

AMC S/STRIKES BACK

By teaming up with Hurst, AMC's lightweight AMX owned Super Stock in 1969



By Daniel Strohl
Photography by Roy D. Query

When a couple of AMC factory guys approached Brian Higgins at Englishtown in 1968 and asked him to race one of their cars the next season, all Brian could do was laugh.

"I asked them, 'Now why would I want to run a Kelvinator at the drags?'" he said.

And with good reason. Ever since Brian and Ernie Krieg incorporated S&K Speed in 1963 in North Lindenhurst on Long Island, they campaigned Chevrolets out at the drags, deviating from the Bowtie brand only when they were able

to get into a Hurst-prepared Hemi Dart in 1968. "I remember those old 327s AMC had, and they were just plain big — couldn't get out of their own way," Brian said.

But then the AMC guys reminded Brian that they had a new engine that year, designed specifically for the already lightweight AMX. Oh, and Hurst would be preparing a group of AMXs with that new engine. Now would he like one?

Brian bit. He and Ernie went over to Westbury Rambler, the closest AMC dealer to their speed shop, and arranged to



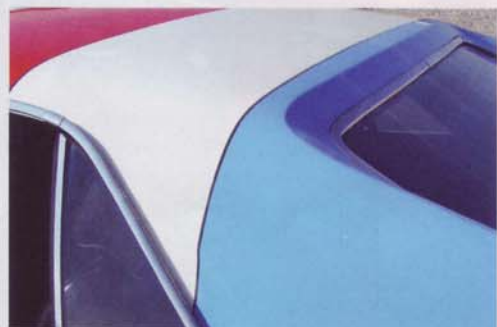
get one of these special AMXs. Fast forward a few months: Brian tore down the engine almost immediately after getting the AMX into the shop. "I looked it all over and saw that the damn thing was pretty stout," he said. So he bolted it back together, then took it to nearby New York National Speedway, where the AMX threw down an 11-flat run at 128 MPH its first time on the track.

Of course, this was no ordinary AMX.

As AMC emerged from its "the only race we care about is



the human race" period and started to embrace and market performance vehicles in the late 1960s, the independent company didn't just dabble in organized racing. Instead, led by Carl Chakmakian, AMC's performance director, Kenosha aimed straight for the top.



Contrary to popular opinion, not all S/S AMXs received the red/white/blue paint scheme: about half did, while the other half were painted Frost White

To set a series of world land speed records, Chakmakian recruited top land-speed racer Craig Breedlove and Craig's wife, Lee. To take on Indianapolis, AMC worked with hot rod legend Barney Navarro, who built a turbo-supercharged and fuel-injected Rambler six-cylinder. To compete in Trans-Am, AMC brought in Roger Penske, George Follmer, Peter Revson and Mark Donohue.

Nor did AMC neglect drag racing. In 1967, AMC contracted with Grant Industries in Los Angeles to build an AMC-powered Funny Car with a flip-top Rebel SST body. With Hayden Proffitt and Bill Hayes in the cockpit and a 343 bored and stroked to 438 cubic inches, the Funny Car toured the country through 1968, stopping at local AMC dealerships for a few days before each race. Doug Thorley's *Javelin-1* Funny Car, powered by a 390 bored and stroked out to 449 cubic inches, joined the Grant Rebel SST on the Funny Car circuit in 1968.

But many of the real big names in drag racing at the time spent much of their time in NHRA's Super Stock races, as perfect an arena as any to promote a company's performance vehicles. The Big Three had

a go at Super Stock throughout the 1960s, tossing all sorts of limited-production, purpose-built lightweight contenders on the drag strip, and accumulated a mountain of press clippings from their efforts.

Walt Czarnecki, Chakmakian's successor as the performance manager at AMC, felt that racing cars in Super Stock would also help spread AMC's new performance image. Czarnecki, hired by Chakmakian at the end of 1967, had previously worked at Hurst Corporation in Ferndale, Michigan, and one of his colleagues there—Dave Landrith, the same guy who instigated the SC/Rambler—had suggested that AMC take the AMX into Super Stock with Hurst's help. Hurst had already proven its ability to modify large batches of cars with the 150 Dodge Darts and Plymouth Barracudas it fitted with Hemis and lightened for Super Stock racing for 1968.

Yet no big names were shoeing AMC products on the drag strip at the time, save for the aforementioned Proffitt and Thorley. A few regional racers drove Javelins, AMXs and Americans and squeezed out some 11-second and 12-second timeslips, but to be taken seriously, AMC needed a celebrity or two. For that reason, Czarnecki and

Landrith invited Shirley Shahan, the famed Drag-On-Lady, then driving a Hemi Dart, to sign on with AMC. Along with Shirley, AMC got her husband, engine builder H.L. Shahan, to commit to building the engines for the Super Stock cars.

AMC thus sent a late production 1968 AMX over to Ferndale for Hurst to convert into drag racing trim. H.L. Shahan took the AMX's 315hp 390 and bumped up the compression ratio from the stock 10.2:1 to 12.4:1 with new pistons from JE. He used a pair of Crane-modified cylinder heads with 2.080-inch intake valves and 1.740-inch exhaust valves, up from the stock 2.025-inch intakes and 1.680-inch exhausts. Unshrouding the valves in the combustion chamber increased the chamber's volume from 50.60cc to 58.00cc. He also chose to bump the valves with a Crane R2741393 roller camshaft. Instead of the stock single four-barrel carburetor and intake, he added an Edelbrock STR-11 crossram intake manifold and a pair of 615 CFM Holley carburetors. The entire bottom end, including the forged steel crankshaft, remained bone stock.

Hurst, meanwhile, added one of its own Super Shifters to the AMX's T-10 four-

speed and stuffed the Twin-Grip AMC 20 rear axle with 4.44:1 gears. The Hurst crew also moved the battery to the trunk, installed a crossmember that allowed the oil pan to drop without removing the entire engine from the car, bolted on a set of Thorley headers and cut the hood for a twin-nostril mailbox-type hood scoop.

A set of Cragars and drag slicks along with a red/white/blue AMC corporate racing paint scheme completed the look of this prototype car, which AMC, Hurst and the Shahans trotted out before press cameras in mid-February 1969 in an effort to lure dealers to speak up for one of the production versions.

When announcing the Super Stock AMX, AMC declared that its engine, good for about 340hp after H.L. Shahan's modifications, would run in NHRA's SS/G class. Yet when NHRA officials reviewed AMC's paperwork for the Super Stock 390 engines, they didn't believe for one second that all those modifications resulted in a simple 25hp gain. Instead, they decreed that the modified 390s made something more like 420hp, which would reassign the cars into the more competitive SS/E class. Later NHRA refactoring, once the cars actually made it onto the track, would bump the cars up again into SS/D and SS/C.

Walt Czarnecki said he felt that the

refactoring would destroy the AMX's chances to make a splash in Super Stock. "But Farmer Dismuke (the NHRA's technical director, who was responsible for the refactoring) told me, 'You guys have a hell of a package; you'll be surprised,'" Walt said.

Of course, to qualify the cars for NHRA Super Stock, AMC and Hurst had to build at least 50 such cars to prove that the AMXs were indeed production cars, available to the public, and not one-off race cars. "And it wasn't exactly a bed of roses trying to get the dealers to take these cars," Walt said. "Bill McNealy, then AMC's vice president of marketing, told me that we're not just gonna build these cars and send them out to the dealers; we have to sell them. So I made the best sell job in my life convincing the dealers to take these cars."

Walt actually surpassed his goal and sold 52 of the AMXs, which AMC ran through its Kenosha, Wisconsin, assembly plant, all equipped the same: Frost White paint, charcoal cloth and vinyl interior, 315hp 390, T-10 four-speed, 4.44:1 gears, heavy-duty cooling, 70-amp battery, manual drum brakes and 14-inch steel wheels from a base 290-powered AMX. More importantly, Kenosha assembly line workers omitted a number of items from the cars: radios, clocks, one of the two horns,

heater, heater controls, sound insulation, undercoating, seam sealer, rocker moldings, grille supports and fender bracing. AMC even supplied the cars with special wiring harnesses without the wiring or connectors for the radio, clock and any optional equipment.

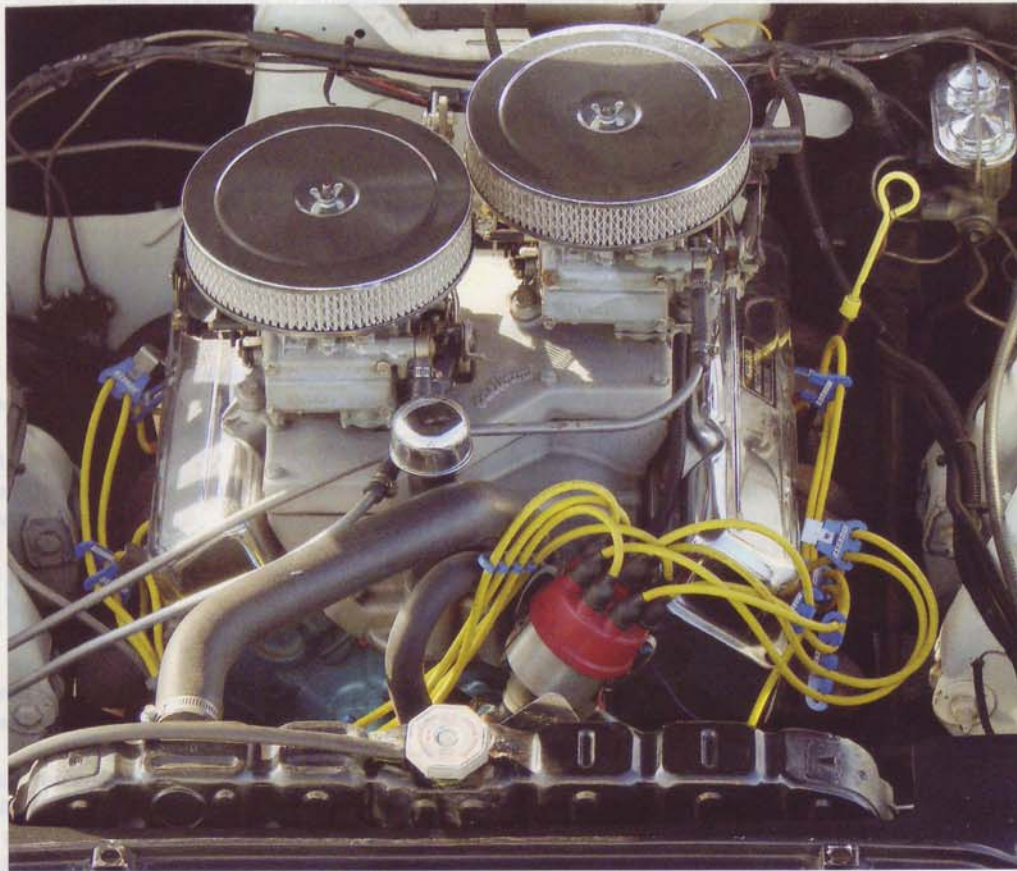
Later researchers found authenticating the cars to be rather simple because AMC built the 52 cars all in one batch and all with consecutive VINs. (Some AMC enthusiasts consider the prototype to be the 53rd S/S AMX; Shirley Shahan never campaigned it—S/S AMX #35 became her car—but former Pontiac racer Howard Maselles, who then worked at Hurst, did.)

AMC then shipped the batch of lightweight AMXs by train to Ferndale, where Hurst made many of the same modifications to the cars that they made to the prototype. The hood scoop design differed from the prototype, however, and the production Super Stocks received extensive suspension modifications. Hurst removed the front anti-roll bar entirely, revised the rear suspension link geometry, relocated the right front rear leaf spring pocket, replaced the stock axles with forged axles from Henry's Axles of Anaheim, California, and added stiffer Rockwell springs and Cure Ride drag shocks.

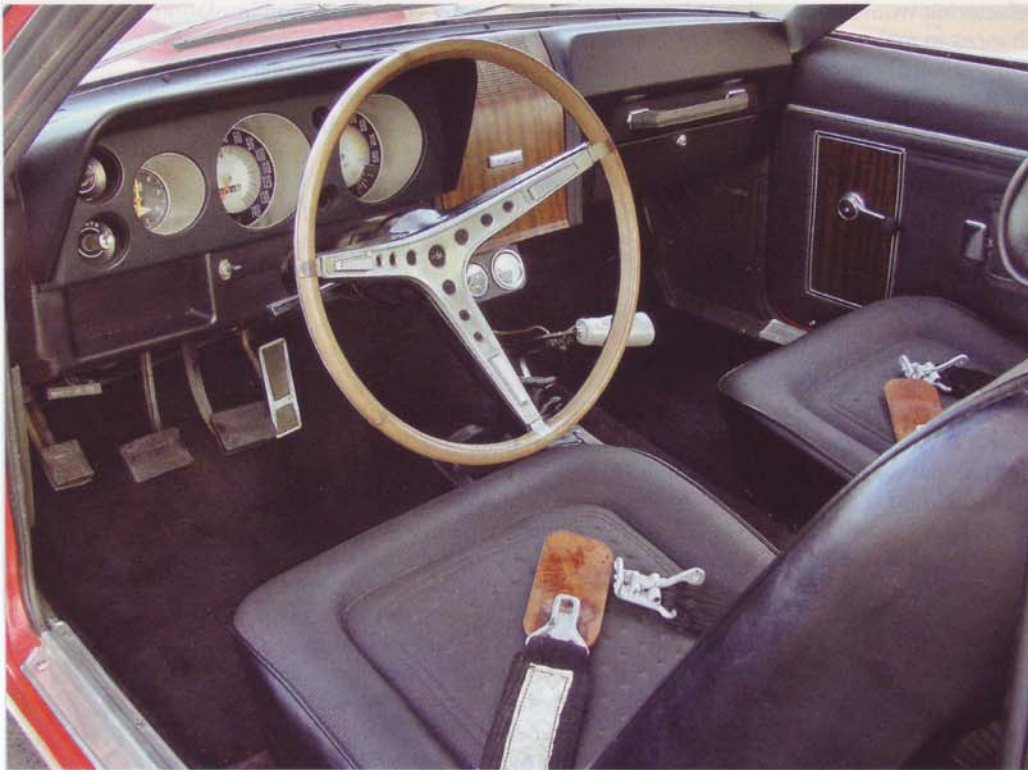
All of the engines went to Crane, where H.L. Shahan swapped the stock



AMC built the cars for the drag strip, so it's not uncommon to find racing modifications



Every S/S AMX featured a specially built 390 with Crane-modified heads and a dual-carburetor Edelbrock intake manifold with 650 CFM Holleys



While stripped of a heater, radio and other unnecessary weight-adding items, the S/S AMXs still came with full dashes and full carpeting

heads for Crane heads, bumped up the compression and added the Edelbrock intake. However, Shahan did not install the prototype's roller camshaft; instead, he left the stock AMC camshaft in the block, knowing that the racers who would campaign these cars would install their own camshafts anyway. He also used a pair of 650 CFM Holley carburetors on the production cars.

According to George Gudat, who owns two S/S AMXs and has conducted extensive research into the cars, Hurst essentially hired guys off the street to work

on the AMXs in a rented warehouse. Thus, the modifications made at Hurst were not wholly consistent among all 52 cars.

"And to meet deadlines, some of the cars got some of the modifications, while others didn't," George told us. "For example, not all of the cars got those trick dropout crossmembers or the wheel well modifications. That's why AMC later issued a bunch of service bulletins detailing those modifications for people who got unmodified cars."

Nor did all of the 52 cars receive the prototype's red/white/blue paint scheme.

George said about half did—and were painted at a local body shop in Ferndale—while the other half were left in Frost White for the dealerships to paint and letter.

Nor did all 52 cars hit the track immediately. While a similarly equipped non-racing AMX retailed for about \$3,500, the S/S AMX came with a price tag of \$5,994. Thus, many an S/S AMX sat on a dealer's showroom floor for several months.

"Initially, they were a tough sell," George said. "For a lot of the seasoned Mopar racers driving cars for GM, Ford and Mopar, it was hard for them to take a chance on a Ram-

40 KNOWN, 12 UNKNOWN

Factory race cars tend to have a short and brutal lifespan. Drivers often wear them out by the end of the first season, and the manufacturers don't care much about them after that, so they get chopped up to be made into next season's race car or otherwise forgotten. The S/S AMXs are a different story, however. Mike Weaver and George Gudat, who run the S/S AMX Web site (www.ssamx.com) have tracked down 40 of the original cars and believe a number of the remaining 12 are still out there. They list each car by the car's position in the range of VINs and its nickname or the name of its major sponsor.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1... Lake View Rambler | 19... S&K Car | 36... Kim Nagel car |
| 2... unknown | 20... Ray Whinery | 37... Miss Vi |
| 3... Frisbee Auto Repair | 21... unknown | 38... The Buran Hustler |
| 4... unknown | 22... S/S AMX #22 | 39... Pete's Patriot |
| 5... Automaster Motors | 23 Performance Automotive | 40... Jones Rambler |
| 6... George Warren | 24... unknown | 41... Nolt Rambler |
| 7... unknown | 25... unknown | 42 AMXterminator/
Dick Steele |
| 8... AM-X-CITER | 26... Sheriff of Nottingham | 43... American Revolution |
| 9... unknown | 27... unknown | 44... Old Reliable |
| 10... unknown | 28... unknown | 45... Patriot's Pride |
| 11... Cotton Candy | 29... Ricker Motors | 46... unknown |
| 12... Gold Digger | 30... Jimmy Walker car | 47... Old Pro |
| 13... S/S AMX #13 | 31... AMX-1 | 48... Goben Cars |
| 14... Bonanza AMX III | 32... Avenue Rambler | 49... S/S AMX #49 |
| 15... The Frog | 33... Carlisle Motors | 50... Bill Rodekopf Motors |
| 16... Wentworth & Irwin | 34... Underdog | 51... S/S AMX #51 |
| 17... McCorkle Brothers | 35... Drag-On-Lady | 52... American Dream |
| 18... unknown | | |



S/S AMX #19, originally campaigned by S&K Speed on Long Island, originally came from Hurst in white and wore a red-and-black paint scheme

bler. So for the most part, dealerships began to flog the cars on their own, and it wasn't until the cars got out there and proved themselves that the cars started to sell."

It also didn't help that the AMXs needed a degree of preparation work before they ran the quarter-mile. A May 6, 1969, letter from AMC specifically told owners of S/S AMXs that their cars arrived unprepared for competition.

"American Motors is offering a non-warranted base car that a dealer or buyer could modify and perfect fairly easily into a successful performance car," the



S&K-added tach shows how high the 390 will wind to make the 420hp that the NHRA claimed

Owner's View

In 1993, while attending an American Motors Owners

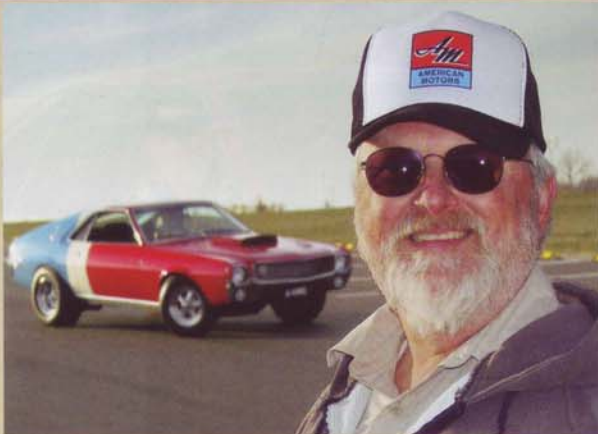
national meet in Kenosha, Wisconsin, we first laid eyes on a 1969 S/S AMX that had been beautifully restored. Rick was fascinated with the history of the S/S AMX, and when we heard the AMX run, it took our breath away and made our hearts skip a beat.

A combination of love and lust took over, and common sense went out the window. We had to own a factory Super Stock AMX.

A couple of years passed, during which we did a lot of background research, until we finally got a hint from another S/S AMX owner that Otis Chandler was selling his. It was kind of neat to find a car that had never been registered for the street and never even titled until we got it.

Now that we own it, we do take it to a few shows, and we do get on it every now and then. When the engine is started, the pounding in the ground goes to your chest like a heart attack. When the car launches, the skin on your face is pulled back to your ears. There is so much power that it's scary, but in the very best way.

—Rick and Paulette Riley



letter stated. "A ready-to-drag car was never offered or implied." The letter suggested the owners overbore and blueprint the engines, install an aftermarket camshaft of their choosing and add their own wheels and tires.

Though the S/S AMXs missed the 1969 Winternationals in Pomona, they started to hit tracks across the country in around March or April of that year. George said that at one point later in the 1969 season and early in the 1970 season, both track and class records in SS/E and SS/D began to fall almost on a weekly basis, more often than not to S/S AMXs. Many of the 53 cars held a record at some point during those two years, even if only for a few days.

Because the cars didn't sell well, AMC tried a unique strategy for the 1970 season. In the 1970 model year, AMC introduced its dogleg heads, which, when combined with the crossram intake manifold,

likely would have helped keep the cars competitive. Rather than build another 50 or more cars just to use those heads, however, AMC issued a conversion kit that included 1970 AMX front sheetmetal, a 1970 AMX dashboard and even a 1970 AMX VIN.

According to George, a good majority of the racers campaigning the cars converted their cars using the kit, only to find out at the beginning of the 1970 season that the NHRA didn't buy into the charade one bit. NHRA officials ruled that the cars could either continue to campaign as 1969 AMXs and use the Crane heads and crossram intake manifold, or they could campaign as 1970 AMXs and use the dogleg heads and single four-barrel intake manifolds. Most of those who converted their cars immediately converted them back to 1969 specs.

Brian Higgins said he did convert the



Hurst added the giant hoodcoop, but left the stock steel 14-inchers for racers to replace



Club Scene

American Motors Owners Association

1615 Purvis Ave.
Janesville, Wisconsin 53548
608-752-8247
www.amonational.com
Dues: \$35/year • Membership: 2,000

National American Motors Drivers and Racers Association

P.O. Box 987
Twin Lakes, Wisconsin 53181-0987
262-843-4326
www.namdra.org
Dues: \$30/year • Membership: 1,678

PROS

- + Factory lightweight racer: Incredible
- + Four-speed and 420hp: Awesome
- + Noteworthy history: Sweet

CONS

- Can't run it on the street: Bummer
- S/S-specific parts cost an arm and a leg: Brutal
- Not restored to original racing livery: Disappointing

S&K car to 1970 specs, only to convert it back two weeks later. He'd had a good year with the car in 1969; Fred Dellis drove the car to an overall win at the York Super Sport Nationals that year and set an AHRA national record in it in August with an 11.08-second run at 127.11 MPH. S&K had such a good year with it, in fact, that they sold off their Hemi Dart (which later became an infamous street racer around New York City) and focused on racing the AMX.

But the 1974 fuel crisis hit S&K hard; during a fit of liquidation, Brian sold the AMX to a couple guys from Canada. The car eventually ended up in the Otis Chandler collection in Oxnard, California, where it was treated to a restoration, painted in the AMC red/white/blue paint scheme instead of S&K's scheme—all red with a black skunk stripe down the center (see *HMM*#8, May 2004, page 84, for a photo of it in that configuration). AMC collectors Rick and Paulette Riley then bought the AMX out of Chandler's collection in 1995 and have maintained it, but not campaigned it, since.

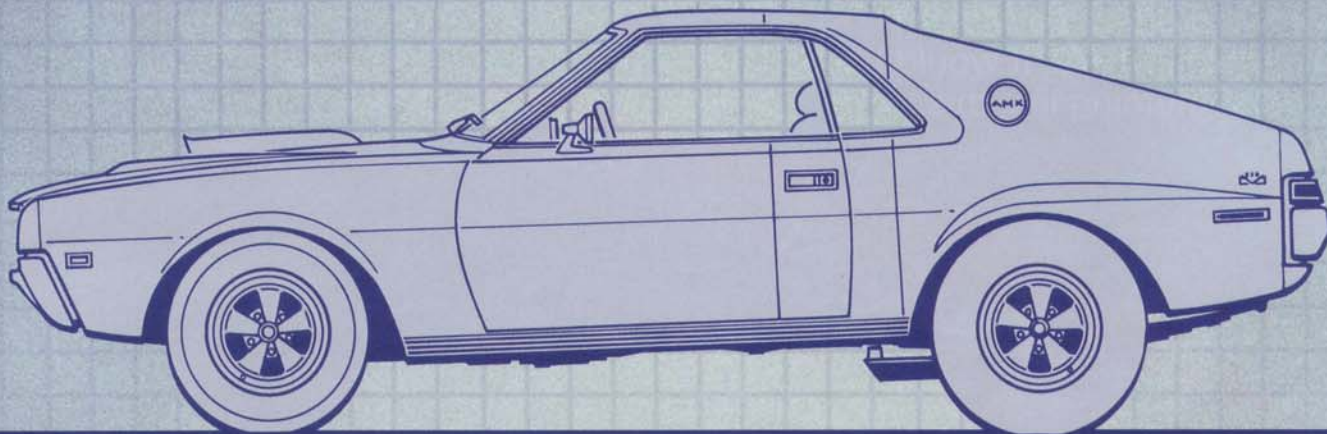
Interestingly, the survival rate for Super Stock AMXs has remained high over the years. Forty of the 52—along with the prototype—are presently known to exist, and George believes some of the 12 missing cars are still around somewhere. A handful, including the prototype, still compete in NHRA drag racing.

Not bad for a Kelvinator, right? 🏁

1969 AMC S/S AMX

340*

HORSEPOWER @ 4,800 RPM
417-lbs.ft. torque @ 3,400 RPM
1/4 mile: 11.08 seconds @ 127.11 MPH***



SPECIFICATIONS

Price

Base price \$3,245
 Price as profiled \$5,995

Engine

Type AMC OHV V-8, cast-iron block and cylinder heads
 Displacement 390 cubic inches
 Bore x Stroke 4.165 x 3.574 inches
 Compression ratio 12.3:1
 Horsepower @ RPM 340 @ 4,800*
 Torque @ RPM 417 @ 3,400*
 Valvetrain Hydraulic valve lifters
 Main bearings 5
 Fuel system Dual Holley four-barrel carburetors (originally 650 CFM), Mallory electric pump
 Lubrication system Pressure, gear-type pump
 Electrical system 12-volt, Mallory dual-point distributor
 Exhaust system Dual exhaust

Transmission

Type Borg-Warner T-10 four-speed manual with Hurst shifter
 Ratios
 1st 2.23:1
 2nd 1.77:1
 3rd 1.35:1
 4th 1.00:1
 Reverse 2.16:1

Differential

Type AMC Model 20 with Twin-Grip limited-slip differential
 Ratio 4.44:1

Steering

Type Saginaw recirculating ball, manual
 Ratio 20.0:1
 Turns, lock-to-lock 3.4
 Turning circle 33.5 feet

Brakes

Type Hydraulic, manual
 Front 10-inch drum
 Rear 10-inch drum

Chassis & Body

Construction All-welded single unit body and frame
 Body style Two-door two-passenger coupe
 Layout Front engine, rear-wheel drive

Suspension

Front Independent, trunnions; coil springs; telescoping shocks
 Rear Heavy-duty parallel semi-elliptic leaf springs; torque links; telescoping shocks

Wheels & Tires

Wheels Cragar S/S (current)
 Front 15 x 4 inches
 Rear 15 x 7 inches
 Tires
 Front Moroso Drag Special (current)
 Rear Goodyear Eagle Dragway Special (current)
 Front 7.10 x 15
 Rear 29.0 x 10.0 x 15

Weights & Measures

Wheelbase 97 inches
 Overall length 177.2 inches
 Overall width 71.6 inches
 Overall height 51.7 inches
 Front track 58.8 inches
 Rear track 57 inches
 Shipping weight 3,050 pounds

Capacities

Crankcase 5 quarts w/filter
 Cooling system 13 quarts w/heater
 Fuel tank 19 gallons
 Transmission 3.5 pints
 Rear axle 4 pints

Calculated Data

BHP per CID 1.08**
 Weight per BHP 7.26 pounds**
 Weight per CID 7.82 pounds**

Production

While AMC built 8,293 AMXs in 1969, just 52 of them were converted by Hurst into Super Stock lightweight racers.

Performance

Acceleration:
 1/4 mile ET 11.08 seconds @ 127.11 MPH***

* according to AMC's figures; NHRA factored at 420hp; S&K set redline at 7,000 RPM

** using NHRA's 420hp figure

*** S&K Speed's AHRA record time