

HONDA 600 SEDAN &

PHOTOGRAPHY: HUMPHREY SUTTON



HONDA 600 COUPE

BY PATRICK BEDARD



Whatever you do, don't buy a Honda 600 just because the price is right. Sure, we know, there isn't another brand new car in the whole Continental U.S.A. that you can call yours for \$1495 (well, OK, you'll probably have to throw in an extra \$100 tribute to the dealer for washing the cosmoline off, so call it \$1595). The Honda 600 sedan is the only one. But to buy it just because it's cheap would be a mistake.

But there are reasons for buying one. Valid reasons. How about the quickest possible trip from One Park Avenue down to Greenwich Village? Or maybe your life style forces you to scavenge parking spaces from the scraps left by Electras? No car can do that better than the Honda. Not only is it the cheapest car in the U.S., it's also the smallest. Just ten-and-a-half feet from bumper-to-bumper, more than three feet shorter than a Pinto. And it's less than four-and-a-half feet wide, which means you can weave down the divider lines on the freeway like the cops do on their fat-back Harley Hogs.

A Honda is a car whose doors you can fling open in jammed-up shopping center parking lots while Big Detroit owners dust the backsides of their trousers as they squirm down the crevices between road-grimed fenders. There's no doubt about it; you can bypass about 50% of the normal grief connected with metropolitan travel if you leave your prairie

“The maneuvers you can make with a Honda, and your frame of mind while driving it, are similar to a cyclist's; that is both fun and a necessity.”

cruiser back in the garage and head downtown in a Honda. You can also have some fun. You enter a scaled-down motor-ing world where sidewalks are as inviting as empty freeways and you can damn near make a U-turn in one lane. It's like being at a greased pig hunt and you're the pig. The Honda handles about as well as the normal American sedan, but you can go around corners at five times the prevailing rate just because you have so much room to spare. There are no fenders way back there in the distance to swing out and clip somebody's mail box, and there are no vague worries about the closeness of your right door handle to those roaring truck wheels. That handle is not much farther away than your elbow, and it's pretty easy to keep track of, even when the old adrenaline is pumping. So—yeah—in a manner of speaking



The sedan: straight-up seat and lie-down wheel

the Honda 600 is a *sports car*. Not the normal top-down, twin-cam, dual-carburetor roadster kind of sports car, but a sports car nonetheless. Because it's fun to drive—fun to do all the terrible, eyebrow-raising, cop-baiting, adolescent tricks like slingshotting semis on the Interstate.

It's a weird kind of fun that you never could have had on four wheels before, unless you're a former Mini owner—or an urban motorcyclist. And right there, ladies and gentlemen, is the nugget of truth about the Honda. The maneuvers you can put it through and your emotional frame of mind while doing it, are similar, indeed indistinguishable, to those of a motorcycle rider. It is both the fun and the necessity of the Honda. Not only do you enjoy almost all of the freedom of movement of the bike rider, but disaster awaits you from the same sources. Watch out for cars! Live in fear of trucks. Bike riders learn that the first afternoon. When you follow a car, watch the driver's eyes in his rearview mirror. Sometimes, with a perfunctory glance at his mirror, he telegraphs a lane change that he can't be bothered to signal overtly. And never assume that the car coming up on a cross street will stop. It probably will—almost always—but that one time it doesn't is all it takes. In fact, never assume anything. And always be ready for the worst. You see, the Honda 600 sedan, with a full tank of gas, weighs 1355 lbs. A run-of-the-mill American intermediate, with air conditioning and all the rest, weighs about three times that. When they come together, it's like punting a football.

We wouldn't want to go too deeply into the psychology of the whole thing, but in a most magnetic way, that is a strong



The coupe: lie-down seat and a straight-up wheel

undercurrent in the Honda's appeal. You *must* drive it well. It's one of the few cars that is never boring. And the rewards for a good job are much the same as those for the motorcycle rider. You'll be able to drive it again another day.

That being the case, the Honda car has two applications: utilitarian transportation and just plain on-road frivolity. Knowing Honda, and the success that firm has enjoyed in the motorcycle market just by being in the right place at the right time, it's probably no coincidence that there are two versions of the Honda 600, a sedan and a coupe. The application of each falls pretty much where you'd expect it to.

Mechanically, the two are identical—same 600cc engines, same 4-speed gearbox, same suspension, same brakes—so let's talk about the differences. Driver comfort is the big one. The coupe has it and the sedan doesn't. The coupe's steering wheel sticks out of the dash at a reasonable angle and its seat back lets you recline in a civilized position. And that's what it takes. Despite the car's shrunken overall dimension, the coupe has room for two in front and little pretense about stowing someone in the back. And those in front—if they are Pepsi Generation types with athletic waist lines and they like each other—can have a pretty good time.

The trouble with the sedan is that the people packagers at the factory were optimistic and tried to make a four-person car out of it. To do so, they moved the steering wheel up for leg clearance so that it's nearly flat, in the GM Coach position. And then they stood the front seat-backs straight up (maybe

(Text continued on page 100; Specifications on page 46)

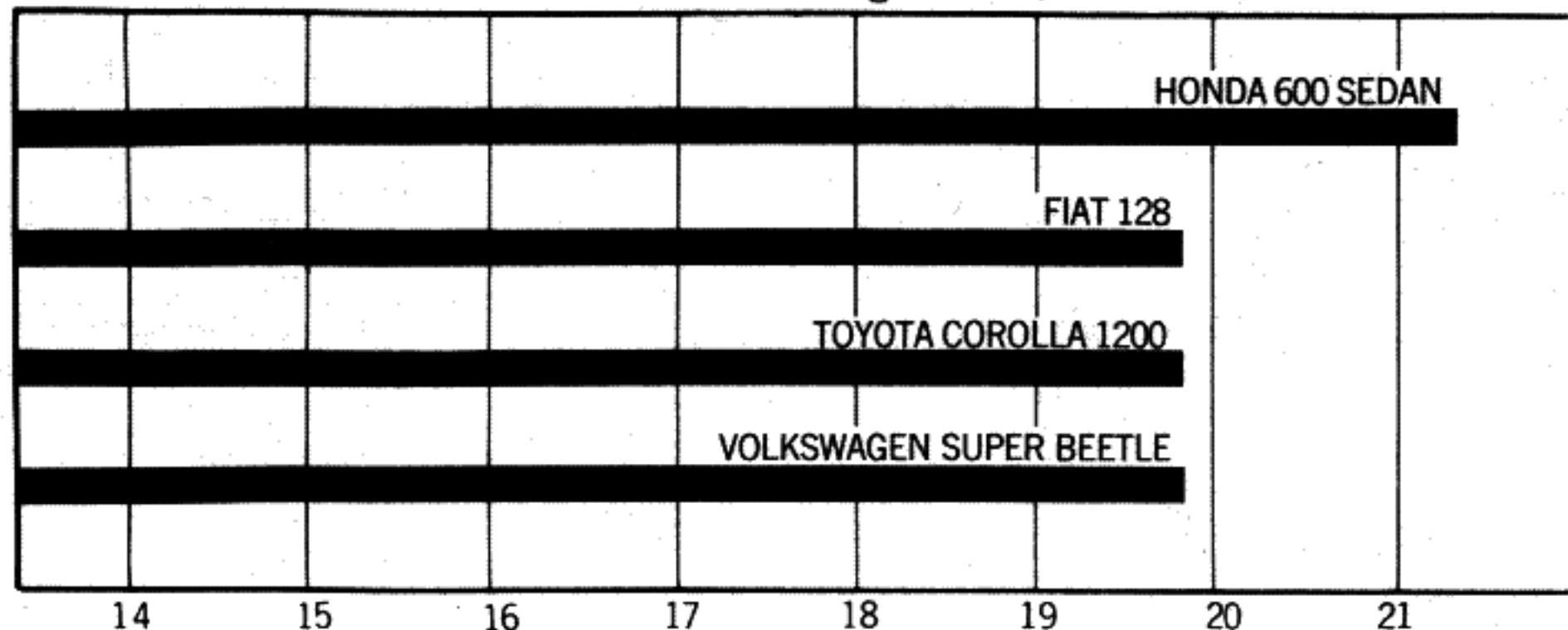
The coupe: flip-up storage compartment and practicality



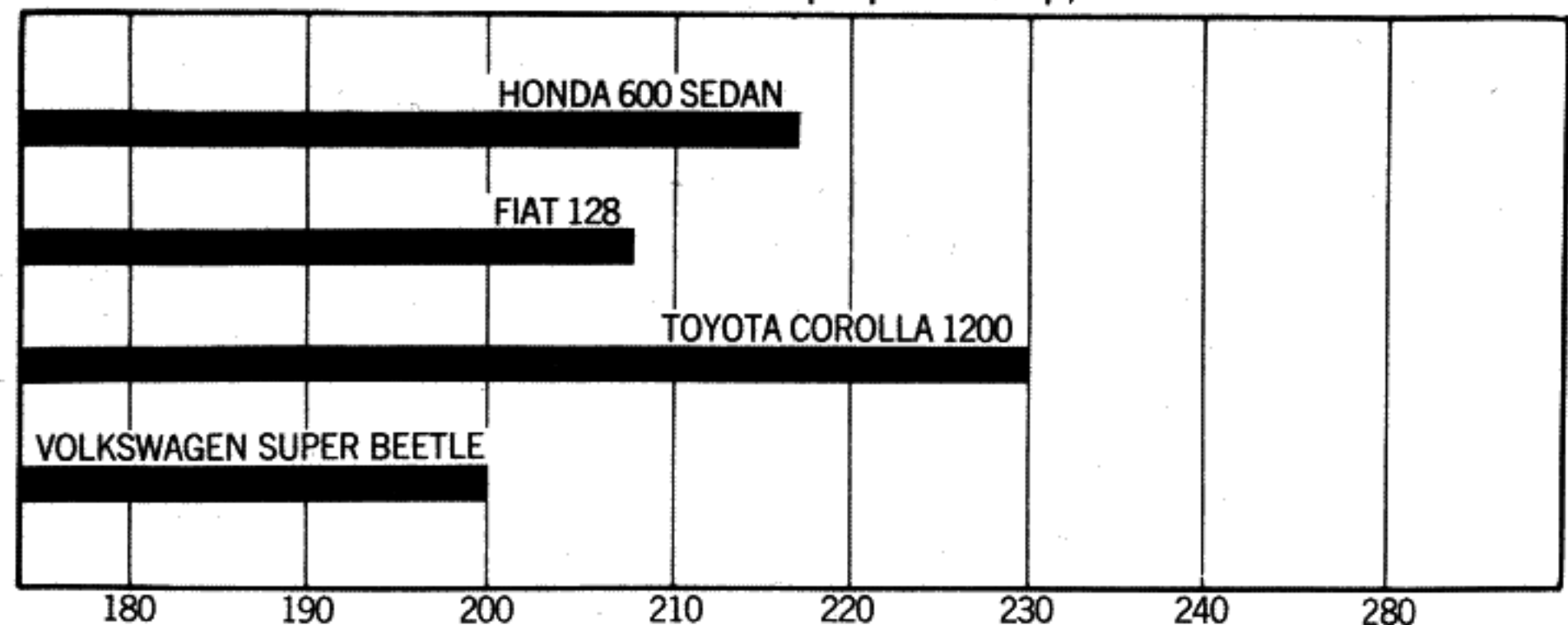
The sedan: built-in trunk with marginal usefulness



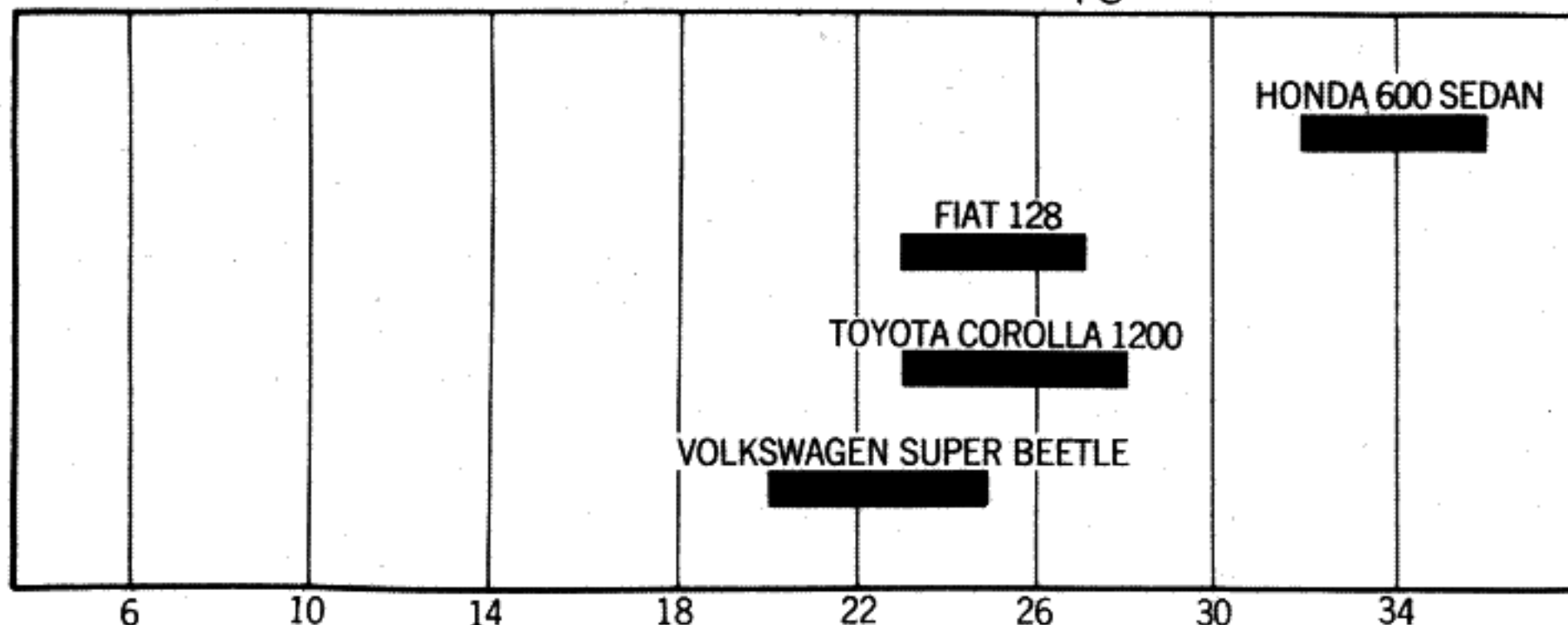
ACCELERATION standing 1/4 mile, seconds



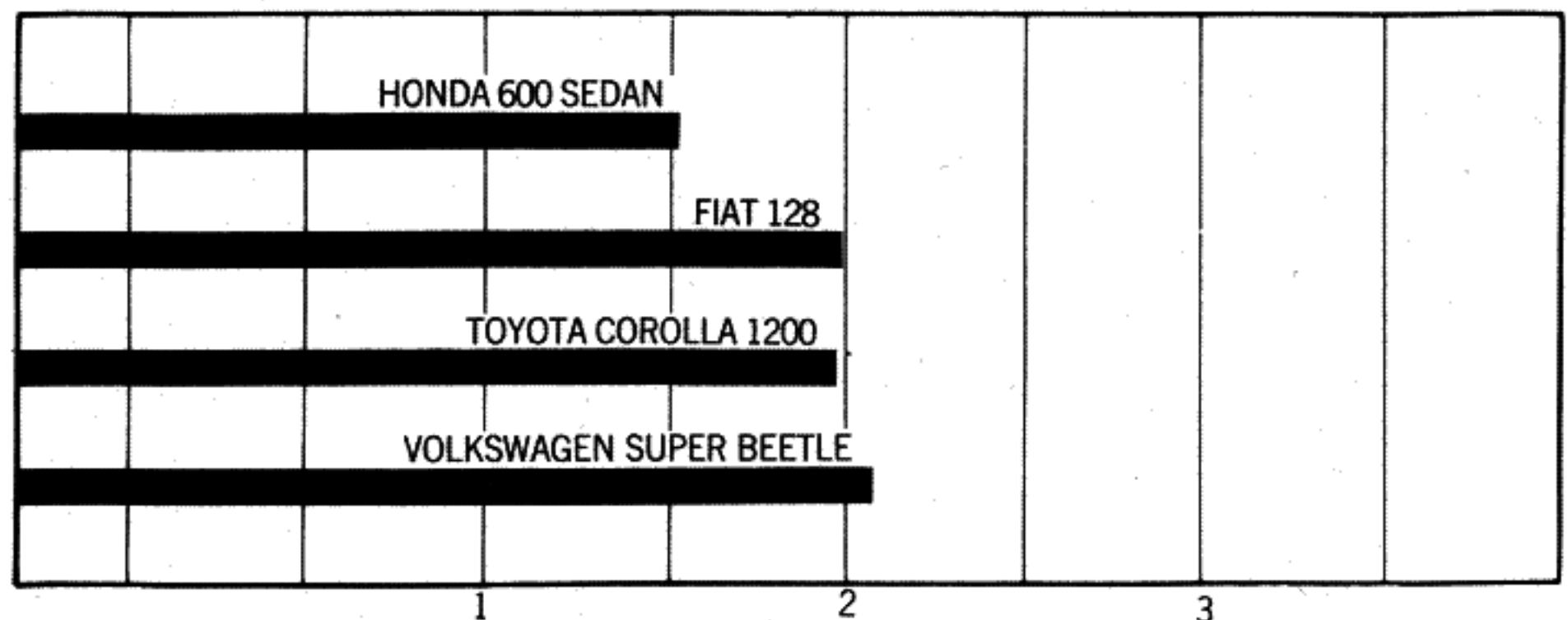
BRAKING 70-0 mph panic stop, feet



FUEL ECONOMY RANGE mpg



PRICE AS TESTED dollars x 1000



Honda 600 Sedan

Importer: American Honda Motor Co., Inc.
100 West Alondra Boulevard
Gardena, California 90247

Vehicle type: Front engine, front-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door sedan

Price as tested: \$1595.00

(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges, does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: Base sedan, \$1495.00; Dealer preparation, \$100.00

ENGINE

Type: 2-in-line, air-cooled, aluminum block and head, iron liners, 2 main bearings

Bore x stroke 2.91x2.74 in, 73.9x69.6 mm

Displacement 36.5 cu in, 597 cc

Compression ratio 8.5 to one

Carburetion 1x1-bbl Keihin

Valve gear Single overhead camshaft

Power (SAE gross) 36 bhp @ 6000 rpm

Torque (SAE gross) 31.8 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm

Specific power output 0.99 bhp/cu in, 60.3 bhp/liter

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission 4-speed, all-syncho

Final drive ratio 3.20 to one

Gear Ratio Mph/1000rpm Max. test speed

I 5.07 3.4 23 mph (6750 rpm)

II 3.08 5.6 38 mph (6750 rpm)

III 1.98 8.6 58 mph (6750 rpm)

IV 1.38 12.4 75 mph (6050 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 78.7 in

Track, F/R 46.1/44.7 in

Length 125.5 in

Width 52.5 in

Height 52.4 in

Ground clearance 5.9 in

Curb weight 1355 lbs

Weight distribution, F/R 66.0/34.0%

Battery capacity 12 volts, 45 amp-hr

Alternator capacity 480 watts

Fuel capacity 6.9 gal

Oil capacity 3.2 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-sway bar

R: Rigid axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs

STEERING

Type Rack and pinion

Turns lock-to-lock 3.0

Turning circle curb-to-curb 32.9 ft

BRAKES

F: 7.2-in solid disc, power assist

R: 7.1 x 1.4-in drum, power assist

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size 13x3.5-in

Wheel type Stamped steel, 4-bolt

Tire make and size Bridgestone, 520-10

Tire type Bias ply, tube-type

Test inflation pressures, F/R 30/24 psi

Tire load rating 670 lbs per tire @ 36 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to Seconds

30 mph 4.8

40 mph 8.2

50 mph 12.8

60 mph 20.8

70 mph 37.7

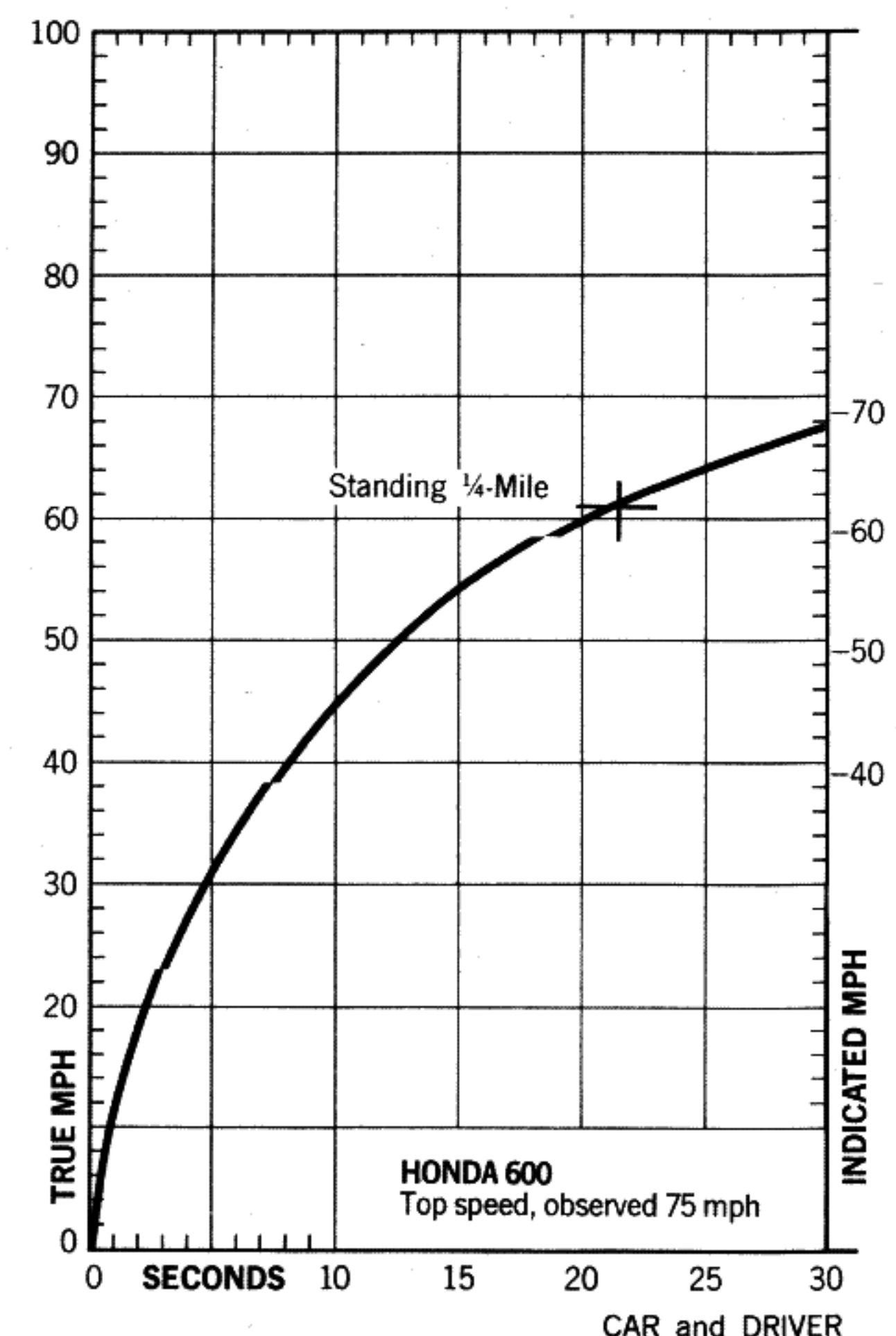
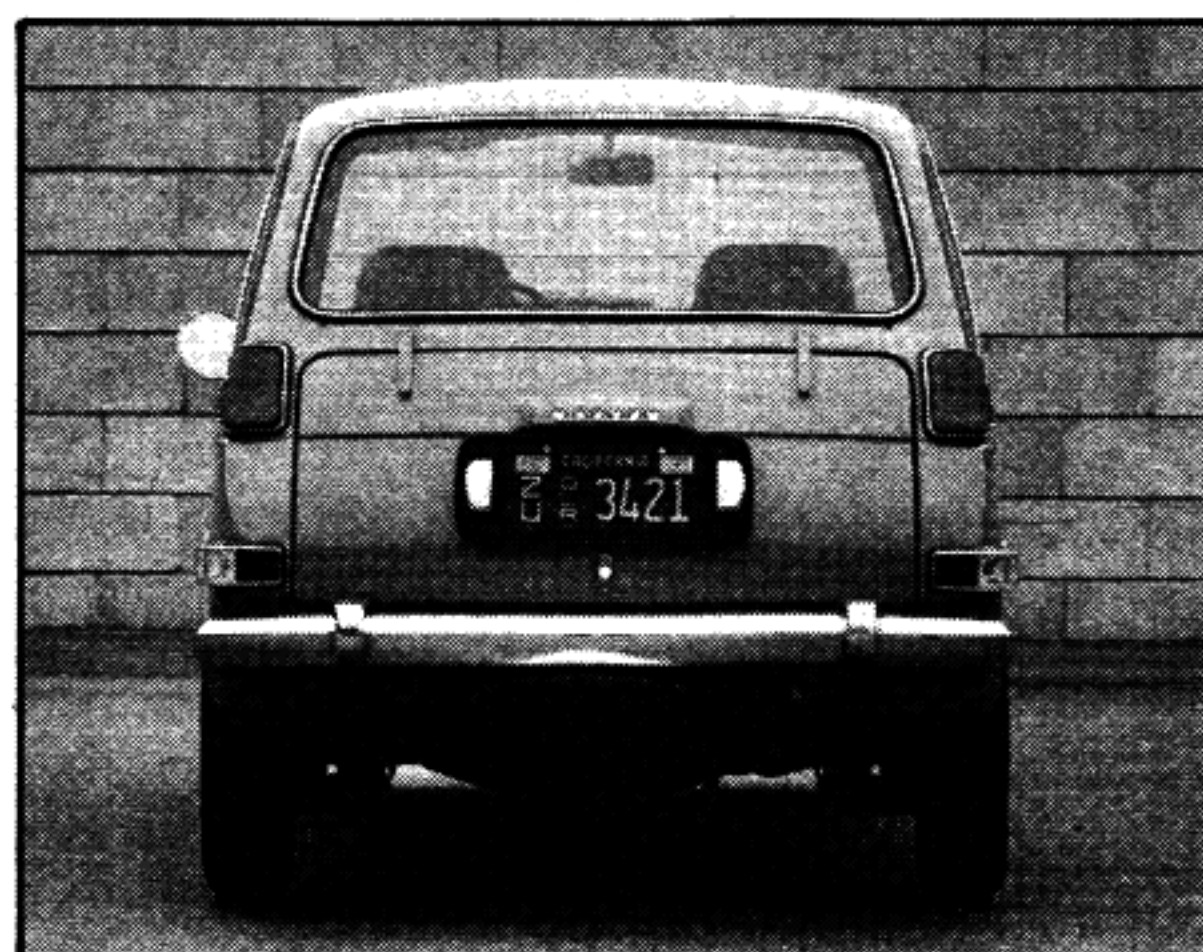
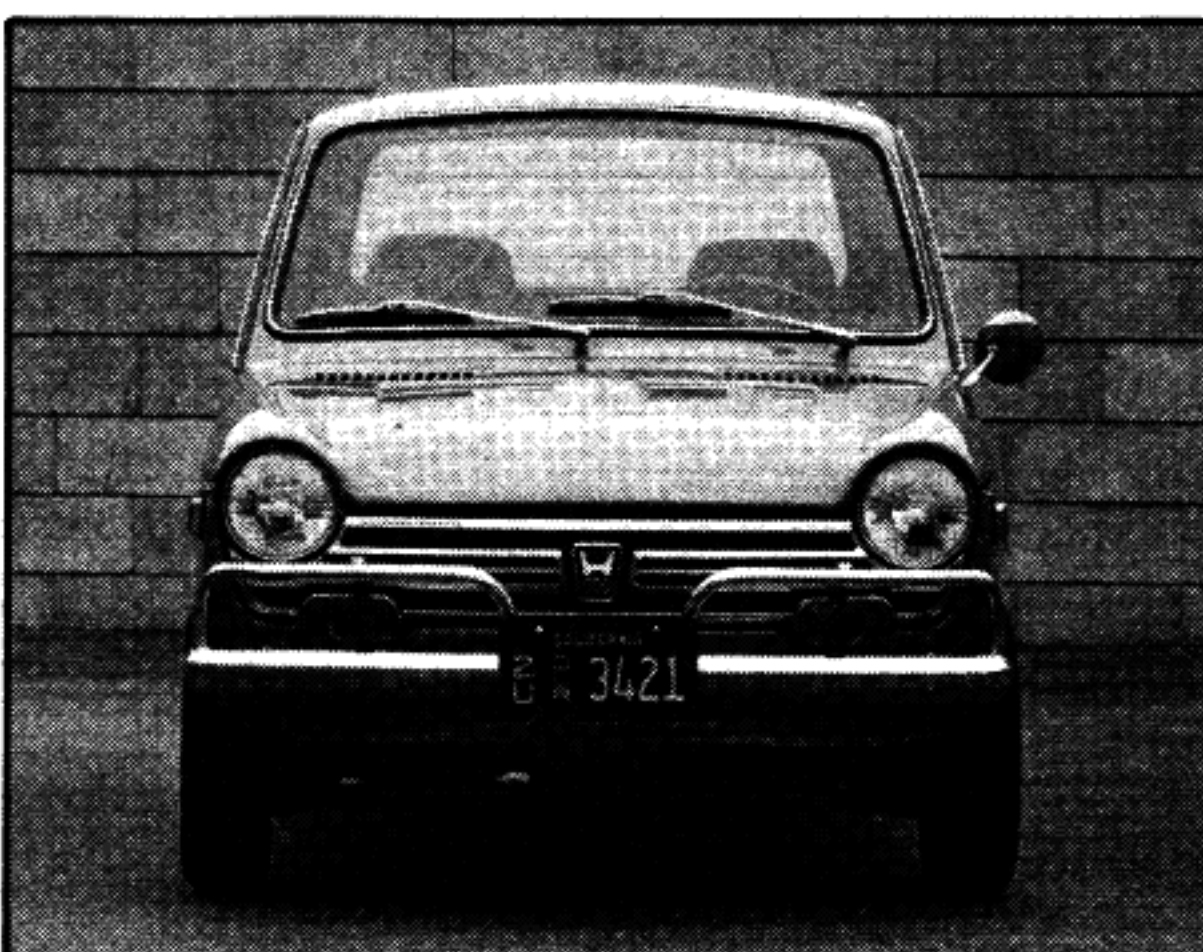
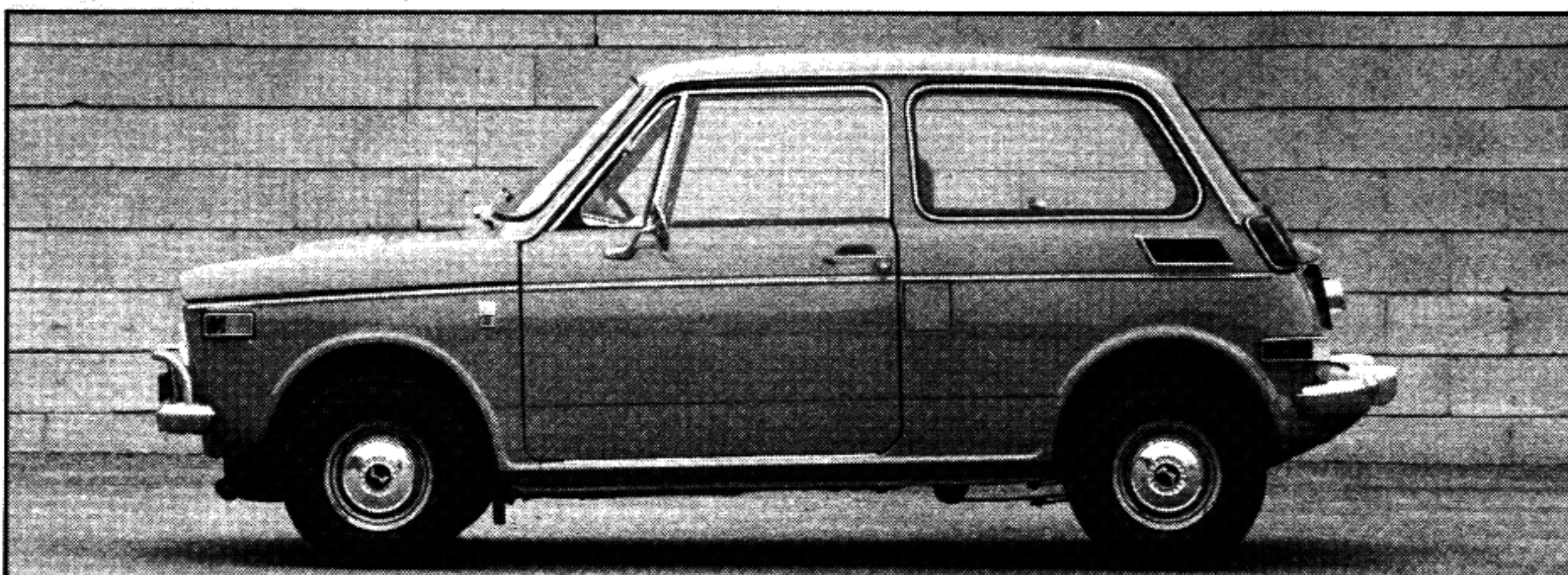
Standing 1/4-mile 21.3 sec @ 60.9 mph

Top speed (observed) 75 mph

70-0 mph 217 ft (0.76 G)

Fuel mileage 32-36 mpg on regular fuel

Cruising range 221-248 mi



(Continued from page 44)

even a little forward of that), so that those in the back could at least see some legroom. It's a compromise—livable if not lovable.

Of course it takes a bit more than relative comfort for two people to make a sports car, so Honda has changed the sheetmetal to a swoopier shape on the coupe and added a few of the normal "GT" items. It's still as homely as a wet dog—the crisp lines of the sedan are easier to take—but most of the additions do the job. The improved aerodynamics are a big help. The coupe's windshield has more of a rake than that of the sedan's, and the roofline is two inches lower. That's good for an extra three mph down the freeway, 500 rpm over the six-grand redline in fourth gear, at about 75 mph. It takes a hell of a long time to get

up there, but those guys in Buicks that you whistle by don't know that.

The other items that make the coupe more of a sporting car are the 145 SR 10 radial tires, which grip the pavement a bit better than the 5.20-10s on the sedan, and the tachometer. The coupe also has an "aircraft type" overhead console which contains the dome light switch and a tiny spotlight for reading maps along with its corresponding switch. All of this pushes the coupe's price up to \$135 over that of the sedan.

When you compare the trunks of the two cars you can successfully make a case for the coupe being *more* of a utilitarian conveyance than the sedan. The coupe doesn't have a trunk lid in the conventional sense. Instead, the rear window and its surrounding frame are

hinged at the top and flip up for admittance to the hold. And the rear seat folds down which gives you a kind of mini-Gremlin layout. But better than the Gremlin, the Honda has its spare tire in a separate compartment beneath the rear bumper. The sedan, on the other hand, has a conventional trunk (about two pillow-size) behind the rear seat and if you need a space larger than that you have to leave the rear seat back behind.

We mentioned that the two Hondas are alike mechanically. They are also very similar to British Leyland's Mini in layout as well as appeal—all have front-wheel-drive with a transverse engine. The Honda's, however, is only two cylinders. And, contrary to its appearance, it isn't an organ transplant from some Honda motorcycle. It is, however, an air cooled vertical twin made all of aluminum except for the iron cylinder liners, and just like on some of the two wheelers, a single carburetor feeds into the rear of the engine through a flexible intake manifold while a pair of exhaust pipes curve out of the front. The most conspicuous difference is that the cars have shrouding around the cylinders and a cooling fan at the rear.

The whole drivetrain bolts into one unit and fits neatly under the stubby hood. The fuel and air goes in one end and the power to the wheels comes out the other. Honda credits it with 36 of the SAE's finest net horses, which is the exact same number VW was touting 15 years ago. Unfortunately, the Honda engines produce a few byproducts that are a trial to live with. One of them is vibration. Car testers have pretty well stopped talking about vibrations these days because, for the most part, car makers have learned how to damp them down to a benign level—notwithstanding a few large displacement Fours to the contrary. The Hondas, however, will surely reawaken a collection of hoary metaphors. The engine is a vertical twin and it shakes—that is the nature of it. The steering wheel tingles in your fingers at certain speed ranges, the instrument panel buzzes and some of the sheetmetal drones. Inside the car it's NOISY. And it gets worse when the heater, particularly with the defroster, is on. Because the engine is air-cooled there is no water for the heater, so Honda opted for the usual expedient of circulating passenger-compartment air around the exhaust pipes. But the engineers didn't figure out a way to block out

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HONDA 600

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the racket that filters through the pipe walls. On wide-open acceleration, which is the usual mode in a 36-hp car, the interior noise level reaches 87 dbA. With the defroster on, it rises to 90. That's a record.

When it comes to acceleration, the Honda sets a record in the other direction. It takes 21.3 seconds for a standing quarter mile and the speed at the end just barely tops 60 mph. Somehow though, that isn't the frustration it sounds like it looks on paper. In fact, poor acceleration is really a major component of this kind of sport driving. You have to stay alert—pick the best lane well in advance so you don't have to lift—always keep the revs up. If you're good you'll be competitive, if not, stay out of the way. Freeways are like Le Mans.

At least you've got maneuverability. There is nothing special about the Honda's ultimate cornering capability—it's well within the normal passenger car range—but you can change directions quickly because of the car's low inertia. It turns out there is no way of learning the Honda's capabilities in the usual way on a skid pad. It doesn't have enough power. The engine peaks out and the car won't go any faster before the tires reach their limit.

The tires get their chance at a limit in the brake test, however, and they win no applause. The test results from 70 mph are borderline acceptable—217 feet (0.76G)—but it takes a professional driver's touch to score that high. At high speeds (above 50 mph) it's almost impossible to lock the wheels and directional stability, particularly when the car isn't traveling a straight path (an expressway off-ramp for a common example), is in short supply. The rear is far too eager to come around. When you consider how vigorously you have to drive these cars to keep pace, the brakes aren't up to the job. Just because a car won't go fast doesn't mean that it shouldn't stop fast.

So, before you go any farther, get the idea out of your mind that the Honda 600 is a cheap little toy car. It's not. If all you're looking for is low-buck transportation and you have anything less severe than Manhattan's traffic congestion, you'd probably be better off in a year-old Pinto or Toyota or whatever. But if you're the kind that goes to sea in a row boat you might find the Honda amusing between voyages. At least it will keep your psyche in practice. ●



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