

If Santa didn't bring you a sports car, you may have to buy one yourself. More than ever there are some fabulous—and even affordable—numbers to choose from.

Good-bye, hair shirt

By Jerry Flint

THE IMAGE of a sports car has always been sweet. Youth, pretty girls, sunglasses, a caressing breeze in a top-down roadster.

Living with the sucker was a little harder. "Two wives ago, my wife said you have to be a sport to drive a sports car," says one auto writer. "She meant owning a sports car was a kind of hair shirt." The lady was right. It wasn't a breeze, it was a cold hard wind in the face and here comes the rain. Sometimes there weren't even roll-up windows. Air-conditioning? Dependable heaters? Wrong car.

Most of the sports cars then were British—MG, Austin-Healey, Jaguar, Triumph—and any day the car ran

without breaking down was a good day. On a bad day, go find parts and try and clean up the oil spots on the driveway. What made up for all the trouble was that it was fun.

Today's sports car buyers get all the fun and few of the hassles of the old days. Good-bye, hair shirt. Hello, problem-free, even luxurious—but still thrilling—driving down back-country roads.

Not that it's easy figuring out what a sports car is nowadays. In the old days it was an open roadster with two seats, manual transmission, and a certain panache in looks and going around corners. Today's sports car may be a closed coupe, it might have



Chrysler President Robert Lutz in his Cobra

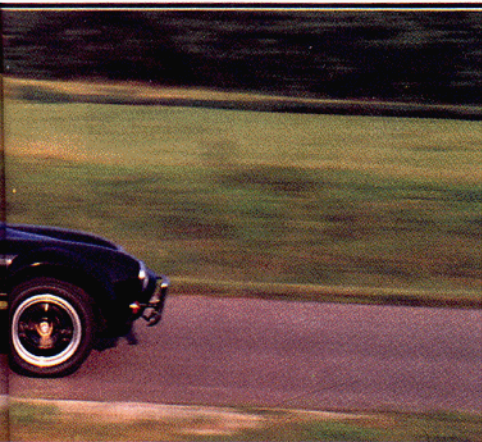
an automatic transmission, possibly a backseat, definitely air-conditioning and a break-the-sound-barrier audio system. It might even be a pickup truck. It won't be roomy, but you won't have to risk your back getting in and out of the thing. The ride will be firm, but you won't get a sore behind. These cars will whip around any curve or corner you can find.

Speed is the one searing difference between today's sports cars and yesterday's. Today's are much faster—130 miles an hour, 140 and even 150 for the powerful closed coupes. And they hold the road at those speeds.

The bestseller right now is Mazda's Miata, a traditional two-seat roadster



Mazda's 255hp RX-7 on sale in March



John Ort



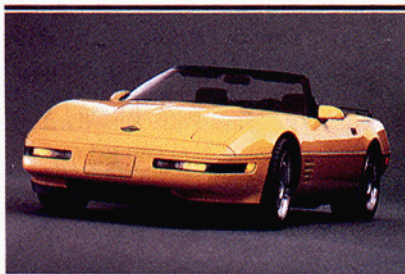
Toyota's two-passenger MR2



Porsche's new 968



Mazda's Miata, built for the true believer



Chevrolet's Corvette



Nissan's 300ZX



Mitsubishi's 3000GT can be had with all-wheel drive



Chrysler's coming V-10 Viper



The Spider Veloce from Alfa Romeo

with optional automatic transmission and detachable hardtop, listing at \$14,800 (but \$16,500 is a realistic price with common options like an audio system and air-conditioning). Some 30,000 were sold in 1991. Another two-seat roadster, the Alfa Romeo Spider, lists at \$21,000, with 1,300 sold last year. A third roadster, the British Lotus Elan, lists at \$40,000, but you can probably get one for closer to \$30,000. Only a few hundred were sold in the U.S. last year.

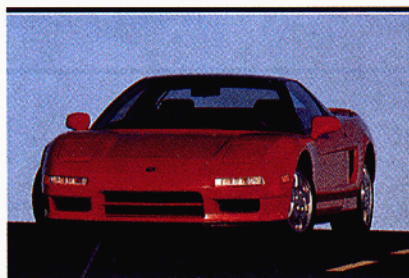
Then come the closed coupes like Toyota's two-passenger MR2, starting at \$16,000 list (almost 10,000 sold) but more than \$20,000 if you want to go turbo with a T-bar roof.

Another closed coupe, Mitsubishi's 3000GT, starts at \$20,000 but quickly punches into the luxury-tax zone of \$30,000 if you load it with all the good stuff like all-wheel drive and the six-speaker, 100-watt sound system. The Dodge Stealth is similar both in design and price; both cars have a small backseat. Nissan's 300ZX—the latest in Nissan's famous "Z" line, first launched in 1969—lists from \$29,000 to \$37,000. The only made-in-the-U.S.A. sports car, Chevrolet's Corvette, starts at \$34,000.

If it lives up to the notices already given it by test drivers in the automotive press, Mazda's new two-seat RX-7 coupe, with 255 horsepower, will muscle its way nicely into the



GMC's Syclone, drive it to believe it



Acura's 155mph NSX

field. Priced around \$30,000, the RX-7 is due to arrive in March.

At the high end are two-seaters like Honda's Acura NSX, a 155mph, aluminum-bodied closed coupe starting at \$63,000, and Chrysler's Viper, arriving in the spring, with a V-10 engine. Price: \$50,000.

Porsche's new 968 line—introduced in the American market last fall—runs from \$40,000 to \$54,000. Porsches top out at \$99,000 for the

911 Turbo.

That about does it for traditional sports cars, but hybrids abound, too. Honda's new CRX, coming in fall, could be a sports car in its high-performance model, but the low-priced CRXs don't have the punch. Or take Subaru's new SVX coupe. With automatic transmission only and backseat, it has so much room and comfort it's hard to call it a true sports car.

If you pine for the old days but don't want to buy a used sports car, you can make your own throwback. Replica kits of the old 427 Cobra, an open roadster of the mid-1960s, are on the market. "The rustic simplicity that was the Cobra's downfall on the new-car market is exactly what makes it work as a kit," says Patrick Bedard of *Car and Driver*. "You can go out to your garage and build a kit 427 Cobra that's absolutely as leaky and noisy and drafty as the real one." Why bother? Answers Bedard: "These Cobras are strutting, overpowered, libido-tickling throwbacks to a time when too much was just about right." Cost: from \$20,000 (without the engine) to \$60,000, fully assembled.

And what about a sports truck? GM saw you coming. The GMC Syclone is a two-seat pickup with a 4.3-liter, 280-horsepower V-6 that does 0 to 60 in less than 5 seconds and, in GM's words, "its performance rivals top sports cars." And you can throw a half-cord of wood in the back. ■