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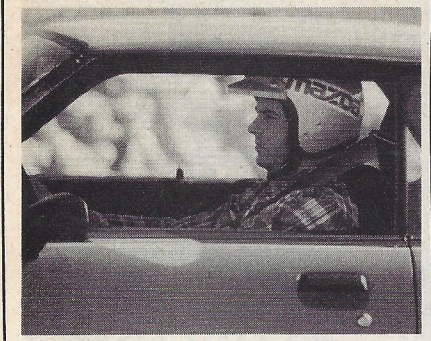
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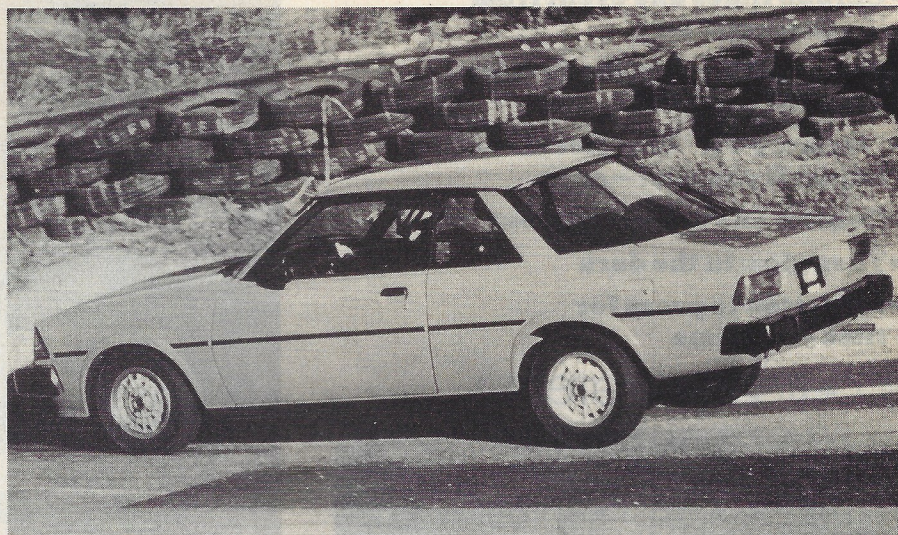


## FIRSTHAND REPORT

by Gary Witenburg  
DETROIT AUTO EDITOR



# Driving the Mazda 626



The 626 coupe speeds through "corkscrew" at Laguna Seca road course in California. Suspension of coupe makes it quicker through such twists and turns than sedan.

Virtually no one had heard of Mazda cars, built by Toyo Kogyo in Japan, when they entered the U.S. market with barely 2000 sales in 1970. But 10 times that many were sold the following year, 63,000 in 1972, and by 1973 Mazda had climbed, almost incredibly, to fourth place (behind VW, Toyota and Datsun) among U.S. importers, with sales of nearly 120,000 cars.

But this success was built largely around Mazda's unique rotary Wankel engine, which was smooth, quick and responsive but far less fuel-efficient than the four-cylinder conventional engines powering competitive imports. Already smarting from dealer and service problems, Mazda was dealt a crippling blow when the Environmental Protection Agency published extra-low fuel economy

numbers for the rotary engine following the 1973-74 fuel crisis. Sales fell to 75,000 in 1974, 69,000 in '75 and 41,000 in '76.

Then the comeback began. Reorganization and a dealer improvement program were followed by introduction of the very conventional but very competent and reasonably priced GLC minicompact two years ago. The quick, sexy, rotary-powered RX-7 sports car came a year after that, and now Mazda has introduced

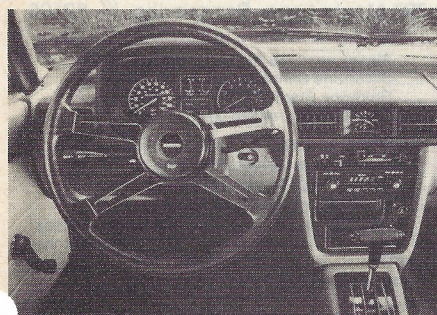
its answer to the midsize, mid-priced import family sedan and sport coupe—the 626.

While everyone else has been falling all over one another trying to build a better VW Rabbit, Mazda has scored a coup by building a better Toyota Corona and Celica in one fell swoop. The two-liter, piston-powered, rear-wheel-drive 626, suspended by MacPherson struts in front and a live axle with coil springs in back, is as conventional as a gray-flannel salesman. But conventional does not mean dull or boring.

Besides going head-on against No. 1 importer Toyota in the growing mid-price battlefield (\$5500 to \$7500), Mazda sees its 626 as competition for everything else from Honda's Accord to Audi's Fox. Clever and sophisticated engineering bits and pieces, innovative and practical conveniences and large touches of class and comfort have been skillfully interwoven.

The 1970-cc, in-line, overhead-cam Four sports an aluminum cross-flow cylinder head (intake on one side, exhaust on the other), hemispherical combustion chambers that have "masked" valve seats to create efficiency-producing swirl in conjunction with high-swirl intake ports, two-stage exhaust gas recirculation (EGR) and twin reed valves (instead of a power-robbing pump) for secondary air to the catalyst. Result: a 25-mpg EPA city economy, emissions are well below even the tough state standards of California, 0-to-60

(Please turn to page 72)

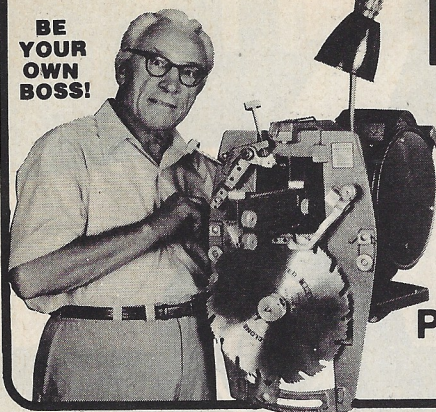


Nose of the 626 has family resemblance to GLC model, as evident from views of the coupe (top left) and the four-door sedan (top right). Coupe cockpit (above, left) shows tachometer, which sedan does not have. Rear seat of both models folds down (split 60/40), as shown (above, right), to accommodate cargo that's too big for the trunk alone.



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## DRIVING THE MAZDA 626

(Continued from page 70)

mph time is 13 seconds and outstanding driveability is achieved.

The front suspension struts are canted rearward for directional stability and road-shock absorption, rear springs are variable-rate tapered coils with gas-filled shocks, suspension travel front and rear is a generous 7.7 inches, and weight distribution is nearly 50 percent in front and 50 percent in rear with a four-passenger load. The result is true sports-car-style handling combined with one of the softest rides ever produced in Japan.

### Good drag coefficients

A bit more sports car than sedan are the 626's aerodynamics. The low, sloping grille and hood, front spoiler, smoothly integrated bumpers and lights, flush windshield pillars, partial engine undertray and other features produce impressive wind-tunnel drag coefficients of 0.39 for the coupe and 0.42 for the four-door sedan (as tested by Mazda). This overall slipperiness aids high-speed performance and road-holding, saves fuel and helps to quiet down interior wind noise.

Inside, roominess front and rear is generous by Japanese standards, comfort and support from the cloth-covered, fully reclining front buckets are excellent by any standards (there's even cushion-height and lumbar-support adjustment for the driver), and the color-coordinated instrument panel is as attractive as it is functional. Convenient shelves, pockets and compartments are everywhere you look, the asymmetrically split rear seat folds down to combine the rear passenger area with the trunk, and a dash-mounted deck-lid release is standard.

The four-door 626 is a bit of an ugly duck with its high, squared-off greenhouse, but the coupe is very svelte and well proportioned. Both come standard with five-speed manual trans, steel radial tires, stereo radio and much more. And the coupe throws in a tachometer, rear sway bar, remote-control outside mirror and electronic check panel. About the only options are larger tires and styled aluminum wheels for the coupe, plus airconditioning and automatic trans for either model.

In Mazda's own words, the 626 was designed to achieve "the perfect combining of European styling, comfort and handling with Japanese quality, value and economy." And it comes as close to this lofty goal as anything at the price that is on the road today. **PM**

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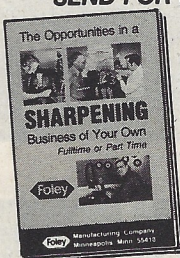
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