

Daily Herald

AUTOFOCUS

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SECTION 9

Auto Sunday

Technician may notice something you miss

I was reminded last week how important it is to have a professional technician service and test drive your car every now and then.

Last week my wife and I were on vacation and rented a one-year-old Dodge Magnum from one of the major car rental companies. The car had 32,000 miles on it and within a few minutes of driving I knew that it needed a new set of tires. Not only was the tread a little on the low side, I could feel the steering wheel wobble when I drove it.

Secondly, I perceived a significant brake pulsation when coming to a stop that indicated some badly warped brake rotors and most likely a need for some brake work.

The third thing I noticed was a very strong shudder when the vehicle shifted from first to second gear on light acceleration. My sense was it needed transmission fluid service or perhaps a computer update. If this car were continually driven like that, a new transmission would probably be needed in the future.

Here is my concern and why I am sharing this story. Let's say that the above car is yours, and you have had it since it was new and you've just gotten used to the way it drives. You feel like you are really good about your maintenance because you go into the Quick Lube every 3,000 miles like a good car owner and get the oil changed.

The problem with that is every one of the areas of concern in my story would have been missed at the Quick Lube with the exception of perhaps the tires. If all of the above deficiencies were let go long enough, they could lead to some pretty expensive repairs.

I am not saying you should never go to the Quick Lube — life is busy and sometimes you need to save time. What I am saying is you should get your car into a full service repair the shop at least a couple times a year for a good test drive and inspection by a trained technician. It will save you money in the long run.

Recalls

With all the buzz about recalls lately, you may be wondering if there are any open recalls on your vehicle. The next time you take your vehicle in for service ask your technician to check if there are any open recalls or TSBs (Technical Service Bulletins) on your car.

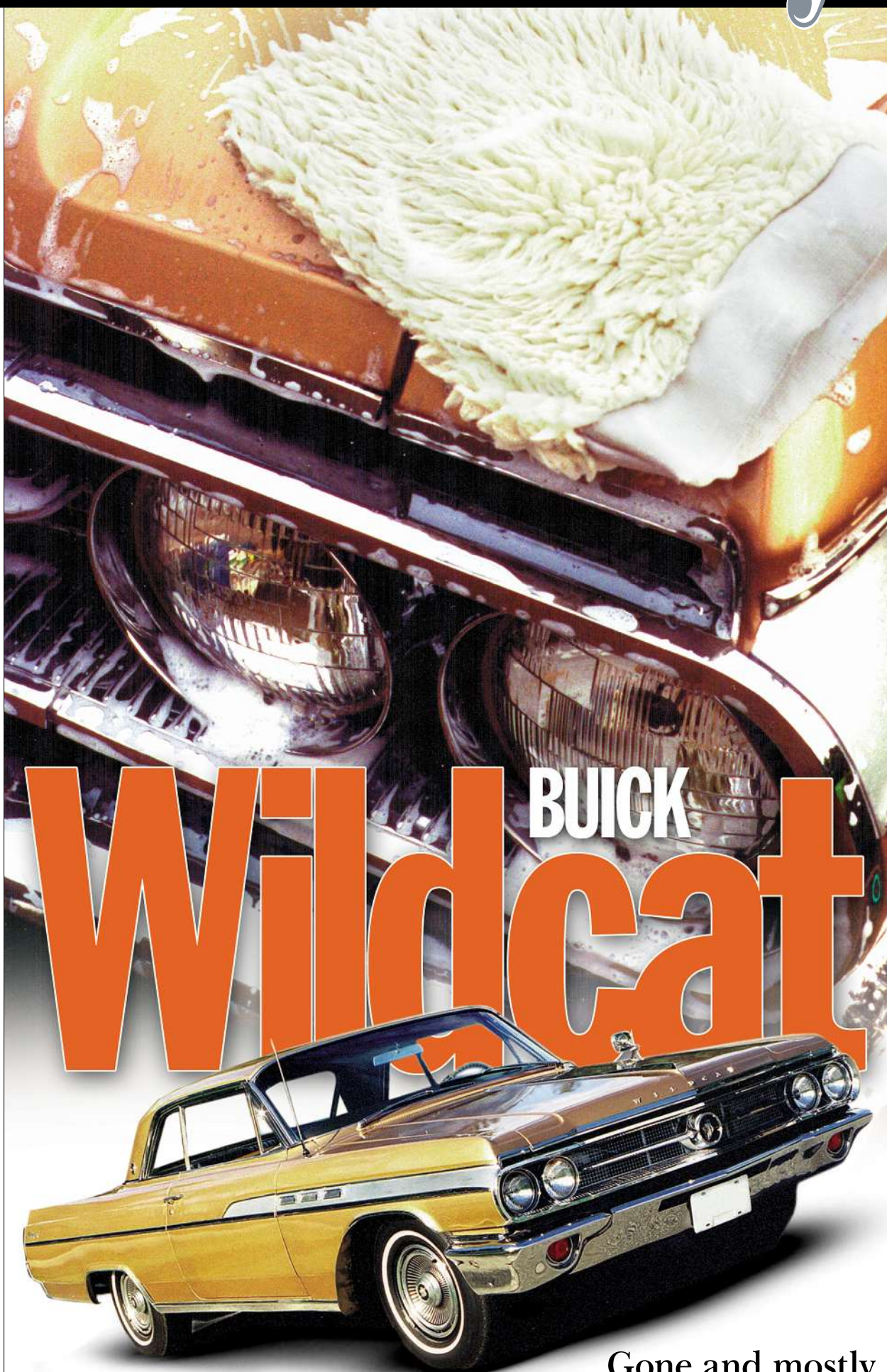
• Douglas Automotive is at 312 S. Hager Ave., Barrington, (847) 381-0454, and 7218B Virginia Road, Crystal Lake, (815) 356-0440. For information, visit douglasautomotive.com. Send questions to underthehood@dailyherald.com.

Car calendar

It's time to update the Daily Herald's list of cruise nights and local car club meetings. If you have new information to submit for this listing, which publishes in the spring through early fall, e-mail auto@dailyherald.com.

Classic recollections

The Fine Lines column will feature the Ford GT40 and Pontiac Grand Prix in coming weeks. Send us a picture of yours at auto@dailyherald.com.



By MALCOLM GUNN

Wheelbase Communications

Although you might not recognize the face, the name probably rings a bell.

Once one of the most familiar Buick handles, the Wildcat is now mostly a faded memory of past glory when big V-8s ruled the land and generous amounts of shiny chrome were directly tied to power and prestige.

For most fans and followers of postwar classic car designs, the Buick Riviera is the model considered one of the most beautiful and memorable. This ahead-of-its-time coupe, designed by then-General Motors automotive sculptor Bill Mitchell, was cool, clean and serene, and signaled the beginning of the end for the vast majority of cars burdened with that chrome-laden look.

It also represented the beginning of the personal-luxury class of car, then defined as a (usually) two-door coupe or hardtop with bucket seats, floor console and a throbbing V-8 motor with plenty of cubic inches to keep it percolating in the fast lane.

With the Riviera, and later the 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado, GM had the market cornered on the personal-luxury segment, with the Ford Thunderbird around as the only real competitor.

But, before the Riv's arrival, Buick had also created, perhaps inadvertently, another brand that comfortably fit within the personal-luxury category. Part way into the 1962 model year, GM's luxury division launched the Wildcat, a sporty two-door hardtop offshoot designed to give Buick a much-needed shot in the arm. Two years earlier, the company had dropped its traditional models such as Century, Special and Roadmaster in favor of the completely new LeSabre, Invicta and Electra. The problem was that Buick's traditional customers — older and conservative in nature — who were used to the more familiar labels, failed to respond to the trio of new names,

and Buick sales sagged. Wildcat, a name used for various Buick concept show cars in the 1950s, was quickly developed as an image vehicle designed to perk things up with the regular Buick buyers and help lure them back into the showrooms. The car would be based on the shorter-wheelbase Invicta instead of the longer and more upscale Electra.

Fine Lines

1962-'70 Buick Wildcat

The first Wildcat came loaded with a padded vinyl roof, special exterior trim with distinctive wheel covers and sporty, all-vinyl interior with bucket seats and a giant, chrome-covered floor console complete with tachometer.

Under the hood, the Wildcat featured what was called a 445 V-8. It was, in fact, the Electra's 401-cubic-inch engine complete with a four-barrel carb and dual exhausts that produced 325 gross horsepower. This was 70 more horsepower than the base LeSabre and a 45-horsepower bulge over the midrange Invicta. A two-speed Dynaflow automatic transmission completed the powertrain.

Quietly introduced half way into the 1962 new car season, the Wildcat sold in only limited numbers (2,000). But the following year, with a two-door hardtop (minus the padded roof) and convertible as well as a four-door hardtop, sales took off to the tune of nearly 36,000 units.

The 1964 version jumped yet again in sales to more than 84,000 cars, helped along by the addition of a four-door sedan. The initial concept of personal luxury was by then evolving into a comprehensive lineup of family cars, complete with distinctive chrome trim and unique wheel covers. For the first time, you could order a more powerful 425 cubic-inch V-8 that increased output to 340 horsepower.

The all new GM full-size lineup

Gone and mostly forgotten, this luxury car drove Buick's image

for 1965 featured clean-looking two-door hardtops with the swept-back rear window. The Wildcat looked particularly attractive fitted with this body style, and appreciative buyers gobbled up in excess of 33,500 copies, helping push brand sales to a level just shy of 100,000 cars. A 360-horsepower version of the 425 was added to the options list as well. By then, what was initially a single two-door hardtop model in 1962 had grown exponentially to three two-door coupes, three four-door hardtops, two four-door sedans and two convertibles.

After sales sagged by 30,000 cars the following year, the newly styled '67 Wildcat was cut back to seven separate choices with a new 430-cube/360-horsepower V-8 as the sole powerplant. But from that year until 1969, total Wildcat sales never broke the 70,000 mark, and the decision was made to end production.

For its final bow in 1970, the car returned to its pre-1964 three-model (coupe, hardtop/convertible) roots, but with a giant 370-horsepower 455-cubic-inch V-8 and new three-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic transmission stuffed inside the engine bay.

The Riviera carried on in all its personal luxury glory, leaving the Wildcat to become an interesting footnote in the nearly 100 years of Buick history. All told, more than a half-million Wildcats found their way into North American drive-ways, admired for their attractive styling, richly appointed interiors, numerous servo-driven components and an endless supply of torque-twisting grunt.

In the 1960s, it didn't get much better than that.

• E-mail feature writer Malcolm Gunn at www.wheelbase.us/mailbag.html.

Suzuki moves SX4 in play as 'hot hatch'

By ANN M. JOB

For The Associated Press

Suzuki's SX4, known as the all-wheel drive car with the lowest starting retail price in America, adds a new, flashier model for 2010, and it doesn't come with all-wheel drive.

The 2010 SX4 SportBack is driven by the front wheels. It rides lower to the pavement than the all-wheel drive SX4 hatchbacks do, has a sportier suspension and an aerodynamic package, including a rear spoiler and a lower chin beneath the grille.

So, the SportBack has hatchback practicality and a flat cargo load floor with rear seat backs folded, while getting away from the plain look of other SX4s.

The four-cylinder engine is upgraded, too, adding 5 percent more horsepower — to 150 — and 4 more foot-pounds of peak torque than last year's four cylinder — to 140 foot-pounds at 3,500 rpm. But this engine change, along with new transmissions, is made in 2010 on all SX4s, including non-SportBack hatchbacks and SX4 sedans.

The SportBack also has a higher starting price than even an all-wheel drive SX4 hatchback. Specifically, starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$18,684 for a base, 2010 SX4 SportBack with manual transmission and five-passenger seating.

This is \$2,100 more than the \$16,584 starting price of the base, front-wheel drive SX4 hatchback with same engine and manual transmission. It's also \$1,100 more than the \$17,584 starting MSRP, including destination charge, for a base, all-wheel drive, 2010 SX4 hatchback.

In comparison, the car that ranks behind the SX4 with all-wheel drive and a low starting retail price is the 2010 Subaru Impreza. With standard all-wheel drive and manual transmission, the base Impreza starts at \$18,190.

Understandably, buyers of the new SX4 SportBack aren't going to be as interested in four-wheel traction as they are in style and fun driving.

The test SportBack, in silver metallic paint and with black cloth seats and black dashboard, had a spunky personality. At times, when I pulled away from red lights, I even felt my head push back into the seat back, because there was noticeable zip at startup.

Controls inside the car were functional and pleasant looking — not overly styled and not cheap-looking. Bluetooth wireless connectivity was one of the few available options on the otherwise nicely equipped SX4 SportBack. Standard equipment includes power windows and doors, fog lamps, automatic climate control, leather-wrapped steering wheel and gearshift knob, keyless entry, push-button start, eight-speaker audio system and navigation system.



ASSOCIATED PRESS/Courtesy of Suzuki
The 2010 Suzuki SX4 SportBack has front-wheel drive.

Grand opening



Arlington Toyota celebrated its move from Buffalo Grove to 2095 Rand Road in Palatine on Feb. 10. Each new Toyota dealership is given a sword by the company to display in its showroom. Attending the grand opening was, left to right, Chris Schultz and Mike Rocco, Toyota Motor Sales' Chicago region; Arlington Toyota owners Scott Vicari, vice president, Tracey Vicari, human resources manager, and Gary Vicari, president; and Bob Carter, Toyota Motor Sales group vice president.