

WHEELS

Automotive journalists put family vehicles through test

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So many cars, so little time. Every year, journalists from across Canada gather at Shannonville Motorsport Park, just outside Belleville, to test the latest crop of new cars and trucks.

This year's 14th annual Car & Truck of the Year competition, held by the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada, featured more than 200 automotive entries, vying in categories from sports car to sport ute to everything in between.

During the competition, teams of journalists attend brief manufacturer presentations, track test the vehicles, inspect them inside and out and then take to the streets in semi-civilized fashion, piloting the test vehicles over prescribed road loops with a variety of driving conditions.

Most of the automotive writers have already driven most of the vehicles before in day-to-day testing or at automotive launches.

The real benefit of back-to-back team testing is the chance to share impressions and information with other journalists and directly compare competitors under the standardized set of driving conditions, while each vehicle's dynamics, its capabilities and even its character remain fresh in your mind.

It's challenging and it's demanding. But you will never hear me say that it's hard work.

We've reviewed most of these products during the course of the year but let me touch on one of the largest but often overlooked categories that I was involved in judging — family car.

With so many cars and a limited amount of categories, there's always some contention over which cars should be judged in which category.

Even having a family car category in itself is arguable if you think about it.

With the advent of four-door, pick-up trucks, sport utes, a resurgence of station wagons and the ever-present minivan, just what exactly is a family car nowadays?

Regardless, the family car category features all-new four-door sedans either brand new models or cars that have undergone significant structural or powertrain changes.

The category was split into two price ranges. The cars listed here all fall into the under \$25,000 category.

FAMILY CAR UNDER \$25,000

Chrysler Cirrus LX:

At first glance, the Cirrus looks like the biggest bang for the biggest buck in this category, judging from the power ratings.

But in performance, testing the entry-level Cirrus was outshined by the Neon. The Cirrus features the now familiar cab-forward architecture and



The stiffer structure contributes to improved ride quality, handling and safety.

It's all about choices

The all-new 2000 Pontiac Bonneville offers style, performance, size, space and comfort

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You never forget your first. I mean your first car of course. Not the one you learned in. That one doesn't count, somehow.

It's that first car you buy, take home, wax repeatedly and just stand there and look at — that's the one you remember.

My first was a 12-year-old, ice cream white, '63 Pontiac Laurentian. Bought from a mechanic friend, it was a plain-jane Pontiac with a straight six and not a single option on board. It didn't even come with an ignition key.

But we found a chain of leftover keys in a garage drawer and, fortunately, the Laurentian chugged to life with an old T-Bird trunk key. The Pontiac trunk was, after that, screw-driver operated.

The old '63 was big and roomy with four doors, a single-speaker AM radio that actually worked and the kind of wide bench seats that kept me asking, "Hey honey, what are you doing all the way over there?"

It gurgled oil and gas with equal gusto, handled more like a Panzer than a Pontiac and I occasionally had to stop and scrape the odd import off the big chrome bumpers.

My on-its-last-legs Laurentian only lasted a valiant year or two. But considering the two hundred buck purchase price, it still ranks as the smartest auto deal I ever made.

So, you can see why I'm partial to Pontiacs. Especially, big ones like the 2000 Pontiac Bonneville.

I recently got the chance to pilot some of Pontiac's latest full-size models through the picture-postcard autumn colours of Muskoka,

sweeping round quiet curves and down long stretches of open roads that lay empty and deserted in the wake of tourist season.

When I matched car keys up to my first tester, an SLE, it was white, the same white as my old car and I guess that's when I started reminiscing about the past.

And I suppose if I tried hard enough, then, yes, I could scrape together a few similarities between a 1963 Laurentian and a 2000 Bonneville. But that would be a stretch, to say the least.

Pontiac's latest and largest sedan is a car of the present, not the past. The all-new Bonneville is built on GM's G-platform, its underpinnings shared with the Oldsmobile Aurora and Buick LeSabre.

The fourth generation architecture is stiffer with 62 per cent more torsional rigidity and a 27 per cent improvement in vertical bending resistance over the '99s.

The stiffer structure contributes to improved ride quality, handling and safety. Some of the improvements come at a cost.

Pontiac cites weight saving measures like aluminum bumper beams that remove mass from the front and rear of the vehicle and the aluminum hood that saves 50 pounds.

But the new Bonneville has still gained well over 100 pounds in curb weight, depending on model and trim level.

The 2000 Bonneville's exterior dimensions remain relatively unchanged, but the wheels



The 2000 Pontiac Bonneville not only offers increased stability but more inside space.

have been pulled to the corners with an inch and a half wheelbase increase up to 112.2 inches and a corresponding wider track of 62.6 inches in front and 62.1 inches in the rear.

The result? Not only increased stability but also more inside space. Interior volume now measures 121.8 cu. ft. up 13 cu. ft. from the previous model.

That translates into plenty of adult stretch-out room and comfortable seating in front and back.

The wheels-to-the-corner treatment also gives the car a hunkered-down look.

Bye, bye bland Bonneville, the new model bulges with more of the exaggerated robust Coke-bottle shape, a smoother hood and windshield rake and distinctive Pontiac styling cues like cat-eye headlamps, twin grilles, muscular haunches and the classic over-the-top body cladding.

The overall effect is blatantly aggressive and more reminiscent of smaller siblings Grand Am and Grand Prix.

Inside, the cockpit is canted towards the driver. The Bonneville has gone vent-happy