

AutoMonday

Tires are likely cause of slight vibration

Q. I own a 1997 Lincoln Town Car. I have a new set of tires with maybe 6,000 miles of use and just had them rotated and balanced. On a recent trip I noticed a vibration in the steering wheel on cement and asphalt roads. Sometimes it is smooth like I would expect and other times the vibration shows up.

I was wondering if it could possibly be the engine missing at that speed? It runs smooth when driving around town or at idle. I normally get around 25 miles per gallon on trips.

Could it be the need to put on a new set of shock absorbers? They have never been replaced but the car does not have a bounce when going down the road. When I bounce on the front or rear it does not continue to bounce but seems solid.

The vibration is slight but noticeable. I was just wondering what you think could be wrong or maybe it was just the road I was traveling on. I was on I-355 and Route 80.

A. What you are describing sounds like a tire that is out of balance. Did you have the tires balanced trying to solve this problem or did it start after having them balanced?

What does not add up is the difference in roads. If all things are equal, speed etc., and you have a smooth ride on someroads it doesn't seem like tire balance.

Sometimes with tire balance you can have a defined speed where it vibrates, say 60 to 65 mph, and when you go above or below that speed you don't feel it anymore. An engine misfire would tend to be more prevalent under a load, like accelerating from a stop or climbing a grade, so it does not seem like you are describing that.

As far as the shocks go they generally won't cause a vibration but, depending on your mileage, you may notice a huge improvement in ride and handling by replacing them. According to the Motorist Assurance Program, shocks and struts degrade in their performance after 50,000 miles.

Another possibility could be an out-of-balance drive shaft or a worn universal joint.

Find a smooth road, if that's possible, and run your car up to the speed you experienced problems. If it is good on the smooth road, I would chalk it up to the road you were on. If you get a vibration, take a technician for a ride and get his thoughts on it.

Maintenance tip

Just because there is tread left on your tires does not mean they are good. If a long road trip is in the cards for you, pay attention to your tires. If you notice any dry-rot or cracking in the sidewalls, replace the tires before you head out; you will be glad you did.

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His business approach to racing, coupled with a burning desire to win, created a new model for motor sports

By JASON STEIN

Wheelbase Communications

Before the silver hair, the checkered flags or the Memorial Day races that turned a passionate driver into a legendary owner, there was a 14-year-old boy with a pair of dark, wide eyes and a smile the size of Turn One.

Roger Penske wasn't even old enough to drive the day his father rolled their '49 Ford off Georgetown Road, past the gray-colored gates and into the infield at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

"Never forget that first day," Penske said. "I remember having terrible seats — the worst seats in the track. I don't even think I could see the cars go by."

How the view has changed. These days, Penske is the 72-year-old race-team and track owner, corporate entrepreneur, financial mogul, "do-everything, be-everything" Indy legend. He is a cunning businessman who built an enormous transportation empire worth billions of dollars. He is a man who, many say, brought the corporate world to racing — and brought racing to a new level.

"Roger is just a competitor," said Rick Mears, Penske's three-time CART champion and four-time Indy winner. "But above all else, he loves running the Indy 500. He loves winning."

In that vein, Penske has few equals. In many ways, he was born to run.

Raised near the banks of Lake Erie in the affluent Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, Penske was a dreamer before he was a winner. To that end, he had his father to thank.

"He told me I could have anything I earned enough money to buy," Penske remembers.

And he would. Penske earned, bought, sold, raced and won early on in life. Racing quickly became an obsession.

Beginning in 1958 at Akron Speedway, and continuing in Sports Car Club of America races and other smaller circuits, Penske was an accomplished driver with a devilish desire.

He won his first race at an SCCA Regional at Lime Rock, Conn., driving an F-Modified Porsche RS. Two seasons later, he was named Sports Illustrated's SCCA Driver of the Year. More titles would follow: a U.S. Auto Club road-racing title, a NASCAR Grand National Series race, then five races driving a Chaparral Corvette GS in 1964. Penske was becoming one of America's most successful young road warriors.

Then, amazingly, he called it quits. "I wanted to pursue the business end of things," he said. "I thought I might prolong my life a little longer if I wasn't behind the wheel."

Behind the scenes, he would dominate.

With Team Penske formed, and racing a key element of his overall business plan, he found early success with driver Mark Donahue, winning two consecutive United States Road Racing Championship titles and three

Pro-Files

Automotive legends and heroes

SCCA Trans-Am championships.

After three years, Penske and Donahue moved into open-wheel Indy-style racing, running in two USAC-sanctioned road races in 1968. The following year, the team entered the Indianapolis 500 for the first time and Donahue finished seventh, earning rookie-of-the-year honors. Three years later, they won the whole thing.

A flood of titles followed in every series possible, but Indy became his hallmark. His stable of drivers became champions: Foyt, Mears, Sullivan, Unser, Fittipaldi, Mansell.

Between 1977 and 1983, Team Penske won the Champ-car points title in six of seven seasons. Over a decade, beginning in 1984, he drank from Victory Lane in Indianapolis seven more times. His teams were referred to as the New York Yankees of racing. He was unstoppable.

By 1995, however, it all came to a screeching halt.

The free-fall of the sport's greatest franchise began a season before a split with the new rival Indy Racing League that split North American open-wheel racing right down the middle. In '95, a year after starting 1-2-3 and getting Indy victory number 10 from Al Unser Jr., Penske would walk away from the speedway empty-handed.

"Probably the longest walk of my life," Penske said of his failed qualification at Indy in 1995 with Unser and Emerson Fittipaldi — winners of four of the previous six Indy events.

And Penske, who decided to stick with CART, which could no longer race at Indy since that was now the IRL's turf, was about to endure the hardest time of his life.

A year later, Fittipaldi was seriously injured in a crash and retired. In '99, on his own with CART, Penske and Unser split, a difficult end to a partnership that earned Penske two Indy victories and one of his record seven CART titles. But when rookie driver Gonzalo Rodriguez was killed practicing in Laguna Seca, Calif., then Canadian Greg Moore (who had agreed to race for Penske in 2000) died during the final race of '99, everything was crumbling.

Fifty-four times Penske's cars went to the track and came home without a win.

"My life seemed to be sliding somewhere I had never known," Penske said. "Those were a few years I wanted to forget."

But, just as suddenly, it all made sense again.



GREG PERRY/
Wheelbase Communications

ROGER PENSKE

Willing to race under the IRL's rules to get back into the Indy 500 ("Indy's a track you can't stay away from forever," he said then), Penske was once again champion, taking the 2001 Indy 500 with Helio Castroneves' first-place finish and Gil de Ferran's second.

It was a record 11th Indy title for the man whose drivers up to that point had won 11 Champ-car championships, more than 110 races and 130 poles.

To those who knew him well, the move to IRL was hardly a surprise. To those who had to race against him, it was a scary proposition.

"Roger Penske doesn't unload anywhere unless it's a serious deal," said Unser. "He has brought a lot of

attention back to (Indy). But Roger Penske brings attention wherever he goes."

More victories followed in open-wheel racing, American Le Mans endurance racing and NASCAR. Penske's driver Ryan Newman won the 2008 Daytona 500, arguably NASCAR's most prestigious event.

It would have been hard to predict at the time Penske hung up his driving suit of what would happen down the road, but it was a life choice that has undoubtedly brought him more challenges, more victories and ultimately more success.

• E-mail feature writer Jason Stein at www.wheelbase.ws/mailbag.html.

2009 Ford Flex is no ordinary crossover SUV

By ANN M. JOB

For The Associated Press

People love it or hate it, but they agree on one thing: The Ford Flex is no look-alike crossover sport utility vehicle.

With a long, tall, boxy shape, generous room for up to seven people and unique touches (such as perforated seat leather that mimics the leather of designer handbags), the 2009 Flex is as distinctive as the people who will buy one.

Best of all, it earned across-the-board five out of five stars in federal government crash testing, and its starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, of \$29,325 undercuts some of the look-alike crossovers.

For example, the starting MSRP, including destination charge, for a 2009 Mazda CX-9 is \$30,490. The 2009 GMC Acadia has a retail starting price of \$32,665.

The Flex, CX-9 and Acadia prices are for V-6 models with two-wheel drive. A 2009 Flex



SAM VARNHAGEN/Courtesy of Ford Motor Co.

This 2009 Ford Flex provides a soft ride and quiet interior.

with all-wheel drive starts at \$34,950.

Styling certainly is the hallmark of the nearly 17-foot-long Flex. Ford offers "vista" moonroofs that give every row of seats, including the third row, panels of glass above them. This, plus sizable side windows, creates an airy feel inside, even for third-row passengers.

A concealed, small

refrigerator in the second-row console is another distinctive option. So is a two-tone paint job that allows for the roof to be one color and the rest of the body to be another.

The only thing missing, it seems, is the option of a "woody" package that would add another kind of style.

But this is not a vehicle for driving enthusiasts. Unlike the CX-9, for instance, the Flex

doesn't feel buttoned down as it moves along mountain roads. Instead, my passengers instinctively braced themselves for the vehicle body to lean when we went through curves. There's just such a sense of mass in this nearly 5,000-pound crossover.

It feels big on the road, a bit slow in its moves and even wallowy at times. There's also a sense that passengers and driver are somewhat isolated from the pavement.

Ford Flex uses an independent MacPherson strut front suspension with an independent multilink arrangement at the back. The platform is a version of the one used in Ford's Taurus X car, though the platform has been lengthened by 5 inches for the Flex.

I have to admit there's a benefit to the soft ride. The test vehicle kept all kinds of road bumps away from passengers. Even sizable bumps came through to riders as mere vibrations, not sharp impacts.

This is a ride that's not found

At a glance

Price as tested: \$44,150
Engine: 3.5-liter, double overhead cam, Duratec V-6
City/highway fuel economy: 16/22 miles per gallon
Length: 201.8 inches
Wheelbase: 117.9 inches
Curb weight: 4,840 pounds
Built: Oakville, Ontario, Canada
Destination charge: \$775

on many other crossovers, and it's perfect for people who drive interstate highways with long straightaways and lots of concrete expansion cracks.

Not only is the ride easy, the interior is quiet.

The engine for 2009 is a 262-horsepower, 3.5-liter, double-overhead cam Duratec V-6. It's the same engine that Ford put in the lighter weight Taurus X, and while it works gallantly in the Flex, it doesn't offer a lively ride.