John Schinella. *Ron Hill.*

Bill Scott.

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

albeit in a much less severe form. The main instruments were grouped in a pod just above the steering wheel, with fingertip controls extending toward the rim at both sides. With a very wide tunnel required for the central fuel tank, the interior console was made deliberately high to provide proper armrest height.

In April 1980 the Interior Concept Studio transferred the project to the Pontiac Interior team, then led by Pat Furey. Fisher stayed with the project as a unifying influence and was thus probably the man most directly involved with the entire development. Bill Scott took over direction of the Interior Studio in 1981, his important contributions being the previously mentioned softening of all the component edges, improved seat contouring (admittedly Porsche inspired), new door panel and grab handle design, and the replacement of the dark charcoal interior color with fresher, contrasting tones in either gray or saddle combinations.

Analyzing the production Fiero's exterior and interior design, and their contributions to the car as a market entity, one can see that a fine balance has been struck between an aggressive sports car look and a more relaxed, inviting appearance that promises comfort and convenience. The car is not brutal in any way but it nevertheless looks purposeful and efficient. It doesn't directly resemble any other car on the market and therefore doesn't rely on arbitrary details for personality. (Bertone's X1/9 is an obvious choice for comparison, but the similarity is confined to the basic proportions inherent in the transverse mid-engine layout: the basically excellent Italian design, now nine years old, is sharp-edged and narrow, with many tacked-on details, while the Fiero has a wide, almost squat look with much smoother surfaces.)

Perhaps to avoid too heavy a look, the Fiero has extremely large wheel openings, which can only partly be explained as providing room for larger tires in the future. I feel that these openings are important in giving the car its agile appearance, enhanced by the extremely attractive pattern of the special-equipment 14-in. aluminum wheels. The 13-in. base wheel, with a hubcap and 18 slots around the perimeter, is just too tame, while the 13-in. aluminum wheel has a slightly dated appearance.

Obviously, the system of bolting the plastic body panels to the space frame allows almost complete freedom in incorporating future changes, whether they are detail modifications to distinguish additions to the Fiero range (such as the V-6 promised for 1985) or completely new body contours for the future. The dual nature of the car, as mentioned before, can be taken to Jekyll and Hyde extremes if the designers are given carte blanche in developing specialized versions. An example is the one-off spider produced in only four weeks by the studio as a teaser to the journalists who attended the Fiero preview at Sears Point in June. Pontiac engineers have said they don't intend to cut the top off the rigid space frame for any production models, but that won't prevent the aftermarket shops from doing it. The 1984 Fiero is a fairly basic design with immediate appeal—and all the ingredients for a long romance with enthusiasts of widely differing intentions.

—Jonathan Thompson

A wide track helps, naturally, but not the reported 19.5-in. center of gravity, which seems high for a car this size.

A new disc brake system also appears for the first time on the Fiero. Pontiac's adapting two existing front suspension systems to the front and rear of this car results in 4-wheel discs, but not 4-wheel calipers. Because the rear requires a mechanical emergency brake, a standard front caliper could not be used. These new single-piston aluminum calipers are essentially identical front and rear, except for the rear emergency brake clamp, and a slight variation in piston bore size for brake balance. A conventional proportioning valve limits rear wheel lockup, although the Fiero may have almost the ultimate configuration for ideal braking. Given the static rear weight bias, and the reported cg/wheelbase ratio, the forward weight shift in braking will give an excellent dynamic balance. Other braking advantages in the Fiero are the central fuel tank, central seating and minimal luggage capacity. This means that no matter how the car is loaded, the optimum brake balance will hardly vary.

In a lightweight car without a power assisted steering option, one might ask why power assisted brakes are standard. The first explanation given was a lack of space in the pedal area for the necessary mechanical leverage. A second reason was an unexpected "knock-back" problem with the 4-wheel discs, which use up too much pedal travel. One hopes this will be sorted out eventually, allowing a non-boosted system and the resultant quicker response.

The standard wheels and tires are fairly conventional P185/80R-13 steel radials on 5½-in. wide steel rims. These provide low rolling drag for fuel economy and contribute to a low base price. However, those hoping to upgrade the appearance of their Fiero will opt for the same-size turbo-finned aluminum wheels. And true enthusiasts will demand the "high-tech" 14 x 6 in. aluminum wheels with P215/60R-14 Eagle GTs. There appears to be plenty of room for expansion in the wheel wells. Pontiac engineers present at the introduction confessed that they hope to have a 50-section tire option available next year. Of course, even if the extra-wide wheels didn't fit, it wouldn't be difficult to add optional flared fender panels.

The optional Eagle GTs are the main ingredient in the WS6 special performance package, which also includes stiffer front springs, stiffer front and rear shocks, stiffer rubber mounts and bushings but no change in the standard front anti-roll bar. For quicker steering response, the steering rack is mounted more rigidly, and a rubber link in the steering shaft is stiffer.

The stated goal in the performance package was to make the Fiero equivalent in every respect to the Firebird WS6 option, but it was fairly obvious that they hadn't met that objective. The transient response is excellent, though not exactly what you might like in a true sports car. The problem in transferring handling technology from the Firebird is the basic difference in weight distribution and wheelbase. With springs and bushings selected to avoid vibrations and freeway pitch oscillation, this doesn't allow much flexibility for response tuning—so far.

Technically speaking, what Pontiac has for the enthusiast is a diamond in the rough with microscopic flaws. Remember, the stated justification for the Fiero was that it be a relatively high-volume, economical commuter car. At that, they have succeeded admirably. Now they can spend a couple of years tuning it with option packages to satisfy the closet racer. The potential is exciting. They have all the pieces in the right places, so now someone just has to come along with slightly better pieces. If there are a lot of people out there who regret not having bought (and kept) one of the first 1953 Corvettes, this is a second chance.—*Paul Van Valkenburgh*