MOTOR SPORTS

TESTING THE THUNDERBIRD

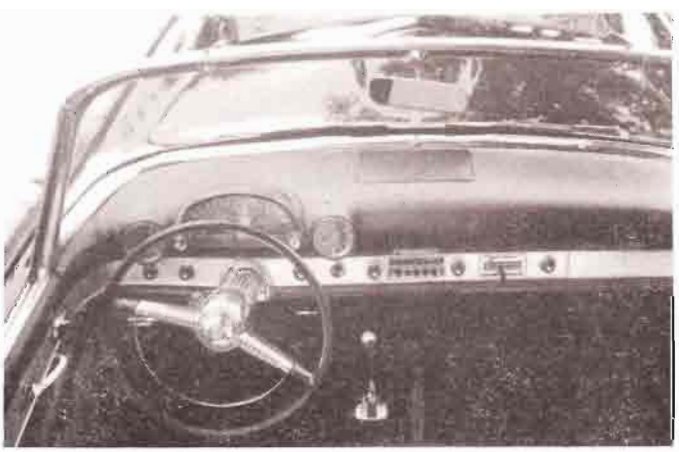
Ford's latest creation is a speedy, sporty answer to the growing U.S. demand for power and comfort with a sports car thrill

by JOHN BENTLEY

In the last three years, the number of imported sports cars on U.S. highways has jumped by 160%—or one for every 2,500 Americans. The auto industry, awakening to the $340,000,000 business this represents, has countered with various new models of its own. The latest of these is the Ford Thunderbird, due for an October unveiling. To subject this new car to a critical appraisal, SI *sent Motor Columnist John Bentley out to the Ford works, where he put the Thunderbird through her paces and wrote the exhaustive report which follows below.*

GHOSTLIKE AT MORE THAN 110 MILES PER HOUR, THE

IT WAS not a pilot model Thunderbird which the Ford Motor Company rolled out for me, but the Number-1 production model of a line which will shortly be geared to a monthly output of 1,000 cars—a big concession by an industry which until very recently still failed to realize that the clink of small change from the cash registers of imported-car dealers was growing to respectable crescendo. Ford's newest baby, as I first saw it, was a lavish car which can be equipped, at extra cost, with all the gadgetry of a prize convertible—and more. The one I drove featured Ford-O-Matic transmission, power brakes and power steering, as well as power-operated seat and windows. Also optional, fortunately, are dummy wire-wheel discs and a detachable hard top which can be provided in place of the standard folding top—a neatly folding affair with spring-loaded bows, easily handled by two people and designed to tuck down out of sight behind the seat.



INSTRUMENT PANEL follows style of the 1954 Ford, with a tachometer *(left)* and sweep-second clock added. Floor shift lever controls hydramatic drive. Visibility is superb.

SLEEK, DOCILE, FAST

It is a sleek, handsome, docile and fast roadster built essentially of stock Ford and Mercury parts (brakes, steering, suspension, transmission) mounted on a special box-type chassis and equipped with an all-steel custom body of outstandingly good finish, welded into one rigid unit. You cannot, for instance, replace a dented fender. The job, as on most sports cars, is one for a panel beater. Yet the Thunderbird is not a true sports car of competition type, nor does Ford make any such claim for it. In advertising jargon it is a "personal" or "much preferred" car—by which is meant a sporting, second-string machine, redolent with snob appeal, highly photogenic and fun to drive on a weekend breeze or a trip to the golf links.

Finished in black, with black and cream leather upholstery, a black pile carpet and black mohair top, this par-

THUNDERBIRD STREAKS PAST THE CAMERA, WITH BENTLEY AT THE WHEEL. FLAT OUT, THE CAR IS CAPABLE OF DOING 128 MPH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE CLARK

ticular Thunderbird heralded one of three color schemes which will include turquoise and Thunderbird red with matching leather. The comfortable seat (51¾ inches wide) is ample for two, but it took less than an afternoon's hard driving to discover that three abreast can easily become a crowd. For a tall driver, leg and headroom are at a premium (24½ inches from seat edge to pedals with the seat fully back and three inches head clearance with the top up) but the telescopic steering wheel provides some compensation for the tight fit.

Against these minor drawbacks, the Thunderbird is a very appealing machine, judged even by sports-car standards. When top and windows are raised, it is as snugly weatherproof as a convertible and the longer you drive it the better you like it. Forward vision (through the curved panoramic windshield offering 1,027 square inches of glass) is superb. Both fenders are clearly in sight and the smoothly contoured hood airscoop confers a pleasant suggestion of power. Instrument grouping is identical with that on 1954 Fords, but with two extra dials of 3⅛-inch diameter, providing a 5,000 rpm tachometer at left and a sweep-second clock at right.

Shifting is by a centrally located chrome floor lever which slides backward or forward on a chrome scale calibrated with a conventional hydramatic dial. The knob has a push-button safety locking device which must be depressed to move from neutral through park to drive. With the accelerator jammed to the floor for a scat getaway, it is easy to spin the rear wheels, even on dry concrete. Under these conditions, the hydramatic upshifts to intermediate and high at the usual 30 and 65 mph, but a manual shift would do the Thunderbird far more justice. Still, the outstandingly good low-speed torque is obvious from the fact that the 0–30 and 30–50 mph acceleration times are identical.

SPEEDING AND CORNERING

Some fast driving and cornering quickly demonstrated the excellent roadability and handling qualities of the car, which has the best power steering I have ever sampled. It is light, positive and devoid of disconcerting "remoteness" and allows quick correction of deliberately induced slides. At 110 mph (4,300 rpm) the Thunderbird was quiet and rock-steady and could be steered with one hand, but stopping was another matter. The power brakes (11-inch Mercury drums with a 50% assist) put dangerously too much

SPECIFICATIONS

engine & chassis

No. of cylinders	V-8
Bore	3.75 in.
Stroke	4.37 in.
Displacement	292 cu. in.
Compression ratio	—
Maximum output	—
Bore/stroke ratio	1: .88
Bhp per cu. in.	.65**
Maximum torque	—
Carburetor	Ford-Holley 4-barrel downdraft (automatic choke)
Transmission	Ford-O-Matic*
Overall ratios:	High: 3.31
	Second: 4.83
	Low: 7.94
	Reverse: 6.62
Rear axle ratio	3.31
Piston speed (5,000 rpm)	2,750 fpm
Mph per 1,000 rpm (High gear)	25.52
Weight	3,250 lbs.
Power/weight ratio	17.10 lbs/bhp**
Turning diameter	36 ft.
Steering wheel turns (lock to lock)	3½
Steering ratio	20:1
Tire size	6.70 x 15
Brake lining area	175 sq. in.
Gas tank capacity (gallons)	17

measurements

Wheelbase	102 in.
Tread (front & rear)	56 in.
Overall length	175.3 in.
Width	70.3 in.
Height (top up)	52.2 in.
Minimum ground clearance	5.5 in.
Trunk space (approx.)	10 cu. ft.
Rear window area	533 sq. in.
Maximum interior width	59 in.

* Optional at extra cost **Estimated (see text)

emphasis on power and too little on progressive braking. Tramping hard on the pedal produced a frightening one-second time lag, after which the wheels abruptly locked solid and the car slid with howling tires. This explains the mediocre stopping at speeds of 45 mph and up.

Flat out, the Thunderbird is capable of 128 mph (5,000 rpm) but this maximum is not recommended since the engine is revving way past peak. Just what that peak is, the otherwise cooperative Ford Technical Service Laboratory refuses to reveal, even at this writing which is within days of the car's general release. The V-8 engine uses a recast Mercury block bored out to 3.75 inches and with a 1.27-inch longer stroke. This block, incidentally, will probably form the basis of the 1955 Ford engine. A fair guesstimate of the Thunderbird's output on the basis of known specifications (*see above*) puts it at around 190 hp at 4,400 rpm.

With each car sold, the customer will get an enthusiast's repair manual of 64 pages with 57 illustrations; and if you purchase one of the first 400 Thunderbirds produced, you will be treated to a goodwill briefing visit from a district sales manager.

The price tag of the Thunderbird is as yet undetermined, but Ford claims it will be "competitive." The $64 question is: competitive with what? If the Chevrolet Corvette is Ford's price target, then the Thunderbird will be a remarkable value-for-money proposition and almost a "must" for tired business executives seeking to recapture their lost youth.

PERFORMANCE AT A GLANCE

Acceleration through gears	0—30 mph:	4.0 secs.
	0—60 mph:	10.0 secs.
	0—80 mph:	16.8 secs.
(High to second)	30—50 mph:	4.0 secs.
Maximum speed obtained		110 mph.
Brake Test (concrete surface)		
	From 30 mph:	34 ft. 8 in.
	From 45 mph:	81 ft. 4 in.
	From 60 mph:	138 ft. 11 in.
Gas Consumption (all tests incl.)		15 mpg

Weather: Mild; humid to rainy; no wind.
Speedometer correction: At 60 mph read 58 mph: 3.3% slow.

LOW AND SLEEK, the Thunderbird is a road-hugging car. Here Bentley and George Brown, assistant manager in Technical Service Laboratory, get set for trial run.