

NEW VW GTI! Hot, hare-raising Volkswagen

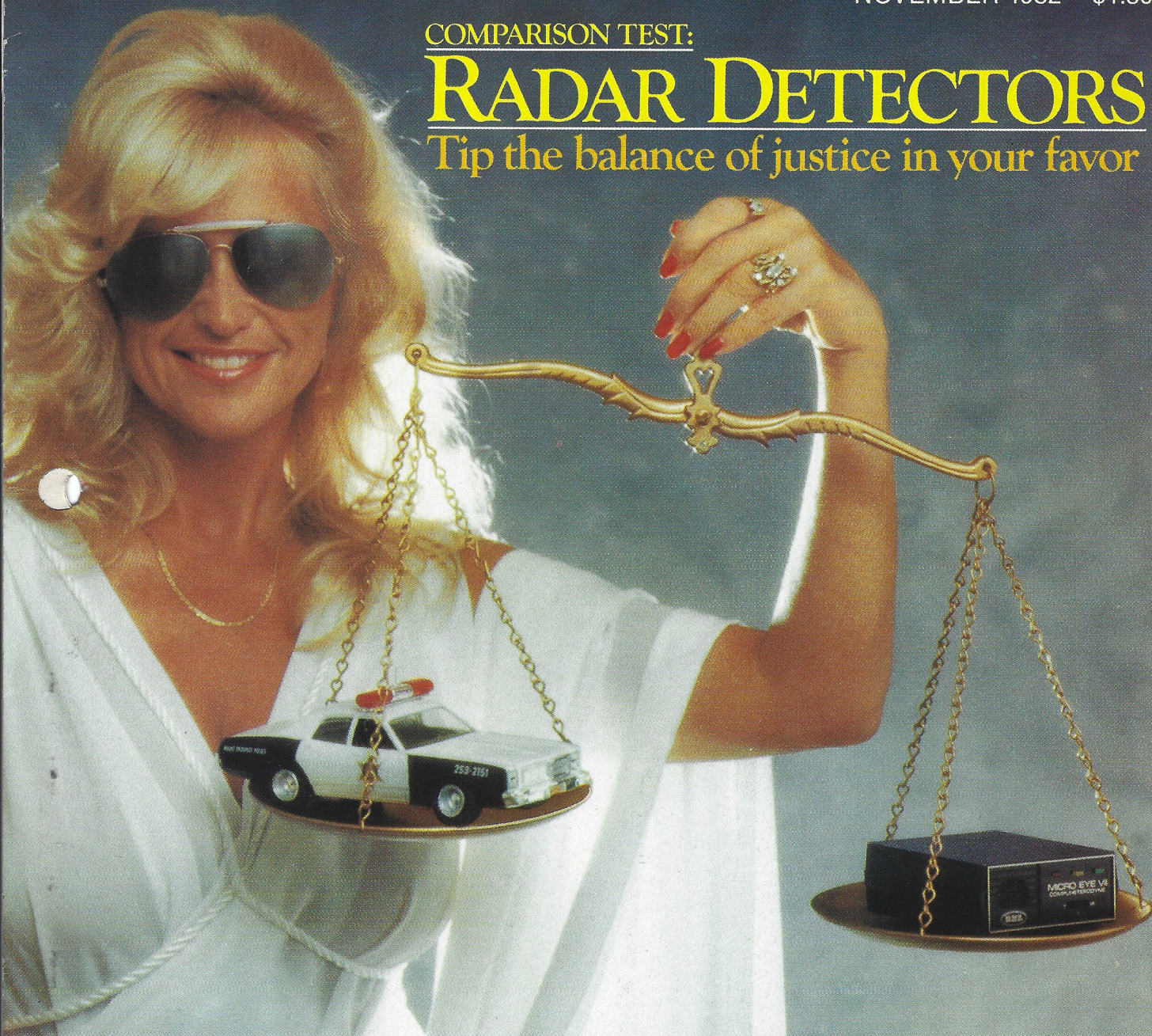
CAR and DRIVER[®]

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ZERO TO SIXTY IN TWO SECONDS FLAT!
Testing Gordon Johncock's Indy winner

MINI-TRUCK TRIO
America blows Japan into the weeds

parking, about all you can see of the car behind is the top half of its windshield.

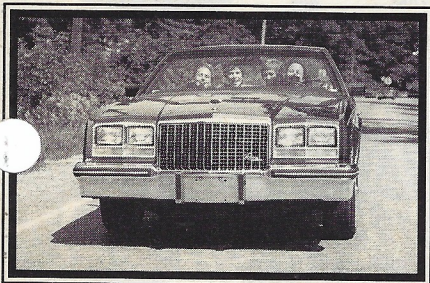
Probably the highest compliment we can pay to a convertible is that, were it not for the sun on the head and the wind in the ears, we wouldn't know it was a convertible. The Riviera drives very much like the coupe from which it is derived. The convertible's extra 167 pounds soften the performance of the 4.1-liter V-6 somewhat, making the optional 5.0-liter V-8 a good call if you ever plan to hurry. The four-speed automatic is a fine thing with either. The suspension rates have been increased in the convertible, primarily as an anti-shake measure, but the handling is also crisper as a result. Four-wheel disc brakes are also standard equipment. Buick hasn't held back on the good stuff.

Of course, given the price, you'd expect caviar; \$23,983 is the number, plus the destination charge and all the other little ways GM has to fatten the take. The convertible is about \$7000 over the coupe. Buick says production is limited to 2000 cars, the capacity of ASC to make the conversion, but we expect the price will surely have a limiting effect all of its own. Twenty-four Gs is a heavy hit, even for a red Buick convertible. (White is the only other color choice, and red leather lining is standard with both.)

Why is the price so high? Buick has plenty of reasons: shipping between all of those assembly plants is not exactly free, and, of course, ASC expects to be paid for its efforts. But from the customer's point of view, all of that is Buick's problem. All the customer remembers is that in 1975, when the last Buick convertible was built, it cost a few hundred bucks over the corresponding tin top. Convertible technology hasn't changed in the intervening years—the new version is not burdened by on-board computers, exotic alloys, or environmental-impact statements—so why does it cost an extra seven grand? One tends to worry about an auto industry that can't efficiently handle something new when the new thing in question is really very old.

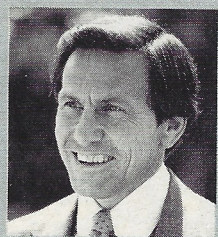
Putting aside the worry, we are pleased to report the continuation of one fundamental truth: a red Buick convertible is still a joyous mode of transportation.

—Patrick Bedard



Lloyd Reuss

Buick's general manager talks sports cars, racing, future products, and his division's changing image.



Unlike some other fast-moving young executives in General Motors' recent history, Buick general manager and GM vice-president Lloyd E. Reuss seems a little uncomfortable with the media attention he often attracts. Adopting the habit of racing drivers, who tend to speak in first-person plural to emphasize the team's importance, he talks of when "we" came to Buick and how "we" are changing the image, improving customer satisfaction, and so on. He also is quick to point out that the big new-image program, with the V-6 engine, the hawks, and the "Free Spirit" advertising theme, began before he arrived as chief engineer in 1975.

"At that time," he relates, "Buick had a very different image... gas guzzlers, dinosaurs, doctors' and lawyers' cars. I remember a fellow I went to school with called and said, 'Damn, I can't imagine you in a Roadmaster.'"

"So we decided as a division to try to change that image, and of course to do that you have to start with the product. You have to make sure that your image is a statement—in your products, in the field, even the napkins in your company dining room. As we went through the next few years, each new product was designed with emphasis on making a much more contemporary statement. Contrary to what some of the competition was doing, we wanted to have what we call a Buick 'face' to carry the Buick theme across the whole product line, so people think of Buick first and then decide which one they want to buy."

Since Buick's 75th anniversary in 1978, another part of the image program has been to promote the division's heritage along with the more contemporary theme: "We wanted to have classic elegance with contemporary execution. We didn't want to lose those 55-to-60-year-old buyers, but we wanted to be able to appeal to the younger ones as well."

The youngest GM divisional general manager since John De Lorean, Reuss (pronounced "Royce") was born in Belleville, Illinois, in 1936. He re-

ceived his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Missouri in 1957, then served two years as an officer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before joining GM's Engineering Staff in 1959 as an experimental engineer. The following year he moved to Chevrolet Engineering as a transmission-development engineer, and in 1965 he was promoted to project engineer on automatic transmissions. The next year brought another promotion, to assistant staff engineer on axles and transmissions. He was named staff engineer on the 1970 Camaro/Nova program, and in January 1970 he became chief engineer on the Vega—too late to help it much, we presume. He was promoted to manager of product planning in 1973, moved to Buick as chief engineer in 1975, back to Chevrolet as director of engineering in 1978, and finally boomeranged back to Buick as general manager and a GM vice-president on December 1, 1980.

His philosophy for success? "There isn't any one secret. Get into an area that you enjoy, then prove that you can do whatever you're assigned to do better than anyone else, and keep trying to get on the higher-risk projects. If you want to bat a thousand, you're really inhibiting yourself. When we first came to GM in the Sixties, we didn't do a new car every year. So, boy, we fought like heck to get on the newest design program, and it happened to be a transmission program. One thing here—and we did this at Chevrolet, too—is that you've got to establish a couple of key items that make up your theme for the next three or four years. You can't walk around with 50 themes, because at a large organization that's interpreted as not having any direction."

"Actually, we have three major areas of emphasis here. First is to be number three in sales; second is to establish the Buick Division as a leader in quality, service, and customer satisfaction; third is to continue to lead in the people part of this business through, among other things, our Quality of Work Life program."

In his first few months on the job, Reuss managed to visit every one of Buick's 26 sales zones throughout the country to hammer home his satisfac-

tion theme. He aims to raise the division's service and quality "above any of the competition . . . and, of course, the dealer plays a key role in that. He's got to understand that we're serious, that the service thing isn't just a little program we've put together for the next six months."

On numerous occasions as Buick's chief engineer in the latter 1970s, Reuss called the V-6 "the engine of the future" and predicted that it would displace the V-8 in large and mid-sized cars by 1985. Then the second fuel crisis hastened the demise of the V-8 and rushed four-cylinders into the limelight. We asked if he still felt as strongly about the V-6's future, or might it serve mainly as a temporary transition between V-8s and fours? "We're going to have a lot of fours out there," he concedes, "but for Buick I don't envision the four-cylinders ever outselling the sixes."

What about the V-6 as the racing engine of the near future? "One of the things we did back in '75 was to bring Herb Fischel over from Chevrolet and set up a Special Products Engineering group. It's been successful over the years in getting a few parts out there, and we're going to be putting a lot more emphasis on that part of the activity. We're going to be seeing a lot more off-road and heavy-duty parts for the Buick V-6, much more than what we have now. Another thing is that NASCAR cars are running too fast now. They're going to be downsizing the engines one of these days, and we'd hope that downsizing would put the V-6 as one of the alternatives. . . . I'm sure we'll be seeing Buick V-6 engines in NASCAR and Indy cars in the next few years."

Buick designers, coincidentally or not, have sculptured very aerodynamic mid-sized (Regal) bodies—relative to the competition—since the '78 downsizing, which have found great favor on NASCAR superspeedways. "Last year we won a manufacturer's trophy in NASCAR for the first time in Buick history," Reuss says proudly, "and we're leading in points again this year. There even have been some racing posters showing up in the dealerships. Can you imagine Buick dealers displaying NASCAR posters in 1965? When they raced at Richmond last season, the dealer association there brought Richard Petty [who campaigned a Regal in '81] into a couple of the showrooms, and of course there were all kinds of people there. It's been an extremely positive thing for our retail organization. There isn't a week goes by that I don't get a letter

or a clipping from some dealer somewhere in the country saying, 'Keep her going.'"

Aside from the well-publicized Buick Turbo Indy Pace Cars, how does a division such as Buick tie in the racing activities with the actual products that people can buy? Is there really any customer benefit? "Some of the things, like the free-breathing V-6 we came out with in '79, when we reworked the entire breathing system . . . that really was a direct spinoff of the work Smokey Yunick had done on looking at how to get more power out of 3.8 liters. A lot of this development work, but not all of it, leads into production. A guy like Smokey is important, because we've got all our dynamometers used up running high-volume production engines six and seven days a week, and we can't move in there with any of this aftermarket work. But there are outside alternatives available, and that's how it can fit into the program . . . and a lot of what the outside people develop, they can sell themselves and make some money."

"Also, we recently introduced the Grand National Regal Turbo to commemorate the NASCAR victories. It's a super-nice package, equipped like the T-type with the handling suspension and cast-aluminum wheels, plus Recaro-like seats, a special decor package and interior trim. And don't think we're not continuing development of the turbocharged engine. The turbo Regal is really a hot car for '83, and you're going to be seeing improvements every year for the next few years, including fuel injection and some other interesting things."

Does he think there will be a return to large-scale factory involvement in motorsports in the near future? "I can only answer for Buick, but I think you'll find a wide variety of opinion within GM on what we should be doing. My concern is that the imports are there. We can't sit back and wait until they've taken over a lot of this competition business; and they're going to try to do it. As far as Buick is concerned, our main emphasis is going to be to get the parts and have the development of pieces so we can sell them to the average customer. If you look at Chevrolet's success, that's really what they've done."

What about the rumors of a coming Buick sports car? "Well," he says, eyes sparkling, "we worked on a car that we called the L-car a few years ago . . . and I wish we had it now. We are looking at and working on a fairly expensive little two-seater, more along the

'classic elegance' line. I would envision that sometime in the Eighties we'll have a two-seater. We keep referring to it as a Buick Corvette, but it would not be on the same level of technical sophistication as the Corvette."

More comparable to a Mercedes 380SEC? "Yes, closer to that, except a new generation of that type of car."

Based on what? "We have a few alternatives. The new E [Riviera] is one, which would make it front-drive. The customer buying a Z28 is not the guy we want. We really want to go after the fellow who's buying, say, a 280-ZX Turbo, or maybe a Mercedes."

What about a version of the mid-engined P-car that Pontiac is developing for 1984? "No, I don't think that fits our image. I do feel that down the road we'll eventually have a product that's smaller than the J-car, but not as a sports car. It will be geared more along the image of a Buick."

What about the future of the big cars, the rear-drive LeSabre and the longer-wheelbase Electra, the latter of which is scheduled for a second major redesign on a downsized, front-drive platform next year? "They are very viable products yet. The volume used to be about 25 percent of the market, but my guess is that it will probably stabilize at 12 percent or so. When you see the new Electra . . . those cars are very contemporary cars, and I think we'll be capacity-constrained even with only three divisions going after them. I think we're going to sell more than the projections show."

When the Riviera gets downsized and the mid-sized Regal personal coupe also goes to front-wheel drive a couple of years from now, won't those two be perilously close in size and content and effectively compete against each other? "As we execute those, that's one of the most important things that we have to be sure of, that the Riviera still has more technical sophistication and appeals to a different buyer. Its underpinnings have to be unique and not items pulled off another product. If you look at the Riviera, all of the hardware that goes with it and the styling execution, its philosophy is really very different from that of the Regal, even though the size differential isn't going to be as great. We look at who's buying them and where they come from. They tend to move up from the Regal to the Riviera, so we're working hard on trying to separate the two personalities."

It seems that GM's formerly staid, old Buick Division is in good hands.

—Gary Witzenburg