

AutoWeek

INSIDE REPORT

Power solution

GM tried for years to build a well-rounded turbo V6 muscle car, but there was always too much power for the platform. Now 4wd comes to the rescue, proving that sometimes the best car for the job is a truck. James D. Sawyer reports on page 17.



Trading post

Mazda gave Ford a hand in developing the new Escort and Tracer. Now Ford returns the favor by supplying the Japanese manufacturer with a version of the two-door Explorer. J.P. Vettraino reports on the Mazda Navajo on page 20.



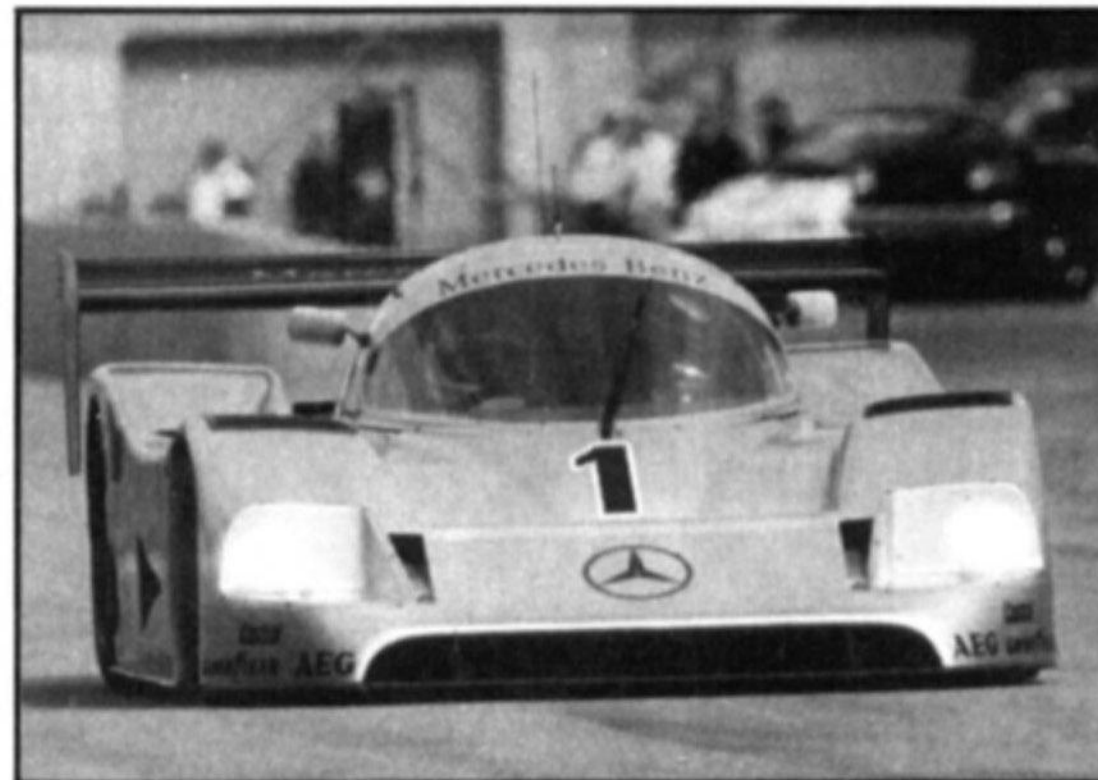
Focus on 4x4s

The temperature's been turned up in the sport/utility market, and nowhere does the mercury read higher than in the four-door segment. Story on page 24. And our AutoFile crew analyzes three examples beginning on page 25.



Covering all the holes

One errant manhole cover managed to damage enough Group C cars to force a red flag after only 61 of the proposed 110 laps at Montreal's Circuit Gilles Villeneuve. Quentin Spurring reports on page 60.



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PUMPED UP PICKUP

Turbocharging and all-wheel drive make GMC's Syclone a 'find' for those in search of the spiritual successor to Buick's legendary GNX

By James D. Sawyer



Performance is no drag for Syclone, which clocked 0-60 passes under 5 seconds and took quarter mile in a best-run 13.19 at 102.5 mph

This is an engine in search of a car.

AutoWeek, Feb. 24, 1986

That, those of you with long memories may remember, is how we characterized the Buick Grand National back when the rear-drive coupe was capturing enthusiasts' imaginations half a decade ago. Powered by a 235 hp turbocharged 3.8-liter V6, the GM mid-size two-door was a throwback to the classic muscle car era. In other words, its strong suit was prodigious acceleration—but only in a straight line. Its weaknesses were handling and, to a lesser extent, braking.

Despite the obvious limitations of the Grand National, someone at General Motors has continued to be enamored with the idea of mating forced induction with the corporation's pushrod V6. Even more horsepower was tried—in the limited-edition

GNX—and a nimbler, more modern platform was resorted to, the result being (to give it its full and proper name) the Pontiac 20th Anniversary Trans Am Turbo.

Neither of these later attempts could fully overcome the Grand National's basic problem: the engine's output overwhelmed the platforms and kept the Buicks and the Pontiac from being well-rounded cars.

Well, rejoice. A solution is at hand. The right car for the job has been found.

And that car is a truck.

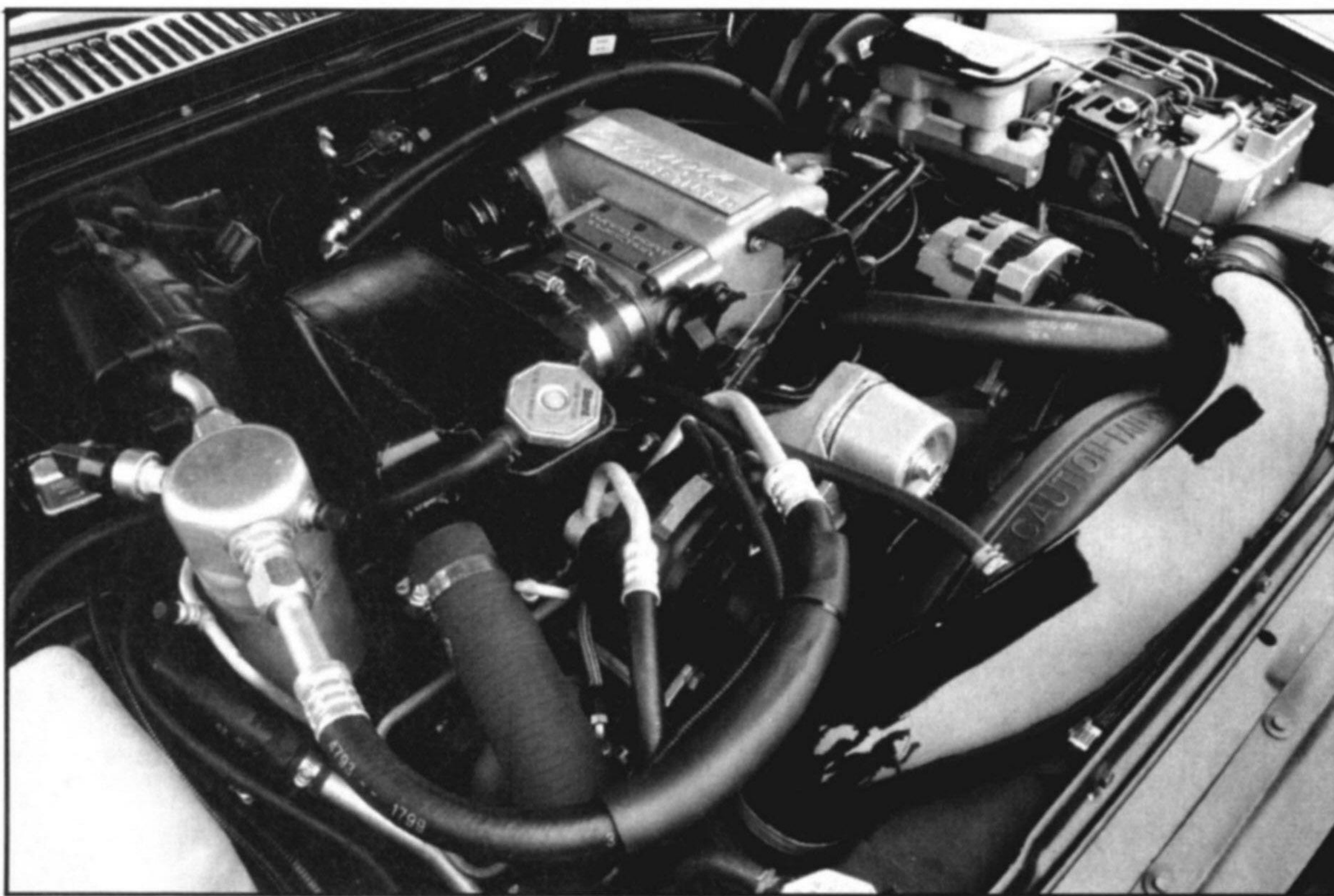
Yeah, buddy. A pickup, a specially-prepared but soon-to-be available to the general public GMC Sonoma, to be exact. Complete with a tonneau cover for the bed and a 500-pound cargo capacity.

Not to mention the ability to sprint from zero to 60 mph in 5.0 seconds. Or less.

Unimpressed? All right. Then how about the quarter-mile in 13.4 seconds. Or less.

If the "or less" is the main thing that's piqued your interest in what GMC is calling the Syclone, well, we ask you to be patient for just a matter of minutes more. First we want to tell you how the General's truck division has been able to get a pedestrian pickup to do everything but leap tall buildings in a single bound.

To start with, the 3.8-liter V6 has gone the way of the passenger pigeon. This is a GMC compact truck so the engine is the 4.3-liter Vortec V6 that's standard in this model. It's turbocharged, of course, and intercooled. Instead of the usual air-to-air intercooler found on Detroit products, however, the Syclone uses an air-to-liquid unit for greater and quicker cooling. Which results in greater and quicker boost. Which results in greater and quicker power. Which is transmitted via a four-speed automatic transmission to all four wheels.



Turbocharged 4.3-liter Vortec V6 whips up 280 hp and a whopping 360 lb ft of torque

The secret of the Syclone is revealed. Full-time four-wheel drive (the same system used by the Olds Bravada and AWD Chevy Astro/GMC Safari) is what makes this turbo V6 truck more successful than the turbo V6 Grand National, GNX or Trans Am Turbo.

Not only can it pick it up, it can put it down. Power, that is. To the tune of 280 hp at 4400 rpm and 360 lb ft of torque at 3600 rpm. Send those numbers out to spin only two tires and you'll wind up with puddles of molten latex and synthetics, clouds of smoke and little forward motion. Send them out to try to spin four 245/50VR 16 Firestones and you're going to be off the line like a shot.

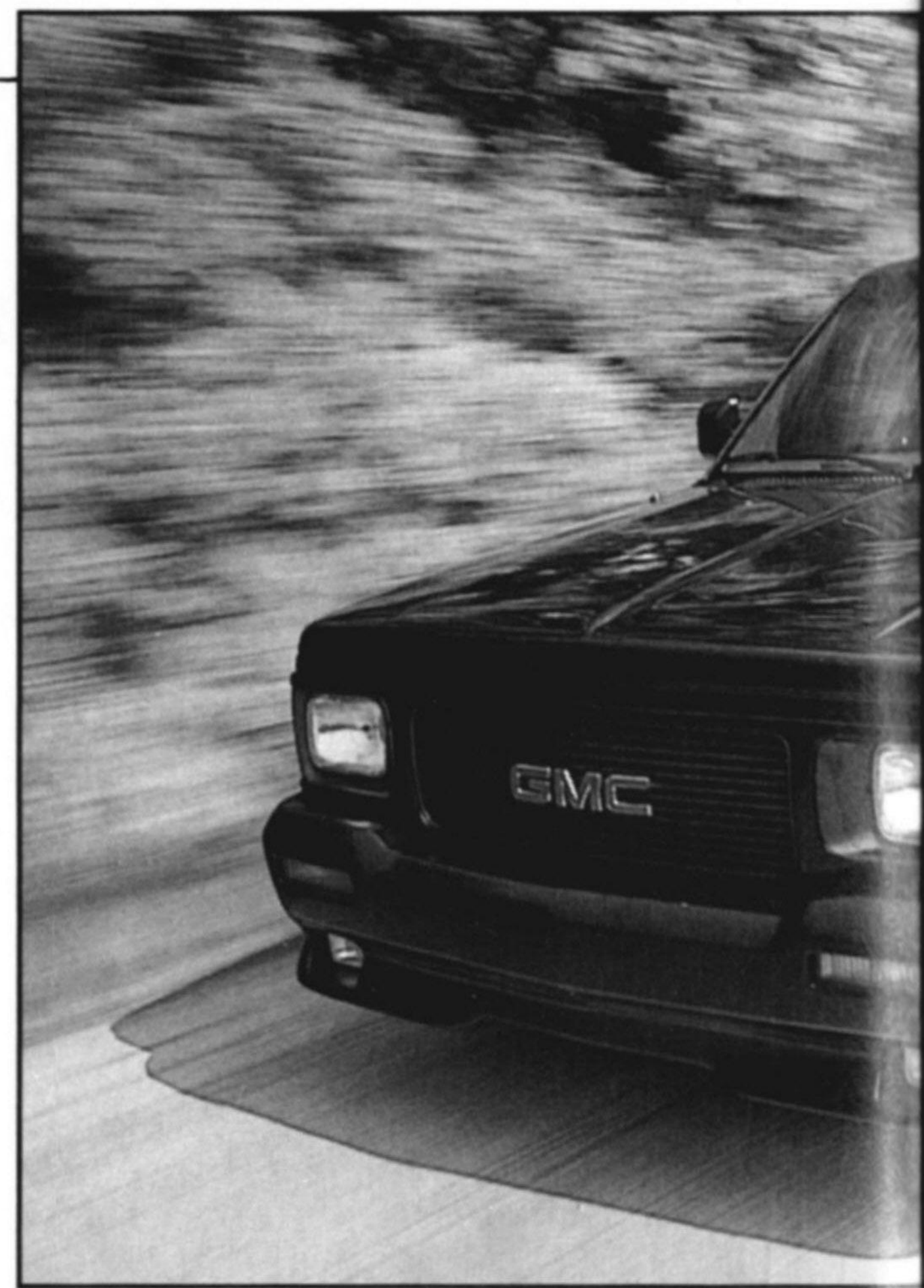
Which is exactly what Kim Nielsen, the man behind the Syclone, was after. The young GMC marketing executive has seen more Christmas trees than Santa Claus. Drag racing is part and parcel of his personality. He'd owned a number of Grand Na-

tionals and done fairly well with them at the strip, but knew he'd feel a lot better running a product from the GM division he worked for rather than from one he didn't.

Plus, he was well aware of the GN's shortcomings and how they could be solved with four-wheel drive. It took a bit of selling, but he finally convinced GMC brass of the merits of the Syclone project. PAS, Inc., of Troy, Mich., was contracted to build the prototype, and this is the vehicle we drove to a 0-60 mph time of 5.0 seconds. Or less.

O.K., enough teasing. Here's what we mean by the "or less": The best times we turned when we drove the Syclone at Milan Dragway on a hot and humid day were 4.69, 0-60 and 13.19 seconds at 102.5 mph for the quarter mile.

Impressive, but there is a caveat. These results—noticeably better than the factory figures of 5.0 and 13.4—were achieved



only after the intercooler was packed with ice and the radiator was hosed down. How much such extraordinary means improved the truck's performance is hard to tell. How much the performance was hurt by the driver being a journalist who'd never responded to Christmas-tree countdown before in his life is hard to tell as well.

The icing of the intercooler is the sort of icing on the cake to which a serious drag racer would resort, so the times are valid dragstrip numbers.

But the Grand National, GNX and Trans Am Turbo could generate those numbers. The beauty of the Syclone is not just that the four-wheel-drive system tames the turbo to let you accelerate, but that it does so to the extent that you can accelerate while coming out of a turn. And that's something its pred-

On-road truck tweaking

'Turbo City' mods pave way to more style, power

For those who prefer pavement with their sport truck, there are alternatives to the likes of Syclone or Dakota Sport.

An increasing number of aftermarket tuners like Turbo City in Orange, Calif., have developed performance packages for light trucks. The advantage is the ability to tailor a truck—aesthetically or mechanically—to taste. From bolt-on tweaks to twin turbos, you can add as much or as little (mostly legal) horsepower as desired.

Turbo City began doing replacement turbos more than a decade ago, and has built a full line of performance products for cars and trucks. With the advent of the sport-truck craze, the company developed bolt-on packages for most full-size and

compact pickups. *AutoWeek* tested the "Turbo City Project Vehicle" Chevy C-1500 5.7-liter Sportside. Bottom line? Fun factor near the top of the scale.

The test truck was equipped with a "basic performance package" that includes free-flow exhaust and custom replacement computer chip. Additionally, it featured an underdrive crank pulley, high-lift rockers, a larger throttle body and a low-pressure nitrous oxide load. A suspension kit includes shorter, stiffer springs, high-performance shocks, an antiroll bar for the rear and a thicker one in front.

For looks, the Turbo City Chevy sports dark-tinted windows, a vinyl bed cover and wide 15-inch alloys. The suspension

kit lowers the truck four inches at the rear and 3.5 inches up front, and the package delivers a subdued sort of machismo.

Most of the fun in this machine flows from the engine and its scads of low-end torque (the company says 310 lb ft at the rear wheels, up nearly 25 percent from stock). Think about this a minute. Here's a pickup with its inherently light tail, a lower center of gravity and a lot less body roll. Add enough grunt to spin the wheels at a little more than half-throttle, even with an automatic. The sum is throttle oversteer on demand, at fairly low speeds without much sweat: not great for the tires, but excellent entertainment.

The power gives this Chevy acceleration you don't expect in a truck. We estimate 0-to-60 in the low seven-second range. That's enough to embarrass some so-called performance cars, and at least three seconds faster than a standard 5.7-liter Chevy



While power is its strong suit, Syclone's interior doesn't take a back seat. Contoured buckets (above) are firm, supportive. A 120 mph speedo is standard, as are leather-wrapped wheel, console, air, AM/FM cassette and power windows, locks

ecessors found rather harder to do. Giving grip to go along with all that power is the Syclone's major accomplishment.

Four-wheel ABS is another thing Syclone can boast of that those earlier vehicles couldn't, although the truck's disc/drum brakes are overshadowed by the full-disc system of the Trans Am Turbo.

Inside, however, the Syclone doesn't take

a back seat to anyone. There are firm, supportive contoured bucket seats, leather-wrapped steering wheel, center console, air conditioning, AM/FM cassette, power windows and locks, all as standard fittings.

All of which costs money, of course. While no firm price has been set yet, we've been told to expect something in the neighborhood of \$25,000. A tad expensive for a

SPECIFICATIONS

Base Price:	..... \$25,000 (est.)
Wheelbase, (in):	..... 108.3
Length/width, (in):	..... 180.5/64.8
Curb weight (lb):	..... 3526
Powertrain:	..... Front-longitudinal, pushrod, intercooled turbocharged, injected, 4.3-liter/262 cid 90-degree V6, cast iron block/heads, 280 hp @ 4400 rpm, 360 lb ft @ 3600 rpm, full-time awd, four-speed automatic
0-60 (sec.):	..... 5.0
Top speed (mph):	..... n/a
Suspension:	..... Front ind., control arms, torsion bars, shocks, antiroll bar; rear rigid axle located by semi-elliptic leaf springs, shocks
Brakes:	..... Vented discs front/drums rear, four-wheel ABS
Tires:	..... 245/50VR-16
Mpg/range:	... 14 mpg (est) × 20 gal = 280 miles (est)

truck—until you consider just what this truck can do.

Similar abilities led to markups and even downright gouging when the GN, GNX and Trans Am Turbo first came out. We don't expect the same thing to happen here. First of all, we think it'll take some time for a truck to earn quite the same cachet among enthusiasts as a car would. Secondly, Syclone production will be market driven. And GMC expects that demand will reach about 3000 units in the truck's first year. That's twice the number of Trans Am Turbos that were built, and nearly six times the production rate of the GNX.

GMC dealers are standing by to take orders now, although the Syclone won't go into production until December. Sonoma pickups will be plucked from the line at GM's Shreveport, La., assembly plant and then take a short trip to the facility that PAS has built nearby. Once the tweaks and the tunes have been completed Syclones will be shipped off to customers, with deliveries expected to commence in January.

And while that might be a little late, something tells us more than a few of them will wind up under a Christmas tree. ■

For \$1,800, Turbo City gave Chevy C-1500 5.7-liter Sportside pickup a new look, stance and 0-60 time in the low-sevens

pickup. And because the engine continues to pull up to almost 5000 rpm there's plenty of passing power.

Suspension improvements make this truck steadier than the typical pickup. On rough roads ride is stiff, but it's an improvement on smooth or undulating surfaces. And on sweeping curves it's stable and predictable.

Successive tight bends remind the driver that this is still a truck. Slow steering and the tendency to oversteer mean a lot of



J.P. Vettrino photo

work for moderate return. And there's one feature we wouldn't recommend: A Stage Two shift kit delays upshifts and improves durability, but "positive shifts" is a serious understatement when applied here. Even at part-throttle the trans won't shift into second

without squawking the tires. It gets annoying and, in traffic, downright abusive.

For maximum power, Turbo City can add twin turbos. The installed tweaks on our test model cost \$1,800, and kits are available for do-it-yourselfers. The rockers and nitrous are gray areas as far as the EPA and state air quality officials are concerned. The reprogrammed chip is definitely ... er, for off-road use only. And all the mods might not sit well with the manufacturer if warranty work is needed. Most dealers aren't likely to argue over a problem with the brakes, but if a head gasket blows, it could be a different story.

Still, an aftermarket package like Turbo City's offers a nice boost in power at a moderate price. Our test truck started fine, idled right and—save for the shift kit—was easy to live with. Those seeking a stylish, fast, reasonably practical vehicle may find it in a pickup like this. — J.P. Vettrino