

Workers of America, rejoice!

Honda's U.S.-built Accord vindicates assembly-line laborers

By David Freeman

Every Honda Accord that rolls off the line at Marysville is a testimonial to the skill and dedication of the American worker, palpable evidence that given the right management, we Americans can build a damn fine automobile. The American-built Accord, like its Japanese counterpart, has seams that fit evenly, doors that close soundly, controls that work smoothly and an overall aura of quality that's rare in most other compact cars built in this country. In fact, the American and Japanese versions of the Accord are so nearly identical that it's difficult to tell them apart. And, as the original Accord has been one of the most feverishly popular import cars in American automotive history, that's good news for American Honda.

But more importantly, it's good for the American work force, which in recent years has shouldered much of the blame for our country's apparent inability to make competitively priced, well-built small cars. Since arrangements like the one in Marysville are uncommon in this country — that is, it's rare that an "imported" car is being assembled on this side of the Atlantic or Pacific — it has been impossible to determine if workmanship perceived by many Americans as inferior indicated a shortcoming in the workers themselves or the system in which they worked. No one knew whom to blame.

Using the American-built Accord, now we know: Management. American manufacturing techniques didn't create a car as fine as the Accord. Nor did Detroit's stuffy auto executives or conservative stylists and engineers. But American workers, using American-made machines, did. So auto workers tired of being blamed for our country's slippage in the world automotive arena can point to the domestic Accord as their vindication.

Of course, it's not hard to see why American workers have received some of the blame. Over the past decade or so American auto makers lost more and more ground to import firms. American consumers began to

wonder why. They wondered, along with the automotive press, why a country which once produced more than half of all the world's automobiles in any given year no longer seemed capable of making competitive cars. And then came the embarrassment of having to ask the Japanese to limit the number of cars exported to the States. What had happened? Who should be held accountable for the disturbing letdown, the unforgivable betrayal?

Some argued that nothing was wrong with the American auto industry or its products, that domestic cars were as good as they ever were. They hadn't changed, our tastes had. We had learned, they said, that we could no longer enjoy unlimited consumption of our natural resources, including petroleum products like gasoline. We no longer expected or even wanted to own the enormous, gas-slugging strataloungers that had so appealed to earlier generations of car buyers.

Maybe the change of heart could be traced to a discrete event, say the Arab oil embargo of 1974. Maybe it was nothing so tangible. But whatever the cause, we started buying smaller, cheaper, more economical and functional transportation. And that was something American car companies weren't used to providing.

But this explanation couldn't explain why imported cars continued to pocket bigger and bigger chunks of the American market place even after Detroit started building a new generation of cars — though there was a kernel of truth to it. These new American cars seemed to offer all the qualities that had made imported cars, and Japanese cars in particular, so popular with Americans. Indeed, on paper they seemed almost identical. But Japanese cars still sold well. American motorists clearly were interested in more than good EPA mileage estimates or short wheel-bases.

What was it?

Enthusiasts and automotive writers agreed: The cars from Japan, at least the small cars from Japan,

seemed better made. The designs were more current, they were more straightforwardly laid out and, generally speaking, they seemed to offer more for the money.

Some tried to explain away the battle between American and Japanese auto makers as unfair. As Brock Yates points out in *The Decline and Fall of the American Automobile Industry* (which has not yet been released), this was unfair and inaccurate: "Americans are inclined to dismiss the Japanese successes on the simplistic basis of a homogeneous work force that is paid about half as much as the average American, and privileged to work in the latest high-technology factories. This thesis has several flaws. The presumed \$1,500 price advantage each Japanese car has over its American counterpart involves only \$500 in labor costs. Over two-thirds of the cost differential can be traced to higher productivity levels. Neither is this efficiency the result of space age technology. The main Toyota engine plant is over 15 years older than several American counterparts."

Yates does have an idea of what makes Japanese cars better than a lot of American cars in the same size and price ranges.

"In contrast (to the Japanese system)," he writes, "the American system dates back to the origin of the industrial revolution, when the worker was considered no more than a semi-human component of the manufacturing process. In America, the worker has no more control than he would over a runaway freight train. The Japanese system confers two benefits. First, an error is immediately sighted and corrected. Second, the notion that an individual worker has some control over his work environment boosts his morale and level of loyalty . . . The conclusion is clear: If management can create the proper working environment, high standards can be maintained, regardless of the composition of the labor force."

The problem with Detroit's products, Yates says, is something he calls the "Detroit Mind." That's the entity responsible for decisions about what the American car should be, and it's something for which Yates has little regard. The Detroit Mind is short-sighted and isolated from current thought on cars and other topics, so it has proved incapable, for the most part, of making American cars more competitive with those from Japan. It is the mind of a privileged bureaucrat, but a bureaucrat nonetheless, one unwilling to make decisions out of step with those of other Detroit Minds.

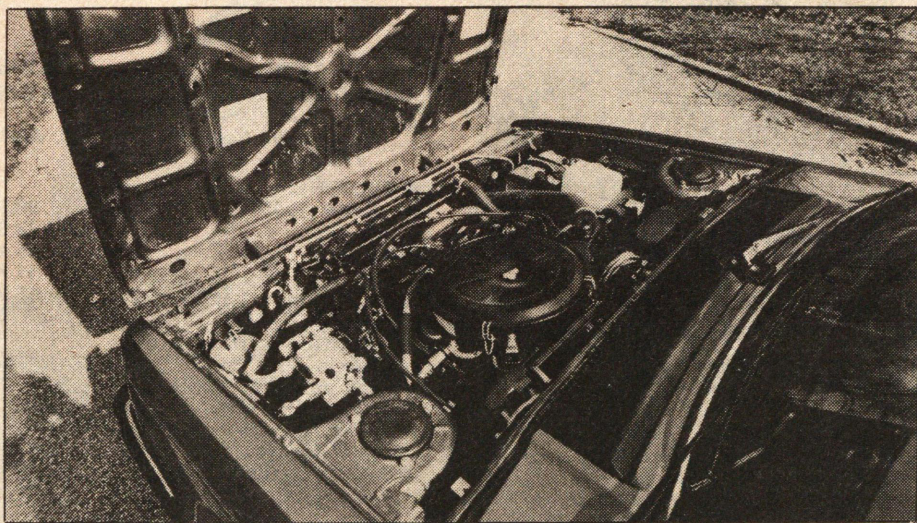
Yates: "The management man has made it through the demanding system that has shaped his entire mental and spiritual physiognomy, giving him an internalized set of attitudes, thought patterns and work habits that has brought him to where he is today. Collectively, it is what may be called the Detroit Mind, a way of thinking that is also responsible for the precarious position of the American automobile industry."

One look at the Accords coming out of Marysville clearly indicates that American Honda has created the right manufacturing environment. The workers are taking blueprints for an extraordinary automobile and executing them fully dozens of times a day.

If the American Accords are an endorsement of the American worker, they are not necessarily an endorsement of the United Automobile Workers, whose members produce almost all the cars made in this country. The new Honda plant so far has not been organized, and Honda and the UAW have agreed not to antagonize each other until after the situation in Marysville has had a chance to gel. It is, of course, a temporary truce only, as the UAW has promised it would organize the new plant sooner or later, and Honda, perhaps perceiving the UAW as a rough-and-tough adversarial union, seems to prefer continuation of a non-union shop.

David Freeman photos





When a few assembly line workers showed up at the plant wearing UAW-embazoned windbreakers and baseball caps—items which are almost *de rigueur* for union members in Detroit—plant managers winced and told them to remove the offensive apparel. Optimistic observers said the clothing was prohibited because hourly workers, or “associates,” as they are called at Marysville, are required to wear specially designed, scratchless white smocks. A quality control measure, they said. Others said Honda was trying to stymie pro-union sentiment before it had a chance to catch hold. Either way, it was clear that things would be different at Honda’s new plant than at most other American car factories. Policy that had prevailed at Detroit and other car-making centers of the United States would not hold here, in Japan, Inc.’s newest outpost in American territory.

The UAW itself says whether or not the plant is unionized will have little effect on the quality of the cars being built there, but adds that eventually the workers themselves will decide they want union representation.

“The union has had, in the past, some difficult problems with Honda Motor Corp. in terms of the exercise of what we consider to be basic

rights of workers to identify themselves as union members,” said one UAW official, who asked not to be identified, in a clear allusion to the baseball cap-windbreaker incident. “Those difficulties were largely resolved last year with the corporation. However, we are still at some significant distance, some significant remove, from organizing that facility. It is our determination to be there and organize no matter how long it takes.”

He added that Honda had tried to hire workers with anti-union feelings in order to keep the UAW out.

A Honda spokeswoman denied the charge, saying that whether or not the workers joined the union was their decision alone. The corporation has no preference, she said.

The role the UAW plays in the quality of American-built cars, then, will be impossible to judge unless the workers at Marysville decide to join up. Right now their wage scales are almost as high as the industry standard, and so far confrontation between the “associates” and their bosses has been minimal. Certainly, the cars being produced are not suffering because the union isn’t there. So the jury is still out on the UAW. But the jury has decided the labor-versus-management issue, and labor has won.



Trouble at the guardhouse

It’s no secret that the United Automobile Workers don’t care much for imported cars, but only those who have visited Solidarity House, the UAW’s downtown Detroit headquarters, know exactly how the union feels. Outside Solidarity House is an imposing black iron fence, broken only by an entrance to the parking lot, itself protected by a brick guard station. On the station are several pro-union and anti-import bumper stickers. Inside is a security guard. He is decked out in blue, and he carries a pistol. Also at the guard post is a sign reading, “300,000 laid-off UAW members don’t like your import. Please park it in Tokyo.”

That sign is perhaps the most threatening feature of the entrance to Solidarity House.

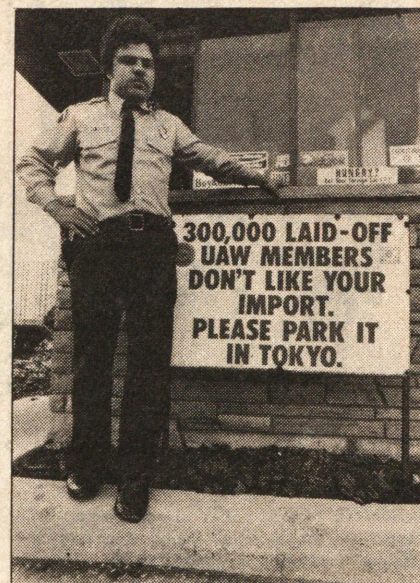
Anyone who pulls up in an imported car gets hassled by the guard. That’s his job. It’s unclear whether or not the guard is charged with seeing that no imported cars get parked on UAW turf—one guard seemed to think so, another didn’t—but there is no doubt import drivers are delayed at the gate.

At least that’s what happened when I pulled up in the American-built Honda Accord discussed elsewhere in these pages. The guard wouldn’t let me inside. When I pointed out that the car itself had been assembled in the United States, the guard countered, “But it wasn’t built by the UAW.”

That much was true; the UAW has not yet been able to organize the Honda workers at Marysville.

But while we argued over what constituted an imported car, another Honda, a middle-aged turquoise-blue Accord, slipped past the guard and into the lot without objection. The guard and the driver even exchanged waves.

“Why’d you let that guy through?” I protested. “That’s not an American car.”



David Freeman

“That’s another story,” said the guard, smiling with eyes closed.

“He works here.”

It was true, I thought. I had recognized the car and the driver. He was a friend in law school who had been working for the UAW for some months. But that fact notwithstanding, it was clear that Solidarity House needed a new sign, or at least a clearer policy.

Right now the sign mentions only imports. It says nothing about union-built cars. And, to confuse matters even more, friends of the UAW are allowed easy entry regardless of what cars they drive. Strangers, even strangers who drive American-built machines, face a harsher judge, one who interprets the sign’s message a little more strictly.

With arrangements like the one prevailing at Honda’s Marysville plant, the UAW will have to rewrite the sign—this time with a prohibition against non-union-built cars, not imports. Until then, domestic Accord drivers will have to take their chances.

—David Freeman

1983 Accord: Improving on an unqualified success

By David Freeman

The Honda Accord has been nothing less than an unqualified success since its introduction to the American market place eight years ago. A small but sophisticated automobile more in the mold of European than Japanese sedans, it has sold well all across America. In recent months it has outsold all other imported cars, and many domestic ones—so not surprisingly it has become a source of continuing frustration for American auto makers.

That frustration doubtless will intensify this year because the Accord is back better than ever, and it’s no longer exclusively Japanese; American Honda, Honda Motor Co.’s U.S. subsidiary, has started assembling four-door models at its new Marysville, Ohio plant. That means Americans who chose not to buy the Accord previously because they wanted to support the American automobile industry now can buy it with a clear conscience; at least with a mostly clear conscience.

Production at the new plant began last Nov. 1, right on schedule, and

has been picking up speed ever since. Currently, output is around 100 cars a day, enough to supply only the Midwest right now. Eventually, however, plans call for a level of 600 cars daily, with all the dealerships east of the Mississippi selling American-built Accord models exclusively.

Honda wanted to begin building cars in this country for several reasons, and first planned to do so back in 1974. It wanted to become a part of the American economy—a part that contributed dollars as well as swallowed them—and because it wanted to avoid being considered an outsider, a threat to the American way of life. Also, it was clear that building Accords in this country, where they sell so well, would be cheaper in the long run.

More recently, Honda recognized that one way to at least partially circumvent the “voluntary” import quotas levied against Japanese auto makers would be to become a domestic company, that is, to build cars here as well as in Japan. This also might give Honda some protection against local-content

legislation, which threatens the economic strength of all import manufacturers with a stake in the U.S. car market.

Thus, although Honda’s decision to build cars here will undoubtedly have a positive impact on both the American economy and the American worker (see accompanying story), the decision was made for purely selfish reasons. There was no altruism whatever.

As one American Honda spokesman put it, “Honda doesn’t do anything to be a nice guy.”

Honda saw an opportunity to build cars at Marysville, and, after having considerable success making motorcycles at an adjacent plant (in operation since 1979), took it.

The results so far have been extraordinary. Despite Honda’s unfamiliarity with American auto workers and the workers’ unfamiliarity with Japanese bosses, the cars have come out very nicely, indeed. Part of the success lies in Honda’s unflinching demand for top quality; one company spokesman said that during the first weeks of production as many cars went to the scrap

heap as went out to dealers. In any event, the American-built Accords are nearly identical to their Japanese kin. The only easy way to tell where a particular car was built, short of looking at the manufacturer’s label, is to scrutinize some of the components. American Accords, for example, have headlights made by General Electric rather than Stanley, and Goodyear rather than Bridgestone or Dunlop tires.

Otherwise, the American Accord we tested, a shiny gray four-door with a new four-speed automatic transmission, was everything an Accord always has been, especially since it was redesigned last year. That is to say it is a thoughtfully designed and economical automobile, one of the most satisfying creations to come from either side of the Pacific in a long time.

The best thing about the Accord is that it’s so easy to drive. There’s lots of glass around the passenger compartment, so it’s got good visibility. The seats, although covered in a fuzzy and not-so-durable-looking fabric more than

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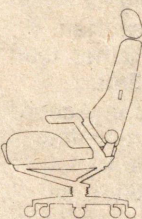
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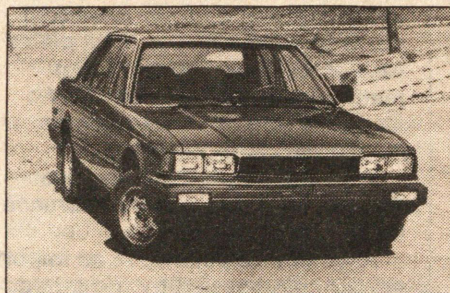
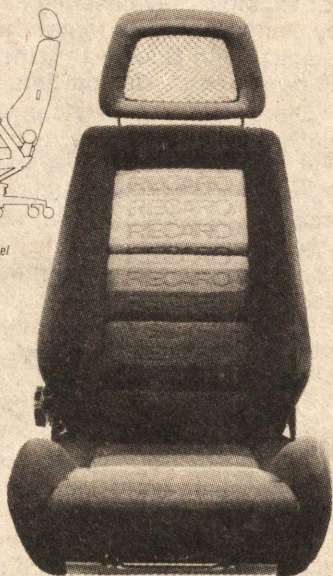
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Accord: Improving on success

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vaguely reminiscent of the stuff lining Norelco electric razor cases, are comfortable and easy to adjust. The pedals and shifter and steering are light to the touch and operate with an uncanny precision, given their overall light feel. Everything on the car or in it just looks and feels right, as if it was designed by people who need transportation rather than what Detroit manufacturers like to call a "personal statement."

It is, perhaps, the perfect car for a beginning or inconfident driver, one for whom steering, accelerating and braking are not yet second nature. Yet because in many respects it looks like and behaves like much more expensive European touring sedans, it can satisfy a more sophisticated driver equally well.

All the prerequisites for an advanced automotive design are there: Fully independent suspension with MacPherson struts locating each wheel, rack-and-pinion steering (standard on all four-door models), and a single-overhead camshaft four-cylinder engine mounted transversely and connected via the four-speed automatic or standard five-speed manual to the front wheels. The only component that seems a little out of place is the three-barrel carburetor. Yet with it the engine is capable of producing an honest 75bhp at 4,500 RPM and 96 ft. lbs. of torque at 3,000, while returning EPA estimates of 37 miles a gallon in the city and 45 on the highway.

If the engine sounds a little weak for a car weighing 2,179 pounds, it is. Yet somehow, the Accord feels energetic enough. Floored, it moves forward unhesitatingly, if not altogether commandingly, the four-speed automatic shifting rather lumpily through the gears.

This transmission, the first four-speed automatic ever to be offered on an imported FWD car sold in the U.S., is not without shortcomings. In addition to the all-too-noticeable shifts mentioned above, it tends at times to be uncertain which gear would be more appropriate for a given situation. In other words, sometimes it shifts back and forth unnervingly.

The only other drawbacks with the car are to be found within easy reach of the shifter. They are problems difficult to notice unless one has spent considerable time behind the wheel. One is that the steering wheel is positioned so that the rim can rub against the thighs of less slender drivers, the other that the seat belt receptacles are too short and the release buttons too awkwardly positioned for seat belt usage to be hassle-free. Given our national predisposition to ignore seat belts in the first place, this is a significant shortcoming.

In other respects, the Accord excels. The gauges are positioned so that they can be seen without obstruction, although the clock—thankfully an easy-to-read analog version—is rather too far from the driver's eyes and poorly illuminated at night. There is an 85-MPH speedometer, gas gauge, temperature gauge and, of course, a long row of warning lights just above. There is also a tachometer, redlined at 6,000. Headlights are operated via a stalk on the left side of the steering column, windshield wipers via a stalk on the right. Speed control, which is standard equipment on the Accord, is controlled by a switch on the dashboard and buttons mounted directly on the steering wheel itself.

Honda traditionally has taken a rather refreshing approach to options. Refreshing means that there aren't many.

Finally, the power-assisted brakes, discs up front and drums in back, do what brakes are supposed to do—stop the car—precisely and with little fanfare.

No one knows exactly what Honda's decision to build cars in this country will mean to the old-guard American auto makers. Clearly, given Volkswagen's plant in Pennsylvania and Toyota's in Tennessee, it is the continuation of a trend, a trend that could mean the end of "buy American" sentiment because there will be no easy way to define what a domestic or American automobile really is.

Yet it is without doubt good for the enthusiast and American motorists in general because it will mean Honda Accords will be available to

1983 Honda Accord

Base Price: \$8,345

Price as tested: \$8,845

(including options listed:
Automatic transmission, \$300; AM/
FM stereo radio, \$200).

DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase (in.): 96.5

Length (in.): 173.6

Width (in.): 65.4

Height (in.): 51.7

Track, F/R (in.): 56.3/55.9

Curb weight (lbs.): 2,179

ACCOMMODATIONS:

Head room, F/R (in.): 38.7/37.0

Shoulder room, F/R (in.): 52.4/51.9

Hip room, F/R (in.): 52.7/53.2

Leg room, F/R (in.): 41.3/32.2

Cargo volume (cu. ft.): 13.3

Fuel capacity (gal.): 13.3

POWERTRAIN:

Layout: Front engine/front drive

Engine type: SOHC inline

four-cylinder

Displacement (cu. in./liters): 108/1.8

Compression ratio: 8.8:1

Horsepower @ RPM: 75 @ 4,500

Torque @ RPM (lbs. ft.): 96 @ 3,000

Fuel delivery: Three-barrel downdraft

Redline: 6,000

Transmission type: Four-speed automatic

Gear ratios:

I 2.38:1

II 1.56:1

III 1.03:1

IV 0.78:1

Final drive ratio: 3.875

CHASSIS:

Suspension:

Front: Ind., with MacPherson struts,

coil springs.

Rear: Ind., with MacPherson struts,

coil springs.

Steering type: Variable-assist power

rack-and-pinion

Overall ratio: 16.3:1

Turns, lock-to-lock: 3.52

Turning circle (ft.): 34.1

Brake system: Power-assisted

front disc/rear drum

Wheels: 5Jx13-inch pressed steel

Tires: P185/70R13

EPA fuel economy: 45 highway/37 city

us right in our own back yard.

Later on that might mean Honda would be able to hold down price increases because of a shortened supply "pipeline," though for the present U.S.-built Accords will cost just as much as Japanese-built Accords.

And it is impossible to overlook the significance of Americans producing a car that is so finely finished as the Accord we tested. Most components, except for the engine and transmission, are manufactured in this country, and they have all the quality of the same parts built in Japan. (The powertrain is made in Japan and shipped to Marysville for installation into the U.S. Accords.) Seams are even, and trim doesn't look as if it had been thrown on from across the room. Everything fits.

Even Brock Yates has nothing but praise for the Accord, which he says was the target car for the slow-selling General Motors J-car. He writes, "... this second-generation car, in three- and four-door sedan configurations, is slightly larger and plusher (sic) than the first, but it remains a high-water mark in small passenger vehicle design and packaging. American loyalists can buy the four-door in good conscience because it is being manufactured—with the same exceptional standards of quality—in Honda's new Marysville, Ohio plant. Within its league of high-economy medium-sized sedans, it is without peer and ranks at or near the top in terms of overall value, regardless of price. The Accord can be recommended without qualification."

We couldn't agree more wholeheartedly.

