

FORD TAURUS SHO

VS.

'97 PONTIAC

ROAD
TEST

GRAND PRIX GTP



AMERICA'S SPORT SEDAN FACEOFF: DOHC V-8 MEETS SUPERCHARGED V-6

by Mac DeMere

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IT'S

the fall of '88. Michael Dukakis is test-driving tanks. Fuzz-faced 17-year-old Jeff Gordon is racing USAC sprint cars. The Chevrolet Corvette ZR-1 prepares to seize the weighty crown of King of the Hill. Our spy photographers snap as-yet-unnamed models from Toyota's new luxury channel, Lexus. A sneak peek at the new "four-door Bronco II" blows us away—which, as the Explorer, it would later do to the car-buying public.

Also in the fall of that year, Ford unveils a hot-rod version of its top-selling Taurus. In honor of its silky, sophisticated, Yamaha-produced 3.0-liter/220-horsepower DOHC V-6, it's called the SHO, for Super High Output. Immediately, it's clear the SHO is not only a giant leap over the plain Taurus, but also a step above most cars—foreign and

domestic—that lay claim to the title "sport sedan."

Back in '88, our test drivers recorded an 8.9-second 0-60-mph run with the Nissan Maxima SE, an 8.1 in a BMW M3, and couldn't break 7.2 seconds with every Chevrolet Camaro IROC-Z. Yet, this four-door Ford sprinted 0-60 mph in eight seconds flat. The next year, a \$25,000 Pontiac Grand Prix GTP coupe, powered by a McLaren Engineering-tweaked, turbocharged 3.2-liter/205-horse V-6, ran but 8.2 seconds 0-60 mph.

Speeding up our time machine, with a '91 Taurus SHO we saw a 7.7-second 0-60-mph run. Then, during testing for *Motor Trend's* 1992 Car of the Year, a second-generation SHO screamed 0-60 mph in just 6.8 seconds, a whopping 2.6 seconds quicker than its pushrod-powered sibling. Suspension mods and tire upgrades helped the SHO more than



hold its own in the curves, too. The SHO was, clearly, the king of American sport sedans.

That was then, this is now.

The new-generation '96 SHO only managed a 7.5-second 0-60-mph run and a 15.7-second, 88.6-mph quarter mile, despite a new V-8 with 0.4 liter more displacement and five more ponies than the '92 model. (A big reason for the difference: The performance-enhancing manual transmission of the '92 is no longer available.) Meanwhile, today's regular Taurus offers its own silky, sophisticated 3.0-liter DOHC four-valve V-6. This Duratec engine makes 200 horses, just 20 less than the original SHO engine, and, importantly, matches the first SHO's 200 pound-feet torque output. This no-longer-mundane Taurus is but 1.1 seconds slower 0-60 mph than the current SHO and only 0.7 second and 2.8 mph off in the quarter mile.

OK, so people don't buy sport sedans just for acceleration; they seek backroad-burning handling, too. Unfortunately, the new SHO doesn't deliver more than its '92 predecessor. Only in 60-0-mph braking distance (128 feet) does the new SHO beat its '92 sibling—and then by just seven feet. The new version tied the previous iteration's 0.80g skidpad mark and fell 0.4 mph slower in the slalom.

Although the new SHO doesn't jump as far ahead of the regular Taurus as it did in the past, the SHO might have held onto its title as America's top sport sedan if it weren't for Pontiac. For '97, Pontiac is resurrecting the spirit of its much-celebrated GTO musclecar, giving it a healthy dose of modern computer-aided enhancement, and implanting it in its new, sleekly styled, crisp-handling, thoughtfully appointed Grand Prix. Central to this tire-smoking front-drive sport sedan, called the GTP, is a supercharged version of the wonderful

3800 Series II V-6. This blown version of the 3.8-liter OHV engine peaks at 240 horses and an awesome 280 pound-feet of torque. The latter figure is a full 50 pound-feet more than what the SHO boasts and occurs at a more-useable 1600 rpm lower in the rev band. This means that while loping along at 2000 rpm, the GTP powerplant makes more torque than the SHO V-8 can manage at its peak.

With the surplus power of a Titan IV booster, the GTP turned in a blistering 6.6-second 0-60-mph run, with a sizzling 15.0-second, 92.3-mph quarter mile. With those kinds of numbers it doesn't seem to matter that the Series II, with its pushrod-operated two-valve-per-cylinder valvetrain and cast-iron block and heads, isn't as sophisticated as the SHO's DOHC 32-valve, aluminum-blocked and -headed Japanese V-8.

We can hear Ford fans: It's unfair to compare the normally aspirated SHO with the forced-induction GTP. OK, strip off the supercharger, and the Series II's power drops to 195 horses and 230 pound-feet. Now, the Series II's torque output only equals that of the SHO, but—the theme continues—the torque peak happens 800 rpm lower on the tach. Even the nonboosted Grand Prix GT gives the SHO a run for its money: a 7.7-second 0-60-mph run and a 15.9-second, 86.7-mph quarter mile, both performances just 0.2 second slower than the macho SHO.

The GTP and the SHO virtually tied in our handling tests, the Ford edging the Pontiac 0.80 g to 0.79 g on the skidpad, by 63.6 mph to the GTP's 63.3 in the slalom, and by 128 to 134 feet in 60-0-mph stopping distance.

But here are more-important numbers: A loaded Grand Prix GTP—with heated leather seats, upgraded stereo with CD player, head-up instruments display, and more—tops out at \$24,571. That's \$1359 less than the SHO's \$25,930 base price, and far under the near-\$30,000 bottom line of our Super-Taurus tester. Delete the supercharged Series II and the Grand Prix' price falls another \$1233. Let's see: The GTP goes a lot faster and costs a lot less.

On the positive side, the top Taurus powerplant is a techno-



fest. The new SHO V-8 is based heavily on the Duratec V-6. To meet packaging and cost goals, the SHO engine had to retain the same mounting points, use most of the same auxiliary components, and employ the same transmission as the Duratec. Rather than go the forced-induction route, Ford and SHO engine producer Yamaha elected to add two more cylinders, turning the V-6 into a V-8. The SHO V-8 uses the bore and stroke of the 2.5-liter Duratec found in the Ford Contour. The engine blocks are cast at Ford's Windsor, Ontario, plant and then shipped to Japan for machining and assembly.

The SHO's quartet of chain-driven camshafts helps its V-8 produce a lovely, purposeful whine. Still, at anything less than a cockroach-stomping romp on the gas, the SHO won't even chirp its tires. Not so with the GTP, which requires a judicious

right foot to avoid wheelspin on all but the highest-traction surfaces. Also, the Taurus' four-speed

electronically controlled AX4N automatic transmission wasn't up to sport sedan-aggressive driving, often getting confused as to whether it should upshift, downshift, or stay in the same gear during the rapidly changing throttle positions of forceful backroad driving.

Beyond a firmer front anti-roll bar and 225/55VR16s Goodyear Eagle RS-As mounted on 16x8.0-inch wheels, the SHO's only suspension change from the Taurus LX is a set of what Ford calls "semiautomatic" struts. Sensors at each wheel note changes in road conditions and driving pattern and automatically switch to firmer valving. The SHO also gets 11.6-inch-diameter front discs, which are a significant 0.8 inch larger than those of the regular Taurus.

Despite these modest suspension changes, the SHO produces a rough, often choppy ride, plus chassis vibration becomes noticeable over certain undulating surfaces. And while the steering of our test car was firm-feeling, it lacked the type of feedback we expect from a sport-flavored sedan.

Visible differences between the SHO and regular Taurus are significant but subtle: The extra bucks net you a small rear spoiler, a unique front fascia with larger grille openings, the 16-inch wheel/tire package, SHO-specific seats, flared rocker panels, a revised rear fascia, and a small body-color "SHO" logo below the left rear taillight. From the driver's seat, it's mainly the 150-mph speedo that distinguishes the SHO.



A 150-mph speedometer and SHO-specific seats say this isn't an ordinary Taurus. Ford's entertainment and environment control panel still draws mixed reviews.

The Japanese-built 3.4-liter SHO V-8 is a 2.5-liter Duratec V-6 with two additional cylinders. It's the first Ford engine to use coil-on-plug ignition, which allows multiple spark-plug firings for each combustion stroke to maximize power and improve cold starts.



Some of our editors found the SHO seats a poor fit, citing a lack of lateral support and an overstuffed under-thigh area. Additionally, the Taurus' function-follows-form radio controls initially were more than a little difficult to work.

The Grand Prix is built on GM's new W-car platform. In previous years, each GM division was forced to use the same chassis dimensions and much of the same sheetmetal when sharing a given platform. But now the divisions have significant choice in proportions and can use unique bodywork. That means it will be difficult to tell the Grand Prix is even remotely related to the next-generation Chevrolet Lumina, Oldsmobile Intrigue, or Buick Century. For its W-car, Pontiac went with a long wheelbase—3.0 inches more than the previous Grand Prix—and the widest possible track, more than two inches wider up front, three in the rear. The latter not only helps extreme handling but also revives the Pontiac Wide Track look, with a snug wheel-to-body relationship.

GTP
SUPERCHARGED

The GTP-specific 4T65-E electronically controlled four-speed automatic features a driver-selectable "performance shift" mode that delays upshifts to higher rpm and causes more-aggressive downshifts. At wide-open throttle, the GTP upshifts with a muscled kick in the driver's back, while the supercharger sounds like a Cuisinart hopped up by Tim Allen: More power! Although the naturally aspirated Series II comes standard with traction control, GM is still working on one of these electronic mothers-in-law that can cope with the supercharged version, so you'll just have to manage wheel-spin yourself—or not.

Other than 225/60HR16 Goodyear Eagle RS-A performance tires on 16x6.5-inch aluminum wheels, the GTP's suspension is unchanged from the GT. A rear spoiler and side badging set the GTP apart visually. One of the best changes from its previous version is the substitution of rear coil springs for the transverse composite leaf spring design.

Don't think the GTP's edge over the SHO is strictly performance related. The Grand Prix' variable-assist steering, a version of the Magnasteer system that's previously appeared on the Oldsmobile Aurora, seamlessly changes from a high level of assist for low-speed maneuvers to a firm feel with excellent road feedback at higher speeds. Ride is supple and controlled, and far from harsh—about



The GTP's "Eyecue" head-up display shows newly selected radio station, CD-player data, and turn signals, as well as speed. We liked the driver-oriented yet not passenger-exclusive console and instrument panel. Even in 195-horse naturally aspirated form, the Series II V-6 pushes the Grand Prix GT to a 7.7-second 0-60-mph run. Add the GTP package's supercharger and that drops another 1.1 seconds. As the car has no traction control, you have to be careful not to light up the tires.





what we'd expect from BMW or Infiniti.

The '97 Grand Prix' interior takes the best of traditional American designs and blends it well with the best ideas from Europe. We found the GTP's new contoured bucket seats, which are designed to absorb energy in a crash, supportive and comfortable, even after a full day of driving. The front seatbelt buckles are mounted to the seat to better accommodate a wider range of physiques, while height-adjustable upper mounts also help make the belts fit better. The GTP's instrument panel and console feature large, easily readable analog gauges and simple-to-use rotary knobs. Operating the auxiliary steering-wheel-mounted radio controls quickly became second nature and, since the newly selected radio station's frequency is displayed on the head-up display, we didn't even have to look away from the road to know what channel we accessed.

Another trick feature on the Pontiac is the new tire-pressure sensor: It employs the ABS sensors to measure the rolling radius of the tires, and alerts the driver when it senses a radius change that indicates a tire has lost eight psi.

In interior room, the SHO and the GTP are fairly evenly matched; the Ford holds a useful edge in front headroom, rear legroom, and rear hiproom, with the Pontiac taking a lead in rear headroom, and front and rear shoulder room. The other categories are a virtual tie.

Staff criticisms of the GTP were few, but one was significant: disconcerting reflections in its 63-degree-raked windshield. Also noted was some chassis shake and a few creaks from the instrument panel of this preproduction car.

If you haven't yet figured out that we think the new Pontiac Grand Prix GTP handily whips the Ford Taurus SHO, then you're probably still contributing to the Committee to Elect Dukakis. Still, the SHO remains an impressive monument to Japanese-American technology. And for most folks, it's plenty rapid. But the Grand Prix GTP, despite lacking some of the SHO's sophistication, is not only considerably quicker and more pampering, it's a bunch cheaper every time you write the payment check. **MT**

TECH DATA

GENERAL		
	Ford Taurus SHO	Pontiac Grand Prix GTP
Manufacturer	Ford Motor Company Dearborn, Mich.	Pontiac Division, General Motors Corp, Pontiac, Mich.
Location of final assembly	Atlanta, Ga.	Kansas City, Kan.
Body style	4-door, 5-passenger	4-door, 5-passenger
EPA size class	Midsize	Midsize
Drivetrain layout	Front engine, front drive	Front engine, front drive
Airbag	Dual	Dual
Engine configuration	60° V-8, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder	90° V-6, OHV, 2 valves/cylinder
Engine displacement, ci/cc	207/3392	231/3791
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE net	235 @ 6100	240 @ 5200
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE net	230 @ 4800	280 @ 3200
Transmission	4-speed automatic	4-speed automatic
Base price	\$25,930	\$19,809
Price as tested	\$29,690	\$24,571

DIMENSIONS		
Wheelbase, in./mm	108.5/2756	110.5/2807
Track, f/r, in./mm	61.6/61.4/1565/1560	61.7/61.1/1567/1552
Length, in./mm	198.3/5037	196.5/4991
Width, in./mm	73.1/1857	72.7/1847
Height, in./mm	55.7/1415	54.7/1389
Ground clearance, in./mm	5.2/132	5.5/140
Mfr's base curb weight, lb	3327	3414
Weight distribution, f/r, %	64/36	65/35
Cargo capacity, cu ft	15.5	16.0
Fuel capacity, gal.	16.1	18.0
Weight/power ratio, lb/hp	14.1	14.2

CHASSIS		
Suspension, f/r	MacPherson struts, lower control arms, anti-roll bar/ Chapman struts, lower transverse links, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, lower control arms, anti-roll bar/ Chapman struts, lower transverse links, anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, variable power assist	Rack and pinion, variable power assist
Turning circle, ft	38.6	36.9
Brakes, f/r	Vented discs/ discs, ABS	Vented discs/ discs, ABS
Wheel size, in.	16 x 8.0	16 x 6.5
Material	Cast aluminum	Cast aluminum
Tire size	225/55VR16	225/60HR16
Mfr. and model	Goodyear Eagle RS-A	Goodyear Eagle RS-A

PERFORMANCE		
Acceleration, 0-60 mph, sec	7.5	6.6
Standing quarter mile, sec/mph	15.7/88.6	15.0/92.3
Braking, 60-0, ft	128	134
Handling, lateral acceleration, g	0.80	0.79
Speed through 600-ft slalom, mph	63.6	63.3
EPA fuel economy, mpg, city/hwy	17/26	18/27