

Automotive

'Witz' picks the harvest for 1986



Gary Witzenburg

There's little money or security in this crazy car-writing business, but the fringe benefits are great.

Imagine testing a couple hundred brand new cars each year, some at race tracks and proving grounds, others on some of the world's greatest roads, a chosen few for a week at a time around home. And getting paid to write about it.

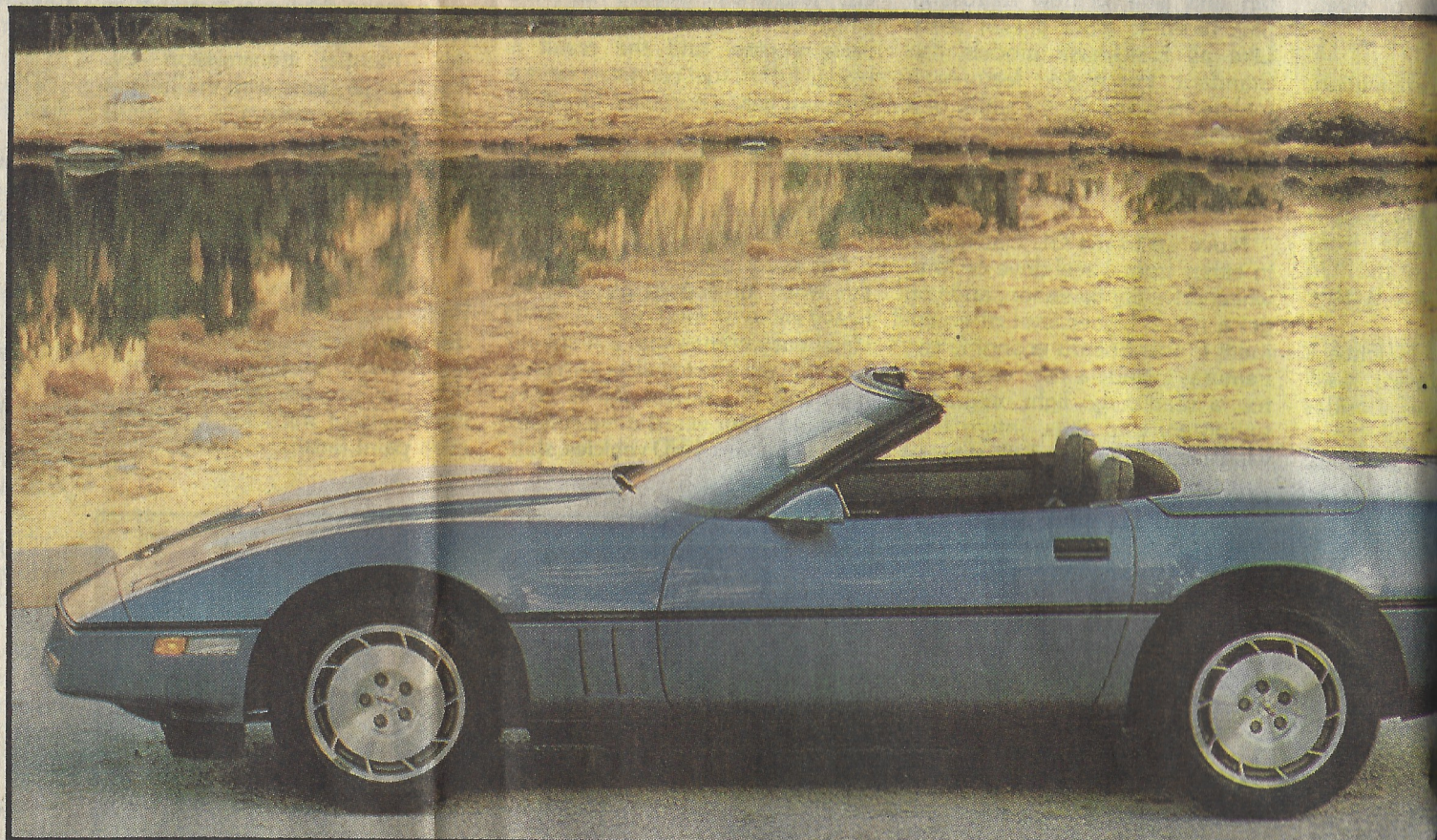
I know, I know, it's pretty tough duty. But somebody has to do it.

Still, you can get jaded after awhile. The Cutlasses and Cavaliers and Corollas of the world start blending into the scenery, and a car has got to be really something to get your adrenalin pumping.

Every so often, you encounter one that is. A car that looks good and feels good and makes you feel good every moment you're behind the wheel.

Ten such cars are presented below. Not "Ten Best Buys," mind you, but 10 personal, highly subjective favorites. Chances are, if you like cars and driving anywhere near as much as I do, you'll love 'em, too.

Audi 5000CS Turbo Quattro. Audi's ultra-aero 5000 has been a favorite ever since its introduction in 1983. It's a roomy, comfy, quiet sedan that rivals Jaguar's classic XJ6 and Ford's new Taurus and Sable as the world's most beautiful four-door. The Turbo version that followed in '84 is even sweeter. Now comes the 5000CS Turbo Quattro. Full-time all-wheel (don't call it "four-wheel") drive, ABS anti-skid brakes and 158 turbo'd horses make it the ultimate all-weather cruiser. Trust me; I spent eight days, 8800 miles in one, including two long nights on glare ice, running '85 One Lap of America rally. New for '86 is fully galvanized sheetmetal that'll probably wear out before it rusts out, and a slight price bump to \$28,000.



Chevrolet's new Corvette roadster is selected as one of columnist Gary Witzenburg's ten personal favorite cars for 1986. It features some of the world's most sophisticated engineering innovations. New for '86 on all Corvettes is a sophisticated anti-lock brake system and anti-lock brake hardware as standard equipment.

Chevrolet Corvette Roadster. For '85, Chevy's starship Corvette got tuned-port injection and nicely refined suspension. This year: standard ABS anti-lock brakes, a state-of-the-art anti-theft system and further engine upgrades. With 230 rip-snorting V8 ponies and 330 ft. lbs. of torque on tap, and huge Goodyear "Gatorbacks" on racer-like suspension on the road, there's nothing that can touch it at twice its \$27,000 price. Best of all is the new Corvette roadster, the first since 1975. It'll pace the '86 Indy 500 and turn up in showrooms by spring. I can't say much more until Chevy releases details in January, but I can report from personal experience that its even better, more solid, than the coupe. Also some \$5,000 more expensive.

Dodge Lancer Pacifica. Chrysler's Dodge Division and performance maven Carroll Shelby are playing a cruel joke on sport sedan intenders outside the Golden State. They've developed the trickiest, sexiest factory four-door made in America; but they're only going to build a handful this year, and they're only going to sell them in California. Call it a market experiment. Call it unfair. Call a California dealer and be first to import a "Gray Market" Dodge. Other '86 Lancers get improved instrumentation, a friendlier manual shift linkage, upgraded fuel injection and a new optional 2.5-liter engine (with vibration-smoothing balance shafts) between the base 2.2 and 146-horse turbo. But if you see an all-white '86 with rocker skirts, roof spoiler and Shelby wheels anywhere east of Fresno, call Immigration.

Honda Prelude Si. Leave it to Honda to take what was already the sweetest-handling front-drive sport coupe in the land, and make it even more desirable. Heck, you couldn't get a regular Prelude for anywhere near its \$10,000-plus base price; wait'll you see the lines out the dealership doors for this one. Introduced so late last model year that they called it an '85.8, the fuel-injected Si version boasts larger tires on alloy wheels, body-color front airdam and rear spoiler, premium stereo, power four-wheel disc brakes and a bunch more for its \$13,000 sticker. I drove one up to Yosemite for the Corvette convertible preview, and found a group of veteran auto writers more jaded that I standing around admiring it one morning.

Lincoln Mark VII LSC. OK, the trunk is small and it looks too much like a Thunderbird. I defy anyone to come up with a smoother-riding, tauter-handling, more driver-friendly luxury sport coupe anywhere near the LSC's \$24,000 base price. Horsepower is up to an even 200 thanks to port fuel injection, roller hydraulic lifters and other improvements to its HO V8 engine. Anti-lock brakes are standard on all '86 Marks, and the LSC gets analog gauges to increase its serious-driver credibility. This excellent car hasn't found much acceptance among die-hard luxury import fans yet, but it will now that the Gray Market is dying. And it'll look better to traditional buyers, too, since Cadillac's rival Eldorado has shrunk to compact size.

"A car has got to be really something to get your adrenalin pumping."

Mazda RX-7. Porsche's 944 used to be my favorite sports car. Now it's Mazda's all-new RX-7. Its slippery new body resembles the 944's in front, its doors are similar to the Chrysler's Laser's, and its back end has a lot of Camaro in it. Not boldly innovative, but better looking, more aggressive and more "upmarket" than before, and it parts the wind with an excellent .31 drag coefficient, .29 with the optional aero package. The fuel-injected rotary engine's power is up to 146, good for eight seconds 0-60 and 128 flat out. The racing-type four-wheel power disc brakes are superb, and the trick rear suspension toes the outside back wheel slightly out going into a corner, then points it in for amazing stability through the turn. Prices start around \$12,000 for the two-seater, \$12,500 for the new 2+2.

Mercury Sable. Ford Motor Company takes styling leadership in America, if not the world, with its new Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable to '86. Of the two, Mercury's Sable is the most bold and futuristic. Instead of a grille, there's a full-width "light bar" in front. Roof pillars are hidden under flush glass. Drag coefficient is an impressive .32, and the gorgeous wagon is wind tunnel-rated at .34. Controls are beautifully ergonomic, convenience features abound and there's spaciousness for six inside. A 140-horse port-injected V6 provides motivation, while a supple, long-travel suspension (fully independent even on the wagon) eats bumps and handles curves with the world's finest. About \$11,000 base.

Pontiac 6000 STE. A favorite of buff-book writers and knowledgeable enthusiasts alike, Pontiac's STE is the original American sport sedan. It's not the fastest, slickest or best-handling four-door around, but it is among the most balanced in overall performance and road feel. A port-injected V6 provides 130 horses through a specially-calibrated automatic transaxle, the standard electronic stereo is upgraded with handy auxiliary controls on the steering wheel, the graphic tach and digital speedo are redesigned to be more visible through the wheel, and the new front end gets flush aero lights — but loses the split-grille Pontiac identity. Anti-lock ABS brakes will be added mid-year, but the long-awaited five-speed manual is put off again. Fully equipped, it's still a bargain at \$16,000.

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Best Buys

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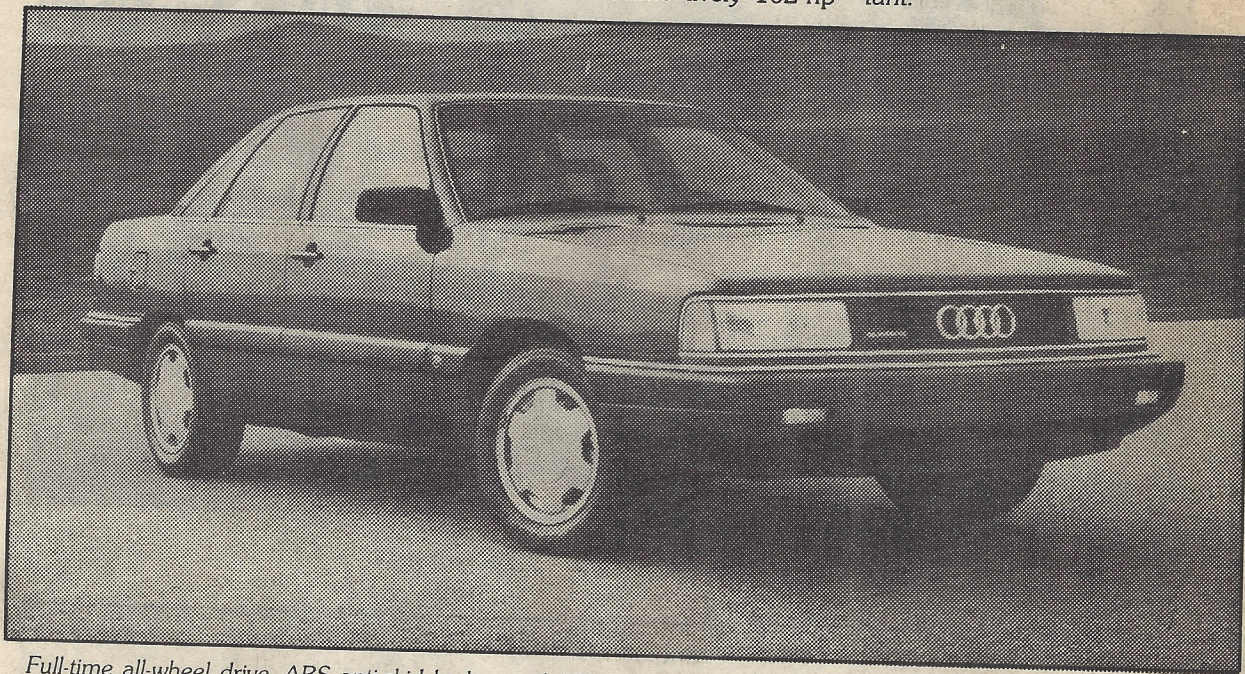
Toyota Celica GT-S. Rivaling Honda's excellent Prelude for sport coupe par-eminence, the all-new, aero-smooth Celica comes in two body styles and three excitement levels for '86. The base ST coupe and GT coupe and Liftback are powered by a 97-horsepower fuel-injected four, while top-of-the-line GT-S coupes and liftbacks boast a very energetic twin-cam, 16-valve 135-horse four-cylinder. Since the Celica has switched to front-wheel drive, you'd think there would be wheel-hop and torque-steer problems with all that oomph. There aren't, because Toyota

engineers have designed them out. Suspension is independent at both ends, steering is power rack-and-pinion, and the GT-Ss have four-wheel power disc brakes. Prices start around \$9,000.

Volkswagen Jetta GLI. Sure, I love the Golf-based GTI. It's a first-rate pocket rocket — quick, agile, solidly engineered and built. But, let's face it, the Golf looks like a loaf of bread. VW's Jetta GLI costs exactly one G more at \$10,190, strikes a classier profile and offers more equipment and a surprisingly large trunk. Otherwise, its essentially the same. Same lively 102-hp

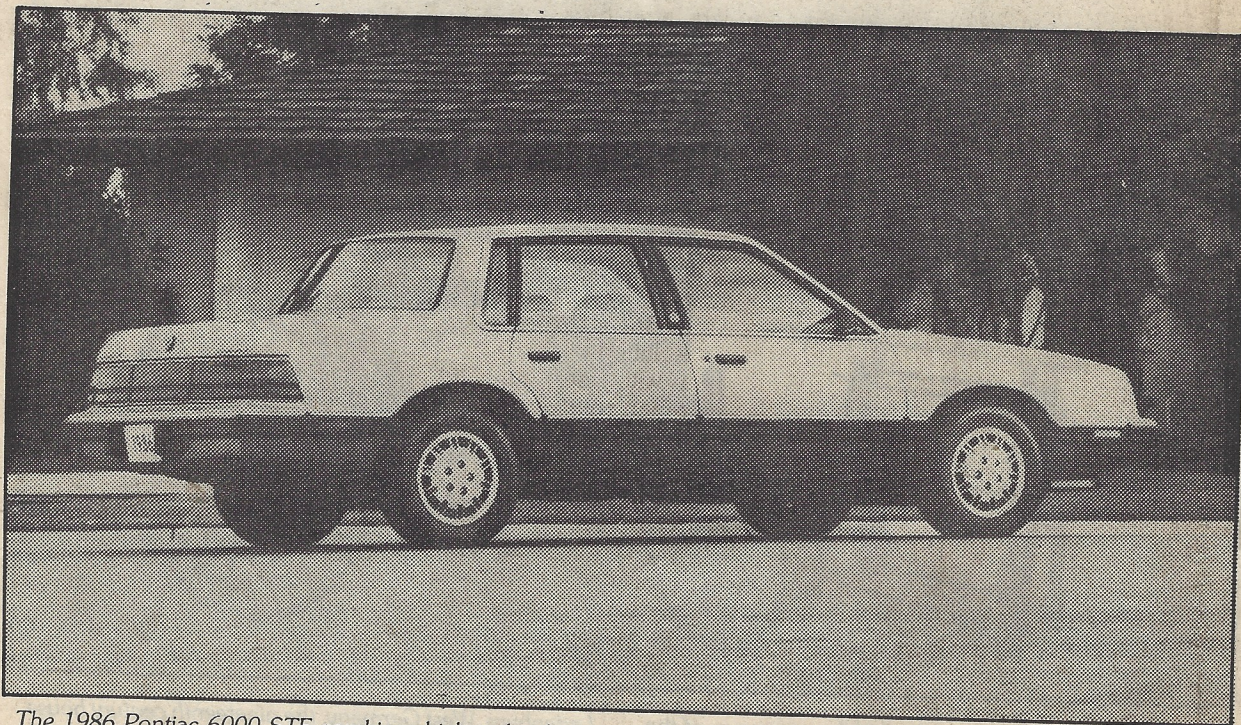
fuel-injected engine, same eager suspension and four-wheel disc brakes, same great sport seats, instruments and functional controls. Sure, it's 150 lb. heavier and a half-second slower 0-60 (9.5 seconds vs. the GTI's 9.0), but its steering is quicker and power assisted instead of manual. A fair trade-off, I think, for a genuinely fun, affordable, made-in-Germany sport sedan.

Gary Witzenburg is the most widely published automotive writer in America. Based in Woodland Hills, he is also a noted car consultant.



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tro one of columnist Gary Witzenburg's personal favorites for '86.



The 1986 Pontiac 6000 STE combines high technology and automotive excellence to make this a special treat for

the sophisticated driver, and made the "Ten Personal Favorite" list of columnist Gary Witzenburg.