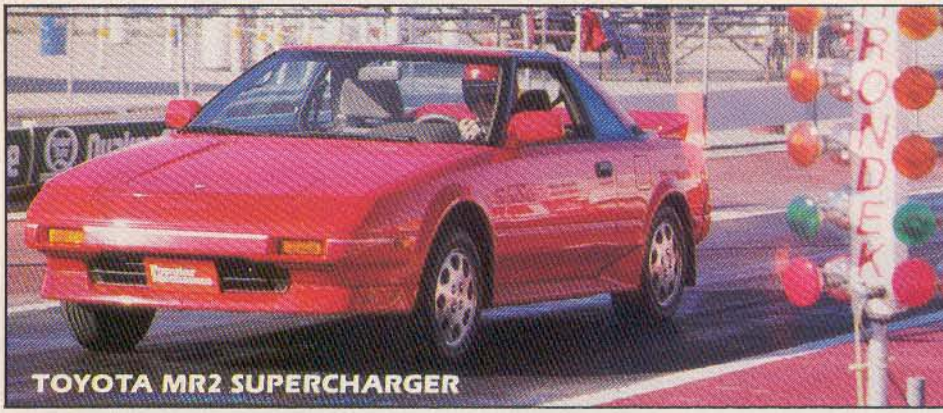
2s FOR THE MONEY

setup this side of a full active system, and the combination of the longest wheelbase in the group plus relatively generous travel provides an excellent level of ride quality to go with the good handling.

In a way, the RX-7 seems almost out of place in this group. Amid this bevy of cocky little fighter-plane cars, the Mazda looks and feels more like a Grand Touring machine—quiet, poised and polished. There were episodes in the test where the RX-7 had to work hard to keep up. But if the test had included a run to, say, Topeka, the RX-7 might very well have been the consensus choice.



Pontiac Fiero GT

Since it first appeared in 1984, the Fiero has drawn flak as a pretty face with nothing behind it.

The pretty face part is hard to argue with. While the RX-7's exterior drew generally positive responses, the Fiero's Ferrariesque packaging was clearly the best-looking shape in the group. Much better, we think, without the optional rear wing.

However, we're also happy to report that the part about no substance can now be consigned to history. Thanks to a total suspension revision, the Fiero now has the underpinnings to go with its seductive exterior.

Fieros previously rolled out with an assortment of undistinguished parts-bin suspension pieces—a Chevette front end, for example, and a modified X-car (Chevy Citation) transaxle adapted for use in the Fiero's mid-engine layout. The rationale for this setup was that the cost of an all-new suspension system would have killed the entire Fiero project.

Although the Pontiac chassis engineers did their best to instill sports car handling qualities into this make-do system, it resulted in extremely stiff ride characteristics, steering effort that seemed intended to provide isometric exercise and uncertainty at the limits of adhesion. It required experience and considerable skill to take liberties with this car on a twisty road.

Equipped with its own suspension components, the Fiero becomes a much more companionable ally for back road blitzes. Handling is improved in every respect—witness the Fiero's performance in the slalom. Steering effort, though still heavy, is down, precision is up and predictability is high.

Although still a bit stiff, due to limited suspension travel, the Fiero's ride quality has also been clicked a notch or two more toward the civilized end of the scale.

Besides being fastest through the slalom, the Fiero was also quickest to 60 mph, despite having the highest curb weight in the group. Though GM's 2.8-liter V6 doesn't compare to the Japanese engines for technoflash or peak horsepower, it makes plenty of good old American torque, enough to make the Fiero just about as quick as it looks.

It also makes quite a lot of good old American noise, a raspy growl that's pleasant enough at low speeds but with a tendency to become intrusive in extended freeway runs.

Elsewhere, the 1988 Fiero continues to be a mixed bag of goods and not-so-goods. Interior materials are high in quality and the seating is better than average, with decent lateral support. But the cockpit is cramped for elbow room and the ingress/egress index is no better than so-so.

Similarly, the action of the 5-speed Getrag gearbox is positive and glitch-free, but the location—atop the Fiero's massive center section—is an awkward reach at best.

Typical of GM, the sound system is first rate, but the analog instrumentation looks cheap and the absence of a glovebox is irritating.

Luggage storage is the Fiero's weakest suit. Although the official cargo volume is higher than the rival MR2, the shape of this space, most of it contained in a vertical well behind

SPECIFICATIONS AND DIMENSIONS

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	PRICE: LIST/ AS TESTED	ENGINE/ DISPLACEMENT (ci/cc)	ENGINE HP, NET/ TORQUE (lb.-ft.)	ENGINE DRIVE LAYOUT	TRANS-MISSION, TYPE	WHEEL-BASE (in./mm)	LENGTH OVERALL (in./mm)	WIDTH OVERALL (in./mm)	TRACK FRONT/REAR (in./mm)
Honda CRX Si	$10,195/ $11,564	L4, SOHC 16-valves 97.0/1590	105 @ 6000 rpm/ 90 @ 2000 rpm	front/ front	5-speed manual	90.6/2301	147.8/3754	65.7/1689	F: 57.1/1450 R: 57.1/1450
Mazda RX-7 GTU	$15,480/ $18,804	2-rotor Wankel 79.8/1308	146 @ 6500 rpm/ 138 @ 3500 rpm	front/ rear	5-speed manual	95.7/2430	168.9/4290	66.5/1668	F: 57.1/1450 R: 56.7/1440
Pontiac Fiero GT	$13,999/ $15,874	V6, OHV 173.1/2837	135 @ 4500 rpm/ 165 @ 3600 rpm	mid/ rear	5-speed manual	93.4/2372	165.1/4190	68.9/1751	F: 59.7/1517 R: 60.1/1527
Toyota MR2	$12,808/ $14,028	L4, DOHC 16-valve 96.8/1587	115 @ 6600 rpm/ 100 @ 4800 rpm	mid/ rear	5-speed manual	91.3/2319	155.5/3948	65.6/1666	F: 56.7/1440 R: 56.7/1440

1. Best speed achieved while weaving through seven cones placed in-line, 100 ft. apart; speeds provide index of transient response.
2. G-force generated during steady-state travel around a 200-ft. dia. circle. Chart number represents an average of three circuits clockwise and three counterclockwise.