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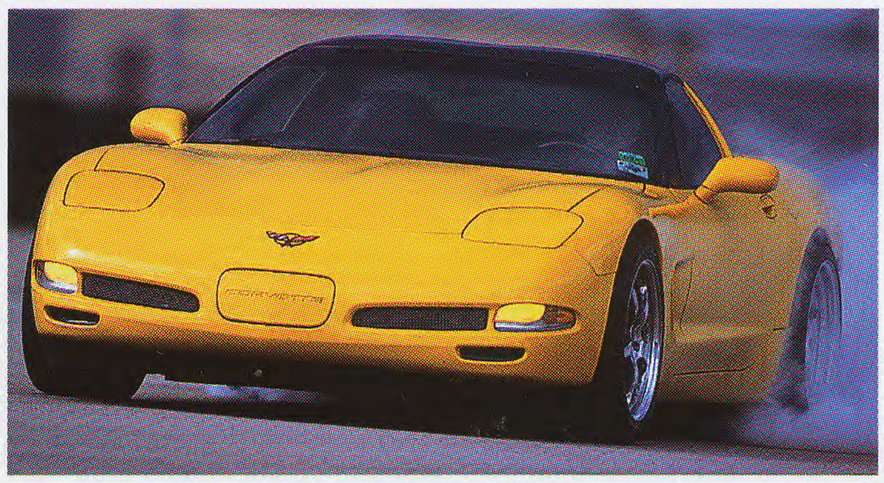

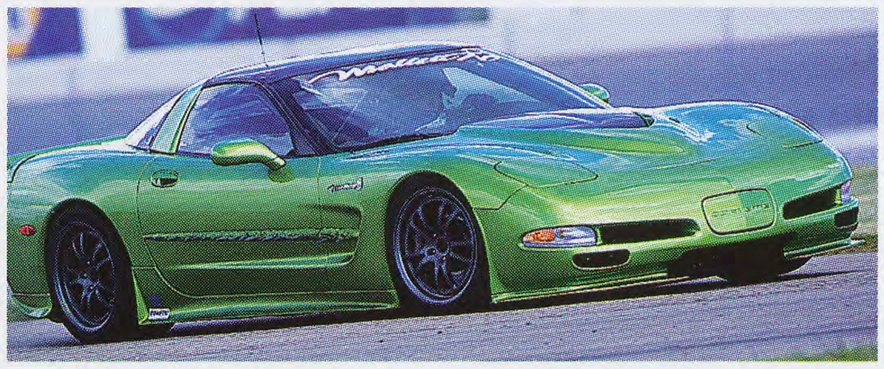

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Low-Impact Sports

You say you want to narrow the choices in the $25,000 all-American coupe sweepstakes? Well, here they are–all three of 'em.

BY TONY SWAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

Turns out not everyone who wants the visual vim and patriotic panache of an American sports coupe finds it necessary to personally supervise each and every gear selection by operating that lever located between the front seats. Take these three cars, which are the entire menu of sporty Big Three two-doors competing in the $25,000 neighborhood. Although two of the three (the Mustang and the Stratus) come with manual gearboxes as standard equipment, most owners prefer to leave the shifting to the car's engine-transmission management system. (Asterisk: To their credit, about 55 percent of Mustang GT and SVT Cobra buyers want to manage gear selection for themselves. But that percentage drops to 33 when base Mustangs, with V-6 engines, are factored into the equation. The mix skews much more heavily toward minimal driver involvement with the

Stratus two-door—78 percent are automatics, and even for the sportier R/Ts, it's 77 percent.) And since the Monte Carlo is automatic only, we specified automatics for all the players.

We didn't invite the Stratus-twin Chrysler Sebring, or the walking-dead Chevy Camaro and Pontiac Firebird, since their contracts won't be renewed for 2003, and then learned that another apparently eligible contender—the two-door version of the Pontiac Grand Prix—had also been consigned to history. The two-door Grand Prix went out of production in August, and there won't be an equivalent car in the Excitement Division lineup until the Americanized version of the Holden Monaro makes its appearance as the 2004 GTO.

The U.S. sports-coupe hood count doesn't increase much even when you throw a lasso around the entire category. The Ford ZX2 and Mercury Cougar both disappear at the end of the '02 model year, making the low end of the spectrum an all–General Motors show: the aging Chevy Cavalier Z24 and Pontiac Sunfire GT, and the new-for-'03 Saturn Ion, which replaces the SC lineup. And that's the lot.

Since we were insistent about transmission choice, you may wonder why there's a disparity in price and, in particular, power. Here's the rationale. The Monte Carlo SS, which wound up wearing the heaviest price tag of our trio, starts at $23,860. That's a lot more than a manual Mustang V-6 at $18,100 ($18,915 for an automatic). Since it was possible to have V-8 power and stay within the pricing parameters, we opted for the GT. However, the Mustang that showed up for this showdown was loaded with other goodies, including some $1300 worth of audio add-ons.

The Stratus was shortest on muscle—200 hp and 205 pound-feet of torque are as good as it gets—but by checking enough options boxes, we didn't have much trouble getting it into the same price stratum as its cross-town competitors.

Our flog was conducted near the small town of Coshocton, Ohio, home of Roscoe Village (and Bob Brenly, the sign said). Make that Historic Roscoe Village—a collection of restored buildings on a street paved with bricks, established during the heyday of the Ohio & Erie Canal (from 1825). And how Ohio is this? The burg's big restaurant closes at 8 p.m. Nearby, we encountered some meandering roads in the hilly country west of town that we had not previously pillaged.

Would power prevail over sophistication and style? Only one way to find out.

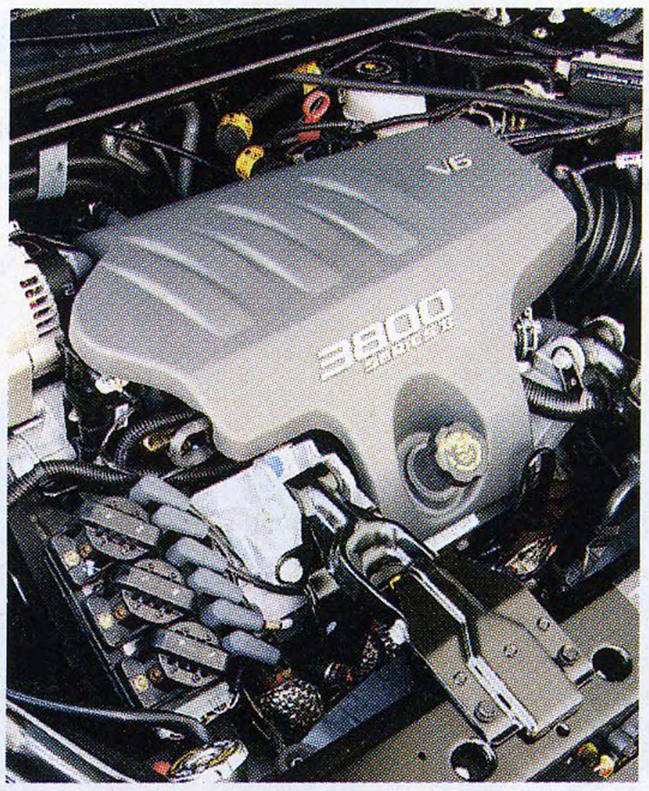
Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS

Highs: Plentiful torque, excellent fit and finish, voluminous rear seat.

Lows: Regressive styling, Novocain steering, absolute absence of fun-to-drive factor.

The Verdict: A sporty two-door well-suited to the relaxed-fit era.

3



Third Place
Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS

Remember *Cool Hand Luke?* There was that wonderful moment when the warden (Strother Martin) returned a battered Luke (Paul Newman) to the slammer and told the assembled inmates, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." So it is with the Monte Carlo SS. Chevy advertises "dual personality," portraying a car that's "classy with a wild streak." There are also allusions to the cars roaring around NASCAR tracks—never mind that the real commonality between the two versions is that they both have four wheels.

Where does the communications failure reside? Probably at our end, because try as we may, we find it impossible to embrace the notion that this car can satisfy the inner racer. Comfortable? Yes. Roomy? Yes, tops in this group. Solid? No question, arguably the best in this threesome. But sporty? Sorry. This car is as frisky and fun-loving as an Arthur Andersen accountant.

So, to review: The Monte Carlo (as well as the Impala sedan) shares the same foundation as the Pontiac Grand Prix, the Olds Intrigue, and a brace of Buicks, the Regal and the Century. This is one of the best front-drive platforms in GM's passenger-car inventory. Overall chassis rigidity is high, and we were also impressed by the fine quality of assembly fit and finish.

Chassis rigidity is a key component in good handling, but Chevy seems unwilling to take any chances in this realm. Even with the heavier anti-roll bars and bigger tires on the SS version, the Monte's all-strut suspension is conservatively tuned to deliver smooth ride quality on most surfaces, plus the predictability of progressive understeer. Add steering that substitutes effort for feel, and you have a device that makes back-road driving more chore than pleasure.

"There's a pervading heaviness to this car that makes it feel slow-witted, slow on its feet, and generally reluctant," opined one logbook scribbler.

The powertrain in the SS consists of GM's deathless 3.8-liter pushrod V-6 mated with a 4T65-E GM automatic. We called the old 3800 "solid, pleasantly torquey, and nearly bulletproof" in our September 1999 road test of the Monte, and that opinion holds today. But it's no JATO unit. Despite its advantage in torque, the SS edged the Stratus by a mere 0.1 second to 60 mph, 8.6 seconds versus 8.7, and the same was true of its quarter-mile performance—16.6 seconds at 84 mph. Why Chevrolet doesn't offer the supercharged version of the 3800 V-6 mystifies us, but we attribute this sluggishness to mass: at 3515 pounds, the Monte was this test's fat guy.

It was also the biggest. Although the Mustang is a bit wider, the Monte Carlo is distinctly longer and taller than its rivals, with a much longer wheelbase. Thus, it's not too surprising that the Monte also delivered by far the roomiest cabin, with a back seat that can accommodate three adults in something closely resembling comfort. We were also impressed with the ergonomics, particularly the dash-mounted ignition switch, the sound system, and even the roomy leather-clad seating,

although all hands wished for more lateral support.

Our test car was adorned with some $5000 worth of options, including a $2100 High Sport Appearance package that included, among other things, a "racing-inspired rear spoiler." None of the elements enhances performance, and knocking a couple grand off the total probably makes the Monte Carlo a more attractive buy to someone, although not to us.

"If you can ignore the Martian styling," concluded one tester, "this is a very nice car. But it's really selling comfort and style, not sportiness." Amen.

Second Place
Ford Mustang GT

Here's a face that is nothing if not familiar. Although its visage was modestly revitalized for the 1999 model year, the Mustang looks pretty much as it has since its 1994 makeover. Nine years is a long time for a design to endure, but it's a mere eye blink compared with the age of what lies beneath. Although subjected to numerous surgical procedures conceived to stiffen its spine and thus keep old age at bay, the bones of Ford's pony car date more or less directly to the Fairmont sedan, circa 1978. That's the automotive equivalent of the Lascaux cave paintings, and even though the chassis guys have managed to keep this survivor spry, the ancient underpinnings show to disadvantage within, where space and layout are defined and limited by the relatively short wheelbase and live axle.

Ford's interior design crew did a nice job of blending now with then (i.e., 1964) during the 1994 makeover, but they were unable to entirely eliminate the awkward relationship of seat, steering wheel, and foot pedals. We never quite got comfortable in the Mustang, and the seats drew some caustic comments: "Like padded lawn chairs," wrote one tester.

That's an exaggeration, but it's fair to say the limited lateral support is disappointing in a car wearing GT badges. So was the relatively high seating position, undoubtedly designed to compensate for the high cowl. The rear seat is restrictive to the point of torment; two adults can be wedged in there for short hauls, longer if they happen to be adults you dislike.

A few other strikes against the inner Mustang: The old-line climate controls, which are being phased out in other Fords, are anachronistic; the dark-gray color scheme is almost more oppressive than the Chevy's all-black treatment; and the Mach 1000 audio system, whose multiple amps

C/D Test Results

	acceleration, seconds							top speed, mph	braking, 70–0 mph, feet
	0–30 mph	0–60 mph	0–100 mph	1/4-mile	street start, 5–60 mph	top gear, 30–50 mph	top gear, 50–70 mph		
CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO SS	2.8	8.6	25.8	16.6 @ 84 mph	8.8	4.0	5.6	119	206
DODGE STRATUS R/T	3.1	8.7	23.8	16.7 @ 85 mph	9.3	4.5	5.3	128 (governed)	190
FORD MUSTANG GT	1.8	6.3	17.7	15.1 @ 93 mph	7.0	4.3	5.6	144	187
TEST AVERAGE	*2.6*	*7.9*	*22.4*	*16.1 @ 87 mph*	*8.4*	*4.4*	*5.5*	*130*	*194*

Vital Statistics

	price, base/ as tested	engine	SAE net power/torque; weight/power	transmission/ gear ratios:1/ maximum test speed, mph/ axle ratio:1	curb weight, pounds	weight distribution % front/rear
CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO SS	$23,860/ $28,930	pushrod 12-valve V-6, 231 cu in (3791cc), iron block and heads, GM engine-control system with port fuel injection	200 bhp @ 5200 rpm/ 225 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm; 17.6 lb/bhp	4-speed auto with lockup converter/ 2.92, 1.57, 1.00, 0.71/ 48, 89, 119, 119/ 3.29	3515	63.1/36.9
DODGE STRATUS R/T	$21,985/ $25,955	SOHC 24-valve V-6, 181 cu in (2972cc), iron block and aluminum heads, DaimlerChrysler SBEC III engine-control system with port fuel injection	200 bhp @ 5500 rpm/ 205 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm; 16.9 lb/bhp	4-speed auto with lockup converter/ 2.84, 1.49, 1.00, 0.73/ 43, 82, 122, 128/ 3.73	3376	62.7/37.3
FORD MUSTANG GT	$23,845/ $27,125	SOHC 16-valve V-8, 281 cu in , (4601cc), iron block and aluminum heads, Ford EEC-V engine-control system with port fuel injection	260 bhp @ 5250 rpm/ 302 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm; 13.4 lb/bhp	4-speed auto with lockup converter/ 2.84, 1.55, 1.00, 0.70/ 46, 84, 130, 144/ 3.27	3495	55.1/44.9

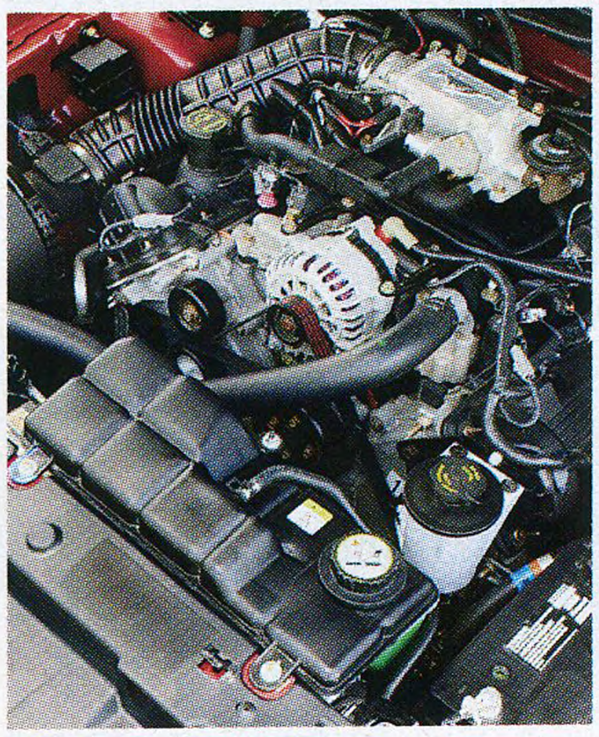
Ford Mustang GT

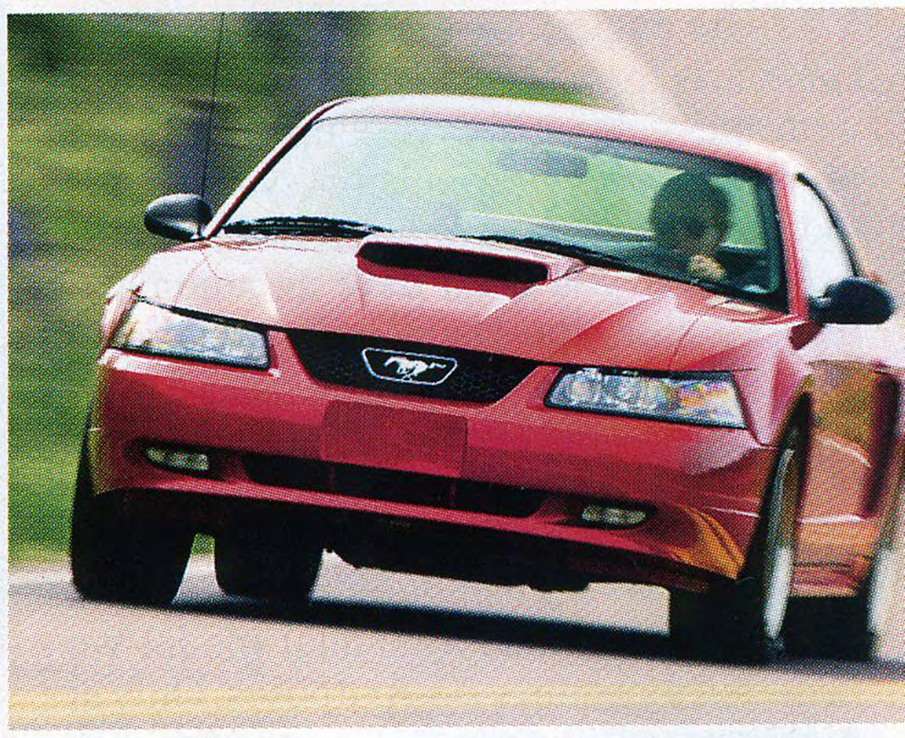
Highs: V-8 punch, athletic character, mysterious Mustang magic.

Lows: Awkward ergonomics, low-rent climate controls, fake scoopery, iron-maiden back seat.

The Verdict: Not getting any newer, but clearly the best performance buy in this bunch.

2





consume a fair percentage of the trunk space, doesn't sound like $1295 worth to us. And there's nothing new to say about the Mustang's exterior. You either like those chunky, muscular lines, or you don't—our crew varies on that subject, but we're unanimous in our opinion of the fake hood and side scoops: *oh, puh-leeze.*

Dated though it is, with its live-axle rear suspension, the Mustang drew acceptable marks on the dynamic side of the ledger. There was some logbook carping about stiff ride quality and road noise transmitted through the suspension—a function, we suspect, of bushings with pretty stern durometers—but the Mustang's cornering attitudes were the least nautical, its steering was both quick and tactile, and its braking performance (187 feet from 70 mph, with limited fade) was the best of this bunch, but unremarkable versus all sports coupes.

The element that really kept the Mustang out of the cellar was located just under its ductless hood scoop—that "throaty V-8" so loved by William Clay Ford Jr., whose last name adorns a number of buildings in Dearborn, as well as this car. There was some unhappiness with the action of the four-speed automatic transmission—"Feels confused," said one tester, "jerky upshifts, delayed downshifts"—but even so it motored merrily away from its rivals in almost all acceleration categories: 6.3 seconds to 60, 15.1 seconds at 93 mph in the quarter. They're best in this test.

Subtracting the $1295 audio system

roadholding, 300-foot skidpad, g	emergency-lane-change maneuver, mph	interior sound level, dBA				fuel economy, mpg		
		idle	full throttle	70-mph cruising	70-mph coasting	EPA city	EPA highway	*C/D* 500-mile trip
0.79	59.9	43	75	67	67	19	29	20
0.79	65.3	43	74	71	72	20	28	24
0.82	62.3	49	81	72	71	17	24	20
0.80	*62.5*	*45*	*77*	*70*	*70*	*19*	*27*	*21*

dimensions, inches				fuel tank, gallons	interior volume, cubic feet			suspension		brakes, front/rear	tires
wheel-base	length	width	height		front	rear	trunk	front	rear		
110.5	197.9	72.3	55.2	17.0	55	44	16	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, strut located by 1 trailing link and 2 lateral links, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/ disc; anti-lock control	Goodyear Eagle RS-A, P225/60HR-16
103.7	190.9	70.3	53.7	16.3	49	37	16	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind; 1 control arm, 2 lateral links, and 1 diagonal link per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar	vented disc/ disc; anti-lock control	Goodyear Eagle RS-A, P215/50HR-17
101.3	183.2	73.1	53.1	15.7	50	32	11	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	rigid axle located by 4 trailing links and 2 leading hydraulic links, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/ disc; anti-lock control	Goodyear Eagle ZR45, 245/45ZR-17

and the $815 automatic transmission from the as-tested price would improve our opinion of this car. Still, it's clear that this first and last of the pony cars is overdue for the major overhaul that's coming for 2004. If we were in the market for a Mustang, we'd wait.

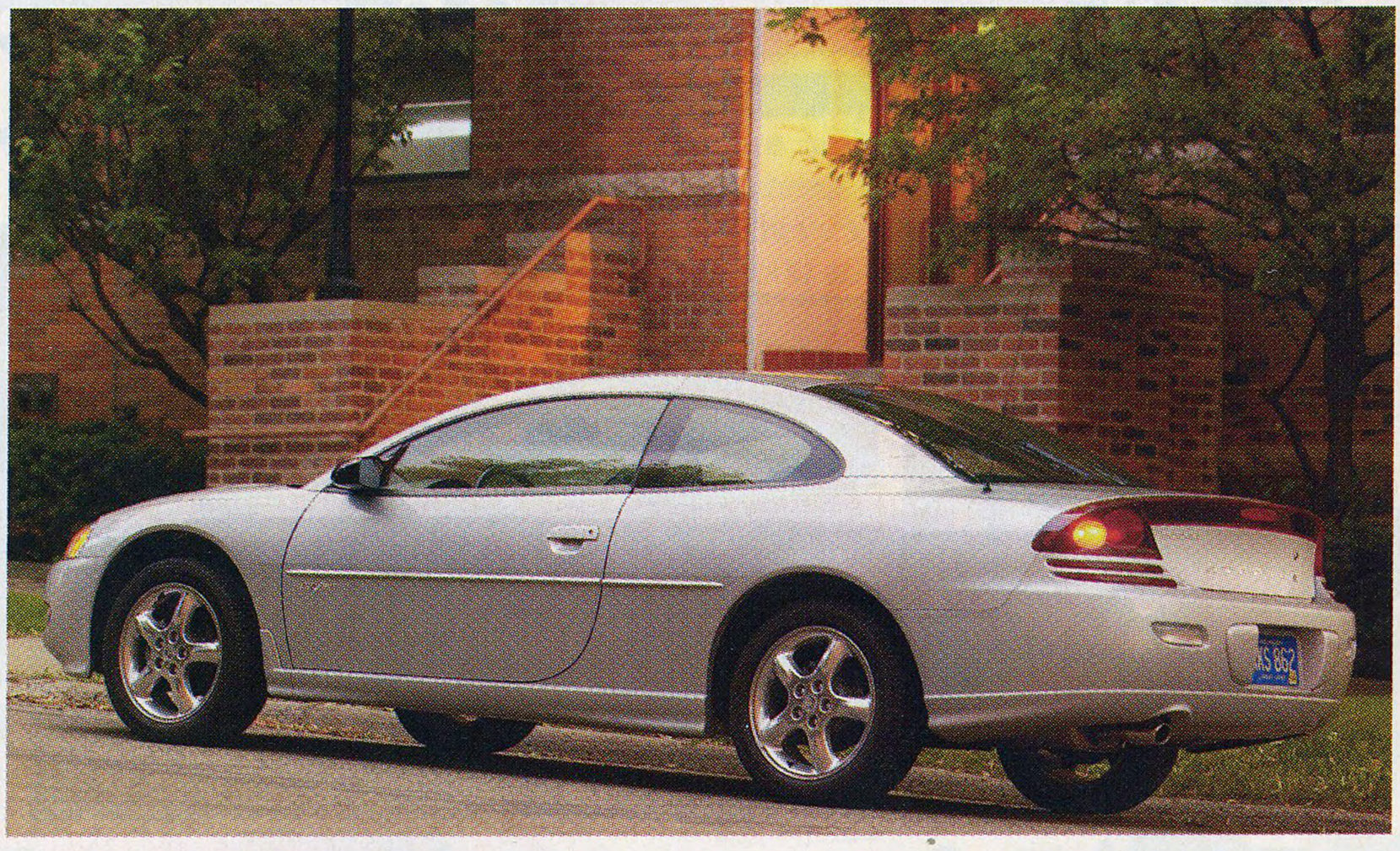
First Place
Dodge Stratus R/T

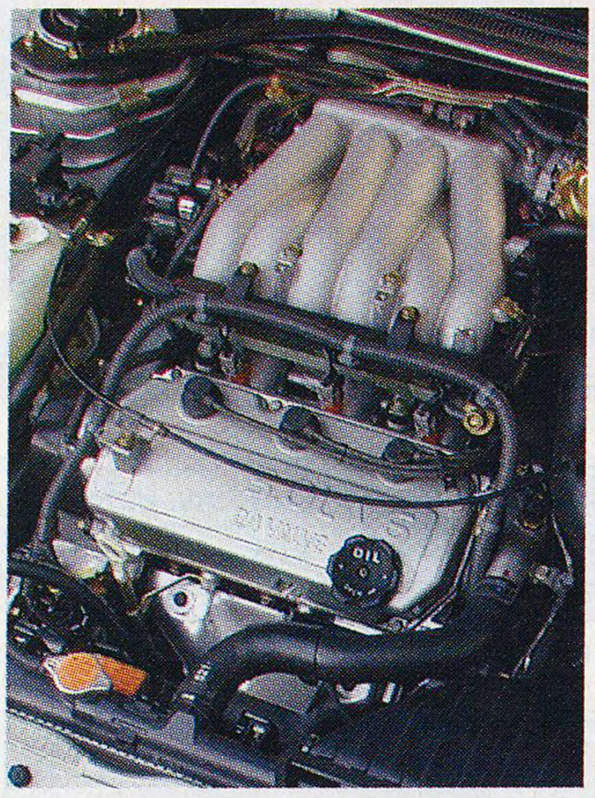
Dodge updated its two-door for the 2001 model year, a process that included a name change—from Avenger to Stratus—and offered two new engine choices. The R/T is distinguished by 17-inch wheels, a little more tire contact patch, a little less sidewall, bigger brakes, a bigger rear anti-roll bar, and, the key feature, a standard 3.0-liter SOHC 24-valve V-6. The engine, as well as much of the chassis, is from Mitsubishi, and it's shared with the Eclipse sports coupe. It's a far more salubrious propulsion system than the previous V-6, a rather asthmatic 2.5-liter, and if you must have an automatic transmission, the DaimlerChrysler four-speed AutoStick is about as good as it gets, allowing manual operation with very little of the override that goes with some manumatics. Still, it damped the Dodge's dash to 60 mph—8.7 seconds, more than a second slower than a manual model we acquired for comparison purposes. Only at higher speeds did the R/T's superior aero begin to assert itself. Although its 0-to-100 time—23.8 seconds—was almost three seconds slower than the manual R/T and more than six seconds adrift of the Mustang, it was nevertheless two seconds quicker than the Monte Carlo. It also gave a good account of itself in passing performance with the quickest time—5.3 seconds—from 50 to 70 mph. And it sounded sweet at any speed.

Where the Stratus surprised us most was on the byways of the Ohio outback. Given its excellent ride quality, we anticipated more rock and roll in the hinterlands, but the reality was otherwise. Inevitably, there was body roll, plus some up-and-down suspension motion, but well-controlled. When it understeered, a quick lift and/or left-foot touch on the brake pedal brought the nose back on the desired line. For all its modest skidpad performance—the all-season Goodyear Eagle RS-A tires managed just 0.79 g on the black lake—the Stratus bites into corners and hangs on like a terrier grabbing a muskrat. Although we'd prefer a little less power assist, the steering is precise, and the car turns in decisively and changes direction briskly. Perhaps we shouldn't have been so surprised, given the R/T's decisive edge in the double-lane-change exercise—3 mph quicker than the Mustang—but it was a surprise of the pleasant variety.

It doesn't take a very keen eye to see that the Stratus is the cosmetic pacesetter in this troika. The rakish lines that make the Dodge Intrepid so sexy look just as seductive on a smaller scale, if not more so. Moreover, it's a shape that makes its two opponents look dated and dowdy.

For all its eye appeal, though, the ele-





Dodge Stratus R/T

Highs: Uptown styling, unflappable deportment, AutoStick manumatic.

Lows: Limited power, excess steering assist.

The Verdict: Delivers on the promise of its slick packaging.

1

Rear-Seat Accommodations

	with 2 passengers		with 3 passengers	
	comfort	space	comfort	space
CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO SS	9	9	8	9
DODGE STRATUS R/T	7	7	5	6
FORD MUSTANG GT	5	2	–	–

Subjective ratings in both categories were assigned by three editors on a 1-to-10 scale (10 being best).

ments that make the Stratus so striking—the steeply raked windshield and even steeper rear window—create some irritating side effects inside the car. Accommodating the windshield angle, for example, required a long upper dashboard, which negates, to some degree, the advantage of the car's low cowl. Forward sightlines are compromised. Looking aft, the rear parcel shelf slopes sharply upward to meet the backlight, requiring constant fiddling with the rearview mirror to avoid seeing a reflection of the shelf and its three inset vents.

Elsewhere, the R/T's interior treatment—executed in tastefully contrasting dark and dove grays—got top marks. There were those who were a little uneasy with the various fighter-plane visual cues that busied the dashboard, smacking, as they did, of creeping Pontiacism. But the many plastics had a quality look, the gray leather upholstery was creamy, and if the front seats were a bit deficient in lateral support on the back roads, they were long-haul comfortable. Long-haul comfort doesn't quite extend to the rear-seat space, but two can ride back there for short hauls without cramping major muscle groups, and it's possible to squeeze in three without resorting to Mazola.

Like its rivals', the as-tested price of our Status R/T was inflated by a fair amount of optional gear. An automatic transmission, for example, adds $825, and if you want the AutoStick feature—you do, you do—be prepared to pony up another $165. We'd also broom the polished-aluminum wheels ($375). However, most of the other big-ticket extras—anti-lock brakes ($740), a power sunroof ($695), the leather interior group ($1045)—make the car more desirable and seem worth the extra dough.

In any case, the Stratus R/T rates a high value index. Add comfort, athleticism, and best-in-test good looks, and you have a winning recipe—at least in this all–Motor City cook-off. How the Stratus would fare versus out-of-town competitors is a story for another day. ●

Editors' Ratings

	engine	trans-mission	brakes	handling	ride	driver comfort	ergo-nomics	features and amenities	fit and finish	styling	value	fun to drive	OVERALL RATING*	
CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO SS	7	8	7	7	8	9	8	9	8	7	6	6	82	3rd
DODGE STRATUS R/T	8	9	8	8	9	9	9	7	8	9	8	8	88	1st
FORD MUSTANG GT	9	7	9	8	7	7	7	7	7	8	8	7	83	2nd

HOW IT WORKS: Editors rate vehicles from 1 to 10 (10 being best) in each category, then scores are collected and averaged, resulting in the numbers shown above.

***The overall rating is not the total of those numbers. Rather, it is an independent judgment (on a 1-to-100 scale) that includes other factors–even personal preferences–not easily categorized.**