

WHEELS

Toyota Solara is a fun driving experience

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METROLAND STAFF

The brand new Camry Solara, a two-door coupe with upscale styling and presence, is based on the benchmark Camry sedan platform and drive train.

Auto show buffs may be excused a little confusion since the Solara name and the original design, first put to paper in 1994, evolved through several different prototypes in the past few years, including a recent convertible

concept.

So, why a coupe? Well, Toyota is gambling on the results of its customer research, and the wide-spread belief that the automotive market moves in cycles.

Once again, it all comes down to the Boomers, the prevalent age group, a generation of soon-to-be empty nesters, older perhaps but still holding on to a forever-young attitude that demands styling, quality and driving

performance excitement. The theory is that at least some of the empty-nesters will start trading in their multi-passenger minivans and sport utes and return to the folds of sport sedans and coupes.

"The Solara is a great addition to the already top quality of Toyota's in Canada," said Glen Pessoa, the sales manager of Markville Toyota. "It's a fun driving experience."

Toyota's not the only company wagering on a shift into the rejuvenated sport specialty segment. Witness also, the new Mercury Cougar and Honda Accord coupe, to name just a few.

Although, the Solara rests on a tightened, Camry platform, the coupe is wrapped in completely different sheet metal. This is not just a two-door version of the sedan. The Solara, originally code-named 7001, combines Japanese and North American design influences in a blend that mixes harder edges with smooth flowing surfaces. Front and rear lights reflect the same V-shaped styling found in the front grille.

I've always had trouble putting the intangibles of styling into words so I'll leave it to Design Chief Warren Crain to describe how "the perimeter line unites the design by traveling around the car. The undercut line balances the upswept perimeter line, creating highlight and contrast areas along the upturned shoulder."

"I couldn't have said it better myself. Because of the upscale positioning, all Camry Solaras come with a healthy list of standard features including air conditioning, cruise control, power windows and door locks, heated side mirrors, tilt steering and four-wheel ABS.

There are two models available. The base SE harnesses the standard 2.2 litre, 16-valve, four cylinder engine that makes 135 horsepower and comes with 15-inch wheels and four-speed

auto tranny only. Toyota expects that more than 80 per cent of customers will opt for the beefier SE V6 model, powered by a 200 horsepower engine with 214 pound feet of torque at 4400 rpm. The five speed manual shifter comes standard. The auto tranny for this model will set you back \$1000.

"People who buy the two door coupe are looking for high performance."

The SE V6 package also adds a CD player instead of cassette deck, 16-inch alloy wheels, four-wheel disc brakes, eight-way power driver's seat, moon roof and rear spoiler. If that isn't tricked-out enough to satisfy your luxury cravings and deflate your wallet, you can add goodies like leather interior, JBL Audio System, integrated garage door opener or go whole hog with the \$3000 top-of-the-line SLE option package.

"The SE V6 model so far has been proven to be the most popular model," said Pessoa.

"I spent a product-launch day test-driving

several different versions of the Solara. The entry-level SE with its four-cylinder engine makes for a sophisticated and very smooth second-car commuter with a respectable 7.2L/100km highway fuel rating.

If you prefer brisker acceleration and passing or if you plan to car-pool Bertha and Edna to the local weight-watcher's meetings, you'll probably pick the pluckier V6. The added power is a noticeable plus with little effect on overall fuel mileage (er, kilometrage).

Despite power differences, both models share many qualities in common. The Solara delivers sportier handling than it's Camry sedan cousin, thanks to a more rigid body structure.

See THE, page 30.



Glen Pessoa, Sales manager Markville Toyota



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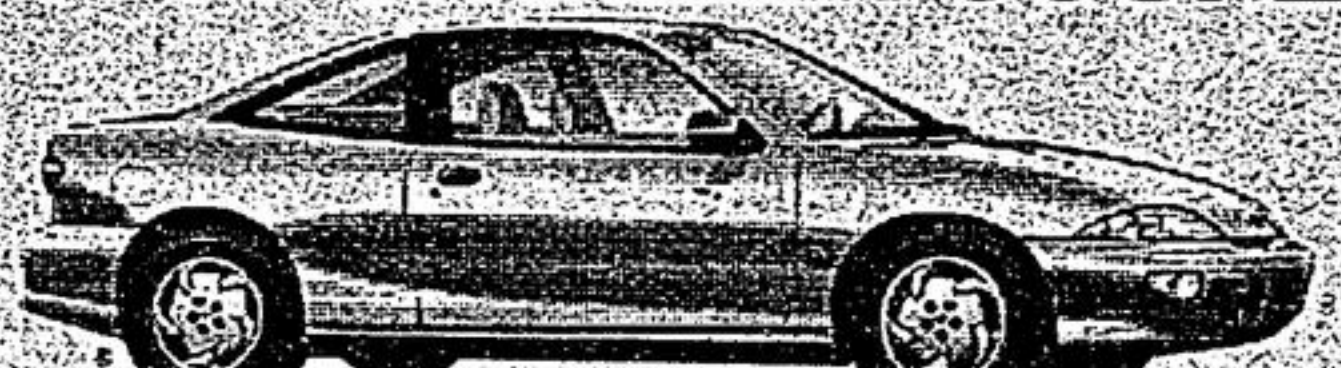
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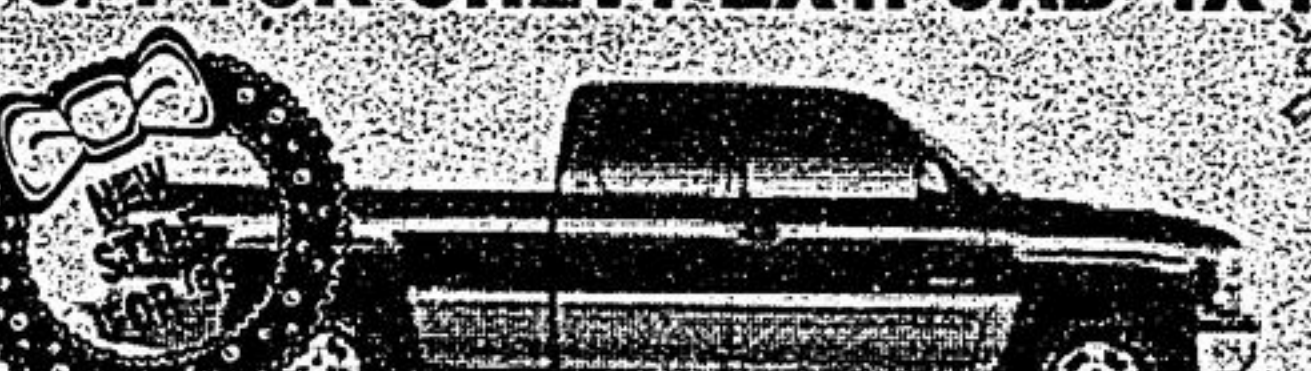
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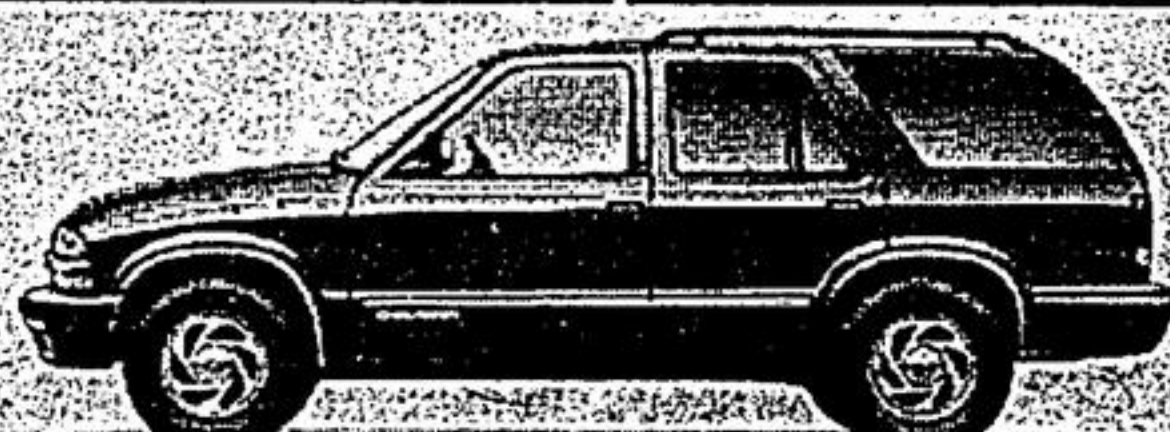
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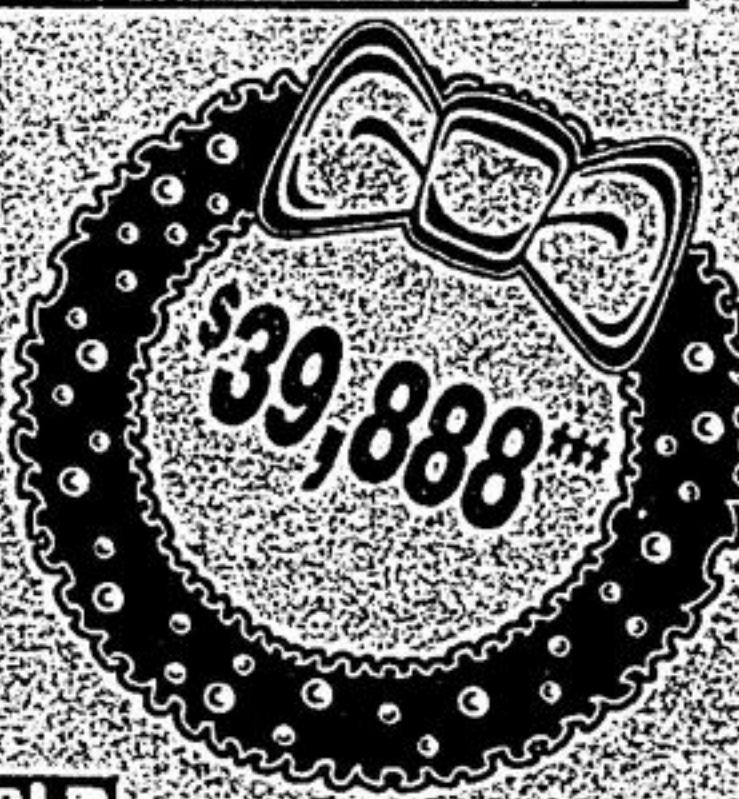
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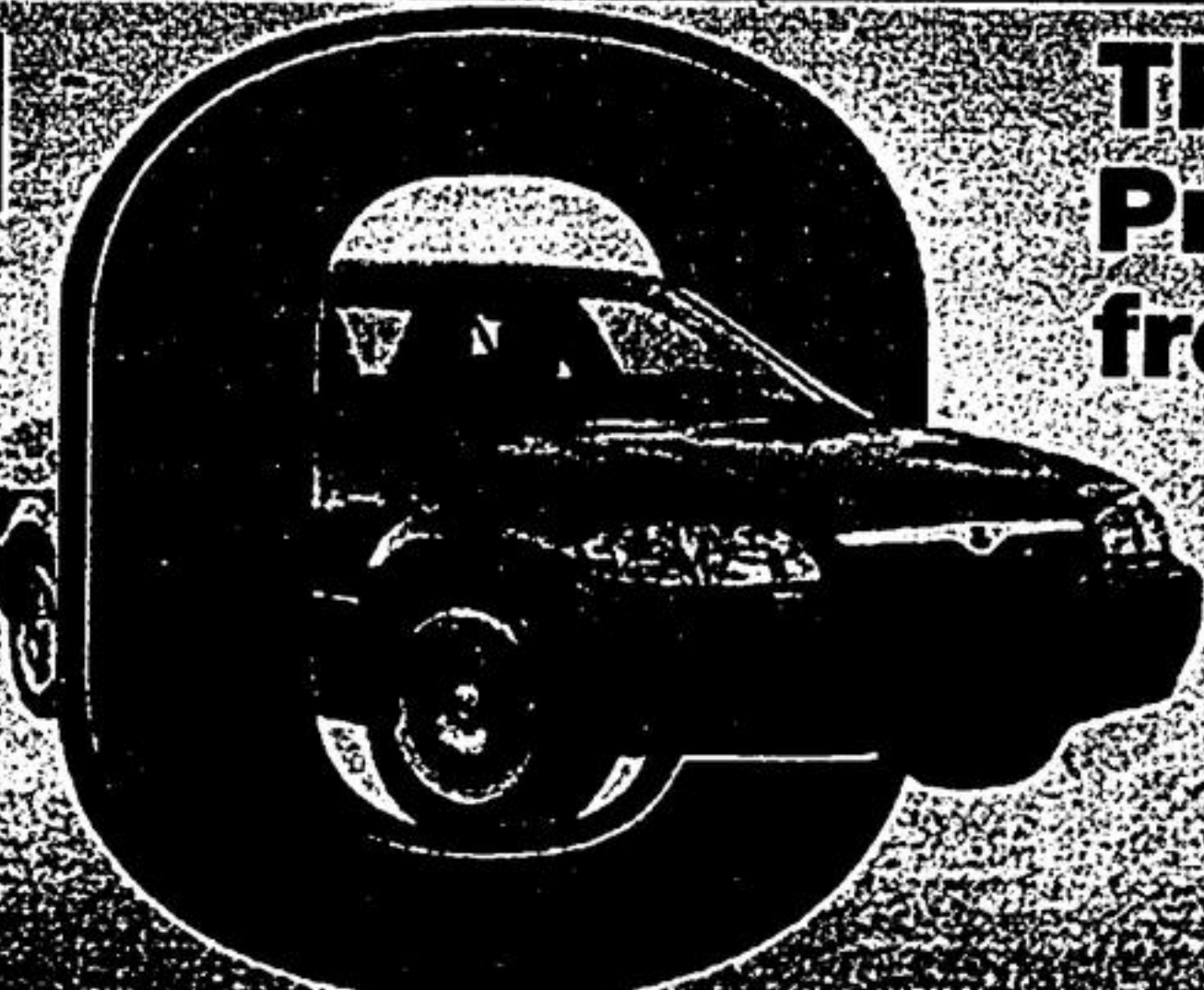
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