

Perfecting Pontiac's P-Shooter

Arguably the best year of the breed, the 1988 Fiero was a styling and performance delight



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The latter part of the 1970s ushered in a second energy crisis and high inflation. What better time, then, to propose a lightweight, two-seat commuter car with a sporty appearance, miserly fuel consumption and a relatively low price tag?

Those were the attributes presented to GM management regarding what became the 1984 Pontiac Fiero. With no obvious threat to the Corvette's performance reputation, and having a concept that was in line with the times, the "P-car" (P-body) was approved. Of course, Pontiac neglected to mention the fact that the original intent of the entire project was a lot more sports car than commuter car.

Though high fuel mileage figures, spine-compressing acceleration and glue-like stick in the curves are not always mutually exclusive goals—especially when considering the lightweight yet stiff P-car chassis, drag-cheating wedge-shaped body and mid-engine layout (a first for a U.S. production car)—in the 1984 Fiero's case, Pontiac was trying to play both sides of the equation by attempting to market it as an economy car and a sports car at the same time.

Evidence of this tactic is revealed in Pontiac's 1984 dealer brochure: "Fiero can be described as an economy car. It can also be considered a practical and durable car. And by its technical specifications alone, Fiero may legitimately be called a sports car." Problem is, some sports car people don't want to own a vehicle that is also referred to as an economy car, and to others who are trying to squeeze every possible mile from a gallon of gas, the term "sports car" has a wasteful connotation attached to it.

This two-pronged approach led to high expectations on both sides and inevitably resulted in some compromises. Budget constraints ultimately ended up combining a sports car appearance and technological, design and assembly innovation with a commuter car heart and chassis. The space-frame body structure, mill-and-drill construction and dent-resistant and no-rust Enduraflex body panels were state of the art, but the 92hp, 2.5-liter,

151-cu.in. Tech IV "Iron Duke" four-cylinder engine and chassis were derivative of existing economy car platforms to save money.

None of this was lost on road testers, many of whom applauded the build and styling attributes, but pointed out the acceleration and handling shortcomings to potential buyers. Regardless, the Fiero sold 136,840 units in its first year, well above its initial estimates.

Over the following four model years, Pontiac would continue to tip the scales in favor of the sports car side. In 1985, the new GT employed the smooth front and rear fascias and the side aero-skirts from the previous year's Indy Pace Car; it had WS6 suspension and offered the Pace Car's rear spoiler optionally. More important, it gained a 140hp 2.8-liter (173-cu. in.) V-6 engine (also optional on the SE). Additionally, suspension revisions were made to improve handling.

In 1986, the late-introduction restyled GT featured fastback-type sail panels and other visual upgrades. It also received a Getrag five-speed gearbox late in the model year for its V-6 engine, since the five-speed that had become available with the 2.5-liter engine in 1985 didn't have the torque capacity for the larger powerplant. Sports car leanings were becoming more obvious with each revision.

Mostly a carryover year, 1987's notable changes included an increase in fuel tank capacity to 11.9 gallons, from 10.2, in order to extend the driving range between fill-ups, and the ignition system was upgraded for the four-cylinder standard in the lower models.

For 1988, the Fiero's suspension was completely redesigned, ultimately delivering the sports car handling and braking that had been anticipated since the 1984 model. The street fighter notchback Formula was also introduced and featured the WS6 suspension and V-6 of the GT, but fewer standard creature comforts in order to keep the price down and performance up.

Mitchell Bell, a teacher from Winter Park, Florida, knows the history of the Fiero all too well. Back when he was preparing for college in the summer of 1998, his girlfriend, Samantha (now his wife), drove a 1988 Fiero GT. That led to meeting a fellow Fiero owner and the purchase of our feature car.

One afternoon, when Mitchell and Samantha were out, the driver of a C5 Corvette noticed her car parked in front of the house. He stopped and spoke with Mitchell's father, Michael, about Samantha's Fiero GT and explained that he had a Bright Red 17,000-mile 1988 Fiero GT for sale, which was in new condition. Coincidentally, Mitchell had been looking for a car to serve double-duty as a spirited daily driver for work and



Though there's no engine under the hood, the spare tire and other items take up possible storage space.



school, yet be interesting and clean enough to participate in shows with his dad. He had been considering the Buick Grand National, but decided that this Pontiac would be an excellent choice.

The following list of standard GT features leaves little doubt that the Fiero had grown into a real sports car by 1988. They include the 135hp multi-port fuel-injected 2.8-liter V-6 engine with 165-lb.ft. of torque; five-speed manual transaxle; Eagle GT+4 tires on aluminum wheels; four-wheel disc brakes; monotone Aero Package; tinted glass; body

side moldings; reclining bucket seats; convex rearview mirrors, left-hand remote; lamp group; Delco AM/FM stereo with seek and scan features, a clock and a cassette deck with auto reverse; tilt wheel with leather-wrapped three-spoke steering wheel; controlled-cycle wipers; instrument panel gauges with a tach; power windows; remote deck lid release; remote-release fuel-filler door; dual map lights and tuned dual twin-port polished exhaust.

Given its mid-engine layout, there is a carpeted storage area, it's behind the 2.8-liter V-6 engine that features multi-port fuel injection and a tuned runner-length aluminum intake with a bolt-together upper and lower plenum.

