

ONE IS "SIMPLY terrific, a benchmark car that will send competitors back to the drawing boards." Another is "a 5-figure bargain, a well balanced handler that has undeniable quality, reliability and durability." The third is "refined, capable, efficient—and very enjoyable to drive." Lofty praise for three cars that represent the low dollar end of the sports coupe market. But the words aptly describe this trio of imports, each of which has more than just sporting pretensions. If you had to choose just one, which would it be: the "terrific" Honda Prelude, the "bargain" Toyota Celica GT-S or the "refined" Volkswagen Scirocco?

That was a question we hoped to answer as we set out for southern California's high desert on our latest multicar comparison test. T-shirts, bumperstickers, posters and other paraphernalia tell you that the land around Lancaster is Space Shuttle country, but we prefer to think of it as an area with varied terrain, wide-open spaces, pretty vistas (for our tag-along picture taker), wonderful driving roads and one of the most interesting road racing circuits on the west coast, Willow Springs International Raceway. Getting there and back gave us perfect opportunity to evaluate the cars' ordinary road manners. And Willow Springs offered a controlled setting to probe each car's limits.

Faithful readers may recall R&T's March 1982 comparison of



THREE SMALL SPORTS COUPES

HONDA PRELUDE, TOYOTA CELICA GT-S, VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO

*Good things (and more than a little fun)
come in small packages*

PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM

Six Sports Coupes that included two of the same cars, the Toyota Celica and the VW Scirocco, 1st- and 2nd-place finishers, respectively, in that test. Both coupes have changed since then, the Celica getting a GT-S package (see R&T, January 1983) consisting of, among other things, irs, heavy-duty springs and shocks, fender flares, wide wheels and tires and sport seats; the Scirocco getting the GTI treatment previously seen in the Rabbit. This includes not only such things as springs and shocks, but the 1780-cc, 90-bhp American GTI powerplant and close-ratio 5-speed. But the car that spurred us on to conduct this latest comparison is the redesigned Honda Prelude. The Honda was so impressive in our May 1983 road test that we wondered if its competition could approach its level of handling, performance, comfort and styling.

So it was off to Lancaster with score sheets at the ready. For those readers unfamiliar with our system, we rate each car on a 10 through 1 (fantastic to awful) basis in 21 areas including engine, gearbox, ride, handling, instrumentation, interior and exterior styling, loading and finish. We also ask each tester to order his preferences with money-no-object and on a you're-darn-right-it-makes-a-difference bases. In this case, money didn't have that much bearing on the editors' personal choices because all cars were in the \$11,000 to \$12,000 range as equipped. See the accompanying tables for these and other data

on our three comparison cars. What follows here are capsule descriptions of each, in alphabetical order.

Honda Prelude

IN OUR May 1983 road test we called it "The best car in its class." How true, as we discovered when we pitted this Japanese jewel against two other top-notch automobiles. The Prelude earned top marks in 15 categories, amassing 527 points out of a possible 630.

Our trio of testers loved its engine, an 1829-cc sohc powerplant that elicited comments such as "silky-smooth, responsive and free-revving." With 100 bhp (in a 2200-lb car!), the inline 4-cylinder hurries the Honda from 0 to 60 mph in 9.7 seconds and gets it to the quarter mile in 17.2 sec. The engine is helped along by the Prelude's excellent 5-speed transmission, whose well matched gear ratios, preciseness and crisp feel earned it a win in that category. Steering with good road feel and on-center characteristics and brakes with proper pedal feel, excellent stopping power and very good control, gave the Honda its next two wins. Then there was handling, a category in which the car at-

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tained an almost perfect score, 29 points.

If there's a word that best describes the Prelude, it's one that all three testers used: balance. Not coincidentally, it is the same word we used in our May road test to sum up the handling picture. To wit: "There's minimal understeer and you almost forget it's a front-wheel-drive car." These attributes came to the fore more than once along our route, but especially on stretches of fast bends through rolling high desert, the sort of terrain where you occasionally set up for a right-hander over the rise, only to arrive upon a left-hand curve sprinkled with sand. Surprises such as this rarely upset the confidence of whoever happened to be driving the Prelude at the time, and said driver tended to note the other two cars receding in his rearview mirror before long.

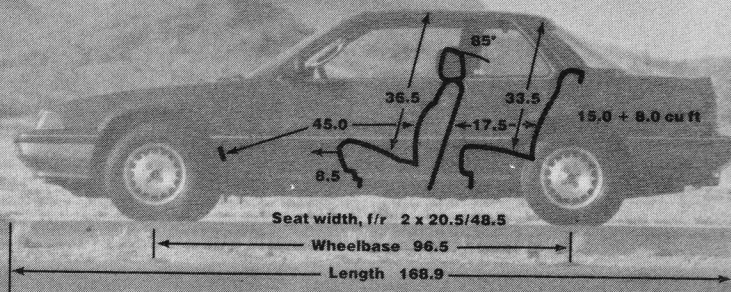
The Prelude's point-winning tally was evidently bolstered by its gold stars in body structure, driving position, controls, outward vision, quietness and heat/vent/air conditioning. To amplify on one of these, our trio lauded the unit body's tautness and absence of rattles; a car that felt carved of a piece and likely to remain so over time. The Prelude's failings are few and not really faults, but rather shortcomings: Its ride, instrumentation, lug-

gage and loading and interior styling are second best compared to the Toyota's or VW's. For example, if the Prelude's instrumentation made it a bridesmaid, it wasn't because the car's speedometer, tach and gauges are illegible or poorly placed, but because the Celica's were even more discernible and extensive. The Prelude's interior is very nicely integrated, though we found its upholstery material and phony stitching less to our taste than the simplicity and elegance offered in the Scirocco, for instance. "A bit too obvious and overstated," was the way one staff member put it. And we felt the Honda's ride was slightly on the harsh side, especially compared with the Scirocco's, though we also sensed that this was undoubtedly the result of a firmness offering the enthusiast some genuine fun.

Not only did we enjoy our Prelude along the road, but it proved the quickest means for every driver around Willow Springs' mix of left and right, slow and fast, up and downhill stretches. Many professional teams test here and, just for the record, the quickest person around Willow Springs to date is Nigel Mansell, whose 1982 Lotus F1 car posted a lap of 1 minute 06.3 seconds. R&T's best was 1:54.6, set by our demon test ➤

Honda Prelude

Weight distribution (with driver), f/r, % 61/39
Fuel capacity 15.8 gal.

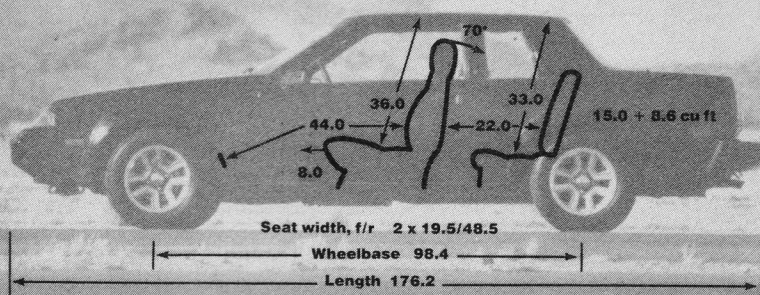


Curb weight 2180 lb
Test weight 2300 lb

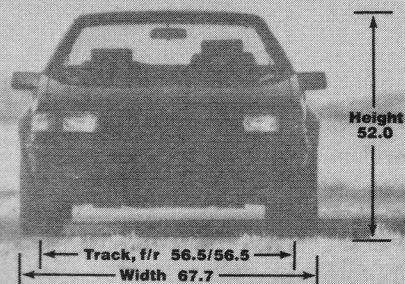


Toyota Celica GT-S

Weight distribution (with driver), f/r, % 55/45
Fuel capacity 16.1 gal.

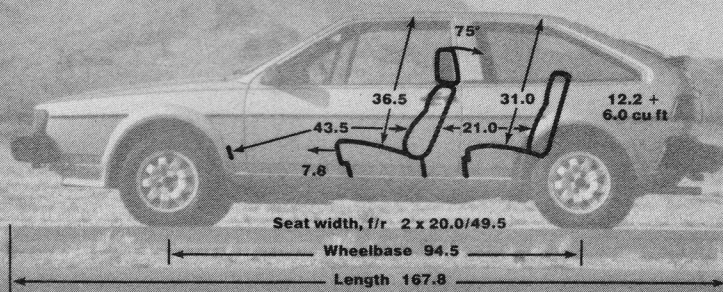


Curb weight 2775 lb
Test weight 2950 lb

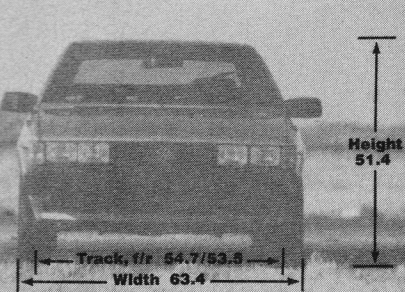


Volkswagen Scirocco

Weight distribution (with driver), f/r, % 63/37
Fuel capacity 10.6 gal.



Curb weight 2170 lb
Test weight 2335 lb



driver (identity withheld pending notification of his psychiatrist), who noted, "Magnificent! Excellent engine, free-revving, smooth with good torque. Great gearing. Superb handling, firm, yet not overly harsh ride. The car really sticks and though it may feel twitchy on bumpy, high-speed turns, it is very predictable. Attitude correctable with brakes or throttle. An easy car to go fast in," he added, quite correctly.

Toyota Celica GT-S

IN *ROAD & TRACK's Guide to Sports & GT Cars 1983*, the text says, "When you factor in cost, economy, reliability and the sheer fun of driving," the Celica GT-S is a \$10,000 bargain. Although the Toyota won only a single category, instrumentation, it finished 2nd in eight other areas to amass 451 points, coming only one insignificant point behind the 2nd-place VW. A tie, we're tempted to call it.

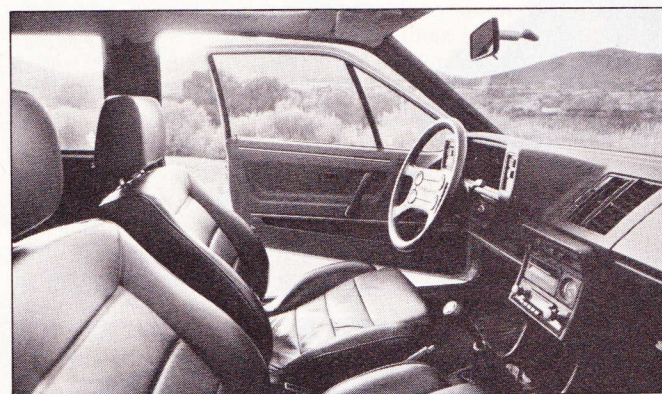
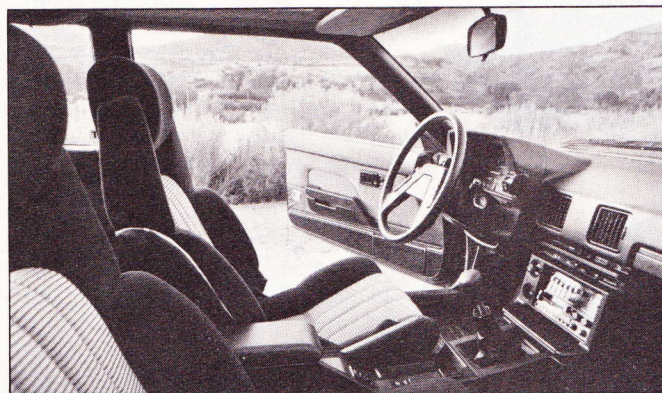
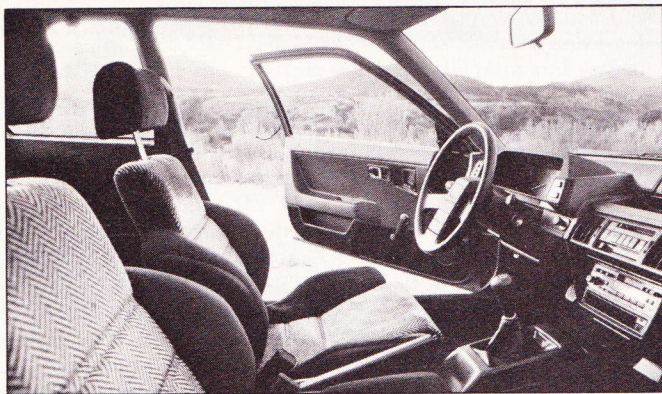
About the Celica's victory: Suffice to say that this car has the most complete array of gauges of the lot. What's more, they are large, well placed and easy to read. To an enthusiast, that's important. So are such things as front seats, brakes, controls and

heat/vent/air conditioning, areas in which the GT-S trailed the Honda, but led the VW. Think of them as worthy of a bronze medal rather than a black mark because they are that good.

Some of the categories in which the Toyota was less than spectacular include the engine. Although it is the most powerful of the group, it is noisy and unsophisticated. Yes, we know we can have the Supra 6-cylinder. But not for 10 grand! True, for this price the Celica offers adequate if not startling acceleration (0-60 in 11.8 sec, quarter-mile results of 18.3 sec at 74.5 mph, least quick of the trio), and more than adequate handling (0.804g around the skidpad, for instance, best of the three).

However, its tradeoffs become apparent when the road gets rough, because the Celica's ride responds in kind. "It feels like a mini-pickup with fat tires," remarked one tester. His comment zeroed in on the problem: The GT-S *does* have big wheels and tires and heavy-duty suspension because it is a grocery-getter doing double duty as a sports coupe. True, the IRS has eliminated some of the live rear-axle ride harshness, but hasn't brought it up to the level of the Honda or VW.

Nor were we enamored by the Celica's styling, an area in



GENERAL DATA

	Honda Prelude	Toyota Celica GT-S	Volkswagen Scirocco
Base price	\$9645	\$9969	\$10,800
Price as tested ¹	est \$10,695	\$12,099	\$11,360
Layout	front engine/fwd	front engine/rwd	front engine/fwd
Engine type	sohc inline-4	sohc inline-4	sohc inline-4
Bore x stroke, mm	80.0 x 91.0	91.9 x 88.9	81.0 x 86.4
Displacement, cc	1829	2367	1780
Compression ratio	9.4:1	9.0:1	8.5:1
Bhp @ rpm, SAE net	100 @ 5500	105 @ 4800	90 @ 5500
Torque @ rpm, lb-ft	109 @ 4000	137 @ 2800	105 @ 3250
Carburetion/fuel	injection	two Keihin (1V)	Bosch L-Jetronic
Transmission	5-sp manual	5-sp manual	5-sp manual
Gear ratios, :1	3.18/1.94/1.25	3.29/1.89/1.28	3.49/2.12/1.44
	0.93/0.76	1.00/0.79	1.13/0.91
Final drive ratio, :1	4.07	3.42	3.94
Steering type	rack & pinion	rack & pinion, power assisted	rack & pinion
Brake system, f/r	9.1-in. vented discs/ 7.9 x 1.4-in. drums	10.1-in. vented discs/ 9.0 x 1.2-in. drums	9.4-in. discs/ 7.1 x 1.2-in. drums
Wheels	cast alloy, 13 x 5J	cast alloy, 14 x 7JJ	cast alloy, 13 x 5J
Tires	Michelin XVS, 185/70HR-13	Yokohama Radial 352, 225/60HR-14	Michelin MX L, 175/70R-13
Suspension, f/r	upper A-arms, lower lateral links, compliance struts, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, lower lateral arms, compliance struts, coil springs, tube shocks, Chapman struts, trailing arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, lower lateral arms, compliance struts, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar/trailing arms interconnected by T- section anti-roll bar, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar

¹Price as tested includes: for the Honda Prelude, air cond (est \$550), alloy wheels (\$500); for the Toyota Celica GT-S, air cond (\$630), elect. sunroof (\$460), AM/FM stereo/cassette (\$440), elect. window lifts & central locking (\$395), cruise control (\$135), black paint (\$70); for the Volkswagen Scirocco, sunroof (\$425), metallic paint (\$135)

CALCULATED DATA

	Honda Prelude	Toyota Celica GT-S	Volkswagen Scirocco
Lb/bhp (test weight)	23.0	28.1	25.9
Mph/1000 rpm (top gear)	21.6	25.6	18.5
Engine revs/mi (60 mph)	2780	2340	3250
Piston travel, ft/mi	1660	1365	1843
R&T steering index ²	1.11	1.05	1.22
Brake swept area, sq in./ton	189	203	204

²Steering wheel turns, lock to lock x turning diameter, curb to curb

which the car received its lowest score. Let's face it, its whittled-from-wood lines are a far cry from the aero look of the Prelude and Scirocco. Interior styling is not much better, integrated being a word that does not appear to be a part of the company's lexicon, at least in this case.

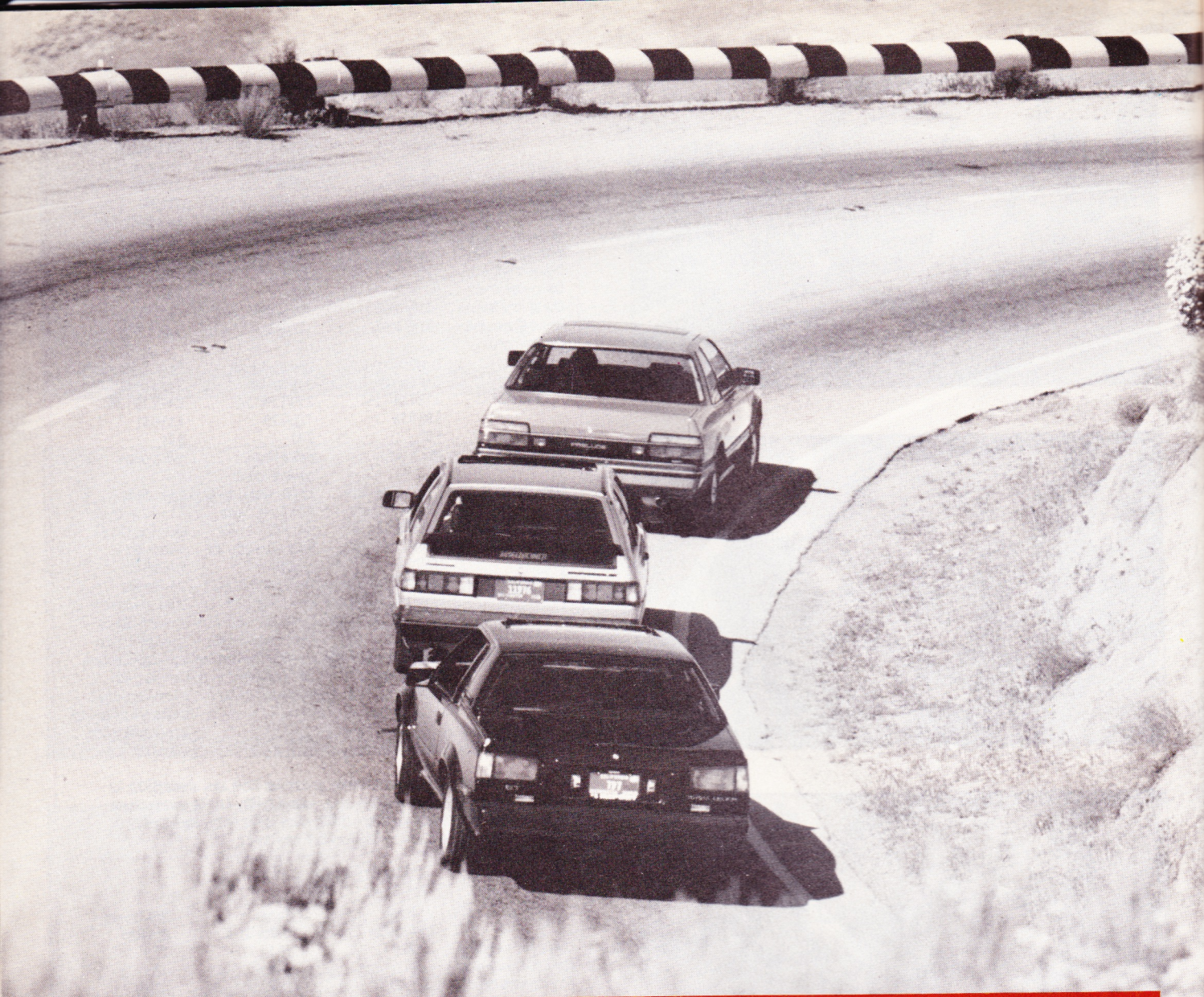
So why would anyone buy a Celica GT-S? For fun—the car is exciting to drive and no slouch on the race track, as we'll soon see. It is also quite comfortable, provided the road hasn't deteriorated too much.

Those high desert roads we've already mentioned gave the Celica—not to say its drivers—a good workout. It handled unexpected changes of direction with only the slightest bit of drama, once one realized just how fat and grippy those tires really are. As one staff member put it, "Oops! The road goes to the right! Crank in the appropriate steering, let the tires scrub off speed and everything's fine. But careful with the brake pedal, because it's not clear that the Celica's rear suspension wouldn't act up if asked to do too many things at once." By contrast, we felt the Prelude's rear suspension would continue holding up its cargo area—its principal job, after all—regardless of the car's attitude.

Around Willow Springs, the Toyota found itself bracketed between the Honda and the VW, with a best time of 1:55.1. Cornering power was its strong point, power/weight ratio its shortcoming, as we discovered during some impromptu racing with the Prelude. Exiting the corners, the cars would be even, but the Prelude would pull away down the straight. Of its performance at the limit, our demon driver reported: "The Toyota feels over-tired and under-suspended, and telegraphs a go-slow approach until you realize that the car can corner harder. It takes practice to go really fast in the Celica, however."

Volkswagen Scirocco

DISTINCTIVE LOOKS, exceptional performance and cornering, a firm yet compliant ride: These are the attributes that set the recently released Scirocco apart from the other sports coupes in its class." That's how we described the then-new VW in our 6-car comparison (March 1982) and that statement pretty much still stands. Except that this time "recently released" means the 1983 version known in Volkswagen ads as the Wolfsburg Edition. Although the car's interior and exterior design have not



PERFORMANCE

	Honda Prelude	Toyota Celica GT-S	Volkswagen Scirocco
Acceleration:			
Time to distance, sec:			
0-1320 ft (¼ mi)	17.2	18.3	17.8
Speed at end of ¼ mi, mph	78.5	74.5	76.0
Time to speed, sec:			
0-30 mph	2.8	3.4	3.0
0-60 mph	9.7	11.8	10.7
0-80 mph	17.8	21.6	20.2
Top speed, mph	108	105	109
Trip fuel economy, mpg	25.5	22.0	27.0
Brakes:			
Stopping distance, ft, from:			
60 mph	161	159	158
80 mph	275	298	271
Pedal effort for 0.5g stop, lb	19	25	25
Fade, % increase in effort,			
6 stops from 60 mph @ 0.5g	32	nil	40
Overall brake rating	very good	very good	very good
Handling:			
Lateral acceleration, g	0.785	0.804	0.785
Slalom speed, mph	61.6	59.8	59.7
Interior noise, dBA			
Idle in neutral	46	49	51
Maximum 1st gear	84	84	78
Constant 30 mph	64	65	66
50 mph	68	67	68
70 mph	73	73	74



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changed (assuming we ignore those 500 limited-production California Edition models; see "Miscellaneous Ramblings," R&T, August 1983), the mechanicals—engine, drivetrain and suspension—have. The latest VW sports coupe is improved in many ways, but not enough to keep it from finishing 2nd in our overall standings; indeed, beating the Toyota by the smallest margin.

We can say that in the Scirocco's case it is a matter of too little too late. For example, the VW's increased displacement engine has 16 more bhp than before and the car does accelerate more quickly than its predecessor (a full second quicker to 60, for example, at 10.7 sec). But it is still no match for the Honda Prelude, even at nearly the same curb weight. Similarly, reengineering of the VW's suspension (stiffer springs, revalved shocks, the addition of front and rear anti-roll bars a la GTI) has, surprisingly enough, not improved the car's handling; indeed, it's not as good as the previous Scirocco's and certainly not on par with the Prelude's.

Remember those twisty stretches we encountered? The ones with sandy corners going the wrong way? The Scirocco's lateral softness gave rise to an accompanying diagonal pitch followed by a rear twitchiness that made it the least pleasant of the trio on unfamiliar roads such as these. And even in extremely familiar settings, we were disappointed: Back home at the test track, this Scirocco posted a slalom speed of 59.7 mph; still quick, to be sure, but significantly off the pace of our March 1982 Scirocco's splendid 62.5 mph. Also, quite independently of our comparison test, we had a chance to sample a Scirocco California Edition; this, with the same suspension as our comparison car's, but completing the GTI package with larger 185/60HR-14 tires on appropriately sized wheels. Guess what? Though both cars were smack on the 0.785g of our March 1982 Scirocco's skidpad result, this California Edition was significantly slower in the slalom, at 57.6. Why? We're not sure, but we'd guess that the Scirocco's added weight and different distribution of it cause the Rabbit GTI pieces to be less than optimal in this application. Neither Scirocco exhibited the flat platform feel of the Rabbit GTI, and the California Edition was even a tad more prone to the lateral softness cum rear twitchiness that affected our comparison car.

Although the Scirocco felt quick around Willow Springs, its lap times proved otherwise. Its best was 1:58.5, fully 3-4 sec off the pace of the other two. Opines our demon driver: "The Scirocco is awfully soft laterally, and it understeers more strongly than the others. You think it's running out of power, but it's just speed being scrubbed off. Also, there's more throttle-off sensitivity than with the other two."

On the other hand, top marks in ride, luggage space and loading, interior styling and interior finish gave the Scirocco the points to inch ahead and beat the Toyota. Our trio liked the German car's ride, which one tester said was "best over bumps, giving a good road feel without harshness." Interior styling and interior finish can be summarized thusly: clean, elegant, simple. If one were placed into the car blindfolded, one would know this was a German car.

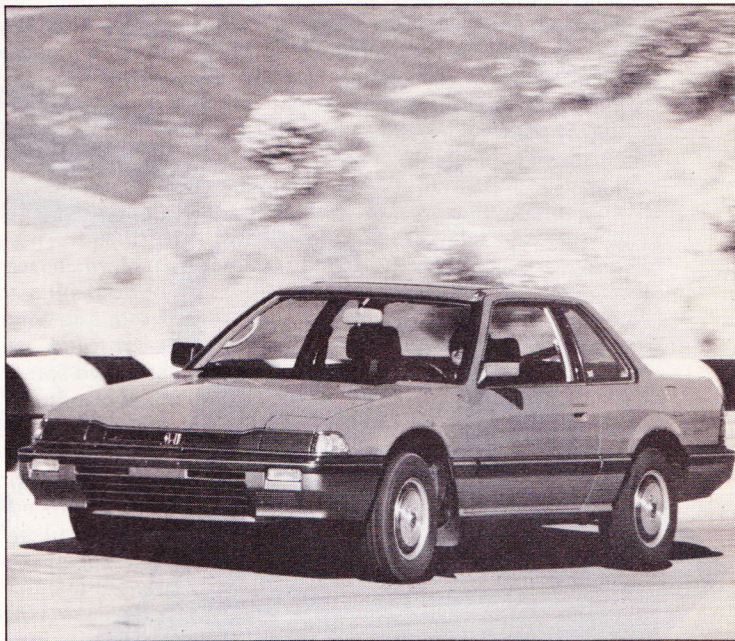
Conclusions

TO BORROW an expression from club racing, "All cars are created equal, but some are more equal than others." This is certainly true of the Prelude, which stands head and shoulders above its competition. Not only did the Honda win the numbers game handily, it was also everyone's 2-way personal favorite, cost considered/cost be damned. And its behavior on road and track only confirmed these subjective views. As we noted in our introductory road test, the Prelude sets new standards by which small sports coupes can be judged.

But neither are the other two absolute dogs in any way. Our subjective point totals leave the impression that the Celica GT-S and Scirocco are essentially equals, but rarely are two equals so contrasting. It's a matter of Japanese vs German character, the Celica's squarish lines vs the Scirocco's rounded contours, the

somewhat garish, though feature-filled nature of the former vs what some may consider excessive starkness of the latter. The Toyota's evident long suit is its maker's well deserved reputation for reliability and durability; the VW's, its distinctly European sporting character.

Good things (and more than a little fun) come in small packages.



CUMULATIVE RATINGS—SUBJECTIVE EVALUATIONS

	Honda Prelude	Toyota Celica GT-S	Volkswagen Scirocco
Performance:			
Engine	28	19	23
Gearbox	26	21	20
Steering	25	22	19
Brakes	25	24	17
Ride	23	19	25
Handling	29	22	21
Body structure	26	21	24
Subtotals	182	148	149
Comfort/Controls:			
Driving position	28	23	21
Controls	26	23	23
Instrumentation	25	27	22
Outward vision	26	20	21
Quietness	25	20	21
Heat/vent/air conditioning	24	22	16
Ingress/egress	22	20	18
Front seats	25	24	25
Rear seats	22	20	14
Luggage space & loading	22	22	23
Subtotals	245	221	204
Design/Styling:			
Exterior styling	25	17	24
Exterior finish	29	23	24
Interior styling	23	20	25
Interior finish	23	22	26
Subtotals	100	82	99
Totals	527	451	452
Staff members' preferences¹:			
Price-independent	9	3	6
Price-dependent	9	3	6

¹Three staff members' preferences, 1st choice = 3 points, 2nd choice = 2 points, 3rd choice = 1 point.