



A Syclone power module, built by PAS, ready for delivery to GM's Shreveport, Louisiana, plant for installation. *Scott Kelly*

## GMC Syclone 1991

"GMC hired ASC/McLaren to build a prototype turbocharged GMC Sonoma pickup after meeting with us (PAS) to talk about what it would take to build a fast pickup truck based on the S-10," Kelly said, "and when we found out McLaren was paid to do their version, the PAS owners said, look, we're just going to do this." He continued:

We went and bought a truck, we took one of our Trans Am 3.8 Turbos, we made an adapter plate for a 700R4. Knowing that the light S-10 would not have any traction, we decided to make it all-wheel-drive. One of Mike Pocobello's friends from General Motors was a transfer case engineer, we engineered a transfer case right off the end of the 700R4 that would hold up to this. So we built an all-wheel-drive Syclone with the Turbo Trans Am engine in it. They (McLaren) used a Turbo Grand Prix engine. I reworked a Sunbird Turbo instrument cluster and wired the first Syclone in an all-nighter at Triad.

It took a drag race to determine who would build the Syclone. The day of the competition it was pouring rain. The two-wheel-drive ASC/McLaren truck lined up against the all-wheel-drive PAS truck. Guess who won?

PAS had already shut down their temporary operation in California, and, using the same business model, established a similar facility just down the road from the Shreveport, Louisiana, plant that built the GMC Sonoma trucks. This time, John Koss was in charge of the PAS Louisiana operation. For the production Syclone, PAS used the full-time all-wheel-drive system that was optional on the Chevy Astro van, which shared the same chassis as the S-10/Sonoma, delivering the power 35 percent front/65 percent rear.

A significant change from the PAS prototype was the use of GM's Vortec 4.3-liter V-6 instead of the Buick 3.8-liter Turbo. "The Buick-Oldsmobile group said they would absolutely not build another of those 3.8 Turbos," said Scott Kelly.



This Norman Rockwell—like photograph by famed Detroit illustrator/photographer Charles Schridde emphasized the heritage of the GMC Syclone. *GM Media Archives*

If we could have gotten the Syclone project on top of the Turbo Trans Am project, then the numbers would have made enough sense to keep the line going. The line had been shut down at the end of the Buick Grand National, and it was a challenge to get that line up to make the Turbo Trans Am.

Following the model of the Turbo Trans Am, PAS, Inc. established a similar four-level build plan. First, PAS received the 4.3-liter Vortec V-6 engines from GM's famed Tonawanda, New York, engine plant. Unlike the 3.8-liter, which came from Buick built for turbocharging, PAS had to modify the 4.3-liter V-6 to withstand the pressure of forced induction. "We validated the whole engine [for emissions and durability]," Kelly explained.

We changed the pistons, we actually created our own cast-iron exhaust manifolds that the turbo would bolt right on to, we custom cast our own intake manifolds as well. We did our own 20k and 50k dyno durability accelerated testing. We worked with GM, of course, because everyone has a stake in making sure it was a reliable vehicle.

The "powertrain module" was sent into the Shreveport truck plant for assembly into the black Sonoma pickups, which were then hauled back to PAS for finishing. They added a Mitsubishi TD06-17G turbo, a water-to-air intercooler, and a modified 48mm throttle body borrowed from the L98 Corvette. PAS also installed the unique fiberglass air dam and tonneau cover, embroidered seats, and the gauge cluster from the Sunbird Turbo, complete with boost gauge. Finally, the completed Syclone was sent back to the assembly plant for distribution to the dealers.

The result was 280 horsepower and 350 lb-ft of torque in the 3,500-pound pickup. The Syclone prototype was first shown at the Chicago Auto Show on January 23, 1989. "Introducing today's technological brainstorm, the new Syclone," GMC declared. "This truck moves in the spirit of the muscle cars of the 1960s, but with

the technology of the '90s!" The 1978 Dodge "Lil' Red Wagon" may have been the first factory performance truck, but they were still just a semi-powerful, stylish short-box pickup. The **Syclone** was something quite different.

The **Syclone** began production on January 17, 1991. "Think of it as a Porsche 911 that really 'hauls,'" announced the full-page ad in *USA Today*. To prove its point, GMC listed the specs of the new **Syclone** next to that of the Porsche 911 Carrera 4. Yes, the specs were amazingly similar—except that the all-wheel-drive Porsche cost around \$50,000 more than the GMC.

"The **Syclone** will beat a brand-new \$122,000 Ferrari 348ts," wrote *Car and Driver* in one of its apples-to-oranges road tests.

The **Syclone's** turbo, torque converter, and adhesive-tape traction are devastating from 0 to 60. Above 80 mph, it pays for its truck shape. It clears the quarter mile in 14.1 seconds, compared with 14.5 seconds for the Ferrari, but the Ferrari is moving 6 mph faster (99 mph versus 93). The Ferrari grabs the lead very soon after the quarter and never looks back. Its top speed is 166 mph. The **Syclone's** is 126.

This was the first time a truck ever graced the cover of *Car and Driver*.

Now, if it happened to be raining, that Ferrari (or most any other exotic) would be left in the **Syclone's** rooster tail, thanks to the AWD. Grabbing the pavement were P245/50-16 Firestone Firehawk tires on 16x8 alloy wheels, unique to the **Syclone**. Brakes were discs front, drums rear, but the **Syclone** was the first truck ever equipped with four-wheel anti-lock brakes. The hunkered-down suspension was stiffened with heavier springs and sway bars. The only transmission available was the Corvette's 700R4 automatic. *Car and Driver* continued: "It also happens to be pretty darn good at the other moves we Americans expect of sports cars. It beats the Ferrari at braking, too, drawing to a stop from 70 mph in 183 feet, four feet shorter. Cornering grip is less but, at 0.80 g, it is still respectable."

By the end of the '91 model year, PAS had built a total of 2,995 of the \$26,000 **Syclones**, including 113 for export, known as "Saudi" trucks. The export trucks didn't need to meet the US government's regulations, so they were equipped with a metric dash cluster,

leaded fuel chip, and a resonator in place of the catalytic converter and non-tinted glass.

Ten **Syclones** also were modified for **Marlboro** to be given away in a special promotion for the cigarette company that year. They were painted PPG "Hot Lick Red," then shipped to **ASC** (American Sunroof Corp.) for a Targa top conversion. **ASC** also installed a pair of Recaro seats with five-point racing harnesses, a CD changer, and a set of Boyd Coddington wheels.

Plans were underway for the **Syclone's** return in 1992, and PAS has already built two pilot trucks when the '92 model was cancelled. A third truck, VIN'd as a '92 model, was part of the **Marlboro** giveaway. The cancellation was simple: many of the '91 **Syclones** remained at the dealers, who had a difficult time selling the expensive supertrucks. Sound familiar? They were expensive, and, due to the performance suspension, could only haul 500 pounds, so they were none too practical. Still, if the Buick GNX was Darth Vader's car, the **Syclone** was the Sith Lord's high-speed cargo carrier.

## GMC Sonoma GT 1992

"One of the reasons our cars were built was to get showroom traffic. GM wanted these trucks in the magazines, they wanted the 'wow' factor for the dealers," according to Kelly. That's why the GMC Sonoma GT was also created.

Unlike the **Syclone**, these GMC S15 trucks were built at the Pontiac West assembly plant, so the modifications took place at the PAS facility in Auburn Hills, Michigan. The cost was dramatically less than the **Syclone's**, at \$16,770. The Sonoma GT got the **Syclone's** interior, with black or gray cloth seats and red piping, console with floor shift, and the Sunbird gauge cluster (without the boost gauge).

Outside, the Sonoma GT also received the same air dam and tonneau cover as the **Syclone**, along with the lowered suspension, four-wheel anti-lock brakes, and stylish alloy wheels. Other than the basic black of the **Syclone**, the Sonoma GT could be ordered in Frost White, Apple Red, Bright Teal, Forest Green, and Aspen Blue. But under the hood was a stock high-output L35 Vortec 4.3-liter V-6 producing 195 horsepower, and standard automatic transmission. Missing were the turbocharged engine and AWD.

"It may wear the **Syclone's** hand-me-downs, but it deserves better" wrote Don Schroeder in *Car and Driver*.

The Sonoma GT certainly can't match the **Syclone's** 0-to-60 time of 5.3 seconds, but at 7.6 seconds, it's hardly a slug . . . GMC backs up the Sonoma GT's power with decent grip, 0.79 g, and equally respectable braking, 211 feet from 70 mph, thanks to a rear-wheel anti-lock system. For a "sport" truck, it's the most athletic for its price, and its performance is nothing to snicker at.

You might think a great-looking compact truck priced reasonably would sell like hotcakes. You'd be wrong. "I was quite surprised we only sold 806," said Kelly.

## GMC Sonoma GT 1992

# PRODUCED: 806

ENGINE: 262-cubic-inch V-6

HORSEPOWER: 195

TORQUE: 260 lb-ft

¼-MILE TIME: 16.10 at 84 mph

## GMC Typhoon 1992–1993

“Good news for those who thought the GMC Syclone was a great idea, but couldn’t justify buying a two-seat pick-’em-up any more than they could a Corvette or a Miata: a Typhoon is blowing in your direction.” So wrote *AutoWeek* in their October 21, 1991, issue. “What we’re talking here is one stormin’ sport/ute. The second chapter of GMC’s effort to rewrite its image from good-for-you heartland virtue to bi-coastal bad boy, the Typhoon is a regular \$30,000 hot rod.”

All of the development that went into the Syclone could be applied to the GMC’s S-15 two-door Jimmy. The same engine/transmission module with AWD, the same suspension and brakes, the same front air dam. Even the same interior mods went into the Typhoon. While still available in basic black, the Typhoon could also be ordered in a variety of colors, like the Sonoma GT.

*AutoWeek* continued:

It’ll blow from 0–60 mph in an estimated 6.5 seconds. That’s a second and a half longer than it takes Syclone to reach the mile-a-minute mark, but in exchange for a little less rush you get a lot more plush. If your family and the gendarmes would sit still for it, Typhoon is capable of howling all the way to 120 mph with four up.

PAS, Inc. built a total of 4,697 Typhoons: 2,497 for 1992, another 2,200 for 1993. That seemed like a success compared to the sales performance of Syclone and Sonoma GT. But it could have been better, Kelly explained:

When we did the Typhoons in ’92, we got halfway through the model year and they still weren’t selling. So we ended up making our own posters and doing our own marketing blitz. So for ’93, which was the last year of that body style, we were going to build 3,000 for that year, and we actually had orders for 4,500. However, GM got sued for the Chevy 454 SS, they promised they were only going to make so many for the collectors, and they made so many more thousands of them, and they got sued by the people that bought them thinking they were getting a limited-production vehicle. GM lost. So GM said, absolutely not, you cannot build the other 1,500.”

So why not carry the Typhoon over into the 1994 model year?

We could not build them for ’94, because GM went to a new body style, and they went to the CPI [center port injection] engine, and we would have had to revalidate the engine all over again for emissions. GM did not sign up for that in time and we could not have met the model year.

PAS did build two Typhoon-like four-door Oldsmobile Bravada SUVs to pitch the concept to Olds and Cadillac and one Chevrolet Syclone, but all were turned down.

The buzz was changing from performance to alternate fuels in the early 1990s, so PAS also built thousands of the first-production Natural-Gas Powered Chevrolet and GMS 1500 pickups with a patented, under-throttle body injection (TBI) injection unit. These trucks were completed at the same PAS facility in Auburn Hills,



Typhoon Dyno Test at the end of line. *Scott Kelly*

Michigan, as the Typhoon and Sonoma GT. Unfortunately, the technology was too early, and the injectors of the day—and the natural gas infrastructure—caused a major reliability and PR issue, and GM recalled the vehicles.

The time was right. The products were right. And the performance DNA of many talented automotive people came together for five great years to build some of the best engineered and most interesting supercars and trucks America has ever seen. Many of PAS, Prototype Automotive, and Triad Services people are still in the prototype, racing, and performance automotive industry.

Sadly, Jeff Beitzel and Mike Pocobello have both passed away. Chuck Mountain has retired to Florida. Scott Kelly, through Mike Pocobello, worked for Jim Hall’s Indycar team in the mid-1990s after PAS closed, and has been doing business consulting . . . and in contact with most of the Prototype guys. Could history repeat itself?

## GMC Typhoon 1992–1993

# PRODUCED: 4,697

ENGINE: 262-cubic-inch V-6

HORSEPOWER: 280

TORQUE: 350 lb-ft

¼-MILE TIME: n/a