

WHICH IS THE SWEETER POTATO?

THE SUPERSWEDES

Volvo, with its 242GT, and SAAB with its Turbo, have taken vastly different roads to reach the same goal. We compare not so much the cars themselves, but the manufacturers' approaches to building fast, drivers' cars.

EARLY IN 1979, the meagre ranks of Australia's sporty sedans are to be swelled by two important new cars from Sweden.

They are the Volvo 242 GT, tested above and likely to be on general sale with the '79 Volvo range early next year for around \$14,000, and the Saab Turbo which is intended to go into the showrooms late this year at about \$18,000. Both cars are uncompromisingly aimed at the driving enthusiasts of Australia.

You may think that the Swedish manufacturers have uncovered an enticing market for medium-expensive sporty sedans and are rushing to fill the void, but this is not exactly true. Both manufacturers have ulterior

motives. Volvo's is the more pressing. Faced with flagging sales in Australia and on many other export markets, the company has rushed to produce a new more responsive, more interesting flagship in an attempt to end the criticism that Volvos are stodgy, fuddy-duddy cars, often bought by people who are realistic enough to think seriously about the consequences of a road accident but not a whit about the pleasure of driving.

The 242GT attempts to combine the best of the durable, safe Volvo sedan range with the things an Alfa/BMW buyer might demand — performance, roadholding, quietness, efficiency and above all, desirability. The Volvo 242GT is very much an "image"

car, built for the world and because its reason-to-be is so urgent and fundamental, the decorations and stripery are very, very calculated.

The sporty Volvo is recognisable as such from any angle. Its strident side-stripes, patterned mag alloy wheels, special silver grille and air dam underneath the front bumper, internal stripes, new wheel and instruments make up a thoughtful, integrated treatment. People do look at the 242GT. They even move over for it on highways without the usual Australian reluctance because it looks too businesslike in a rear vision mirror.

Saab doesn't have the same worldwide urgency to change its image, though its sales



haven't exactly been climbing through the roof. It does, after all have an old and hard-won reputation for building cars which rival Volvos for strength, long life and safety while incorporating the automotive "finer things" like a supple ride, excellent high-speed cruising ability, economy, comfort and (once again) above all, desirability.

But Saab has a problem in Australia. Its cars aren't sought-after the way they are in Europe. Saabs have a depressingly low resale value — depressing for all except those who realise the merit of the cars and take advantage of low second-hand prices. Saabs haven't been systematically or aggressively marketed here and as a result a little of the Volvo stodge has rubbed off. The Turbo was coming anyway — it is Saab's attempt to build a car with six-cylinder power, smoothness and flexibility without needing to change its body and engine designs fundamentally. But it comes at the right time for Australia. We like fast cars here. The Saab is an exceptionally fast car.

The Saab's decoration — because it doesn't

have to prove so much on its major markets — is somewhat understated compared with the 242GT's. The car is a standard three-door Combi coupe with no more mods to the body than its 190 km/h top speed decrees. There is a chin spoiler in insignificant black and another spoiler under the rear window but these are barely styled. They just fit, that's all. The sole concession to distinctiveness is a set of striking alloy wheels and even these don't find favor with everyone. "Great car but I hate the wheels" is a common remark.

It's worth recording that David Bentley, car designer and friend of WHEELS, dislikes the whole shape, saying that the body proportions are wrong. Most of the magazine's staff don't find the Saab actually offensive, but agree that it isn't in the Giugiaro class.

The two cars are not directly comparable, of course. For one thing, you could own a Volvo 242GT and a Mini Clubman for the price you'd pay for a Saab Turbo. For another, the Saab has a turbocharged engine, the Volvo does not. And mechanically, the cars are like chalk and cheese. The

Saab has front-wheel drive — a fairly novel arrangement with the engine pointing north-south and driving the gearbox underneath. It has a three-door hatchback body with a rear seat that folds to make a positively cavernous luggage space behind the front seats.

The Volvo has conventional engineering. A 2.1-litre front-mounted engine, driving the rear wheels through a four-speed gearbox with overdrive. Even that last detail is traditional rather than modern — most sporty cars have five-speed gearboxes these days, though the Saab, too, doesn't of course.

But though the mechanical layouts of the cars are completely different, the approaches of the two manufacturers to building a sports sedan are quite similar. Both have seen no need for major changes to their basic high-volume sedans. They have concentrated on improvements in crucial areas. Both cars use Pirelli CN36 tyres which are practically standard wear for serious fast cars between 1.5 and three litres, made in Europe or Britain. You find them on BMWs, or even on Escort RS2000s and RS1800s



SAAB



sold in England. It's measure of the relative abilities of the standard Volvo and Saab suspensions, however, that the Volvo which gets no power boost (just the lightest sedan body and a tall top-end overdrive ratio) needs considerable suspension beefing to make it point properly while the Saab, which gets a big power and performance boost, gets only the alloy wheels and CN36 tyres.

But with both manufacturers the sporty car game is an add-on business, involving some re-styling and in Saab's case some pioneering work in turbocharging, but a minimum of fundamental re-engineering.

There are things on both cars which more conservative buyers would not like. There are soft-wall Pirelli tyres to damage on back roads. There are chin spoilers to grind on the tops of gutters when parking. There are orange and black treatments which would cause some people to turn up their noses and under the Saab's bonnet there is enough performance to frighten the average to-work-and-back driver.

So how do the cars come out of it? Like

we said, Australia will soon have two serious new sporty sedans. There's no "touch of the Celicas" about these cars — they really can get around corners quickly and gobble up the distance. And they feel good to be in.

There's no question that the Saab does its job the better. Driving it is a private experience because it really isn't noticed by the throng as are most cars of \$18,000 or so. Saab has made no real attempt to convey to the crowd that this is Bruce-the-Discerning whose good taste has caused him to buy this fine car which he now wears on his back like a Savile Row bag of fruit or around his jowls like a splash of the top cologne.

If you hear about the Saab from a brochure of a bald set of specifications the sum of \$18,000 seems like a heap to pay for it. After all, we are discussing a family car which covers the standing 400m in a briskish 17 seconds. That's the time it takes in a 302 XC $\frac{1}{2}$ Falcon. But experience the Saab and you'll know that figures don't do it justice. For \$18,000 it puts into your hand a combination of power, economy, space, practicality, refinement, roadholding and noise

suppression which is, dammit, almost magical. The sum of \$18,000 suddenly seems reasonable, or would do if it weren't for the realisation that any one of us could take about half that amount to Europe and stand a chance of owning one.

The Volvo is a good sports sedan. It deserves to be called a serious one. It would benefit greatly from some more ergs under the bonnet and a throttle pedal which was a lot more sensitive. Perhaps an exhaust note, too. But its steering is damn good, especially for power, and its ride is firm but quite comfortable. There is stacks of useable equipment and room. And a 242GT will cruise at 160 km/h if the traffic conditions are right and there aren't too many long hills. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two cars is \$4000 and a turbocharger. No turbocharger we've seen is worth \$4000 on its own — at least not one for a car engine — but what it can do to a car's totality probably justifies it. If the Volvo were turboed and had the Saab's performance we'd probably be hard pressed to keep it out of our list of the great cars.

