DRIVING ROAD TEST

Photos by John Plow

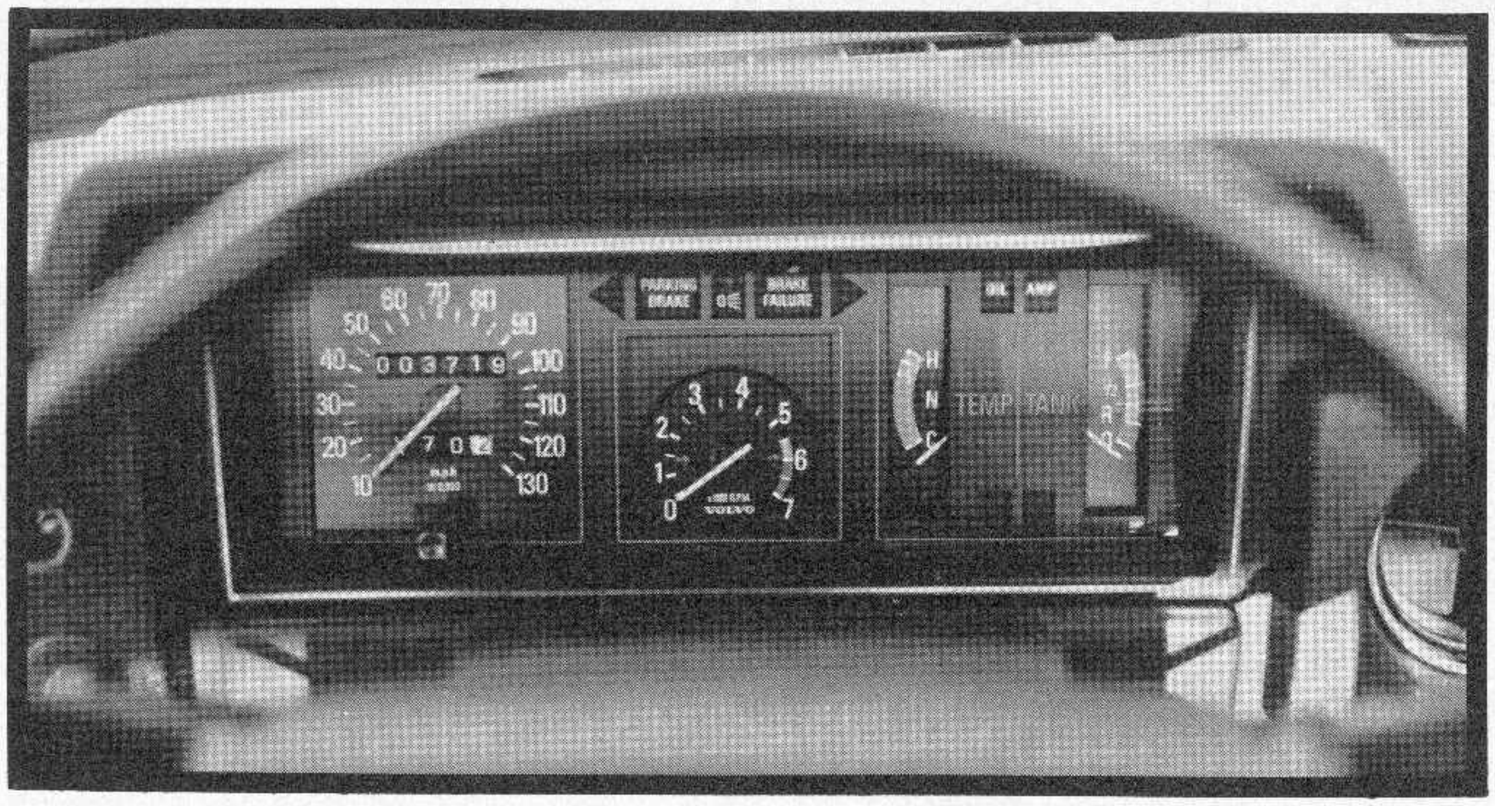
VOLVO 164

Bank vault on wheels

Everytime we test a Volvo we can't help wonder why there isn't a Canadian car. On paper it certainly looks feasible. We're one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Our driving conditions are unique when you consider the extremes of temperatures, the distances we travel and the varying road conditions we must contend with. Yet Sweden, a country half the size of Ontario with approximately eight million people manages to build *two* unique automobiles, never mind one. Both the Saab and the Volvo are designed specifically for the Swedish environment and both meet the demands rather well.

Since there is a reasonable similarity between the Swedish environment and ours in the areas of temperature extremes and road conditions, it would stand to reason that Volvos would sell extremely well here (Saabs are not imported to Canada though they are sold in the United States). But though sales are brisk, especially as far as the lower priced 142 series is concerned they're nowhere near as popular as the American full-size sedan. Why? Because there is an important difference between the buying habits or tastes of the Swede versus his Canadian counterpart. The Swedish consumer demands value for money (their cars cost more per hours worked than they do here). He's not so much interested in styling as he is in comfort, safety and functionality. The Canadian buyer on the other hand apparently wants a big flashy car. Styling is often more important than back seat room or size of trunk. In fact if you compare many full-size sedans to the Volvo, be it the 142 or the 164, you'll find that there is more room in the back seat of the Volvo than there is in the North American vehicle. And more often than not, the seats are far more comfortable. So why don't Canadians buy more Volvos? Because, quite frankly they're nothing more than a box. The engine sits in one box, the passengers in a slightly larger rectangle and there's a third box for luggage. In all, a very practical means of packaging people and their luggage, but one that results in a rather homely looking vehicle.

The 164E is the top of the line model and has limited sales success in this country. Though the 142's are assembled in Halifax, the 164 series is imported from Sweden. Last year for instance the total allotment of 164's was 700 units. Mind you with a price



The new dash layout is far easier to read

tag of $6895 it's not surprising that Volvo doesn't sell too many of these machines. Though they may include an amazing array of design features and options such as leather upholstery, air conditioning, radial tires and excellent all-round visibility, they are, as far as the average Canadian consumer is concerned, a small car. And as everyone knows expensive cars are large cars. We can thank the Americans for this attitude, for it is they who have created this bigger means better philosophy.

Visually there isn't much difference between the Volvo 142 and 164. Certainly the grill is square while the 142's is more horizontal and the hood looks to be slightly longer, but other than that the cars are basically the same. Inside the 164 comes equipped with leather upholstery while the 142 has a cloth covering as standard. But there are a number of differences between the two models. First of all, the 164 comes equipped with a six cylinder engine, complete with fuel injection. The latter is a Bosch electronic unit with a computer sensoring device located under the front passenger seat. By the way, fuel injection in German is Einspritz, which is why the 164 has an E attached to its name. Spring rates are altered to accommodate the larger six cylinder engine and of course the entire car has more sound insulation built into it in order to produce a quieter, more limousine-like ride. In all the 164E weighs in over 490 pounds heavier than the 142 sedan.

One of the highlights of all Volvos is the seat design, be it in the front buckets or rear seating area. The designers at Volvo take the time to build seats that not only look good, but are orthopedically correct. You can drive for hundreds of miles in a Volvo and never climb out of the car with an aching back. The front buckets of the 164 are manually adjustable for height, fore and aft positioning and rake of the back rest. They also have another feature unique to Volvos, namely the lumbar support. One of the prime causes of back problems when driving a car is the lack of support for the small of the back. Many designers simply bolt the back of the seat to the seat cushion leaving a gap where the two meet. After a few hours in the car, the driver starts to slouch in the seat placing a considerable strain on the small of his back. Not only are Volvo seats shaped to reduce this gap or angle between the seat and back rest, but there is also a strap within the padding of the seat. By turning a knob on the side of the seat, one can tighten or loosen this inner support, thereby making that portion of the back rest firm or soft.

Unfortunately the lateral support of the 164's front seat does not appear to be as good as in previous years. Now one seems to sit *on* them, whereas in the past there was a definite feeling of sitting *in* them. The side portions of a seat, both on the seat squab and the back portion should have built up edges that grip your body reducing the tendency to slide across the seat when cornering. This is especially true when the seats are vinyl or leather as they do not grip as well as cloth. For '73 it would appear that Volvo has overdone the padding and come up with a seat that won't permit your body to sink into the center section. Even so, they are a remarkable device, far better than those offered in most cars, be they domestic or import.

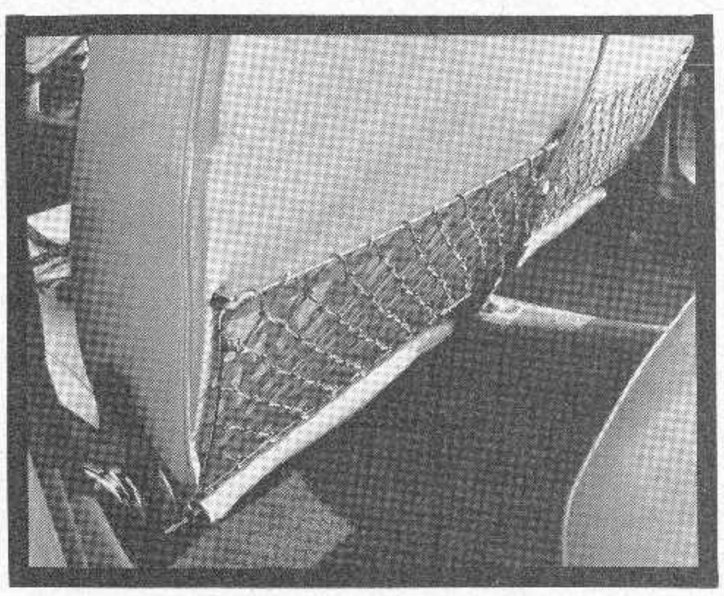
In the rear, the seats are two buckets connected by a fold down arm rest. About the only difference between the back seating area and the two front buckets is that the rears do not have head rests. Head room by the way is excellent. Again this is a function of the overly square shape of the outer body panels. It may not be pretty to have a square-looking passenger compartment but it certainly makes sense from a functional point of view. In many cars, the rear seating area is lower than the front seats which brings about a feeling of claustrophobia, but not so in the Volvo. If the roofline plunged in a rakish fastback shape this might be necessary, but it's not. There's also a substantial amount of legroom for rear passengers, even when the two front buckets are pushed all the way back on their track. Again this is a function of space utilization. Not that we want to be constantly knocking American cars, but so often we hear of a U.S. manufacturer who is proud of the fact that it has the longest hood in the industry. Or that it's proud to announce the new bob-tailed profile. When you shape the outside of the car first, then start making room for the passengers afterwards, you're going to run into problems of headroom or lack of legroom. Compare the outer dimensions of a Riviera, Thunderbird or Grand Prix to a Volvo and then compare rear legroom. There's no contest.

Earlier version of Volvos have been criticized for a ribbon-like speedometer that was difficult to read accurately. Well for '73 the 164 has a traditional round speedo along with a matching gauge for the tachometer. In fact the entire dash has been re-designed and we think it's a vast improvement over previous models. Everything is within easy reach and readily seen. The steering wheel is still a bit too large, but that's a small point and something one gets used to in a matter of minutes. The gear shift is a small stubby lever that protrudes from the floor about even with the front padding of the driver's seat. As such it's ideally located for shifting without having to lean for the shift from second to third. There's also an automatic available for $70 though we can't comment on its operation as we haven't driven a 164 so equipped. The four-speed is positive with short throws and narrow spacing between second and third. The synchromesh in our vehicle was rather balky in second gear resulting in the odd graunch if we weren't careful shifting down from third.

Another strong point of the Volvo is the heater/defroster performance. Not only is it easy to use, consisting as it does of three buttons, one for the floor area, a second for the defroster and a third for recirculating air, but it is also very efficient. Of course this should not come as a surprise since Sweden's climate can be as cold and bothersome as ours.

Volvo's insistence on functionality also shows itself in the seatbelt design. Nothing could be simpler. Attached to the central pillar, about shoulder height is a chrome attachment. One simply pulls this and draws it across the chest

to be slotted into a plastic receptical between the two front buckets. The belt is free to slide within the chrome attachment, so that once it is snapped into place, the belt is drawn back into its holder until it is snuggly against your chest and lap. It is neither too tight or too loose and within minutes you're unaware of its presence. Normal movements are not restricted at all, though sudden movement such as during impact, causes the belt to lock preventing any forward movement of the body. With a belt system as comfortable and convenient as this, there's no excuse for anyone not wearing it.



Parcel nets, just one in a series of no cost extras

The armrests of the door were a bit too small for our liking. With the seat in position we found that our elbow barely reached the trailing edge of the arm rest. The Volvo is one of the few cars that still come with side vent windows. Some, especially smokers, will appreciate this as it provides for slow speed ventilation without the buffetting associated with opening the main window. Nevertheless this triangular window does cause considerable wind noise, not because it's badly fitted, but because it causes air turbulence around the A pillar. The kick panel on either side has a small rubber lever that operates a fresh air inlet for the foot level ventilation. It's best just to flip this with the foot rather than grope for it with your hand.

Starting the six cylinder engine equipped with fuel injection is simple enough, providing one follows instructions. Turn the key part way and wait a moment for the sensors within the computer to take note of the temperature and adjust the injectors then turn the key. You don't press the gas pedal or everything gets confused. The engine starts right away, immediately sitting at 1000 rpm until it's warm. Blipping the throttle illicits a tremendous roar from the fan. Though it's a plastic unit that flexes with speed thereby flattening out and drawing less power from the motor, it still makes a godawful racket. On the highway, much of the underhood noise is a result of this fan. Though it would cost more money, we'd like to see Volvo adopt a thermostatically controlled fan, much like the Renault 17 reviewed elsewhere in this issue. With these, an electric sensor turns the fan on only when the engine temperature reaches a specific level. While the car is rolling along the highway, there's sufficient air flow through the rad to make the fan unnecessary. It's only when the car is idling or in stop and go traffic that the fan needs to be running. If Volvo were to switch to such a set-up the highway cruising noise of the car would be cut substantially.

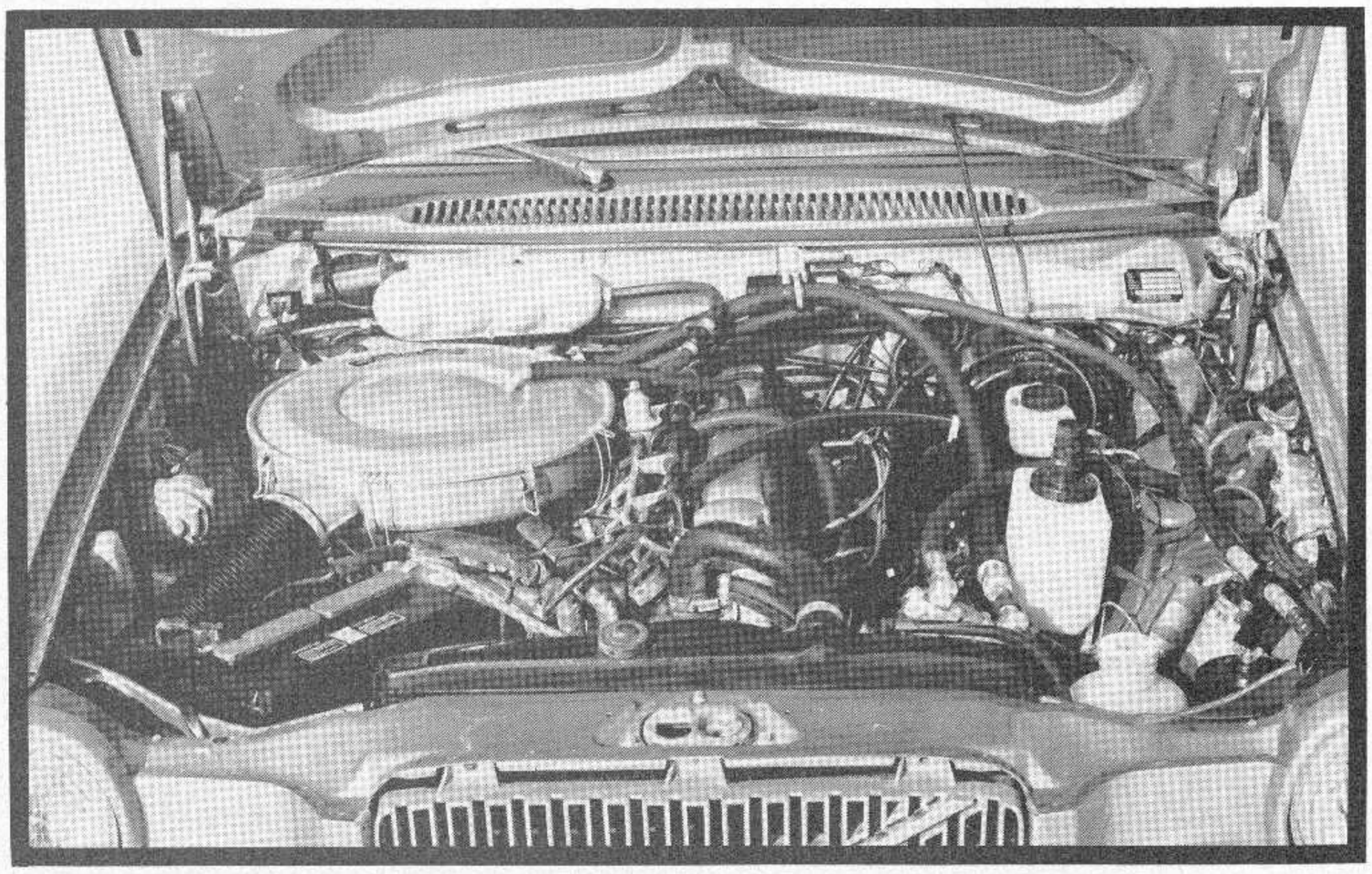
Engine noise is cut to a degree by the overdrive, another standard feature of the 164. Flip a switch on the steering column once you're into fourth gear and the engine revs drop by 700 rpm – a plus as far as engine durability is concerned as well as a gas saver.

As you accelerate through the gears, you find yourself rarely allowing the revs to climb above 4000 rpm, even though the engine is redlined at 5500 rpm. This is a result of fan noise and a general buzziness from the engine. Once the tachometer needle begins to nudge 4000 the engine begins to get sluggish, climbing the remaining 1500 rpm rather slowly. In truth it's a dependable work horse rather than a snappy sports engine. There's more than adequate power for Canadian driving conditions, it's just that the car doesn't lend itself to sports car treatment.

The steering is power assisted and quite light, though not as numb as most North American machines. The turning circle is an amazing 34 feet which never ceases to amaze us. In a parking lot, the car can be made to wheel around the sharpest corners and into a spot where normally you'd have to jockey the car back and forth to get in straight. Through tight corners the car tends to lean a substantial amount partly because of the car's height and high center of gravity. Again the car doesn't particularly enjoy being treated like a sports car, preferring to be driven more like a luxury car – which of course it is. Radial tires help the car's cornering ability and in fairness to Volvo we should add that it's better than comparably equipped North American sedans. Frankly, fast cornering in the 164 is uncomfortable. First of all you slide about in the bucket seats and have to hold onto the steering wheel in order to stay upright. With the engine buzzing away and everything heaving over, it's best not to bother. The car does tend to understeer, sliding nose first off the road if you over-cook it but again that's typical of all North American made cars. Overall we'd say the Volvo 164E handles somewhere between a typical North American automobile and a BMW or Mercedes-Benz.

Certainly most Canadians will not consider buying the Volvo 164E – it's just not big enough on the outside or flashy enough. Sure they'll be impressed with the interior appointments and the size of the trunk, but it's awfully hard to impress the neighbours with that kind of logic. No, most Canadians want something that's longer, lower and wider. But for those who care about comfort, practicality and high resale value, the Volvo 164E deserves consideration. Its fuel injected six cylinder engine gives good performance while getting 18 miles from a gallon of gasoline. The interior is absolutely elegant and the overall level of construction is high. It's the type of car you can drive for five years – maybe even ten, according to Volvo, and you can't say that about many cars these days.

Hoses for air conditioning, hoses for emission controls, but where is the engine?



DRIVING ROAD TEST

technical data

VOLVO 164

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE

Location	front
No. of cylinders	six, in-line
Valve operation	overhead, pushrod
Compression ratio	8.7:1
Carburetion	electronic fuel injection
Bore	3.50 ins.
Stroke	3.15 ins.
Displacement	181.7 cu. ins. (2978 cc)
Power	138 hp @ 5500 rpm
Torque	154 lb. ft. @ 3500 rpm

TRANSMISSION

No. of forward speeds	four
Final Drive	3.73:1
Gear ratios	1st—3.54; 2nd—2.12 3rd—1.34; 4th—1.00

BRAKES

Front	disc) power assisted
Rear	disc)

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	107.1 ins.
Track	53.2 ins. front; 53.2 ins. rear
Width	67.1 ins.
Height	56.7 ins.
Length	192.3 ins.
Weight as tested	3390 lb. (52.5% front; 47.5% rear)
Fuel capacity	12.8 gals.

STEERING

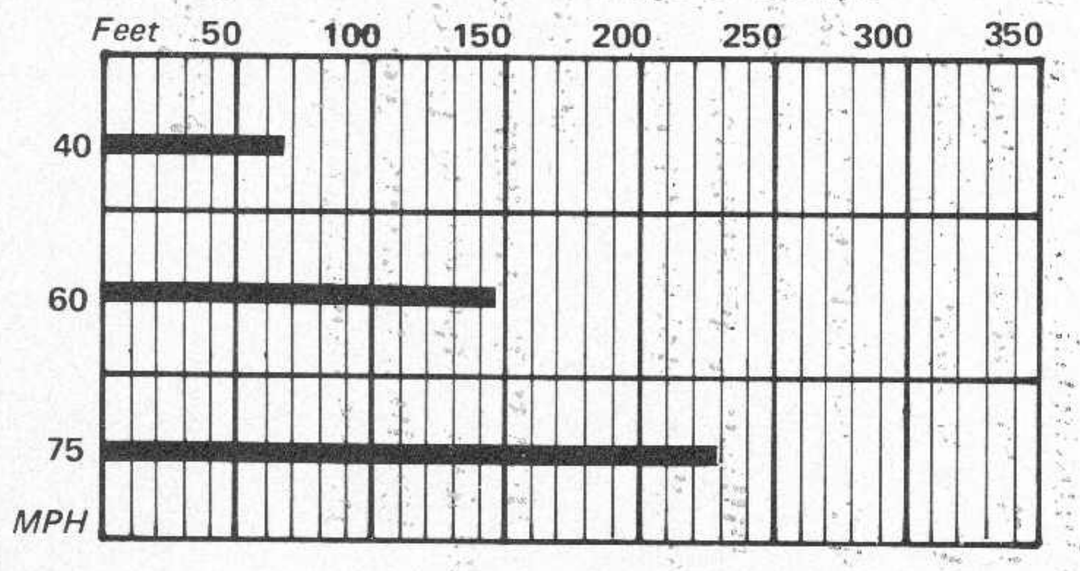
Type	recirculating ball, power assisted
Turning circle	34 ft.
Turns lock to lock	4

SUSPENSION

Front	unequal length A arms, tubular shocks, coil springs, sway bar
Rear	solid rear axle, trailing arms, tubular shocks, coil springs

CALCULATED DATA

Braking distances in feet: average of 3 stops



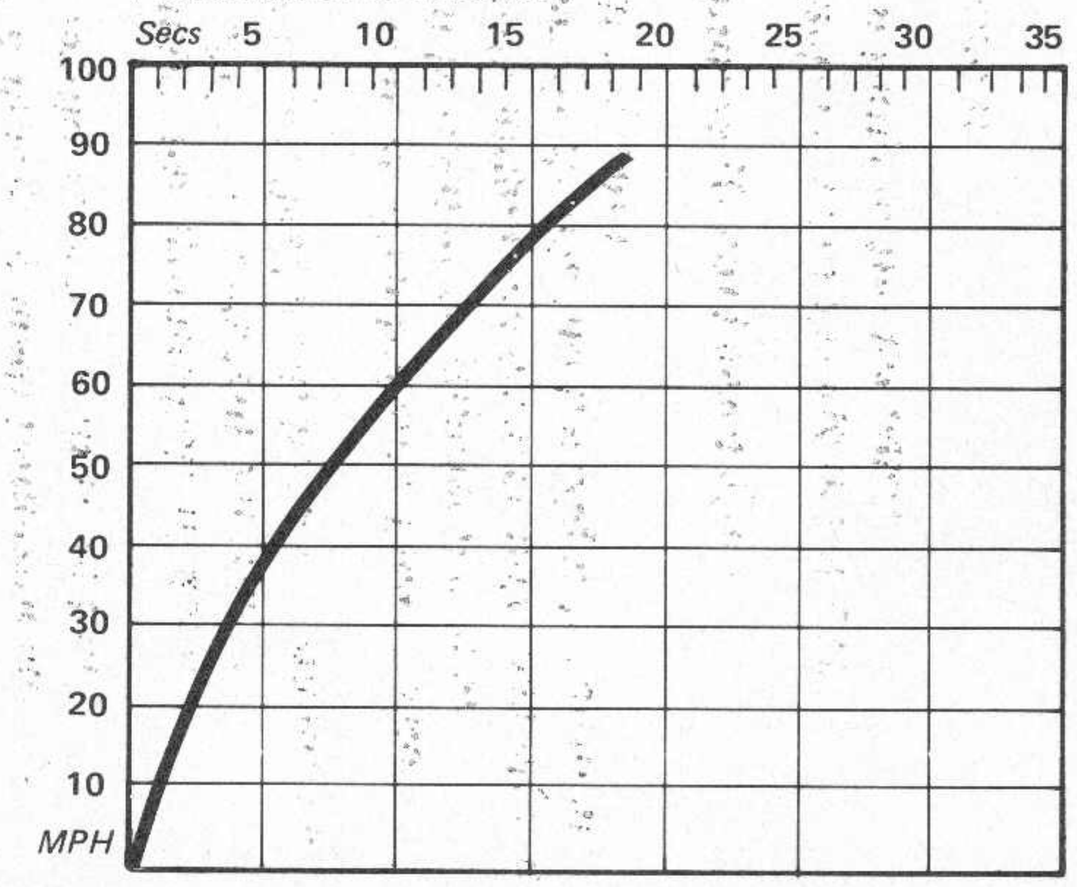
BRAKING

75-0	229 ft.
60-0	147 ft.
40-0	68 ft.
Fuel consumption	15–18 mph.

ACCELERATION

0-40	5.1 secs.
0-60	10.1 secs.
0-80	15.7 secs.
Quarter mile	17.5 secs./86 mph.

Acceleration in seconds



Suggested retail price	$6870	
Optional extras:		
Sunroof	215	
Price as tested		$7085