

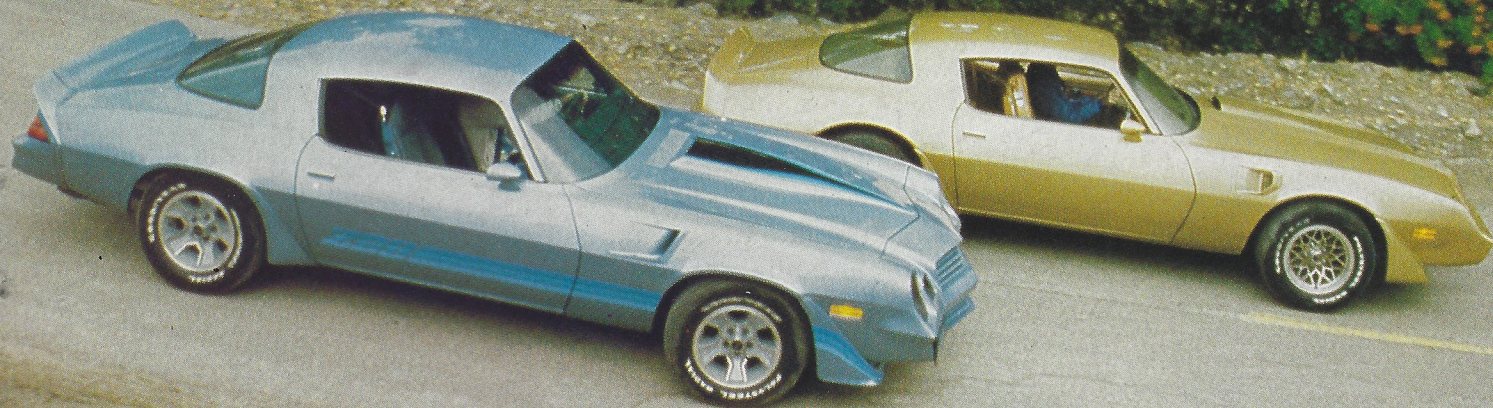
*GM's 1.5 Liter, 86 MPG Two Seater*

# ROAD TEST

FEBRUARY 1981

\$1.75

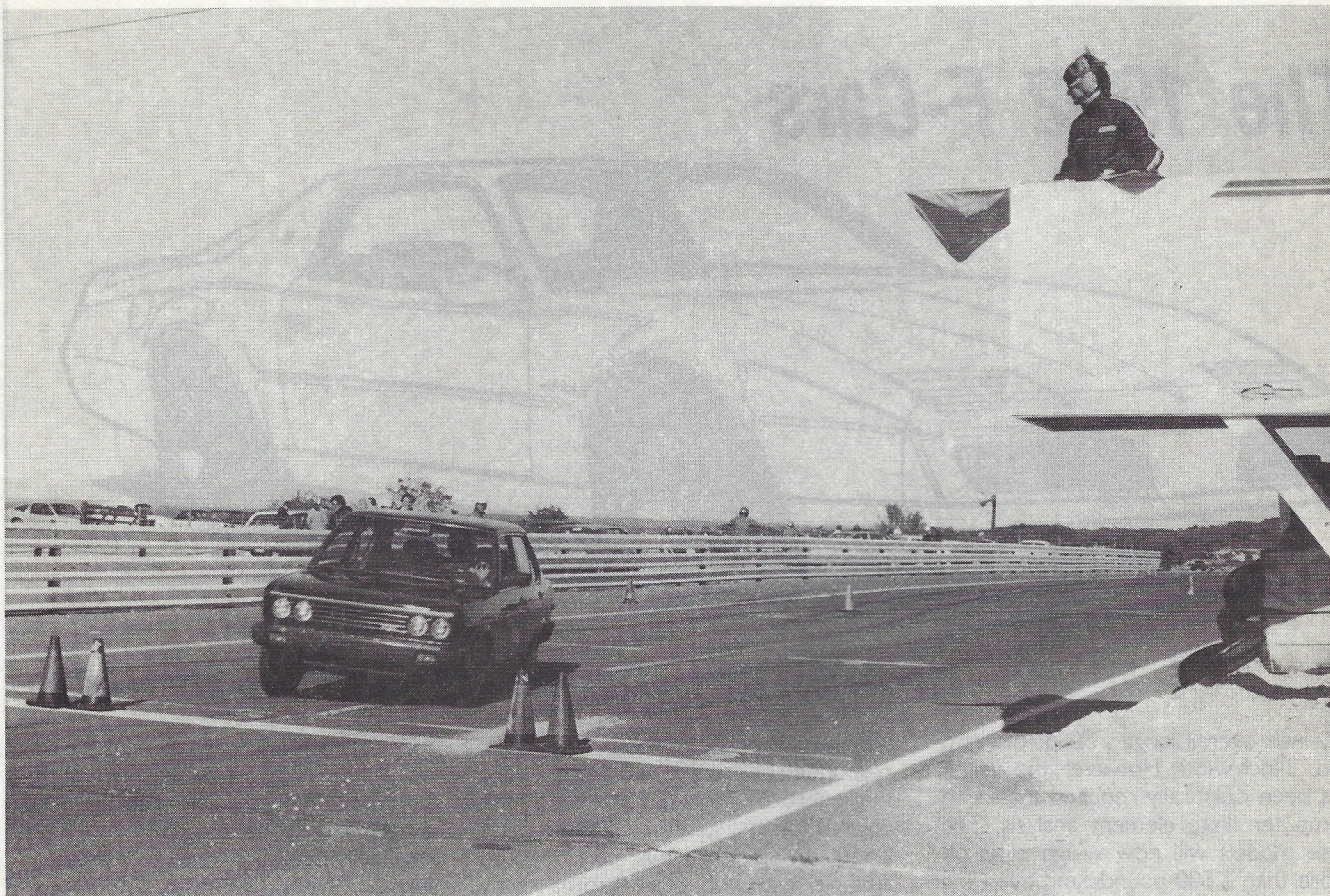
*MIGHT VS. RIGHT  
350 Z28 & TURBO T/A*



*Chevy Monte Carlo, Renault 18i, Austin Allegro  
Driving Impressions*







# FLAUNT YOUR INCOMPETENCY

Wherein Gary Witzenburg attempts to do the same.

**H**ere we are, gathered in a group, helmets in hand at the drivers' meeting. Chief Honcho Skip Barber, who runs the country's second best-known racers' school, is briefing us on the course, its danger spots, and safety in general. Our cars are aligned in a neat row awaiting certain abuse and possible destruction. Feet shift impatiently, hearts pound, minds race with anticipation, and bodies shiver with the cold.

I first discovered FYI some five years ago, and joined IMPA (International Motor Press Association) chiefly because of it. A large, normally serious, New York-based organization of professional



auto writers, photographers and public relations people, IMPA goes bonkers one day each fall and throws a down-home automotive orgy. Long known as Flaunt Your Incompetency Day, it was renamed IMPA Test Day a couple of years ago for obvious reasons. But, the game's the same, responsible moniker notwithstanding.

See, We (writers and photographers) provide job security all year for Them (PR types) by not ignoring their products ... sometimes, when deserved, even saying kind things about them in print. In return, They supply the occasional lunch, drink, test car and, once a year, some of their Best Stuff for FYI. All's fair.





*Symbolic of the purpose, and diversity, of FYI Day are the Ferrari 308 and Chevy Citation lined up side-by-side for testing.*

The event itself is the brainchild of one Fred Mackerodt, editor-turned-PR man who works hard and well at his trade while describing it as lots of "Hi, how are ya? ... Ho, ho, ho!" He and PR woman/author/racing timer-scorer/driver extraordinaire Judy Stropus pretty much run the thing each year, assisted by a hard-working handful of IMPA members. The prestigious Road Racing Drivers Club, champions all, donates instructional and guidance talent, while corner safety stations are well-manned by Sports Car Club of America members and friends.

The concept, while not unusual in Europe and other civilized places, is completely unique in ultra-litigious, safety-paranoid America. Imagine turning loose a flock of ordinary citizens, who happen to write about, photograph or promote cars for a living, on a real, live, very challenging road-racing course with brand new automobiles attached to their lead feet. Chaos? Pandemonium? Death and Destruction?

Actually, surprisingly, through a combination of safety-consciousness, good planning and great good luck, none of the above. Few cars have been bashed or broken through the years, and no one yet has so much as scratched his or her little pinky. Oh, there is the occasional incident ... a dusty spinout here, a broken spoiler there, the odd BMW in the bushes. Egos, after all, are at stake.

Some are really very good drivers, a few with racing experience. Others are concrete-canyon dwellers who transport themselves in buses and subways and in the back seats of careening cabs and seldom get closer to a race track than their TV sets. But the only really dangerous types are the Rodney Racers who go very fast but aren't nearly as good as they think, and the Sidney Slugs who creep around scared to death and don't know what mirrors are for. When a Rodney overtakes a Sidney and wants to pass, look out!

The worst incident so far occurred two years ago when a couple of clowns

nobody knew managed to sneak in with a pair of Mazda RX-7's. I watched one of them try a dangerous pass only to spin off the track in a cloud of dust and blue tire smoke. When I approached the corner, he flailed back on course in front of me. I followed while he completed the lap, still too fast and half out of control all the way. Next time around, there he was, greasy-side-up in the dirt, with his friend stuffed in a sand-bank beside him. Nobody hurt, but scratch one RX-7 and two would-be racers. Security was tightened after that.

Last year, they tried throwing FYI at Lime Rock in Connecticut, which is closer for most people and a nicer facility than Bridgehampton in some ways. But it's also only 1.5 miles around (vs. Bridgehampton's 2.9 miles), too short for FYI's volume of traffic, and has only one left and six right turns. When the season's first significant snowfall ended up scheduled for the same day, it really got ridiculous.

This year we were back at good-old





*Prior to pitting their skills against Bridgehampton's 2.9 miles, members of IMPA gather to discuss the coming bash.*



*As is normal for a meeting of automotive journalists, food and drink were near at hand.*

Bridgehampton, and the weather smiled. When the drivers' meeting broke up, we grabbed the nearest RRDC guy (in my case, Datsun racer Bob Sharp) for our mandatory familiarization lap, after which we got our little hospital wrist-bands that serve as on-track credentials. Now the stampede begins.

Since the official purpose of FYI is to learn about the performance of the cars, most of the neat stuff is gone in a flash. I grab a nice looking Ford Escort. Oh, well, good enough for a warm-up lap. I start the engine, struggle with the shift-gate (undoubtedly designed in Ford's legal department), and get in line. They let people on-course spaced by a few seconds to minimize passing, but with all the Rodneys and Sidneys it doesn't make a lot of difference. I cinch the belts down tight and double-check my helmet strap. Soon I'm off and accelerating down the long front straight.

Bridgehampton's first turn is a fast downhill right, followed by another that compresses the suspension at speed and glues tires to asphalt ... great fun in a good car if you know the course. The little Escort is honking right along by now down a short straight that leads quickly to still another right, slower than the first two but faster than it looks. Another straightaway leads to a long, tight, tire-grinding right that exits to a short uphill





*ROAD TEST's 1981 Car of the Year, Escort/Lynx, was on hand to be thoroughly wrung out by the attending writers.*

straight and then a pair of flat-out (in a slow car) lefts. The course straightens again for a while, then bends gradually to the left as the car approaches top speed. The long, gradual left ends in a tighter left turn, then the track falls sharply downhill to the light-bulb-shaped right-hand hairpin. From there, it's a long, uphill climb to the last turn, a medium-speed right leading back to the main straight.

The Escort seems slow as syrup with its lazy, long-ratioed automatic tranny, but it handles the turns fairly well despite a bit too much body lean for its "SS" handling suspension. It also needs more front-seat travel for long-stemmed types like me, but is otherwise a pleasant little car. Now for something a bit more ... uh ... spirited.

Upon returning to the pits an unmanned Rover 3500 beckons. Good, solid, semi-sexy sedan, with fair performance from its 3.5-liter V-8 and an excellent five-speed shifter ... feels overstuffed and overweight for today's ultra-efficient market, but corners very well anyway. Definitely fun to drive. How 'bout a Z-28 Chev? Too big and heavy outside and small inside, but who cares? Does it ever move for this day and age! Excellent handling and stability even on the bumpy parts, nevermind its stone-age live axle on leaf springs. Chevy's other trick car, the Citation X-11, is also

good fun on the track; good power and super handling despite a lot of torque-steer under power. Another domestic, Pontiac's revamped Grand Prix, proves to be (yawn) a nice-looking, very comfortable car.

After getting politely reprimanded for cutting in front of someone going into a turn in the X-11 (even the best of us can be Rodneys at times), I try a slalom competition in an Audi 5000 Turbo. The flagship Audi is great, and even better on the track ... its only vice being a high price. The Saab Turbo is less pretty and more eccentric in its strange, Nordic way, but even more fun than the automatic Audi, thanks to a zippy five-speed transmission. The BMW 528i, also five-speed, is typically BMW at a fast sprint but lets me down by spinning a year's-worth of rubber from its inside rear tire when pushed hard in tight turns. For that kind of money, they damn well ought to throw in the limited-slip! Datsun's new 810 Maxima is a nice street package but disappoints on the track with massive understeer and marginal performance from its fuelie six. Another letdown comes from Renault's otherwise-excellent 18i sedan. Its too-soft suspension dances all over the asphalt in the bumpy parts at speed.

I try a couple of sports cars, Triumph's TR-8 and Fiat's 2000 Spider ... both fun

on the track, but the V-8 Triumph's got the edge in driver comfort and performance, though the new fuel-injected Fiat 2-liter's no slouch either. Next a Fiat Brava (with the same newly-injected 2-liter) and a VW Jetta. The Fiat's nicer inside but I see it as more of a family car than a sport sedan; the Jetta's just like a longer, fancier Rabbit with a trunk, which is what it is. Both are viable BMW 320i competitors.

Finally comes the car I drove out from Detroit, a brand new Dodge Aries two-door K-car with the optional 2.6-liter engine and automatic transmission. Aside from needing a bit more front legroom and a seatback recliner, it is impressive on the road and surprisingly agile and spirited on the track. Its optional heavy-duty suspension is a bit stiff, more like an import than an American small car, but gives truly excellent handling no matter how hard-pushed. Altogether an excellent package well up to its Chrysler-saving mission.

Another FYI has ended as the sun sets over the beautiful Long Island fallscape and Mackerodt, Stropus, and friends break out the beer, wine and cheese on a station wagon tailgate in preparation for the long drive home. We've learned a hell of a lot about many cars in one long day. And most of us managed to hide our incompetency quite well. □