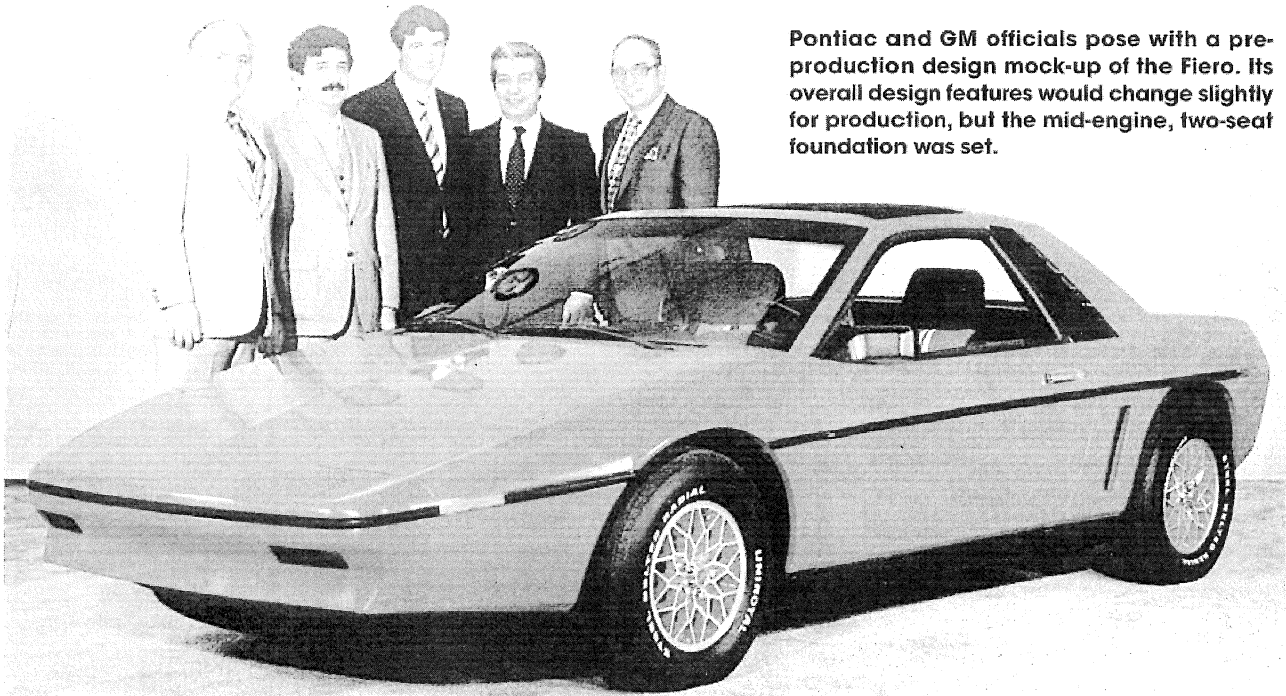


FIERO CHRONICLE

Upon its 20th anniversary, we examine the life and times of Pontiac's star-crossed two-seater

Text by Paul Zazarine | Photography and illustrations from the Paul Zazarine collection



Pontiac and GM officials pose with a pre-production design mock-up of the Fiero. Its overall design features would change slightly for production, but the mid-engine, two-seat foundation was set.

IN THE SIXTIES, JOHN DELOREAN WANTED A TWO-SEAT SPORTS CAR. INSTEAD HE GOT THE FIREBIRD. A DECADE LATER, PONTIAC WANTED A TWO-SEAT SPORTS CAR. INSTEAD, THEY GOT THE FIERO.

The debut of the Pontiac Fiero was one of the most anticipated new car introductions of 1984. Only the Corvette got more ink from the automotive press, and while the Corvette has survived the test of time, the Fiero's star blazed for five short years before it was extinguished.

How a car that held so much promise and failed in the marketplace is a story of compromise, cost cutting and the resulting defects that plagued product quality. It's also the story of a group of deeply dedicated engineers who passionately pursued the Fiero's transformation from spurious commuter car to true sports car, only to see it terminated just as it was finally becoming the car they intended from the start.

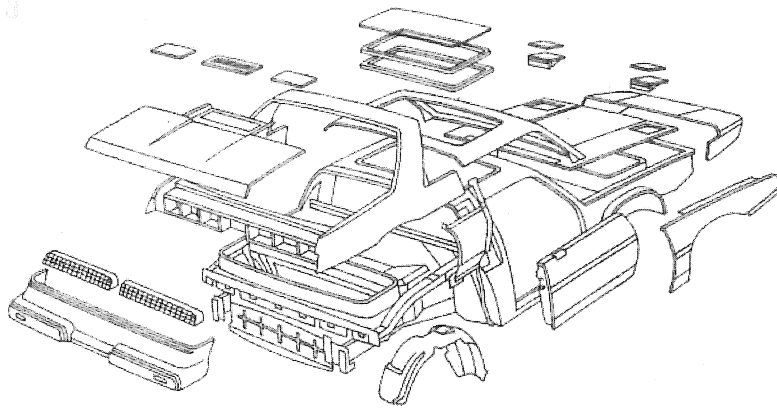
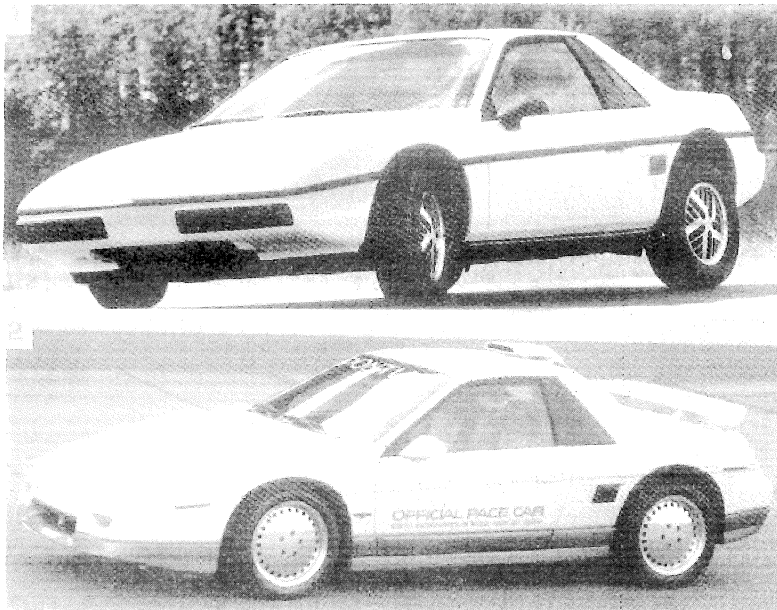
The Fiero began as the "P-car" project in GM's Advanced and Experimental design studio in 1979, a reaction to the second Arab Oil Embargo. GM

wanted a small commuter car to compete with the imports. After a full-sized clay had been approved, it was handed over to Pontiac in April 1980.

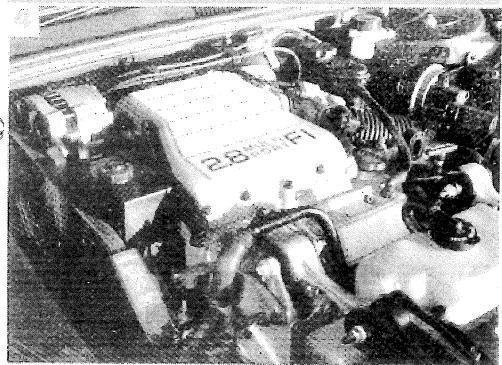
Known as the "Pegasus," the project came under the design supervision of John Schinella and the engineering of Hulki Aldikacti. On May 4, 1982 GM gave approval to sell the two-seater, but not before the engineering budget had been deeply slashed. The name Fiero was chosen, too. Translated from Italian, it means "very proud."

With just a \$400 million budget, Aldikacti and his team were forced to scramble to save the Fiero. To cut costs, Aldikacti borrowed the Corvette's SLA front suspension and steering, while the MacPherson strut rear suspension came from the Citation. In essence, the X-car front suspension and transaxle were turned 180 degrees and modified for the Fiero's mid-engine, rear-wheel-drive architecture. The seat hardware came from the Sunbird and even the Firebird contributed the outside rear view mirrors.

Since part of the sell to GM was its role as a gas-sipping commuter car, the Iron Duke four-cylinder engine was used. Rated at 92 horsepower, the Iron Duke used a Rochester single-barrel throttle-body



- 1** The 1984 Fiero created more excitement than any previous Pontiac new product launch, generating more than 40,000 pre-orders and ending the first model year run with more than 135,000 units.
- 2** In 1984, the Fiero was selected to pace the Indy 500; the first time a four-banger had led the grid since the 1912 Stutz. A special aero package was designed and the stock engine was replaced with a 2.7L Super Duty version of the Iron Duke that produced 232 horsepower. It propelled the Indy Fiero to lap speeds of nearly 140 mph. Pontiac built 2,000 replicas to sell.
- 3** Enduraflex body panels were mounted to the space frame by way of a "mill and drill" process that produced 39 mounting pads that supported the body panels. The 60 separate panels were base coat/clear coat painted, then installed on the space frame.
- 4** GM's 2.8L multipoint fuel-injected V-6 received different heads and special exhaust manifolds for the Fiero. It was rated at 140 hp @ 5,200 rpm.



fuel-injection setup and was hooked to a four-speed manual box (automatic was optional) and a 4.10:1 axle. Pontiac claimed 50 mpg at 50 mph.

If the Fiero's hardware was uninspiring, the assembly process was revolutionary for GM in that it used a "mill and drill" space frame, bolt-on Endura plastic body panels and a mid-engine layout. The Enduraflex composite had first been used on the 1968 GTO and absorbed minor knocks and never rusted. Fiero was the first to use it for a complete body skin and would win an award from the Industrial Designers' Association for innovation and styling.

When the Fiero was introduced on September 12, 1983, it caught the attention of consumers and auto journalists. The press raved about the styling, innovative assembly process and interior. They overlooked the engineering compromises and lack of power, prognosticating that continuous improvements would solve these weaknesses.

The 1984 Fiero came in three model variations: the base coupe, the SE and the Indy Fiero, which was a replica of the Indianapolis 500 Fiero pace car. The Indy Fiero came with special emblems, seats, and an aerodynamic body package. All

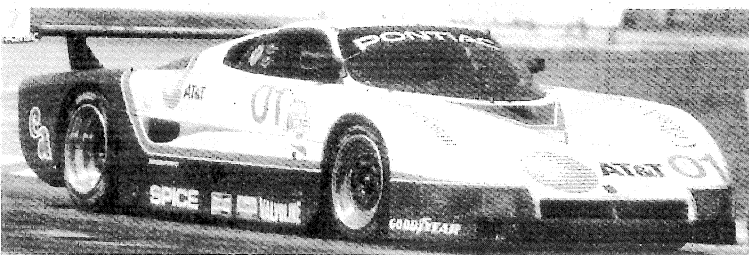
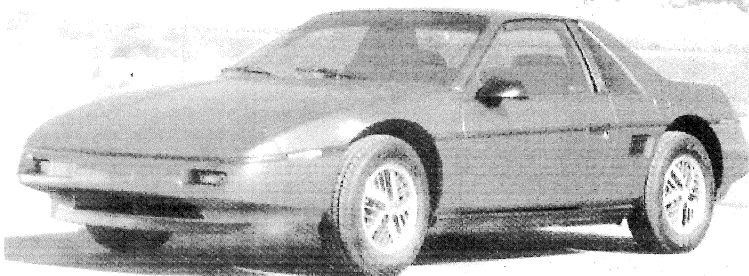
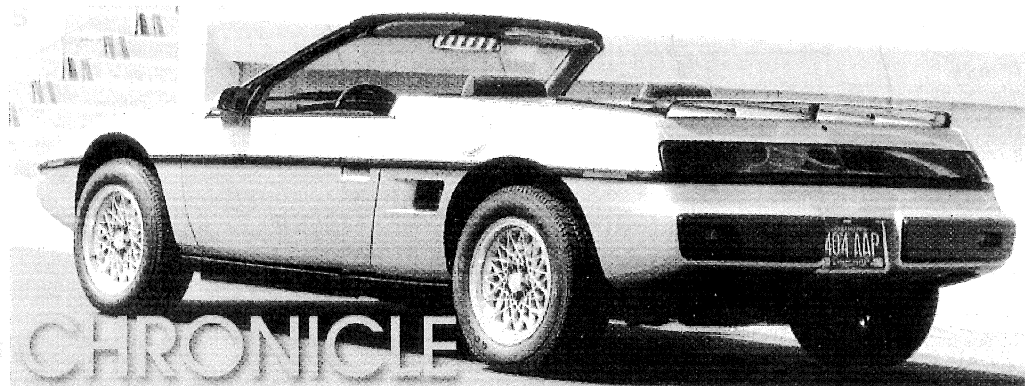
1984 cars were equipped with the 2.5L TBI four-cylinder engine.

Accolades for the new Fiero came from all quarters. It was included in the prestigious "Ten Best Cars of 1984" by *Car and Driver* magazine and finished second to the Corvette for *Motor Trend's* "Car of the Year" award. When the model year was over and sales were tallied, the Fiero had sold more than 135,000 units. Pontiac predicted the Fiero could sustain the sales mark each year - a promise that would come back to haunt the Excitement division.

Fiero Production 1984 - 1988

| YEAR | BASE | SE | INDY | TOTAL | USA | CANADA |
|-------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|
| 1984 | 7,088 | 87,027 | 20,110 | 114,225 | 114,225 | 0 |
| 1985 | 6,280 | 147,704 | 13,019 | 167,003 | 167,003 | 0 |
| 1986 | 9,143 | 25,300 | 24,316 | 58,759 | 58,759 | 0 |
| 1987 | 12,809 | 3,878 | 3,105 | 19,792 | 19,792 | 0 |
| 1988 | 12,553 | 0 | 0 | 12,553 | 12,553 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 61,873 | 124,929 | 40,540 | 227,342 | 227,342 | 0 |

FIERO CHRONICLE



- 5** Pontiac commissioned American Sunroof Corporation to produce a convertible prototype. It was considered for production but cancelled due to cost and the Fiero's continued lagging sales.
- 6** Pontiac obtained almost 20 percent of Fiero buyers had traded in an import, making it the top import conqueror of 76 domestic car makes.
- 7** Pontiac Motorsports had designs on racing the Fiero, even before the first production car was built. The Fiero enjoyed great success, winning the 1987 Daytona Sunbank 24-Hours of Daytona and capturing the IMSA Manufacturers Cup. It posted 11 fastest qualifying positions, set 10 fastest race laps and won 9 events.

Death Of A Sports Car - The Inside Story

...of the problems. But the biggest problem was the fact that the biggest... The 2.8L V-6 multi-cylinder engine was the victim of defective connecting rods. When these rods failed, it could... They would rip throughout the engine, putting oil into the cylinder and... There were other quality problems such as... loose pistons and other... was based for the 1984 Fiero.

...the new Fiero... they handled each rod as a... to the National Highway Traffic... By 1987, the... in... as many... to the ground.

...of the problems of the... potential customers... with the public... other... to... Fiero sales began to...

...in early 1987... under government... of 1984 Fiero...

...the high cost of... with...

Pontiac delivered a V-6 in 1985, the L44. It was one of GM's ubiquitous 60-degree, 2.8L multi-port fuel-injected engines. The L44 delivered 140 horsepower, a stout 170 lb-ft of torque and could be mated to a Muncie four-speed transmission. This power team boosted the top speed to 125 mph and slashed two seconds from 0-60.

In 1985, the GT also was introduced. It used the 1984 Indy pace car's aero package and transformed the Fiero into more of a sports car. It also was faster than the Toyota MR2 and cost only half as much as a Corvette. But even with the addition of the GT, sales took a serious tumble to just over 75,000.

The GT's styling was revised in 1986 with a fast-back rear deck and side pillars. A Getrag/Muncie 5-speed was added to V-6 models halfway through the year. Sales rebounded, too, by more than 8,000 over '85.

Few changes were made for 1987. The LR8 four-cylinder's oiling system was improved and output was boosted to 100 horsepower, thanks to a new ram-tuned manifold and a distributorless ignition. The base coupe's front and rear fascias were facelifted and the SE also received the aero package. Sales had now dropped to one third of 1984's numbers. Pontiac attributed this "squeeze"

FIERO CHRONICLE



The yellow one's advantage comes from the red one. And vice versa.

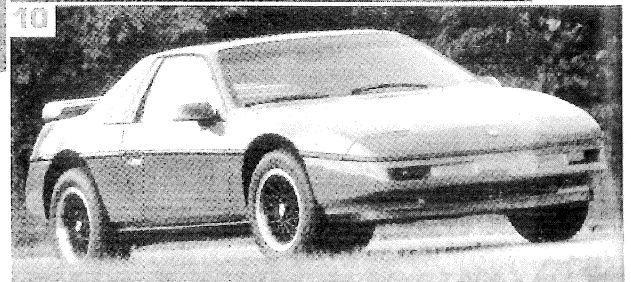
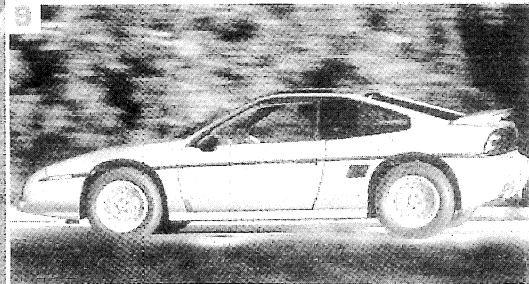
The yellow Fiero is IMSA ace Bob Earle. It won six Camel GTU races in 1985, more than any other competitor. Its advantage comes from a modified version of the red Fiero's standard 2.5-liter engine and sleek aerodynamic shape. The red one, in turn, uses the same basic mid-engine layout and space frame design as the yellow one. So while racing improves the breed, here's a case where the breed also improves the racing.

PONTIAC FIERO
WE BUILD EXCITEMENT

8 Pontiac was quick to advertise the racing success of the Fiero. The Super Duty proved to be a powerful race engine and the Fiero cleaned up in IMSA competition.

9 The 1986 GT with the 140-hp V-6 engine and four-speed gearbox was a strong seller. New additions included 18-inch diamond spoke wheels and the superb WS6 suspension package.

10 New to the 1988 lineup was the Formula, which replaced the SE model. The Formula had all the performance hardware of the GT but without the aero package. T-taps were offered for the first time.



to "the entry of new nameplates into the two-seat market."

The major changes made to the 1988 Fiero were too little and too late. GM had invested \$30 million into the 1988 Fiero's suspension (money that was committed when sales were still strong),

replacing the off-the-shelf Chevette and Citation parts with new scrub and kingpin geometry that had shorter spindles, longer A-arms and a 28mm stabilizer bar. The Fiero's rear got a new subframe with a tri-link design that allowed for specific tuning of each component.

This new sophisticated suspension completely changed the Fiero's handling, adding a crisp and nimble agility that the X-car parts couldn't produce. Another major improvement was the addition of vented disc brakes. The SE model was discontinued and replaced by the Formula, which shared the GT's performance package but not its heavier body.

The Fiero finally delivered on the promise first hinted at in 1984, but weak sales, strong competition and crippling insurance premiums (as high as \$5,000 in some states), coupled with the reputation for fires, did the car in. Pontiac decided to drop Fiero at the end of the 1988 model year, and final orders for the car were accepted during April of 1988.

The last two Fieros to roll off the line were given away to employees on Aug 16, 1988. Then the lights were turned off in the plant, the glorious crusade was over and the proud Fiero died an undignified death.

PE

Resources

Whether you're just getting into the scene or are a die-hard in it, you'll find a lot of interesting information and resources on the Internet. Here are some of our favorites:

www.fierodriversonline.com: This site is an online community with a wealth of information and a lot of great photos.

www.fiero.org: Great site for Fiero-related clubs and events.

www.michiganfieroclub.com: Michigan Fiero Club site, there are lots of great photos and information on this site.

www.ciogf.org/clublisting.htm: List of Fiero clubs in the United States.

<http://members.rogers.com/ottawafiero/>: Ottawa Fiero Club site with links to many other Fiero-related sites.

<http://fiero.4ever.cc>: Site of the Fiero 4Ever website in Finland - if you can't find a Fiero in your area, this is the place to go to find a conversion.

www.fierostore.com: The place to go to find Fiero-related items.