

# GMC Sonoma GT

It may wear the Syclone's hand-me-downs, but it deserves better.

BY DON SCHROEDER

Does this story sound familiar? A car company takes a bread-and-butter vehicle, soups it up with exceptional performance, throws in spoilers, paint, or trim, and gives it a *rep*. The enthusiasts pant. The crowds point and stare. A star is born. But then, to bump up total sales, the company takes the spoilers and paint or trim and plops them on a lesser model for less money. The enthusiasts yawn. The crowds get confused. The star croaks. It's back to the drawing boards.

General Motors has played this game for years. Soon after Pontiac introduced the superb 6000STE in 1982, lesser 6000s began sporting the STE's exclusive paint and trim. A more flagrant example involves Chevy's Corvette ZR-1. One year after its introduction, Chevrolet fitted all Corvettes with the ZR-1's most distinctive feature: its "square" taillights.

Just last year, GMC introduced the \$27,465 Syclone pickup, a fire-breathing, 280-horsepower four-wheel-drive monster with a voracious capacity for speed and threatening looks to match. This season, GMC offers the Sonoma GT, on first sight a dead-ringer for the Syclone. It costs about ten grand less, but it's also less potent. So the copycat saga continues. Or does it?

For its \$16,770 entry price, the Sonoma GT comes with the same slick interior and the fully loaded option portfolio of the Syclone. (Which is no surprise: both vehicles receive their final trimming at PAS, of Pontiac, Michigan.) Where the GT departs from its muscular twin is the driveline. Power comes from GM's normally aspirated, 195-horsepower Vortec V-6, and it drives only the rear wheels. The wheels are stamped steel and shod with BFGoodrich Comp T/A 215/65HR-15 tires.

The Sonoma GT certainly can't match the Syclone's 0-to-60 time of 5.3 seconds, but at 7.6 seconds, it's hardly a slug. The engine could be smoother, but it feels strong, with enough torque (260 pound-feet at 3600 rpm) to put down a layer of rubber should the Dairy Queen lot need resurfacing. Otherwise, driving the GT is an experience remarkably similar to piloting



a Syclone. Its steering is knife-edged sharp and its cornering flat. The 4L60 four-speed automatic slams shifts just like in the Syclone. The engine even sounds the same.

GMC backs up the Sonoma GT's power with decent grip, 0.79 g, and equally respectable braking, 211 feet from 70 mph, thanks to a rear-wheel anti-lock system. This is a fun truck that can cover ground at a very quick clip. Most of the time, that is. Unfortunately, the Sonoma inherits the GM small-truck frame, which—with the GT's stiff springs—seems to flex like the uneven parallel bars at Barcelona. The resulting bounciness makes safe exploration of the Sonoma's cornering limits next to impossible on lumpy pavement.

Those stiff springs allow a cargo capacity of 950 pounds, but the cargo had better lie low. With the standard tonneau cover frame in place, the opening at the tailgate resembles an oversize mail slot. Loading anything taller than fifteen inches requires disassembly of the frame with hand tools. The cover should include a bag of Lee Press-On Nails. Reinstalling the snaps for the tonneau tests not only fingernail strength, but patience, too.

Serious haulers should consider another option: GMC can build a regular Sonoma with all the GT's speed goodies—engine, suspension, wheels, and tires—for \$13,291. It won't have the GT's full instruments, floor shifter, or zippy

spoilers. But if you relish the thought of greasing past the authorities, this vehicle offers the stealth of a submerged crocodile at feeding time.

The burgeoning sport-pickup market is serving up a host of choices. Dodge offers V-8 power in its mid-sized Dakota Sport. And those obsessed with size can opt for Chevy's tire-smoker, the full-sized 454SS (soon to be joined by Ford's F150 Lightning). In comparison, the pint-sized Sonoma GT offers a unique package. For a "sport" truck, it's the most athletic for its price, and its performance is nothing to snicker at.

Nice job, GMC. But did you have to make it look just like the mighty Syclone? ●

**Vehicle type:** front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger, 2-door pickup

**Price as tested:** \$16,770 (base price: \$16,770)

**Engine type:** V-6, iron block and heads, GM engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement	262 cu in, 4300cc
Power (SAE net)	195 bhp @ 4500 rpm
Transmission	4-speed automatic with lockup torque converter
Wheelbase	100.5 in
Length	181.7 in
Curb weight	3307 lb
Zero to 60 mph	7.6 sec
Zero to 100 mph	26.2 sec
Street start, 5 to 60 mph	7.8 sec
Standing 1/4-mile	16.1 sec @ 84 mph
Top speed	112 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	211 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.79 g
Road horsepower @ 50 mph	20 hp
EPA fuel economy, city driving	17 mpg
C/D observed fuel economy	19 mpg