

# Pontiac Volkswagen Grand Am vs. Scirocco

**W**hen you were a kid, did you ever play a game called "Telephone"? As a communications-based pastime it doesn't quite rank up there with "Post Office," but it does teach a valuable lesson that applies to later life. In "Telephone" one person tells another a message, and then it's passed along from person to person. Usually, by the time the message reaches the end of the line, it's so garbled that it's nearly

unintelligible. Which brings us to the automobile industry.

Not long ago some nameless demon who labors in the field of demographic and psychographic testing coined the term "Yuppy" to describe a group of consumers known as young upwardly mobile professionals. Such a group seemed a natural market for cars, since it was reasoned to have everything a car manufacturer could want from the consuming public,

namely large gobs of money.

Marketing mavens have theorized that the Yuppies out there (yes, you may be one of the them) have similar needs and desires when it comes to automobiles. Further, the conventional wisdom is Yuppies prefer European cars—say, BMWs rather than Dodge Diplomats. (You might wonder who doesn't, but that isn't the point.) Market researchers have concluded that by hitting the Yuppy "hot



# Honda vs. Prelude

## Can an American car win Yuppies' hearts?

by Jack R. Nerad

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIC HUBER

buttons," bushel baskets of manna will rain on the lucky manufacturers' bottom lines.

Since automobile makers are rather greedy when it comes to their bottom lines, we have recently been blessed with scores of new offerings claimed to fill the Yuppymobile void. Everybody seems to think it's a good idea to create cars for Yuppies. The game of "Telephone" comes in when the car builders try to determine just

what this money-laden consumer group actually wants. Someone in market research might have the answers (note, we say might), but by the time those answers have passed from ear to ear they tend to get a bit confused.

Of the domestic cars introduced lately, one—the Pontiac Grand Am—has been most heavily touted as appealing to Yuppies. According to Pontiac press literature, the Grand Am is

a "sports specialty coupe" that will "compete head to head with upscale imports." Since we auto press types have been lobbying for vehicles of this kind for millenia, we stand more than ready to embrace them. But at the same time we tend to be a bit cynical, stung by cars that claimed to offer "European refinement" and then arrived on our doorstep equipped with vinyl roofs, mock-wire wheel covers, and wide whitewall tires.

To test its Yuppworthiness, we decided to stack up the Grand Am against two cars that also fall under the heading "sports specialty coupes" and see just how well the Pontiac excites our young upscale professional corpuscles. To do battle with the Grand Am, we picked the Volkswagen Scirocco and the Honda Prelude.

The Scirocco was an obvious choice because of its made-in-the-*Vaterland* origins, high-revving fuel-injected 1.8-liter engine, and chiseled coachwork. After all, VWs were appealing to Yuppies before the term was invented.

We had different reasons for choosing the Honda Prelude. True, it, too, has a high-revving engine and chiseled coachwork, but it is obviously not built in Europe. Our major rationale for selecting the Prelude was its unprecedented appeal to the Yuppy segment. All one has to do is glance at the sales numbers or ask a local dealer how much *over* sticker price Preludes are selling for to realize how popular this little devil is.

### Tale of the Tape

**B**efore we get to our testing, let's take a quick look at how these vehicles stack up dimensionally. The Scirocco has the shortest wheelbase (94.5 in.) and overall length (165.7 in.) of the three, and the Prelude is only slightly larger—wheelbase is 96.5 in. and length is 169.1 in. Compared with these two, the Grand Am is rather rotund with a wheelbase of 103.4 in. and an overall length of 177.5 in. The Pontiac weighs considerably more as well. It tips the scales at 2624 lb when equipped, as our tester was, with the V-6 engine, while the Prelude checks in at 2293 lb and



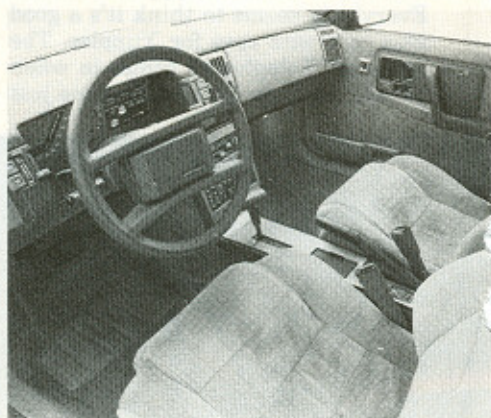
## Pontiac tells us the Grand Am was designed to fill the Yuppymobile void



Honda Prelude



Pontiac Grand Am



Volkswagen Scirocco



the Scirocco at 2181 lb.

To deal with the larger amount of avoidrupois, we chose a Grand Am equipped with the 3-liter cast iron V-6 engine. Sporting a 9.0:1 compression ratio and multi-port fuel injection, the engine pumps out 125 peak hp and 150 peak lb-ft of torque, significantly more than its imported rivals.

The Scirocco and the Prelude are both fitted with single overhead-cam 4-cylinder engines. An 8.5:1 compression ratio and K-Jetronic fuel injection help the cast iron block, aluminum head VW engine (1780 cc) develop 90 peak hp and 100 peak lb-ft of torque. The Honda uses dual side-

draft carburetors as its induction system—not exactly state of the art—but makes up for this by offering a 12-valve cross-flow cylinder head for better breathing. In this form, the 1829cc Prelude engine generates 100 peak hp and 107 peak lb-ft of torque.

All three cars are front-drivers. The VW and Honda offer independent suspension front and rear. The Grand Am is independent up front, but uses a beam axle in back.

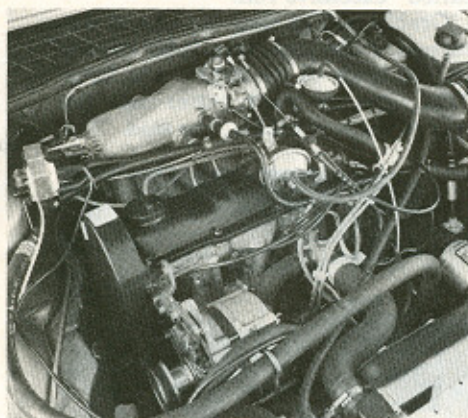
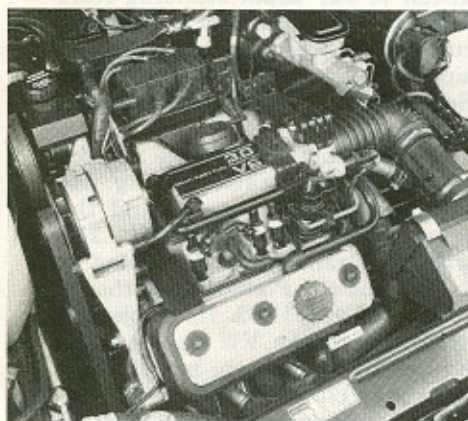
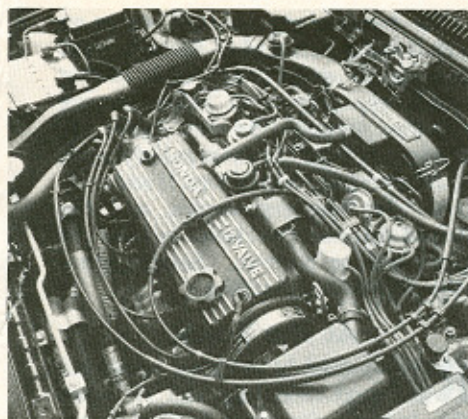
Both imported cars offer 5-speed manual transmissions to back up their engines. Not much surprise there; 5-speed manual is what we've come to expect in Europeanque

sports machinery. When we chose the V-6 in the Grand Am, however, we were also confronted with the fact that a 3-speed automatic is the only transmission available. A 5-speed is offered on the 2.5-liter Tech IV, the Grand Am's base engine, but with the V-6 it's automatic or nothing. (Already, we begin to wonder if Pontiac is truly serious about its importlike aspirations.)

### On the Road Again

Our first order of business was to get our three test vehicles from our Hollywood base to our testing venue at Sears Point Raceway, a

## Through the California hills, it became apparent the Scirocco was the easiest to drive fast



stone's throw north of San Francisco. This 300-mile-plus frolic provided ample opportunity to throw the cars around in a studied combination of freeways, urban streets, and wild two-lane whoop-de-dooos.

With Engineering Editor Ron Grable in the lead in the Grand Am, Photog Vic Huber in the camera-toting Audi 5000 Wagon, yours truly in the Prelude, and Chief Editor Tony Swan looking for stragglers in the VW, we blasted up I-5 under crisp, blue skies. Exiting the Grapevine, it looked like we might have our first automotive casualty when Grable inexplicably pulled over to the side in

the Pontiac, but it turned out that the aviation buff was just scoping out a cropduster that was dancing 10 ft off the deck. (We had to wonder what he was thinking about 20 miles later when he pulled off the freeway again, this time to gaze at a herd of sheep.)

Not surprisingly, the Grand Am proved to be the best suited for the superhighway section. It set the pace in quietness and ride quality, closely followed by the Honda, while the Scirocco seemed a bit harsh on expansion joints and over rain grooves.

Of course, we figured the Pontiac would be the best freeway vehicle. American cars have traditionally

been excellent highway cruisers. For us the true test of the Grand Am's Eurocoupe abilities was to come in the next section—a high-speed two-lane blitz up the spine of California. We hit the asphalt running and didn't lift pressure on the go-pedal until our first vehicle change. All three testers seemed comfortable with this relatively flat, reasonably straight portion of two-lane, and the Grand Am exhibited the highest top speed.

The driver change went off in clockwork fashion. Grable climbed into the Scirocco and roared off. Your narrator piled into the Grand Am

## The Grand Am was best suited for the superhighway, but its real test came on the twisting two-lane

and whizzed away. It wasn't until we were several miles down the road that I realized I was still toting the keys to the Honda as well. A quick U-turn brought me back to a rendezvous with the boss, who was dealing very calmly with the fact that one of his junior editors had sailed off with his car keys.

Back on the road, we soon settled back into distance-devouring speeds, though with the Grand Am it's hard to tell just how rapidly the distance is being devoured. The car's speedometer is a hockey stick-shaped affair that attempts to look high-tech while masking the fact that there's a real

ly to notice in mid-pass that the truck was piloted by a forest ranger complete with Smokey the Bear hat. The curves and hills took their toll on the Pontiac, however. By the time the next driver change rolled around, the Grand Am's brakes were smoking in protest.

This time Grable went into the Honda, Swan into the Grand Am, and your author into the Scirocco. It was a tight squeeze into the VW's confining cockpit, but it immediately became apparent that the German sportster was the easiest to drive fast. In portions where the Grand Am and Prelude would exhibit a great deal of body lean, which masked their limits, the Scirocco felt taut and firmly connected to the road. Though the engine isn't a powerhouse, it seemed extremely willing as we dashed through the California hills.

We tumbled into The City as darkness fell and made a dogged effort to follow Chief Swan as he snaked through the byways of his former



needle-type gauge waiting to be let out from behind its facade. Under ideal circumstances it's difficult to read. At high speeds it becomes impossible, because once you pass 85 mph the pointer disappears entirely.

After a lunch that is best forgotten, Grable sauntered up and said to me, "Now you better watch yourself on this next stretch. There are some flat-out turns and some 20-mph turns. Be careful or it'll jump up and bite you." Well, forewarned, as they say, is forearmed, so the approach to this section was one of keeping a few tenths in reserve. That turned out to be hard to manage in the face of Messrs. Grable and Swan's exuberance and obvious satisfaction with their mounts—the Scirocco and the Prelude, respectively.

Over this hill-ridden, curve-laden section of California Highway 25, the Grand Am's deficiencies as a true Eurostyle road car really began to tell. Lacking a manual transmission for engine braking into corners and torque multiplication out of them, the Pontiac really had to be pushed to keep up with the program. Complicating matters was its over-assisted power steering, which offers very little feel and has a large on-center dead zone. Which is not to say the Grand Am couldn't kick up its heels in the straights. We well remember zipping by a pickup truck on the high side of the Grand Am's mph scale on-



home base. Unfortunately, the VW's fuel-injection system didn't seem to take to the streets of San Francisco. It stumbled badly several times before quitting entirely in the middle of Van Ness at the height of the Friday rush hour. Needless to say, this did not make yours truly the most popular man in the City by the Bay that evening.

After managing to restart the beast, we were able to coax it up several blocks only to have it die a thousand deaths halfway up the hill on Union Street. In the melee that followed, an attempt was made to push the VW up the grade, which resulted in a slight bodywork alteration before the crest was successfully negotiated. At that point, Chief Swan lent his automotive talents to the Scirocco and was able to guide it to our dinner appointment. Thereafter, save for some roughness at idle, the VW exhibited no coughing or wheezing, and the reason for its ungentlemanly behavior in S.F. remains a mystery.

The weather poured cold water on our testing scheduled for the next day, so we spent most of it taking turns scaring each other as we splashed through the wet. Again the Scirocco proved the most satisfying in hard driving, while the Honda offered the best ergonomics, and the Grand Am was the choice to take the gang out to dinner. (Seems some stereotypes are justified.)

### At the Track

Rain-washed blue skies appeared the next morning, and we were able to begin our track testing. In addition to our usual standing-start dragstrip-style runs and skidpad excursions, we also had the pleasure of zipping the three sport coupes around Sears Point's hill-and-dale road course.

Resident hotshoe Grable did the honors in the track testing. He brought the Scirocco around the course in the fastest time—2:16.21—with the Grand Am right behind at 2:16.34 and the Prelude more than a second off at 2:17.82. His subjective evaluation of the VW on the track praised its suspension, but knocked its skimpy 175/70HR13 tires. He also noted severe brake fade and what he called "excessive roll."

Grable told us that the Grand Am turned in its 2nd-place time strictly on the basis of its engine and tires. "The tires are much better than the rest of the suspension," he said. "The



car has suspension steer that really requires attention over bumpy surfaces." He also lamented the fact that no manual transmission was available with the Buick-built V-6. "With the auto you just can't use all the power that's there," he said, "particularly out of the turns."

Despite delivering the slowest time of the three, the Honda did garner some praise from our tech wizard. He liked the seat/wheel/shift lever relationship (in fact, we all did) and lauded the Honda's brakes. But, as with the Scirocco, he wasn't too crazy about the Prelude's 185/70SR13

## Forget the rhetoric about New Values Buyers, the Grand Am is an American car, pure and simple

tires. He felt the car's all-independent suspension has the potential to deliver much more cornering power with better rubber.

Despite having the least powerful engine of the three, the Scirocco gave us the best 0-60 and quarter-mile times (10.79 sec and 17.98 at 76.6 mph, respectively). The VW's light weight and close-ratio 5-speed trans are responsible.

The Grand Am was next in the 0-60 dash (10.97 sec), but its 3-speed automatic dumped to the bottom of the barrel in the quarter (18.71 sec at 77.2 mph compared with 18.04 sec for the Prelude). The Honda was last in the 0-60 at 11.14 sec.

Our brake tests confirmed Grable's suspicions. The Honda pulled down from 60-0 in an extremely good 135 ft. The Pontiac was next at 143 ft, while the VW brought up the rear with a comparatively poor 163 ft. Chalk it up to those skinny tires.

On the skidpad there was very little to choose between the three. The Scirocco and Prelude turned in identical .78 g marks while the Grand Am, on the strength of its 215/60R14 Goodyear Eagle GTs, hit .81 g. Unfortunately, as we concluded our testing, the Grand Am's oil pump decided to head south and with no oil pressure it became back-up-the-truck time.

### Summing Up


Our overall favorite of this threesome was the Prelude. It seems to do everything well from around-town slogging to freeway cruising to

a blast through the twisties, and it does all this while retaining excellent creature comforts and superb convenience. The dash and controls are all an enthusiast could ask, marred only by power steering that lacks feel. Perhaps it's scary that the Japanese can build a "European" coupe better than the Europeans, but Honda has been surprising people for a long time now. With a tire upgrade and, say, 20-30 more horsepower under the hood, the Honda would be the match for nearly any non-exotic on the road. As it is, the car's a super coupe that deserves all the praise it's been getting.

The Scirocco, on the other hand, hasn't been getting much publicity lately. Even Volkswagen doesn't seem to have much to say about it. (The car was destined to receive VW's 16-valve powerplant, but that has been delayed indefinitely.) However, we found the German sports coupe a pleasure to drive, particularly in its element—twisting two-lanes. The car is cramped—any attempt to squeeze in more than two people is destined to make some enemies out of the rear seat passengers—and the shift lever seems to rotate whenever the car is in motion. In spite of its fuel-injection stumble, however, we like it. Clutch and shifter work well together, the seats are comfortably supportive, and the steering is quick and precise. There's a no-nonsense character to the Scirocco that's a true expression of the European sport coupe ideal and its handling inspires the most confidence of this threesome.

Finally, we have the Grand Am. We truly think Pontiac is moving in the right direction with this car; it just hasn't moved far enough. We're not sure why, but after all these years of trying, GM still can't seem to give us a car with the sporting feel we get from overseas. Forget all the rhetoric about New Values Buyers, head-to-head competition with upscale imports, and the rest; the Grand Am is an American car, pure and simple. Perhaps in the objective tests the Grand Am comes close to its two rivals, but subjectively none of our party liked it nearly as well. It's too big and too heavy to compete effectively with the Scirocco and the Prelude. And we have to ask, how can Pontiac expect this car to gain respect as an import-fighter when it can't even be ordered with a manual trans?

Sure, the Grand Am will haul five passengers in reasonable comfort while the other two won't, but so will a Checker Marathon. We hoped for more, especially after Pontiac division gave us a groundbreaker like the Fiero last year. The Grand Am is certainly no Fiero. Under the wrap-around molding lives the soul of an American sedan. That's not all bad, but it's not what we were led to believe.

We don't know if General Motors has been playing "Telephone" lately, but somehow we suspect the message got a bit garbled. Next time, we suggest they plug into a few more overseas circuits before they try to build a Eurocar. 

## DATA

### HONDA PRELUDE

#### POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Front engine, front drive  
Engine configuration.....L-4, OHC, 3 valves/cylinder  
Displacement.....1829 cc (112 cu in.)  
Max. power (SAE net).....100 hp @ 5500 rpm  
Max. torque (SAE net).....107 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm  
Transmission.....5-sp. man.  
Final drive ratio.....4.07:1

#### CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/independent  
Brakes, f/r.....Disc/disc  
Steering.....Rack and pinion  
Wheels.....13 x 5.0 in., steel  
Tires.....P185/70SR13

#### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2451 mm (96.5 in.)  
Overall length.....4295 mm (169.1 in.)  
Curb weight.....1042 kg (2293 lb)  
Fuel capacity.....60.0 L (15.8 gal)

#### PERFORMANCE

0-60 mph.....11.14 sec  
Standing quarter mile.....18.04 sec/75.6 mph  
Braking, 60-0.....135 ft  
Lateral acceleration.....0.78 g

### PONTIAC GRAND AM LE

#### POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Front engine, front drive  
Engine configuration.....V-6, OHV, 2 valves/cylinder  
Displacement.....2966 cc (181 cu in.)  
Max. power (SAE net).....125 hp @ 4900 rpm  
Max. torque (SAE net).....150 lb-ft @ 2400 rpm  
Transmission.....3-sp. auto.  
Final drive ratio.....2.84:1

#### CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/twist axle  
Brakes, f/r.....Disc/drum  
Steering.....Rack and pinion  
Wheels.....14 x 6.0 in., alloy  
Tires.....P215/60R14

#### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2627 mm (103.4 in.)  
Overall length.....4509 mm (177.5 in.)  
Curb weight.....1192 kg (2624 lb)  
Fuel capacity.....51.5 L (13.6 gal)

#### PERFORMANCE

0-60 mph.....10.97 sec  
Standing quarter mile.....18.71 sec/77.2 mph  
Braking, 60-0.....143 ft  
Lateral acceleration.....0.81 g

### VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO

#### POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Front engine, front drive  
Engine configuration.....L-4, OHC, 2 valves/cylinder  
Displacement.....1780 cc (109 cu in.)  
Max. power (SAE net).....90 hp @ 5500 rpm  
Max. torque (SAE net).....100 lb-ft @ 3000 rpm  
Transmission.....5-sp. man.  
Final drive ratio.....3.94:1

#### CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/independent  
Brakes, f/r.....Disc/drum  
Steering.....Rack and pinion  
Wheels.....13 x 5.5 in., alloy  
Tires.....175/70HR13

#### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2400 mm (94.5 in.)  
Overall length.....4208 mm (165.7 in.)  
Curb weight.....991 kg (2181 lb)  
Fuel capacity.....37.8 L (10.6 gal)

#### PERFORMANCE

0-60 mph.....10.79 sec  
Standing quarter mile.....17.98 sec/76.6 mph  
Braking, 60-0.....163 ft  
Lateral acceleration.....0.78 g