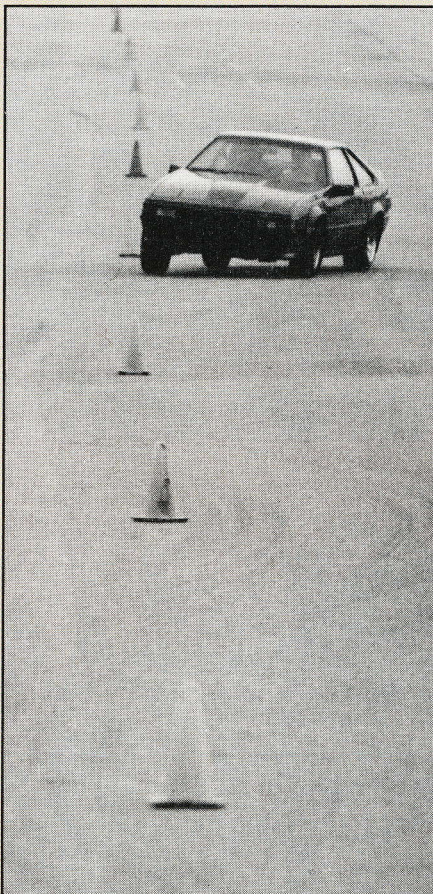
At the Test Track

Our redline-research report.

• To provide a solid foundation for our evaluation of these eight sports coupes, we subjected them to all of our usual track tests, omitting only the coast-down procedure. In addition, we put every contender through a 900-foot slalom test.

In our acceleration runs, the Laser, the Merkur, the Starion, and the Supra showed virtually identical flat-out performance despite their very different powerplants. They all sprinted from a standing start to 60 mph in about eight seconds and covered the standing quarter-mile in roughly sixteen seconds at about 85 mph. The powertrain variations were reflected, however, in the 30-to-50-mph top-gear acceleration tests. The Supra's normally aspirated engine used its broad-band power and instant responses to good advantage for a 9.4-second clocking. The turbocharged Starion engine was also impressive, thanks to its relatively hefty displacement and low-rpm tuning. In contrast, the Merkur and especially the Laser suffered from the small displacement and poor low-rpm boost of their turbo engines. They were clocked at 12.6 and 16.0 seconds, respectively.

With a massive 200 bhp, the SVO Mustang was by far the quickest sports coupe in our test, accelerating from 0 to 60 mph in a mere 6.8 seconds and rocketing through the standing quarter-mile in 15.1 seconds at 90 mph. But its highly tuned powerplant is even weaker at low speed than the Laser's, making the Mustang the most schizophrenic performer of the bunch. At the other end of the power spectrum, the Audi Coupe GT was much quicker than its meager 110 bhp would suggest. Thanks to its light



weight, well-chosen gearing, and instant response, it turned in a performance only a little slower than that of the front-runners. The 300ZX is much more powerful than the Audi but also much heavier, so it was no quicker except at very high speeds. The Camaro Berlinetta is as heavy as the ZX and offers much less

power, so its bottom-of-the-pack finish isn't much of a surprise.

When it came to dissipating speed, the leaders were the 300ZX and the Starion, with stopping distances from 70 mph of less than 190 feet. The 300ZX displayed excellent front-to-rear balance and good modulation, and the Starion benefited from its rather simple anti-lock system, which operates only on its rear wheels. The SVO Mustang came next, at 197 feet, but with its huge, sticky tires, it should have done better; its performance was limited by premature rear lockup and mediocre modulation. The Audi Coupe, the Supra, the Merkur, and the Laser were all in the 206-to-209-foot range, generally with average controllability and a bit too much rear-brake bias for really short stops. The Merkur did display excellent modulation, but this advantage was offset by tires that were a bit on the small side. Bringing up the rear with a 242-foot stop was the Camaro, hampered by early rear lockup and the poor traction of its Goodyear Vector all-weather tires.

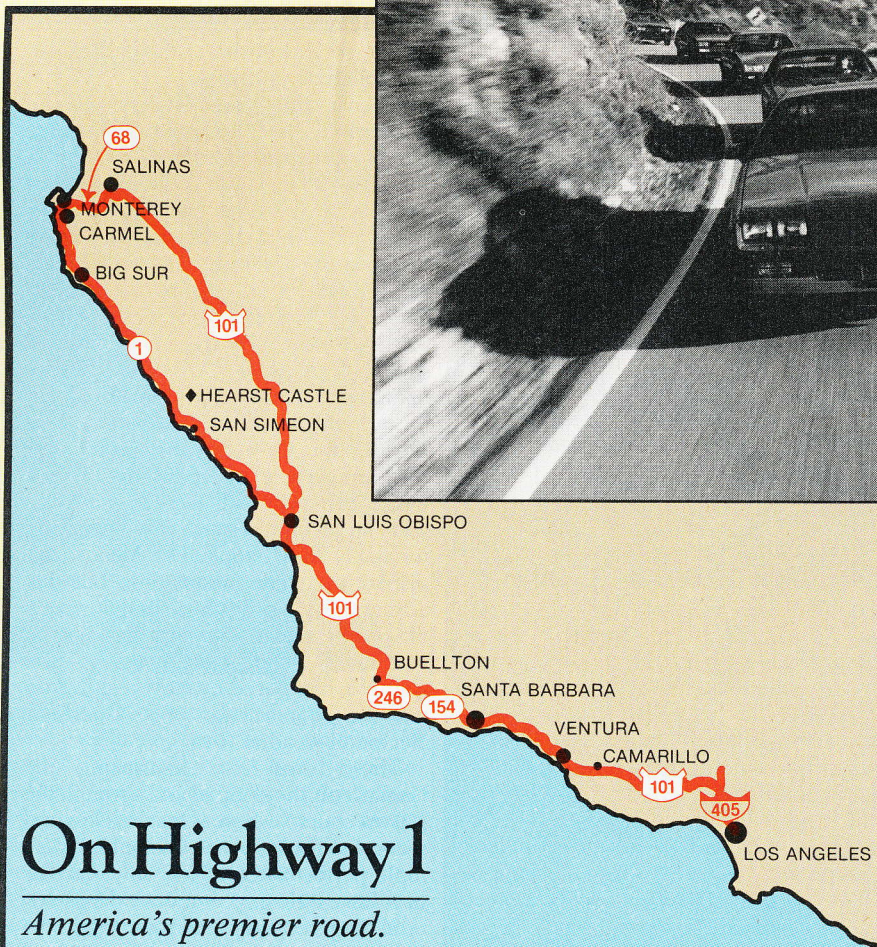
These tires also hamstringing the Camaro on the skidpad and through the slalom course, where it finished last and second to the last, with 0.74-g and 55.5-mph performances. Not only did the tires have little grip, but once they started sliding, recovery took some time. The Merkur's small rubber also provided limited grip, resulting in only 0.76 g on the skidpad. Through the slalom, however, the Merkur's natural rhythm helped it to a mid-pack 57.0-mph speed.

The Audi Coupe, the Laser, the Supra, and the 300ZX all developed 0.77 g on the skidpad, but their slalom performances varied widely. Controllable, predictable, and suffering no wayward tail wags, the 300ZX made it through the cones in an excellent 58.0 mph. Slightly slower was the Audi, with predictable behavior but a bit of front-tire scrub—both characteristics stemming from its understeering front-drive nature. The Laser had similar qualities and felt subjectively excellent, but a little too much tire scrub kept it from changing direction as quickly as the Audi and the 300ZX. The Supra didn't like the slalom course at all: its tail tended to swing, its suspension bottomed occasionally, and its power-steering pump couldn't keep up with the rapid motions at the wheel.

Neither the Mustang nor the Starion suffered from any of these problems. Both threaded through the cones with clean responses and minimal superfluous motions. Combined with their excellent traction, this smooth handling produced the test-leading 58.5-mph runs.

—Csaba Csere

maneuverability, 900-ft slalom, mph	interior sound level, dBA			fuel economy, mpg		
	idle	70-mph cruising	full throttle	EPA city	EPA highway	C/D 700- mile trip
57.0	54	70	82	19	25	24
55.5	49	68	80	18	27	21
56.0	51	70	81	19	29	24
58.5	55	71	79	19	25	19
57.0	50	70	82	19	24	19
58.5	50	73	79	19	24	NA*
58.0	45	70	78	19	25	21
55.0	43	73	80	20	24	22



On Highway 1

America's premier road.

• Since we're still considered perpetrators down in Baja, the *C/D* staff selected the Highway 1 that lies *north* of the border for this comparison test. Although parts of California's Highway 1 were trashed two years ago by the same storm that ruined Mexico's Highway 1 (and our reputation), the scenic coastal two-lane is open for business once again, and we were happy to celebrate that fact. The portion we drove, from San Luis Obispo north to Monterey, runs relatively free of campers, and we encountered only two stretches where construction had funneled the traffic into one lane.

Getting to the good stuff from the Los Angeles airport involves a trying blitz through parking lots 405 and 102, known fondly as "freeways" in L.A. Once you spot the exotic and stately 120-year-old eucalyptus trees lining the highway between Camarillo and Oxnard, though, you're home free.

After the morning's first panoramic view of the Pacific from 101 between Ventura and Santa Barbara, we cut the corner to Buellton (home of Pea Soup Andersen's) via Highways 154 and 246. This pair of lovely two-lanes took us across the Santa Ynez Mountains, past blue, blue Lake Cachuma, and on beyond miles of immaculate Arabian-stud farms, giant pines, and towering stands

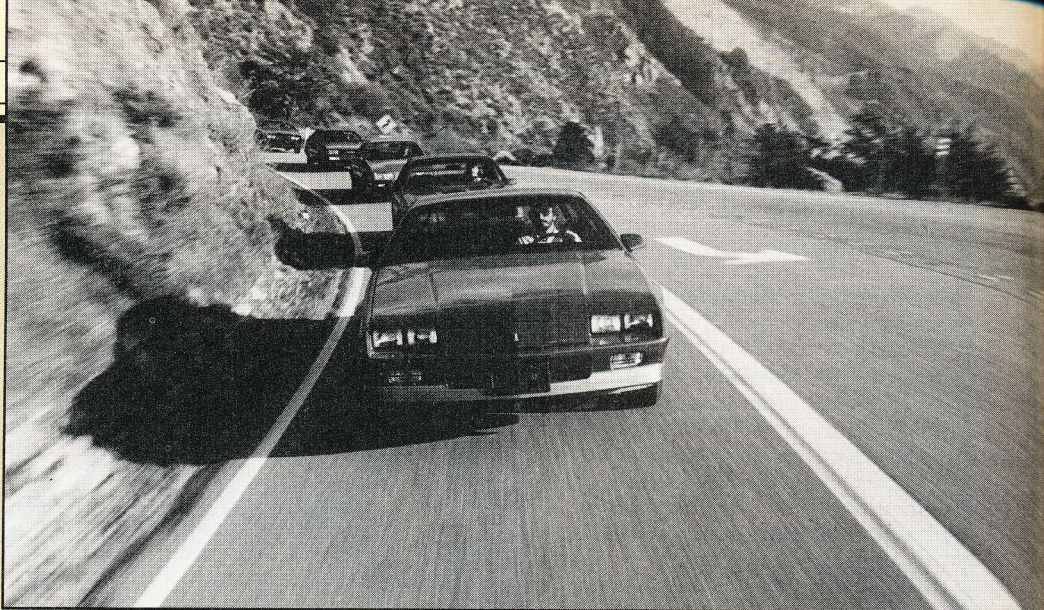
of pampas grass. Returning to 101, we followed the verdant foothills of the San Rafael Mountains. It was planting time in the valley, a precious sight to visitors from the land of subzero temperatures and blizzard conditions.

The best of Highway 1 is scratched on the west face of the Santa Lucia Range north of San Luis Obispo. An enraged Pacific pounds a craggy shoreline below. We made San Simeon in time for the day's last tour of William Randolph Hearst's castle, one of the world's most grandiose exercises in suburban living. Do not eat at a restaurant called Mexican Food in San Simeon. Trust us.

Staying the night in San Simeon gave us plenty of daylight to enjoy the blooming cacti and other flora, Big Sur's pine forests and roaring surf, a pod of whales spouting offshore at Rocky Point, and, of course, that hair-raising squiggle of a road. We watched the sunset from Carmel's Seventeen Mile Drive, motoring through deep pine and cypress forests to reach the wind-swept marsh and white-sand beach.

Reluctantly, we took to the freeway for the run home, jumping on at Salinas. Shortly after a pass back through the eucalyptus windbreak at Camarillo, our 700-mile, eight-car party was over.

—Jean Lindamood



"The engine sings."

"Every control movement seems calibrated to my body and brain."

"It clearly has something the other sports coupes don't."

We'll stop there before we bury you with hyperbole. What the Audi owns is a kind of stellar all-around ability that goes beyond simple performance testing and numbers crunching. It can do it all.

The Audi engineers, for instance, have managed to bless this car with one of the best ride-and-handling compromises we've ever encountered. The Coupe's suspension is so absorbent in city driving that you're sure it will fall all over itself when you dive-bomb a back road—but it doesn't. In fact, it excels, soaking up the bumps and never losing its composure. Subjectively speaking, it has the best all-around suspension of the group.

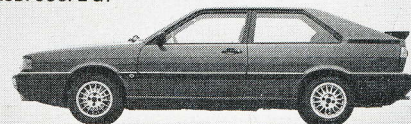
The steering is equally impressive. It requires an absolute minimum of minding on long Interstate stretches. It bends into corners without a twitch. It's dead-nuts accurate and full of road feel. Fold in the stable suspension and you've got a road carver of the highest order, able to do more on its little 185/60HR-14 doughnuts than the other cars in this group can do on their big baloneys.

The 2.2-liter, 110-hp five-cylinder is also a delight. The soothing hum it sends out is

COUPE COMPARO



AUDI COUPE GT



pure honey, from idle to redline. It's surprisingly torquey and right-now responsive, so you don't need to do a lot of shifting if you don't want to. And it's every bit as refined when you're working it for all it's worth. Flat out in the mountains, you rarely

notice that this Audi is the least powerful car in the group.

The Coupe GT's driving environment is first-class as well. The cabin is simply and tastefully trimmed, so uncluttered by banks of touch switches and wild electronic dis-

plays that it looks almost empty. The cloth seats grab you in all the right places, and there's sedan-sized room for the rear-seat passengers. The beautiful four-spoked wheel feels great in your fists. The shifter clicks home with purpose, and the clutch has just the right takeup.

If you're looking for serious deficiencies, well, the Coupe GT really doesn't have any. That's why it was voted into the top spot in nine of our eleven categories, picking up three perfect scores along the way.

The Audi failed to win in the engine and exterior-appearance areas—we wouldn't mind a few more ponies, and the design is getting a little dated—but we love it just the same. The Audi Coupe GT has the stuff of champions, and we're proud to pronounce it King of the Sports Coupes. To the rest of the world's carmakers we can only say this: your target has been identified.

—Rich Ceppeos

Subjective Scores*

	engine	trans- mission	brakes	handling	ergo- nomics	comfort	ride	design		fun-to- drive	OVERALL RATING
								interior	exterior		
AUDI COUPE GT	29	33	32	35	34	34	33	31	29	35	35
CHEVROLET CAMARO BERLINETTA	14	21	12	8	13	19	20	12	26	11	9
CHRYSLER LASER XE	17	19	18	21	15	14	13	11	22	18	16
FORD MUSTANG SVO	22	30	25	25	22	18	18	17	26	24	22
MERKUR XR4TI	24	26	25	25	28	30	30	28	30	26	29
MITSUBISHI STARION ESI	29	26	29	29	24	25	24	20	20	29	27
NISSAN 300ZX 2 + 2	31	28	27	23	17	24	29	14	17	19	22
TOYOTA SUPRA	34	28	28	29	29	31	31	27	26	34	32

*Total scores awarded by seven judges (5 = best, 1 = worst). Maximum possible: 35