

The Magnificent FIVE



PLUS 1

by Mike Noun

When the Pontiac Firebird debuted in February 1967, Pontiac named the different models “*The Magnificent Five*.” However, Pontiac General Manager John DeLorean showed an immediate desire to add yet another version of the Firebird — something along the lines of what Carroll Shelby had created for the Ford Mustang.

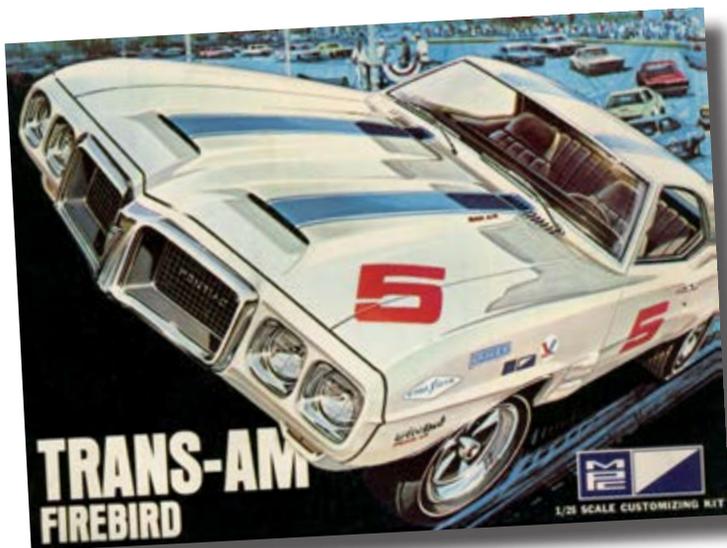
What DeLorean wanted for his “*Plus 1*” was a super-high-performance car that could become the Division’s flagship vehicle. He requested proposals from not only within the hallowed halls of Pontiac Engineering, but from outside as well.

Within the 1967-’68 time frame, one submission reportedly came from Australian F1 racer Jack Brabham for a fuel-injected OHC-V8 screamer. Another came from John Fitch, known for building Chevrolet Corvair conversion cars. Pon-

tiac engineers also pitched OHC-6 and 350 V8-powered proposals which could be built in-house. But ultimately, DeLorean was not satisfied with *any* of the packages.

Then, in late 1968, designer Gene Winfield and designer/artist Harry Bradley approached Pontiac with a proposal called “*Firebird Can Am*.” Gene Winfield was a consultant under contract for the plastic model company AMT, and therefore had advance notice as to what the 1969 Firebirds would look like long before they were seen by the public. The Winfield/Bradley drawings were the first designs to be seriously considered by Pontiac as a possible look for what would eventually become the 1969 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am.

A full-size prototype was built and brought to Pontiac’s engineering garage for review. Liking what he saw, DeLorean



Although AMT was the model company Gene Winfield worked with, it was MPC who had the contract with Pontiac to produce the model kits. Shown here is an original 1969 Trans Am model kit #727-200. The 200 indicated the original cost to be \$2.00. You will pay considerably more for a nice example today! (Model kit on display at the Pontiac-Oakland Museum).

approved nearly every part of the design, but some alterations were in order.

Pontiac then revamped this prototype and officially named it "Trans Am." Based on a 1969 Firebird 400 painted Palladium Silver, the car would get a fiberglass hood, a full floating rear wing, side air extractors, tweaked suspension, and a deflector over the windshield wipers for aerodynamics.



WHAT TO CALL IT?

To gauge reaction, the T/A prototype was released to a few media outlets. While the automotive journalists loved the handling and performance of the 400 cubic inch powerplant, criticism arose from the use of the Trans Am name itself. Detractors claimed it was an insult to fans of the popular SCCA Trans Am Series where an engine size limitation of 305 cubic inches was strictly enforced.

To address this, at least 20 alternate names were proposed for this new track-inspired 'Bird. Favorites reportedly included Can Am, Sebring, Express, and Turismo. There was even a

proposal for a model called the Firebird SK (Sport King) which featured bold hood striping, a rear spoiler borrowed from the Camaro parts bin, a chin spoiler (requiring all-new tooling), and 15x8" Corvette wheels. But alas, the earlier Trans Am concept and name held its sway.

After its initial appearance, a few more styling tweaks occurred. The hood scoops were moved forward and the rear wing downsized. This latest version was once again sent out to the media, and more in-depth workshops were conducted. Reaction was still tremendously positive, so Pontiac decided to proceed with production plans for the 1969 Trans Am despite any remaining criticism of the name choice.

But, one thing would definitely change: The silver paint scheme would be abandoned in favor of Cameo White with two body-length Tyrol Blue racing stripes — the design fervently promoted by the original designers.

PRICING WOES

Debuting on March 8th, 1969 at the Chicago Auto Show, the Trans Am seemed to be a hit. Pontiac scheduled production for May, 1969, but as late as the third week of April,



official pricing was still not set. It had been noted that the Trans Am package would add between \$900-\$1,300 to a base Firebird. But, to prevent sticker shock, it was suggest-

ABOVE & LEFT: Silver Trans Am prototype sitting in what appears to be the Pontiac Engineering garage. Body-wise, it has most of the features production versions would have, with minor changes being made to the rear spoiler, air extractors, and hood scoops before production began.

BELOW: This is the same car as shown above, making its post-restoration debut at the Muscle Car Nationals in November 2014.

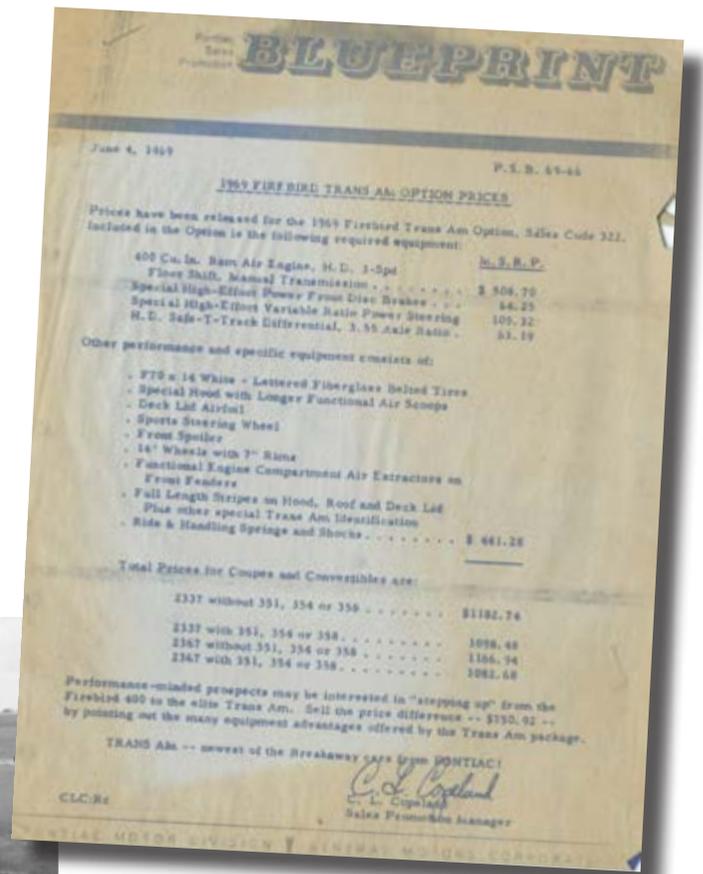


ed that the Trans Am be a \$397.00 option on top of a Firebird 400, with power steering, power brakes, and Safe-T-Track differential being mandatory. In the end, the decision was made to price the Trans Am option at \$1,098.48 (and even higher in later months of production) over the base-model Firebird.

To give a better understanding of what the Trans Am option consisted of, Pontiac employed an unusual sales tactic. Rather than show a single \$1,098.48 option price, the Marketing Group decided to break out the components of the Trans Am option and show individual prices.

For that \$1,098.48 investment, a buyer received a very special car. Included in the Trans Am option were all the components of a Firebird 400, plus: a Ram Air engine; twin, full-length body stripes painted over the upper surfaces; a unique hood not shared with the Firebird 400; special front fenders with functional air extractor cutouts; rear spoiler; front spoiler; power steering; front disc brakes; and a Safe-T-Track differential.

Due to projected problems applying the Trans Am's



ABOVE: Dated June 4, 1969, this original "Sales Blueprint #69-66" was sent to dealers outlining the pricing for the various Trans Am features. (Courtesy of Pontiac-Oakland Museum)

TROUBLE AHEAD

painted stripes —and all the special tooling required for the unique additions — only 300 units were scheduled for production in May. Worse yet, because there was a possibility the Trans Am could be a sales flop, zero units were scheduled for June.

Initial 1969 Trans Am sales were indeed much lower than expected. A reactionary proposal in June by Pontiac's ad agency (see "Alternate Reality?") to address the striping problem was shelved when the more pressing concern of trying to figure out how to how to fix the slow sales situation on existing units took precedence.

With less than a couple hundred Trans Ams sold by the summer of 1969 (and tooling costs for the hood, fenders, and rear wing weighing down the books!) Pontiac reached out to the Hurst Corporation for possible help. A plan arose to create yet another high-profile version of the 1969 Firebird that would incorporate the Trans Am's existing hood



If you could go back in time, would you go to the Chicago Auto Show where the Trans Am made its debut on March 8, 1969? Notice the Judge to the left, also in the Pontiac display, and the Firebird 400 convertible just behind the Trans Am.

and rear spoiler. The pitch was to build 50 white Firebirds with a basic 350cid engine and two-speed automatic trans, and ship them to Hurst for conversion into Super Stock racers.



This pencil drawing by Tom Goad is dated 2-11-69, just days after he transferred from Chevrolet to Pontiac. On the same sheet is a hand-written outline of the car's special features with two choices of names, Firebird SK (Sport King) or Trans Am. (Courtesy Pontiac-Oakland Museum)

As part of this plan, Hurst would remove the factory-installed economical drivetrains (for eventual return to Pontiac for credit), and replace them with Tunnel Port Ram Air V engines, 4.56 gears, headers, and a THM400 racing automatic transmission — specially modified by Hurst. The rear wheel wells would also be modified for wider tires,

and the battery would be relocated to the trunk. Though the concept had some support, the proposal never made it past the planning stage.



Early and late versions of the 1969 Firebird brochure are easy to tell apart: the latter version has no reference to the year. (Courtesy Pontiac-Oakland Museum)



ALTERNATE REALITY?

This rare photo, showing an alternative vision for the 1969 Trans Am with side-flanking stripes, surfaced just recently in 2014.

The car pictured appears to be of a pre-production version of the Trans Am, but the factory memo that accompanied this photo was dated June 12, 1969 (weeks after the car had already been in production). The lack of “normal” twin upper-deck stripes, now replaced by proposed side stripes has us wondering: Is what we’re seeing real? Did a car actually get built (and striped) this way?

The memo is addressed to F. J. McDonald (Pontiac’s General Manager, following DeLorean’s departure to Chevrolet Division) who received it June 16 from J. H. Graham, a member of the Ad-Hoc committee responsible for creating the Trans Am and the GTO Judge. But, its original source was McManus-John & Adams (MJA), Pontiac’s über-talented advertising agency; Graham was just passing it along.

The benefit of this stripe configuration, according to the memo, was

that it gave the illusion of greater length to the car. A more realistic advantage could be that the stripes—as illustrated—were to suggest a cost-saving, inexpensive vinyl alternative to the problematic painted stripes conspicuously absent from the upper surfaces. The memo goes on to say, “If you are interested in pursuing, we can check out the cost of adding this touch to the balance of the Trans-Ams being built.”

McDonald (or his secretary) then wrote on the memo, “Check it out with your market schemers” (the Ad-Hoc committee), and immediately sent it back to Graham.

Today, we know this stripe scheme was never used on the Trans Am and we can deduce that the picture in question was most likely a “re-touched” photo expertly modified by an MJA airbrush wizard back in the day.

Regardless, it certainly offers an interesting look at what *could have* been! It is also a fascinating look at process of how some decisions came about at Pontiac. (Photo courtesy of the Pontiac-Oakland Museum.)



This is the Trans Am's feature page for Dealer Albums (sales manual). Because the Trans Am was introduced mid-year, it depended on how conscientious a dealership's sales manager was whether or not these inserts made their way into his album, making them somewhat rare today. (Courtesy Pontiac-Oakland Museum)

A LOSING PROPOSITION

Trans Am sales remained sluggish through the close of the model year. The automotive press had already saturated their magazines with photos and information on the all-new "second-generation" 1970 Firebirds, so sales of all 1969 Firebirds and Trans Ams consequently suffered.

GM then announced that the tooling for the 1970s was trickier than expected, meaning that the new design's production would be delayed and that existing 1969 Firebird production would continue through December — months past the typical September introduction of the brand's lineup for the coming year. The new 1970 Firebirds wouldn't be ready until February 1970.

Sales materials provided to Pontiac dealers became confusing as they still had to promote "old" 1969 Firebirds as part of the normal September 1970 debut of the rest of Pontiac's lineup. The solution to cost-effectively extend the car's shelf life was to simply remove all references to "1969" on the Firebird-specific brochure.

By the time first-generation Firebird production ended late in the calendar year, a mere 697 Trans Ams had been pro-

TRANS AM TIME LINE

November 14, 1968 - Pontiac Engineering (Bill Collins) gives product presentation on Trans Am and Judge option at 9am in Engineering Building's large conference room.

February 3, 1969 - Car Distribution Bulletin #69-66 announces that Trans Am (UPC code WS-4 - Sales code 322) will be available for production starting April 1, 1969.

March 5, 1969 - Car Distribution Bulletin #69-69 outlines Trans Am features and UPC codes.

March 7, 1969 - Pontiac press release announces Trans Am.

March 8, 1969 - Trans Am debuts at the Chicago Auto Show.

March 1969 - Newspaper and magazine stories on the Trans Am first appear.

April 1, 1969 - Sales Blueprint 69-53 announces Trans Am.

April 30, 1969 - Pontiac compares list price, engine displacement and horsepower ratings of Trans Am, Z-28, Boss 302 Mustang and Cougar Eliminator including C.I.D. and horsepower. (Distribution unknown.)

May 15, 1969 - Car Distribution Bulletin #69-78 announces Trans Am pricing to zone distributors.

May 21, 1969 - Trans Am production begins at Norwood plant.

May 23, 1969 - Pontiac releases Sales Manual insert page for Trans Am to dealers.

June 4, 1969 - Pontiac outlines Trans Am pricing with Sales Blueprint 69-66.

June, 1969 - Trans Ams begin arriving at dealers.

duced, only 8 of which were convertibles. (In comparison, the 1969 GTO Judge — another midyear introduction — sold 6,833 units. And it did not enjoy the "extended" sales year that the Trans Am had!)



Pontiac Motor Division participated in the NASCAR "Grand American" racing series with the 1969 Trans Am. Here Buck Baker poses with his Trans Am at Michigan International Speedway in the summer of 1969. (Courtesy Pontiac-Oakland Museum)



A rare option found in few 1967 - '69 Firebirds is a fold-down back seat. It is ultra-rare when found in a 1969 Trans Am, as shown here. (Photo by Tim Dye)

Was the 1969 Trans Am a sales flop? Yes, but not because of poor performance or an unattractive design. It was mainly due to three reasons: the Trans Am option was expensive; dealers were unsure how to sell such a special Firebird; and the all-new 1970 Firebirds stole the thunder.

RARE BIRDS

Because most 1969 Trans Am buyers were focused on high performance, it was rare to see a Trans Am loaded-down with power-robbing options or with equipment that contributed to heavier overall vehicle weight. A mere 32 were built with air conditioning; only 5 had power windows.

As for price, a 1969 Trans Am with an optional RAIV engine, Rally II wheels, 4-speed transmission, console, and an AM/FM radio would top out at nearly \$5,000, while a comparably-equipped 1969 GTO Judge was around \$4,400. A loaded 1969 Trans Am convertible, meanwhile, could surpass \$6,000!

The Trans Am came standard only with what racers would consider absolutely necessary items for road courses (power



Fans of early Trans Ams know today how rare it is to see just one of the eight convertibles produced. The 2013 Muscle Car Nationals managed to bring six of the eight together in one place! (Photo by Tim Dye)

PONTIAC	
MAKE: PONTIAC	VEHICLE IDENTIFICATION NUMBER: 223379N
DEALER TO WHOM DELIVERED: BLACKHAWK PONTIAC SALES	FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT: NORWOOD, OHIO
DEALER AT: ROCKFORD, ILL.	MANUFACTURER'S SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE: \$ 2759.00
MODEL: 22337 FIREBIRD HARDTOP COUPE	Destination Charges: 74.00
	SUB-TOTAL \$ 2833.00
MANUFACTURER'S SUGGESTED RETAIL DELIVERED PRICE ON OPTIONS AND ACCESSORIES INSTALLED ON THIS VEHICLE BY THE MANUFACTURER	
TRANS AM OPTION CONSISTS OF	
400 HO ENG, H.D. 3 SPD	.00
FLOOR SHIFT, DUAL EXHAUST, ETC	424.44
POWER FRONT DISC BRAKES	64.25
POWER STEERING VARIABLE RATIO	105.32
SAF-T-TRACK DIFF 3.55 RATIO	63.19
OTHER PERFORMANCE AND SPECIFIC EQUIPMENT CONSISTS OF..	
F70X14 FIBERGLASS TIRES WHITE LETTERS, SPECIFIC HOOD WITH LONGER FUNCTIONAL HOOD WITH SCOOPS, DECK LID AIRFOIL, SPORTS STEERING WHEEL, FRONT SPOILER, 14 INCH WHEELS STD TYPE 7 INCH WIDE, FUNCTIONAL FRT FNDR AIR EXTRACTORS, FULL LENGTH STRIPES ON HOOD, ROOF & DECK LID AND OTHER IDENTIFICATION, RIDE AND HANDLING, SPRINGS & SHOCKS UNLESS OTHER OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT IS SPECIFIED.	441.28
4 SPEED MANUAL TRANSMISSION	
AXLE-PERFORMANCE	354
RADIO-AM & FM STEREO	368
TAPE PLAYER-STEREO	388
CLUSTER & TACHOMETER-RALLY GAUGE	394
WHEELS-RALLY II	444
CONSOLE	454
	472
CAMEO WHITE- TRIM 08	
Factory Installed Options and Accessories- Sub-Total \$	1891.02
Total Amount: (Does not include dealer installed options or accessories, state or local taxes or license fees)	\$ 4724.02
PONTIAC MOTOR DIVISION	
10-043 02241 611789	General Motors Corporation

This is a sample of a 1969 Trans Am window sticker. Because of the unique situation of 1969 Firebirds being produced late in the 1969 calendar year, there were two styles, the 1969 version shown here, and one based on the 1970 form. (Courtesy author's collection)

steering, power disc brakes, and positraction rear end), but other items — also typically associated with performance cars — were not included as standard equipment solely in an effort to keep costs down. A tachometer, gauges, and sporty Rally II wheels were all relegated to the “available options” list.

Perhaps due to the cost, it's not surprising that no one ordered a 1969 Trans Am convertible with the optional \$389.68 RAIV engine; all eight of the Trans Am convertibles produced were equipped with the standard RAIII engine.

THE TRANS AM LEGACY

With superior handling, performance, and good looks, sales of the T/A could only go in one direction: up. The iconic Trans Am would eventually become one of the longest continuously-running performance nameplates in American history. Pontiac would go on to build over 850,000 Trans Ams in the next 33 years, ending with the unfortunate cancellation of the entire F-Body program in 2002.

But today, DeLorean's famous “Plus 1” 1969 Trans Am — complete with its famous white/blue paint scheme (the American racing colors associated with international competition) that the original designers so vigorously campaigned for — is easily recognized as one of the best examples of Pontiac performance, uniqueness, and collectability. 🏁