

**T**he Judge? For the uninitiated, the handle makes little sense. It conveys nothing about one of the most potent automobiles to ever rip up ribbons of asphalt.

The Judge was a magical nameplate that struck a mixture of fear and awe into anyone old enough to drive. But what's with the name?

These days, any carmaker would have to be more than a little crazy to brand one of their models 'The Judge'. But back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, outright craziness was what sold cars and gained marketshare. GM, Ford and Chrysler were locked in a death grip as they fought to attract young, upwardly mobile baby boomers with their thirst for speed and bottomless supply of cash and credit. Even straight-laced American Motors, builder of sane and sensible sedans, was eventually sucked into the musclecar vortex. It was the one time in the history of North American auto industry when this type of attitude prevailed in Detroit's corporate offices.

In the mid-1960s, horsepower and cubic inches were all the rage. Although musclecars represented only a small fraction of total sales, they were viewed as important image builders for Detroit, which used them to puff up the Big Three's youth-oriented appearance. This was particularly evident at Pontiac, which, under whiz kid John Z. DeLorean's guidance, had fully embraced performance as the key ingredient that separated it from the other divisions in the General Motors stable.

By 1964, the radical notion to stuff a big V8 between the frame rails of an 'intermediate' economy coupe had resulted in the birth of the GTO. The car was as much about hype and hoopla as it was about horsepower, but it stirred up the lucrative youth market like no other car before or since.

Once the horsepower gauntlet had been tossed, there was no stopping it. Every other GM car division, except Cadillac, quickly followed suit, hotly pursued by Ford, Chrysler and AMC.

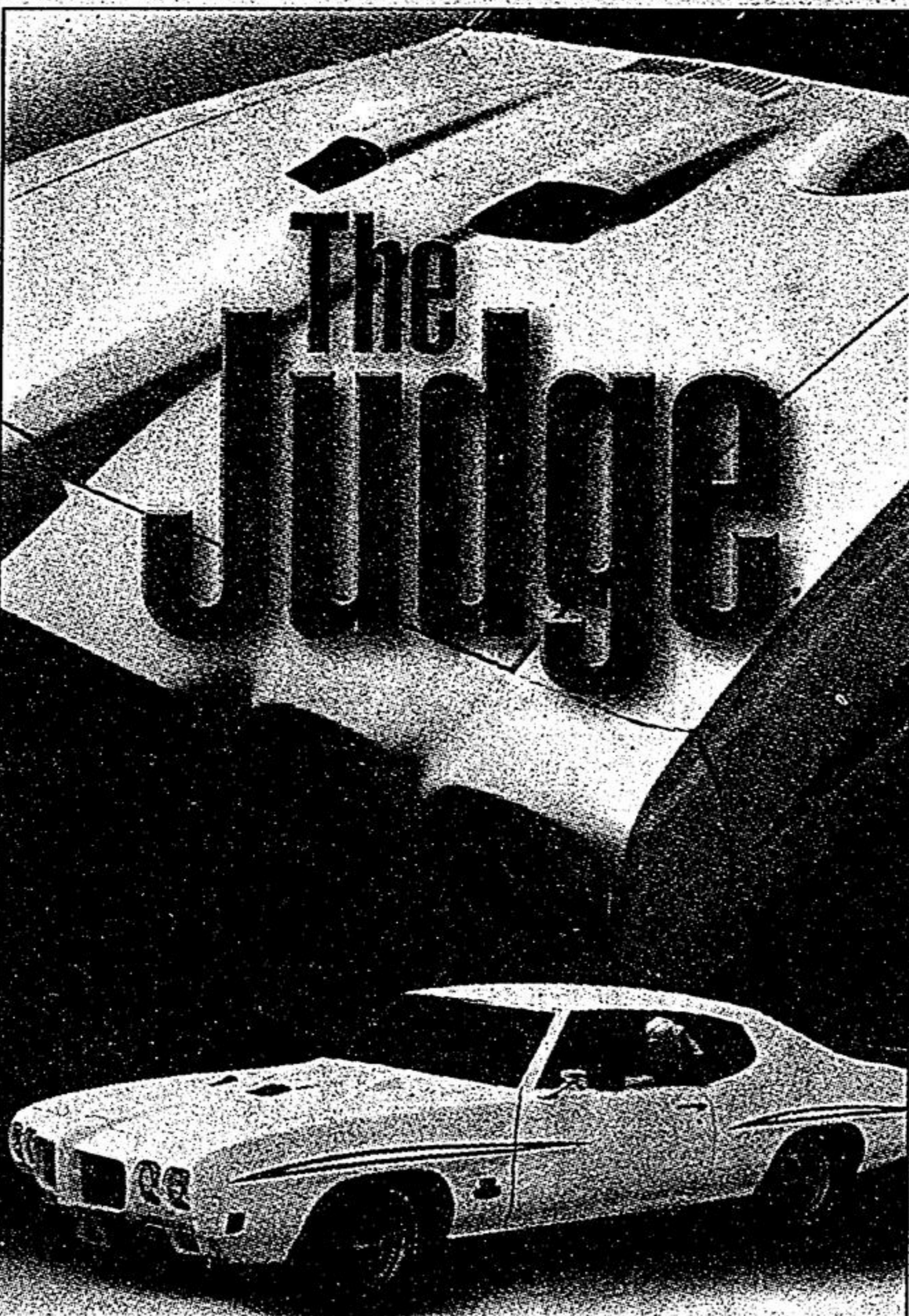
But it was Plymouth, Chrysler's low-priced sedan division that nailed it with the kids. The marketing hotshots thought this group cared little for a car with all the fancy trimmings (too much like Dad's Newport Custom). All they cared about was straight-line, stoplight-to-stoplight performance that would give them bragging rights among their friends.

Before anyone could say, or even spell, hemispherical combustion chamber, out popped the Road Runner, a

stripped-down Belvedere two-door sedan devoid of exterior chrome and geegaws, save for its cute-sounding beep-beep horn. Under the hood lurked a potent 335-horsepower 383 cubic inch V8 that could propel the car to 100 km/h in seven seconds.

The Road Runner hit the streets for the 1968 model year and, not surprisingly, became an instant hit. Also not surprisingly, the car caught the attention of Pontiac's product planners who felt the cheap-speed Road Runner might undermine their position as the top dog in the performance field. Pontiac needed to build its own Road Runner.

The initial prototype was based on the GTO but



employed a pillared two-door coupe shell and hood used on the more commonplace Pontiac LeMans. The GTO's rubber 'Endura' front bumper was tossed in favour of a cheaper-chromed piece.

Under the hood, further cost-saving measures meant replacing the GTO's 400 cu. in. engine with a smaller 350-cube unit equipped that used the 400's cylinder heads. Tests proved this combination was actually quicker than the Road Runner.

The prototype, labeled the E/T (dragstrip jargon for 'elapsed time'), was presented to John DeLorean, who reacted in a less-than-enthusiastic manner. Not only did he think it eroded the GTO's image, but was mortified that anything smaller than the 'Goat's' traditional 400 motor would go into the car.

Clearly, DeLorean wanted something special. Instead of gutting the GTO, as was done in the first attempt, the next effort included all the standard GTO features, and added the potent 366-horsepower 400 cubic-inch Ram Air engine as part of the package. Also included was a Hurst T-handle shifter, heavy-duty suspension, chrome air cleaner and rocker arm covers, rally wheels and a rear deck spoiler. What was intended to be a low-priced Road Runner beater had become one of the most expensive cars of the day.

DeLorean loved it, but insisted the E/T name be dropped. His preference was to call it 'The Judge'. At the time 'Here come da Judge' was a popular expression used on Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In, a popular TV comedy-variety show. The name stuck.

The finishing touches to The Judge consisted of an available bright orange paint scheme along with pop-art 'The Judge' decals and matching side stripes.

The first cars were released to dealers in January, 1969, which sold more than 6,800 units, or 10 per cent of the total GTO production for that model year. By far, the vast majority were ordered in orange.

The following year, sales of The Judge dwindled to half of the first year's production as the short-lived fad began to wane. In 1971, the final year for The Judge nameplate, a mere 374 cars were produced, including just 17 convertibles.

The Judge may have completely missed the mark as a Road Runner fighter, but, for at least one glorious season, was the right car at the right time.

Malcolm Gunn is Wheelbase Communications' chief road tester and historic writer. Wheelbase is a worldwide supplier of automobile news, reviews and features.

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