

Trans Am: The Beat Goes On

These homologation specials are among the most enjoyable muscle cars—they can actually dance, rather than just run fast



1969 Camaro Z/28

From humble beginnings, by the late 1960s, the Trans-American Sedan Championship Series grew into one of the most popular events in SCCA history. Conceived as a sedan racing class for production-based cars with a minimum of four seats and engine displacement of between 2 liters and 5 liters, everything from Datsun 510s and Alfa Romeo GTVs duked it out with big American iron.

Manufacturers such as GM, Ford, Chrysler, and even AMC jumped at the chance to get their wares in front of literally thousands of spectators from their key pony car-buying demographic. The SCCA was aware of what heated competition between factory-sponsored teams could do to draw (paying) spectators to race tracks, and the factory teams were more than happy to oblige, as winning races on Sunday meant selling cars on Monday. Let's see how the major players compared on the track, in the showrooms, and now:

Chevrolet Camaro Z/28

The 1967 Chevrolet Camaro Z28 was the first Trans-Am homologation special to hit the market. With its 302-ci engine rated at 290 hp, it was an honest attempt at a street version of the car GM was racing. A solid-lifter cam, 4-speed manual transmission, heavy-duty suspension, 15-inch wheels, quick steering, and the conspicuous absence of comfort options such as an automatic transmission or air conditioning announced it as a serious high-performance street car. They revved like crazy, sounded great, and had a host of high-performance race options available over the counter at the dealer. In competition, the first-year Z finished behind the Ford Mustang in '67, and well behind it in sales, with just over 600 units sold.

However, in 1968, the Z/28 was back, and clinching the SCCA Manufacturer's Championship helped sales jump to just over 7,200 cars. In 1969, the Z/28 again grabbed the championship and made another quantum leap in sales, with over 20,000 Z/28s sold. Today, the

1967 version is desirable for its low production numbers, and great examples bring north of \$100,000. Zs from 1968 don't seem to bring the money a good '67 or '69 will; they tend to live around \$60,000–\$75,000.

Strangely, the highest production 1969 Z is to many the most desirable. Great examples with some of the rare factory performance options can bring \$125,000. By 1970, Ford's Boss 302 Mustang came back and stole the Camaro's candy, taking back the Manufacturer's Championship and apparently the Z/28's sales. Just over 7,700 1970 Z/28s were sold in its first year of the new body style. Today, these early second-gen Zs are gaining popularity quickly, and prices reflect this. A great '70 Z/28 will be solidly into first-gen money, roughly in the \$60,000-range.

Pontiac Firebird Trans Am

Pontiac took a novel approach to naming their homologation special option package for the Firebird. The new-for-1969 racer for the street was named the (drum roll, please) Trans Am, used under license from the SCCA for a \$5 royalty for

every car sold. In an odd twist of fate, the car named after the series couldn't race when Pontiac decided not to build their 303-ci engine and instead fitted 400-ci units, as used in the GTOs. Without meeting the SCCA requirements for a production version of the Trans Am, which were essentially similar to the race car, the 1969 Trans Am became a racer in name only. All was not lost, however, as the street cars had some excellent chassis and suspension tuning by GM engineer Herb Adams, along with a great-looking "any color as long as it's white with blue stripes" exterior treatment. Just 697 were built in '69, and lack of racing provenance doesn't seem to hurt them today, with great 4-speed cars eclipsing Z/28 values in the \$100,000–\$125,000-range. Second-generation Trans Ams follow along the lines of second-generation Z/28 prices.

Ford Mustang Boss 302

One can assume the product planners at Ford were getting an earful in 1968 after GM stole their SCCA title. Ford practically owned SCCA racing up until this time with the A/Sedan and B/Production Mustangs, as well as the T/A cars of 1967 and 1968. So for 1969, they fought back with the Boss 302. Much like the first-gen Z/28s, the Boss 302 was only available with a potent solid-lifter 302 with a 4-speed behind it, and no



1969 Firebird Trans Am



1970 Mustang Boss 302



1970 AAR 'Cuda

air conditioning. Ford's 302 had fairly radical, big, canted-valve cylinder heads with huge ports, along with other trick race items like a 6,750 rpm rev limiter. As hard as they tried, Ford still couldn't stop the Z/28 on the track in '69, and certainly not in the showroom, with a little over 1,600 Boss 302s sold. But 1970 saw the Boss 302 winning the SCCA title, although still lagging in sales with just over 7,000 1970s sold. Today, a great '69 brings about \$100,000, while a '70 costs roughly 10% less.

Plymouth AAR 'Cuda & Dodge T/A Challenger

Chrysler entered the game late, as it wasn't until a 1970 SCCA rule change allowing production engines to be stroked and/or debored to meet the 5-liter limit made their new 340-ci engine eligible. Using the new-for-1970 E-body pony cars, Plymouth introduced the All American Racers 'Cuda, while Dodge rolled out the T/A Challenger production specials. Both were fitted with the 340-ci "Six Pack" engine, staggered front and rear tire sizes, side-exit exhaust, fiberglass fresh-air hoods, and other "racy" items. Although visually stunning, not even Dan Gurney in his AAR 'Cuda or Sam Posey in his T/A Challenger could get the job done in Trans Am for 1970. Gurney's AAR team finished 5th overall and Posey managed 4th. While brutally fast, the new Chrysler entries

in the Trans Am war lacked development, not to mention the extra years of experience both Chevrolet and Ford had. For 1970, 2,724 AAR 'Cudas and 2,399 T/A Challengers were sold. Today, a prime AAR 4-speed will bring right around \$100,000, while a T/A will bring slightly less.

So does racing really improve the breed? Judging by the above examples, the answer is a resounding yes. These Trans Am homologation specials are some of the most enjoyable and usable cars from the muscle era, and they can actually dance rather than just run fast. With real American racing history, stable values, great looks, and a racy feel, compared to similarly priced big-block muscle cars, these remnants of SCCA-mandated production requirements offer a ton of bang for the buck. Pick your flavor, find your favorite twisty road on the way to cruise night, and keep the revs up. You may not be Dan Gurney, but you can sure look and sound the part. ♦

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