

Pontiac Grand Prix for 1997

The Pontiac Grand Prix for 1997 is not only a significant car for Pontiac, it's significant for the entire future of General Motors.

This is the first of the "Brandscape" cars; cars that will now be tailored to the personality of each of the General's six divisions. Cadillac will be the flagship, Buick the powerhouse line, Saturn for those who like Japanese but want mechanicals made in North America. Then we have Chevrolets which will be sensible family cars and Pontiacs which will be, to use their own slogan, "built for drivers."

Following the Pontiac Grand Prix later this year will be the Buick Century, the Chevrolet Malibu, and the Oldsmobile Intrigue. They will share far fewer common parts than in the past. As an example, the vehicles they replace were essentially identical under the skin with only cosmetic changes.

In the mid-size family segment for example, Chevrolet previously fielded the Lumina and Pontiac its Grand Prix against the opposition. Problem was they were clones in terms of interior size, smell, and feel. Ergo they were competing against themselves.

Not so with the Brandscape cars. If you want comfy ride, go with the new Lumina. If you want taut handling and crisp steering/engine response, try the new Grand Prix. Bottom line is the money still goes to GM instead of a competitor.

The concept behind Brandscape is creating character unique to each division; essentially the same plan as back in the 1940s and 1950s that worked so well. To use GM's own description, they now target buyers with "a rifle shot not a

shotgun approach."

I had a chance to drive the 1997 version of the Pontiac Grand Prix recently and the changes felt and seen are immediate.

Firstly, this is a large car. Available in a sedan and coupe versions, it was styled originally as a coupe and then the four-door was evolved from that. In fact, it's hard to tell a sedan from the coupe at a distance because the lines are so similar.

There will be three engines offered. Standard fare is a 3.1-litre (3100) V6 producing 160 hp and 185 ft/lb of torque; a 3.8-litre V6 (3800 Series II) with 195 hp and 230 ft/lb of torque; and the same engine called the SC for Supercharged that puts out 240 hp and 280 ft/lb of torque. The only transmission available on this front-wheel-drive vehicle is GM's faultless four-speed automatic.

Coupes and sedans are offered in SE and GT trim levels, the 3100 engine is standard on the SE, the 3800 in the GT and optional on the SE. The GT sedan and coupe are also available with the GTP package which includes the SC engine. I imagine most GTPs will be ordered in two-door format.

Another significant change is the move to coil over gas shocks at all four corners which does away with the transverse leaf spring of the previous Grand Prix. In addition, the wheels are moved outward, a return to the classic Pontiac "wide track" stance. Wheelbase in this car is 3-inches longer than the previous model, another factor aiding handling and ride.

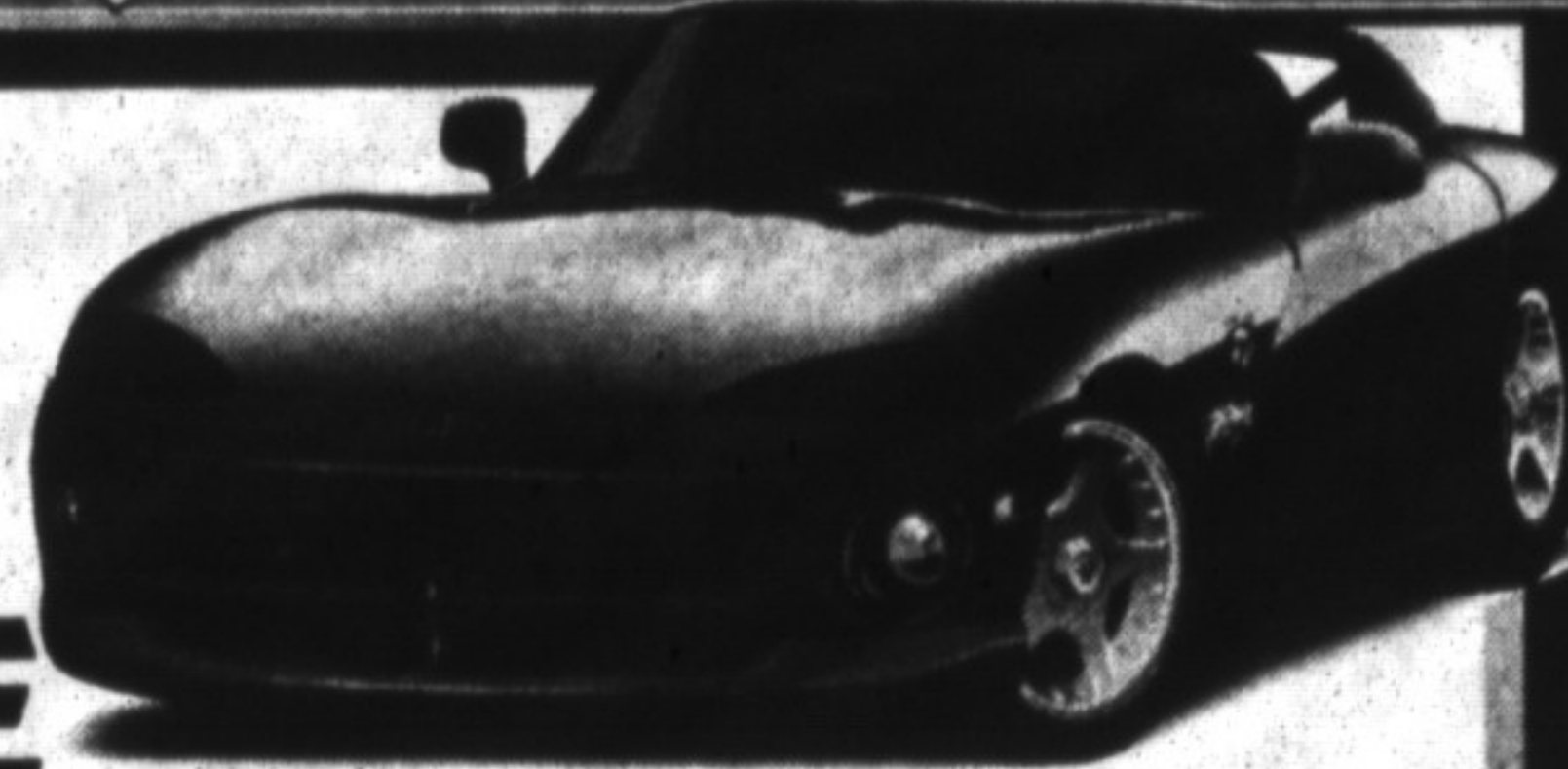
All of my driving in this car was done
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