

# MOTOR TREND'S 1969 CAR OF THE YEAR... ROAD RUNNER

It was a tough decision to make...  
but here are the comments of MT's editors  
telling why it's **Road Runner** in '69.

How do we choose the Car Of The Year? In 1951, when MOTOR TREND originated the award, selection was relatively easy because the American automobile industry was structured rather simply. When you talked of Ford, for instance, there was Standard or Deluxe trim in two-door, four-door, convertible, and station wagon body styles. The engine was 100 hp V-8 or 95 hp six and you had your choice of three-speed standard transmission or the just-introduced Fordomatic. The option list consisted of radio, heater and white sidewalls.

Now look at Ford for 1969. Galaxie, Fairlane, Mustang, Falcon, Thunderbird and the models of each size car run on forever. Engines: 428, 427, 390, 351, 302, and so forth. Transmissions: three-speed, four-speed, close-ratio four-speed, automatic, and all connected to a wide selection of axle ratios. Options: radio, power steering, power brakes, air conditioning, and on and on. In short, the simple car of eighteen years ago has become a very sophisticated piece of machinery. In 1951, Cadillac was a far step above Ford, but today Ford's LTD not only challenges Cadillac in ride and quality but comes very close to matching the price when fully loaded.

And now that we've illustrated how the American automobile has evolved into a complicated network of bodies, engines, transmissions, options, etc., we would like to point out that selection of a Car Of The Year has also taken on some of these same complexities. How do you choose THE car of the year from all the contenders?

The first step toward the selection of MOTOR TREND'S Car Of The Year for 1969 was to call a meeting of our staff members. We started the meeting with the assumption that every car being manufactured in this country was a

contender. Each nameplate and model thereof was presented and a discussion made of its qualities — good and bad. All staff members had been exposed to the 1969 crop of automobiles either during long-lead press previews, regional dealer showings or through the efforts of local public relations departments in supplying test cars, so opinions were quick to be voiced.

Following an all-day session, we boiled down the dozens of cars to a more manageable group of six finalists. At this point, we contacted the public relations departments of the six cars presented and asked to borrow vehicles for test purposes. For the next several weeks, the test cars were rotated among the staff members to make sure that everyone had ample opportunity to form opinions. Then, another meeting so each staff member could point out the virtues and faults he had observed. In this manner we could all crosscheck each other's observations to make sure no important points had been overlooked. Finally, one more driving session of several days, and then the meeting to choose MOTOR TREND'S 1969 Car Of The Year.

The winner — Road Runner! Just what is there about Plymouth's Road Runner that influenced us to choose it over the other five finalists? First of all, the original concept of the Road Runner was one of combining a low-priced two-door sedan body with a strong but docile-running engine. Add on a firm suspension and good brakes, throw in some simple ornamentation, a silly bird emblem, a beep-beep horn and you have a reasonably-priced automobile that performs like something that usually costs half again as much. If you insist on spending more money for a Road Runner, you can order a fancier interior, a hardtop or convertible model,

a racing type hemi 426 engine and a wide variety of options; but the basic concept of simplicity and low price is what makes it a winner.

Note that practically every other automotive division has come up with their version of this concept for 1969. You no longer have to buy the fanciest (and heaviest) model adorned with useless chrome, non-functional scoops and the like, to get a performance car. And just in case this description leads you to think the Road Runner is only for those who frequent the drag strips on Sunday, let us quell those thoughts. That 383-inch engine which is standard equipment, is the same engine used in Chrysler Corporation cars from Dart to Newport. It isn't a racing engine. It's quiet, smooth, dependable, delivers reasonable economy for its size — but it's lively.

The Road Runner is a pleasure to drive. Nearly everybody on the staff preferred this car over the others whether they were driving freeways, curves, bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic, or taking out-of-town guests to dinner at one of the better restaurants. It's not a hot rod but it will give a darn good imitation of one if you ask it to. It handles extremely well on mountain curves, rides securely at high speed on all types of roads, has reserve power for passing situations at any speed, stops straight and quick, and has good room for both passengers and luggage.

In summation, we chose Road Runner MOTOR TREND'S Car Of The Year for 1969 because it was the car everybody here liked to drive. It's an exciting car and has influenced other manufacturers to follow the simple, practical theme that delivers a completely functional automobile.

Now you know how we selected the 1969 Car Of The Year. We anticipate



Photos: Gerry Stiles

letters from many readers saying that we've pulled the biggest goof of all time because we didn't select this car, or that car, but those of us who voted cast the largest number for Road Runner.

We made the decision and we're proud of it!

— **Ray Brock, Publisher**

**I**t's a great car! A car made for driving. Forget all the super gadgets, special "idiot" lights, plasticized, Naderized, hermetically sealed space-type driving compartments. This is a driving car.

"Form follows function," and in my estimation Road Runner is a very functional car that I felt comfortable driving in all kinds of situations. Apparently I am not alone in my thinking, the public has purchased more Road Runners in 1968 than computers could predict. The Road Runner started a whole new trend in Detroit, every major manufacturer is now producing a Road Runner-type car.

But let's face it — I like the Road Runner. I'm a bird! So-o-o-o "Beep Beep."

— **Tom Uhler, Art Director**

**B**eep Beep! It may be gauche but Plymouth started a whole new thing with a goofy looking bird and a unique, no nonsense car and, what's

more important, the people liked it. Road Runner has been an instant success. In the 1966 model year Plymouth sold 1826 hemi Belvederes, or one percent of Belvedere sales. In 1967 performance GTX sales totaled 12,108 cars for 8.7 percent of Belvedere production. With the introduction of the Road Runner in 1968, performance car sales in the Belvedere line soared to 62,871 units, of which 44,599 were Road Runners! In one month alone, October, 1968, Road Runner accounted for 29.8 percent of Belvedere sales, a record that's hard to beat.

There is no doubt that the Road Runner deserves Car of the Year honors. Charles Colton first said it over 100 years ago and it still holds true: "Imitation is the sincerest flattery." In 1969 the Road Runner is being imitated, to one degree or another, in record numbers. It could have been just another supercar, but Plymouth charted a whole new course. Primary consideration was powertrain and performance. Creature comfort and convenience came last to hold down costs and make a going machine available to the young performance buffs who know where it's at, but don't always have the cash to match their enthusiasm.

Plymouth has kept the formula simple; spend the money on engine and

*No more can we say that species *Geococcyx Californianus* is a long-tailed ground cuckoo that runs with great swiftness and inhabits only open regions of southwestern North America. It now claims as its habitat, the entire nation, through all of whose parts it continues to run with even greater swiftness and increasing profusion. (Below) Glenn White, left, general manager of Chrysler-Plymouth, justly receives Car Of The Year award from Ray Brock, publisher of Motor Trend.*



transmission. Even powertrain options have been kept to a minimum, except for rear axle ratios. The two engines, the 383 cubic inch and 426 cubic inch hemi, both represent optimum performance potential for the car. Although only two engines are available, a variety of power inducing options can be ordered, such as high-duration cams, special manifolds and the "Air Grabber" cold air induction system.

The Road Runner also has select ride and handling characteristics with Chrysler's torsion bar suspension. Especially with the 383 engine, the Road Runner will corner acceptably for a car designed basically to run fast in a straight line.

Keeping convenience secondary is a tough job, as the "American Way" requires exploitable new features each year. For 1969 a Road Runner convertible has been introduced. Roll down rear windows in place of the cheaper pop out type and other interior dress-up items are creeping into Road Runner production. Continued additions could relegate an exceptional car to the realm of



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mundane supercars. But we hope not.

Performance is the thing with the Road Runner and it's without compromise. We also like the interior roominess, huge trunk space and great bucket seats (although they cost more than the spartan bench type). The center console, floor mounted automatic shift lever is a bit too far forward for easy shifts but you adapt rather quickly.

In its plain wrapper, stripped down version, the Road Runner is all fight. But that horn won't scare anyone. Beep, Beep!

— **Bill Sanders, Road Test Editor**

**A** lady who drives around town in a '62 Ford Fairlane with a dented hood, although Managing Editor of MOTOR TREND, is obviously not a car nut.

However, being the Managing Editor, I get to drive all the new cars that we test. As a matter of fact, this year I've had so many different '69s, that the lady I rent a garage from decided I was doing something illegal, so I've been evicted.

Nevertheless, after months of driving the '69s, I've really never been too upset when I had to go back to the '62 Ford. After all, it's nice to drive a new car around town — but then, a car is just a car.

One night I was told I could take home the bright orange car parked on G3. I got there to find that all the way home, I would be advertising that this was, in fact, the "Official Pace Car" for the *Times* Grand Prix at Riverside, lettered in heavy black characters across both sides of the car. To say I wasn't choked up at the prospect would be a gross understatement. I'm not at all shy, but calling attention to myself in this manner didn't really excite me.

But then, when you drive an old banger like mine, you don't get to be too choosy, right? So off I went. Drawing attention at every stop light. "What's a chick doin' drivin' that car? You some kind of racer or something?"

Then the magic happened. Wow! What a sensational car. Here was I, driving around in one of the most exciting automobiles I ever sat in. It wasn't just a car anymore. I'd found love. For sure. Not only did I not care about the garish lettering on the side, I just wouldn't part with the thing. For a week I made up lies about my car being out of commission so that I could continue driving the Road Runner.

Now, I'm not going to give you any technical reasons why I think the Road Runner should be Car of the Year. After all, as a woman, I don't need reasons. It's my intuition, that's all. I mean it is

definitely the best car to come out of Detroit this year.

I know, cause after all, I'm the Managing Editor of MOTOR TREND and that makes me an expert.

— **Ellen Merlo, Managing Editor**

**W**alkin' on Sunset. Eyeballing. The Sunset Strip. Hollywood Boulevard is dead and the Strip lives. Alive with people and cars. An endless river of moving automobiles teeming like fish down Sunset Boulevard, jammed all in together at the narrows of the Strip. Not just any cars, representative species from every corner of the globe — present and past. A cornucopia of cars. Cars dyed every hue cataloged in the spectrum and some that haven't. A giant, pop-art automotive museum somehow more legitimate than any other because cars in an automotive museum should do what they were built to do — move, run, drive. They move on the Strip.

Where XKEs and Rolls and Ferraris are familiar almost to the point of contempt, the spectator becomes blasé, glazed by the exotic profusion. His attention must be wrenched away by something ramming his optic nerves — packing his irises with color and stuffing his ears with pure car sound. Something like a blood-red Road Runner hemi. They've seen Road Runners on the Strip before — the habitué of the rolling museum knew what a Road Runner was in three week's time — but not many hemis. The rough, hard idle swells up and out from under the car, ricochets off other cars and rams into the ears of the drivers, the spectators. You think twice about a 383 Road Runner, but a hemi only once — and let it pass. That's part of the Road Runner's wonder, there are only two engine choices — stout and stoutest. Wonder of wonders is that the car exists at all.

Seemingly advancing head long into the terminal stages of third place forever, from out of a secret pocket in their pleated pants, Chrysler sprang the Road Runner.

The idea of an inexpensive, high-performance car was not completely original — other manufacturers had built them before. Plymouth's master stroke was the all encompassing scope of their thrust — the cartoon character, beep-beep horn, decals, jackets, ad campaign, Sox & Martin drag clinics, all of it. It was the first time their company offered not just a car, but a mood: the Road Runner is in — *the car* to have if you feel or are young.

Hand carried by Plymouth Product Planners, Jack Smith and Gordon Cherry, under the blessing of their chief Joe Sturm, the group brought Road Runner along, treaded lightly through cor-

porate halls dappled with conservatism. And in the doing roused enthusiasm that rocked to the beep-beep rhythm. Overnight the place was wallpapered with Road Runner decals. Smith and Cherry compressed years to days and even while it was being introduced the 'Runner was being updated. It was the dream all third-place finishers dream, to be first, put over one job on the industry — innovate instead of imitate — and when they awoke they found they had made it — clean through the looking-glass. Then came the flattery: Super Bee, Cobra, Cyclone, C.J., The Judge, new names. Chevelle SS, Olds, old names. It is still flattery. Beep-beep, you're real class.

— **Eric Dahlquist, Technical Editor**

**I**carus is fashionable these days. The word is out ... "He shall inherit the earth," "He shall raise us from material bondage," and now the latest generation of psychologists are using him for classifying those reluctant to mature — who seem to be achieving epidemical proportions. They call it the "Icarus Complex" and it seems to be amazingly relevant to current lifestyles. Oversimplified, it can be identified by a desire to remain a child and by a development of flight fantasies.

Admittedly, this new behavior won't imbue France with solvent francs, or even revitalize Carol Doda's sloughing silicone, but at least it has resulted in a more honest and basic approach to automotive appreciation. Suddenly, it's a mark of distinction — among those who really count — to own a car built purely and unequivocally for *driving*, and it's a blemish on your integrity to have your car adulterated by the comforts and conveniences of a lax society — not to mention "junk."

So Plymouth's timing in expanding the Road Runner line couldn't have been more accurate. It's the first recent domestic car whose function is primordial physical fulfillment for the driver ... a sensation of man's absolute control over machine. And it's the first recent domestic car whose builders had the good sense to use only the essentials of kinetic enjoyment — a suspension that transmits contact with the road and responds to your touch, an engine that gives you a margin of response at any speed, and noise to tell you what's happening.

In no other instance has a builder been able to stop before he reached the point of diminishing returns of gimmickry. As a result, Road Runner offers the highest ratio of driving sensation per dollar of any domestic made ... which means it is entirely valid that it be awarded "Car of the Year" for, among other things, its absence of "features."

— **Julian G. Schmidt, Feature Editor**