

SPEED DEMON



Behind The
Wheel Of
The GMC
Syclone



By Rik Paul

It was an unusually busy day at the Los Angeles County Raceway. Gathered at the dragstrip were a variety of top fuel dragsters and other equally serious racing machines that were being fine-tuned for the NHRA Winternationals in Pomona, California. This hard-core performance crowd was not impressed easily, especially with factory-stock vehicles.

But when we parked the black pickup, it was as if a light bulb had been clicked on. People suddenly began to recognize the GMC Syclone. One after another, racers and crew members began drifting over to get a firsthand look, inside and out, at the truck they had

been hearing about for months.

Yes, the GMC Syclone has been causing quite a stir, not only in the sport-truck world, but in the entire automotive performance scene. The anticipation of this compact rocket's premiere has been building since it was first announced last summer. As



this article was being written, the first production units were finally being shipped to dealers' showrooms.

We've talked about this performance phenomenon before. In fact, Sport Truck was the first truck magazine to bring you photos of an actual Syclone prototype, as well as the first driving impressions. But with Syclones finally reaching anxiously waiting buyers, we felt it was a good time to take another, more in-depth look at what it's like to drive this instant legend. We intercepted a prototype Syclone from its tour of the auto-show circuit and put it through its paces during a couple of whirlwind, high-performance days.

The Rush

The first thing you notice when you spend a little time in a Syclone is how easily you adapt to having warp drive at your command. The Syclone

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is powered by a 4.3-liter Vortec V-6 that has been equipped with multiport fuel injection, a turbocharger that is capable of delivering up to 14 pounds of boost and a water-cooled intercooler that optimizes intake air density. The power output specs read 280 horsepower at 4400 rpm and 360 lb-ft of torque at 3600 rpm. Coupled with the light weight of the Sonoma body and chassis, this engine makes the truck blindingly quick.

Once behind the wheel, we quickly discovered that the Syclone has a dual identity. There's a fair amount of turbo lag in the 4.3. Plus, it's only available with an automatic transmission. So during normal around-town driving, with few opportunities for sustained acceleration, we didn't fully experience the turbo. In this mode, the truck acts like a normal 4.3-equipped Sonoma. However, once the boost gauge needle starts climbing, it's hyperspace time.

Cruising down the highway becomes an exercise in willpower. You know what the truck can do, and you find yourself waiting for opportunities to let it loose. Seeing a line of semis in front of you on a steep slope starts your adrenaline pumping. Now is the perfect time to sink your foot deep into the accelerator pedal, feel the turbocharger kick into action and ex-

perience the rush of a patented Syclone pass that's over way too soon.

The Rest

Fortunately, though, the Syclone is more than just a speed demon. In fact, with four-wheel antilock braking and a full-time, all-wheel-drive system, it's the most technologically advanced pickup in production. In addition, the body has been dropped about 1½ inches to lower the truck's center of gravity, and low-profile, 50-series Firestone Firehawk tires have been mounted on 16-inch aluminum wheels, enhancing the Syclone's cornering abilities.

The bottom line is that the Syclone is also the best handling stock pickup on the road. Once we

found our rhythm on a smooth stretch of winding road, we carved through turns with exhilarating stability and control. This feeling was mirrored during the handling tests, where the Syclone performed like a champ, sticking to the pavement better than any stock truck we've ever tested.

There were weaknesses in the handling package of the truck we tested that kept it from performing at the same world-class level as the drivetrain. For instance, the stock GM recirculating-ball steering system was vague, slow to react and imprecise. And the truck placed a premium on smooth driving. Charging hard into a corner did not inspire confidence in us. To compensate for this weakness, we found that corners are best handled by setting the suspension at the beginning of

How Fast Is Fast?

What do you do with a truck like the Syclone? There's no other truck on the road that can come close to its blistering acceleration. So where do you go for meaningful comparisons?

Well, we turned to the pages of *Motor Trend* to see how the Syclone compared to world-class performance cars. The results, drawn from the magazine's "Road Test Review" (March '91), are as enlightening as the Syclone driving experience itself.

Check out the comparison chart below. The Syclone runs with some very fast company.

Syclone Comparison

| MODEL | 0-60MPH ¹ / ₄ -MILE | |
|--------------------------------|---|------------|
| | (sec.) | (sec./mph) |
| CHEVROLET | | |
| CORVETTE ZR-1 | 4.7 | 13.1/110.0 |
| GMC SYCLONE | 4.9 | 13.6/98.6 |
| CHEVROLET | | |
| CORVETTE L98 COUPE | 5.3 | 13.9/99.0 |
| ACURA NSX | 5.4 | 13.7/103.1 |
| PONTIAC 20TH ANNIV. | | |
| TRANS AM | 5.4 | 14.2/95.8 |
| PORSCHE CARRERA 4 | 5.5 | 13.9/100.4 |
| LOTUS ESPRIT TURBO | 5.8 | 14.4/95.3 |
| CHEVROLET CAMARO IROC-Z | 5.8 | 14.4/97.8 |
| PORSCHE 928 GT | 5.9 | 14.3/99.7 |
| NISSAN 300ZX TURBO | 6.0 | 14.4/100.9 |
| FERRARI TESTAROSSA | 6.3 | 14.5/100.7 |

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the turn and letting it carry the truck crisply through the turns. The less steering input needed the better.

In addition, this prototype's suspension had been softened slightly to improve normal ride quality. The flip side of this is that at higher speeds, the truck overreacted to bumps and road irregularities, sacrificing a degree of overall control on bumpy or badly maintained roads. Whether this problem was just a result of a poorly dialed-in prototype or is inherent in production models remains to be seen. Of course, we shouldn't be going that fast on public roads anyway, right?

The final judgment on the Syclone's handling? "Smoothness" is the key. When smooth driving techniques are used on nicely paved roads, it's a blast. On ragged pavement, however, you should play it cool.

Other driving impressions? As might be expected with four-wheel ABS, the braking is excellent, giving a firm, progressive feel, even during a 60-0-mph panic stop.

In addition, the Syclone's cab, with sport bucket seats, a console-mounted shifter, a thick, leather-wrapped steering wheel, air conditioning, power windows and door locks, a tilt steering column and its sporty, attractive analog instrument cluster, is both comfortable and user-friendly.

Overall, we can confidently say that the Syclone is several notches higher on the adrenaline scale than any other factory pickup (as well as most customs) that we've driven. In fact, we feel that the Syclone is beyond mere truck compar-

isons. It definitely invites comparison with some of the best sports cars on the road, which is what we've done in the accompanying sidebar "How Fast is Fast?" The \$25,500 sticker price isn't cheap, but it will buy you a legend. ■

This Is Just The Beginning

GMC Truck has a good thing going with the Syclone, and the company plans on making the most of it. For instance, refinements for next year's model are already in the works. These will include an improved wastegate control mechanism to reduce turbo lag, dual remote mirrors, a redesigned console and an improved suspension that will be tuned for greater lateral acceleration and road holding ability. There is also talk of offering the truck in colors other than black, red being at the top of the list. How does the idea of a red Syclone with a black logo strike you?

Also playing off of the Syclone theme will be the new Sonoma GT. This two-wheel-drive, regular-cab

pickup is scheduled for release in the fall of 1991, and it will be powered by a high-output 4.3-liter V-6 capable of delivering 200 horsepower and doing 0-60 mph in 8½ seconds. It will include an automatic transmission, Syclone-like body styling, a sport suspension package, Syclone seats and instrument cluster, a console-mounted shifter, rally wheels and a price tag that's a bit lower than the Syclone's.

That's not all. Eventually, GMC would like to extend the Syclone influence to an economical, four-cylinder-equipped, base Sonoma pickup. It would probably offer Syclone styling cues and a 4.11:1 rear axle for better off-the-line acceleration, but basically it would be a way for the budget-minded buyer to get a little of that Syclone magic.

