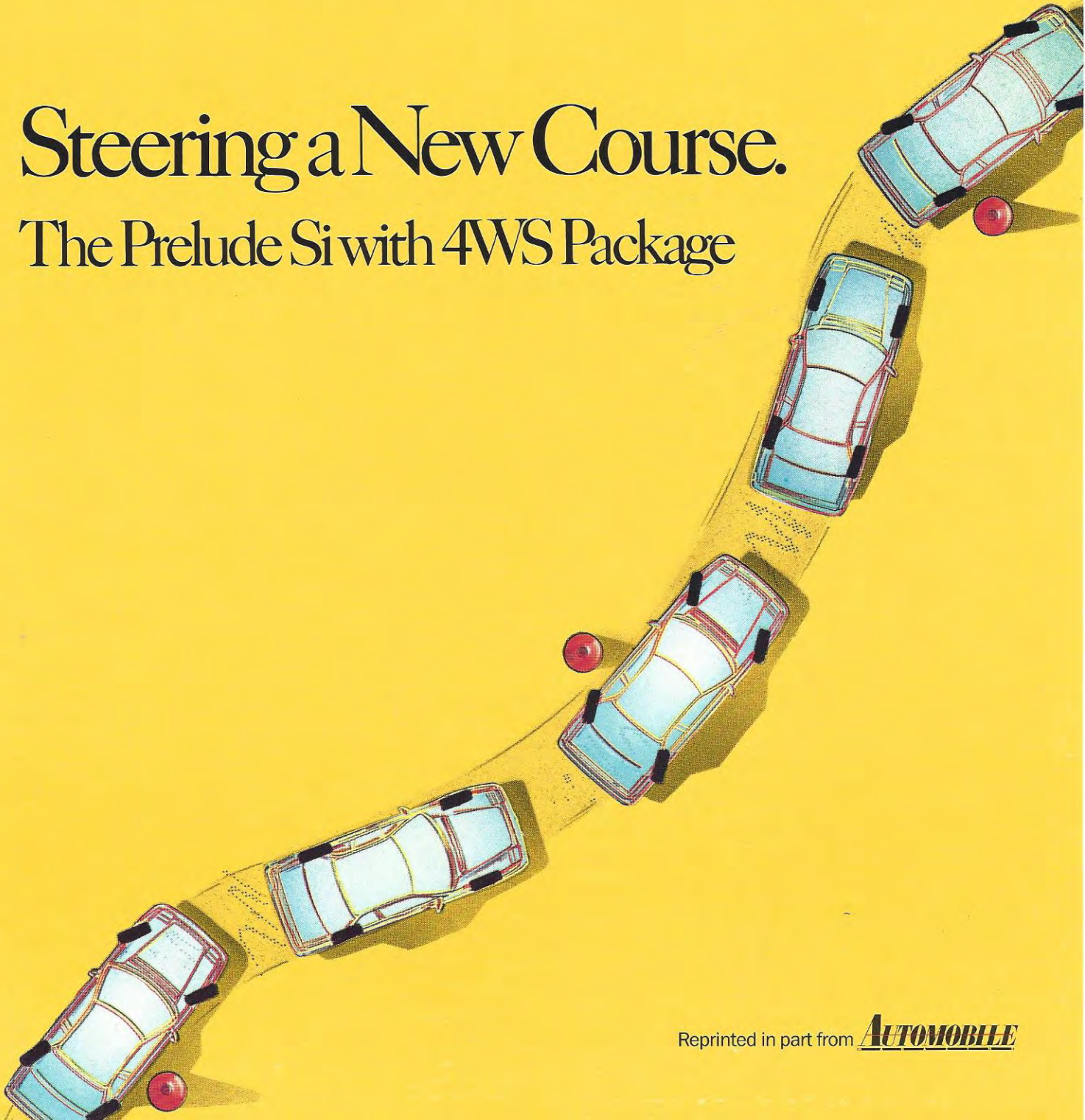


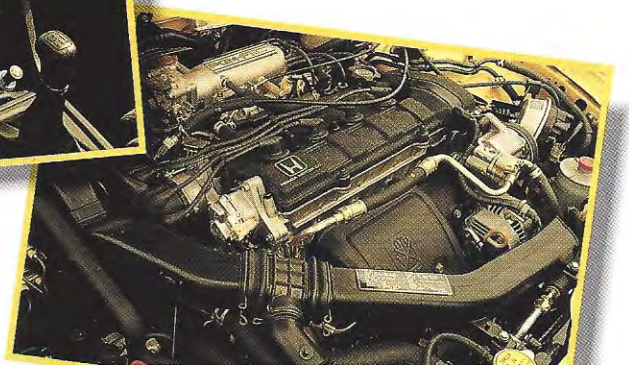
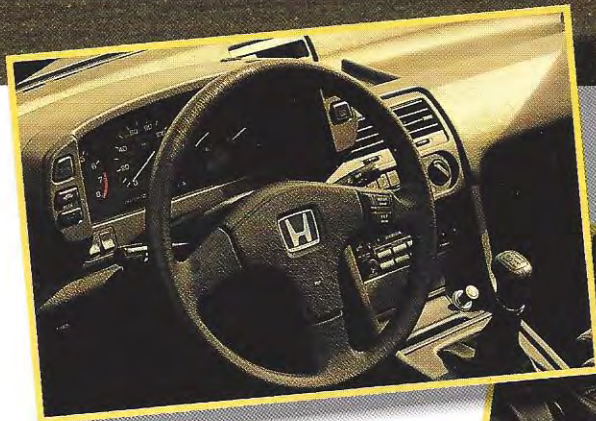
AUTOMOBILE

M A G A Z I N E

Steering a New Course.
The Prelude Si with 4WS Package

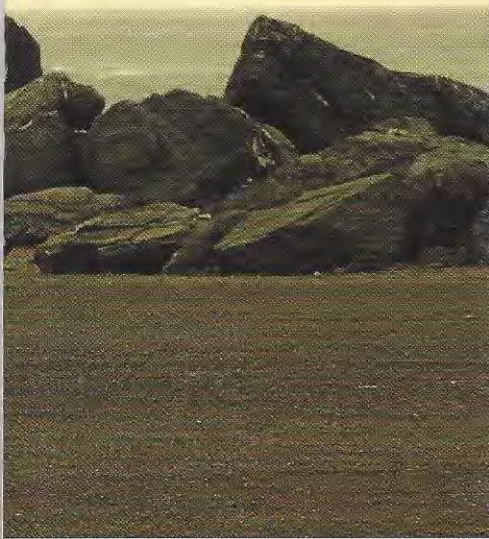


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**FOUR
SEASONS
TEST**

**HONDA
PRELUDE
Si 4WS**



**"Jaunette" departs
exactly as she entered:
with style, grace, and no
bad habits.**

BY JOHN PHILLIPS III
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG JAREM

Ann Arbor—

The entry in the logbook was enigmatic: "Glad to be back in 'Jaunette,'" it read. "You took her from me after less than a month."

We weren't certain, but it looked as if our normally reserved and formal design editor, Robert Cumberland, was having an affair. An affair with "Jaunette," which is French for "little yellow one." (Robert has lived much of his life in France and may thus be pardoned, but did wife Françoise know?)

Sure enough, "Jaunette" was sleek and sexy, worthy of Robert's affections. She was better known in our offices, however, as a chrome yellow 1988 Honda Prelude Si 4WS. If you have followed the previous installments of this Four Seasons saga [May and December 1988], you already may have forgiven Cumberland his indiscretion. Anyway, Robert had his wife as chaperone on most of the weekends he spent with "Jaunette."

There is a lot to love in this car, as we discovered in two cross-country trips, in eleven individual jaunts to states on the right-hand side of the Mississippi, and in one 624-mile sprint from Detroit to New York City, a distance covered in ten hours and twenty minutes by publication director David E. Davis, Jr. "One hundred miles of the journey was in snow and ice," he recalled. "The car goes like a four-by-four. I am amazed."

So were we during the fifty-two weeks we operated our four-wheel-steer Prelude. It was serviced five times at Howard Cooper Honda in Ann Arbor and once at Hoehn Honda in Carlsbad, California. The car was out of our hands for a total of five and a half days. Not bad, considering four of those visits were for scheduled maintenance.

Incredibly, over the course of 28,414 miles, the engine never consumed an extracurricular quart of oil, and despite the sixteen-valve, 135-bhp DOHC engine's addiction to high revs, overall fuel economy was impressive at 26.3 mpg. The car never quit on the road, nor did it ever fail to start on the first crank, even after it was parked at Detroit's Metropolitan Airport for five days when the temperature hovered at or below twenty degrees. More spectacular, we faced only one nonwarranty repair (a measly \$31.50), when, in the car's final

few days with us, we finally corrected a steering wheel that was cocked a few degrees off center.

Earlier in the car's life, however, we encountered three more serious corruptions, although none cost us a red cent. As the car crossed the 10,000-mile threshold, drivers began to mutter about an odd gronk emanating from the right front suspension. It was alternately described as "a drawn-out compression noise, like a shock that's lost fluid" and "a bag of potato chips caught in a coil spring." Never did this malady affect handling or ride, and never did the noise become downright intrusive, but we had the mechanic take a look during our 15,000-mile service. He heard it, too, and ordered a new "right front strut" (because the damper-and-coil-spring assembly does not perform a locating function, his description is technically inaccurate), which was installed free of charge at 17,763 miles. Alas, the noise returned at 21,323 miles, and the dealer replaced the upper bushing on the *left* front damper (the sound wasn't coming from that quadrant, but it was worth a try), again at no charge to us.

During that same visit, which also neatly took care of the scheduled 22,500-mile servicing, we also complained about the driver's window, which, when raised or lowered, wailed like a wrought iron cemetery gate. Without batting an eye, our dealer ordered a new \$163.29 motor assembly—not an inconsequential undertaking—and charged it to Honda, even though we were well and truly out of our car's twelve-month/12,000-mile warranty. (We have heard from several Honda owners whose dealers have been as generous as ours, unhesitatingly replacing *any* nonabused part in the car's first year. For all of its '89 models, Honda has since raised its coverage to a more respectable thirty-six months/36,000 miles.) The electric lift was replaced, gratis, at 21,680 miles, and the squeaking was ever after silenced.

The third item that required work was a suspect hydraulic hose in the power steering pump, but this was drawn to our attention not because it gave trouble but because it was part of a recall. The hose, on two-wheel- and four-wheel-steer Preludes, occasionally leaked fluid atop exhaust manifolds, we were told. Naturally, Honda paid for the new part

as well as for \$96.60 worth of labor.

Unfortunately, the intermittent front suspension gronking continued apace. Most of us learned to ignore it, although Cumberland had one more go at fixing his beloved "Jaunette" during her final servicing at 28,356 miles. Hoehn Honda could find nothing amiss, nor had that dealership's repair staff encountered the noise in other Preludes. We thus dismissed the matter as one of those incurable gremlins that, as experienced car owners will attest, you eventually accept with bemused indifference. Sort of.

It is worth noting that our final, 30,000-mile servicing was an exhaustive procedure that comprised twenty-

six operations—everything from a complete tuneup (including a note telling us where the ignition timing and idle were set!) to a special scrutiny of the rear steering box and each of its tie rod ends and boots. This latter operation was probably unnecessary. According to J.D. Power's Initial Quality Survey, the four-wheel-steer Prelude has actually had fewer mechanical problems per 100 cars than its two-wheel-steer sister. In any event, our dealer even reset the tire pressures, vacuumed the cabin, and gave "Jaunette" a thorough bath. At \$280, this was not exactly an inexpensive bon voyage, but we drove away glowing and satisfied.

During the Prelude's life with us, there were other problems, but none was so irksome as to demand mechanical attention. The sunroof shade rattled almost from the day we took delivery. The air conditioner was hard pressed to cool the cabin on any day the ambient temperature surpassed 80 degrees Fahrenheit (a common Prelude failing, says our local dealer). And the fuel gauge was perpetually a quarter-tank pessimistic. Of the 123 times we filled the Prelude's 15.9-gallon tank, on only four occasions did anybody pump into it more than twelve gallons.

More serious was the matter of our car's 195/60HR-14 Michelin MXVs,

REACTIONS

Like Domino's, "Jaunette" delivers—no fuss, no muss, and the product is hot.

It's a demonstration of our unanimity of opinion on Honda's slick Prelude that the strongest point of disagreement I can think of harks all the way back to Robert Cumberland's introductory article for this Four Seasons test [May 1988]. He called tuning the radio "an exercise in frustration." I, on the other hand, like the Honda's sound controls: I can identify them at a glance and also operate them with winter driving gloves on (far too many very good cars fail that test). True, you do push the horizontal frequency-selection rocker switch right for up and left for down; that slip in ergonomic logic might have annoyed Robert.

Beyond that, no one in the *Automobile Magazine* family has found the Prelude to be anything but intelligent, satisfying, and refined in the way that (we've said this before) only Hondas are—especially for the money. So the discussion on our Four Seasons Si centered around its rear-wheel-steering effects. I'll acknowledge that four-wheel steering can help in a tight parking lot, and it does improve the car's response in a violent-avoidance-maneuver test. But between unexpected corrections it calls for now and then and an unpleasing feel of inertia in the wheel, I'm not sold on Honda's mechanical, steer-angle-dependent system.

I find four-wheel steering technically interesting, and I can imagine it becoming as natural a part of automotive design as electric starting. But that's a lot of trial and error into the future. You have to start somewhere, and the Prelude's four-wheel steering starts me looking for something else. —Kevin Smith

Confession time. I can't seem to get the hang of straight parking. I can park a car, don't get me wrong, but when the slot is at a 90-degree angle to the road, well, let's just say that it's not a pretty sight as I edge in and out, in and out, and in and out once more to fit between the lines. My parking shame is especially magnified when there's a man waiting patiently behind me in our narrow parking structure. I just know he's thinking "woman driver." Arrggh. You should see my one-move parallel park, *pal*, I mutter.

Of course I love the four-wheel-steer Prelude. It makes me brilliant in the parking structure, and I love to look brilliant behind the wheel. Unfortunately, I can no longer parallel-park in one move. The Prelude's wheels turn into the curb too sharply, and I haven't been able to retrain myself to compensate.

I also don't like the odd sensation at speed of having a few extra links between the steering wheel and the tires. Not that the added steering control doesn't offer additional stability in drastic maneuvers, as we've all discovered; it's just not the feeling I prefer to have at my fingertips when I'm driving hard.

Otherwise, our Prelude year was a typically no-fuss, no-muss Honda experience. Hondas are so reliable that it's no wonder our dealer was overly solicitous. It's the Maytag repairman syndrome—they're the loneliest guys in town.

I wouldn't hesitate to buy a Prelude. But would I pay \$1300 for the comfort of looking like a professional valet parking attendant? Nope. —Jean Lindamood

John Phillips is a romantic; he finds torrid passion where only honest affection reigns and domestic drama where none exists. It was in fact Françoise who gave "Jaunette" her name, a fact I thought significant enough to mention in the Prelude's logbook, because Mme. C. had never awarded a sobriquet to any of the hundreds of cars we have used in the past. Nor did John fully realize the nature of the nickname. It's the gentle sort rural French people often give to cows—add the diminutive to the predominant color, and you get "Brunette," "Blanchette," or "Rousette."

No matter. What is important is that our Honda so easily won the hearts of all who drove it, whatever the prevailing conditions. I was spared any icy winter experimentation but was skeptical about the behavior of the four-wheel steering, not liking its feel in strong crosswinds. It was in fact exceptionally good on the slippery stuff, which may explain why I saw so many Preludes last winter in Switzerland, the land of four-wheel drive.

The rear seats are as inadequate as those in most coupes; think of it as a two-seater. Driving from Ann Arbor to California by way of the Grand Canyon, I appreciated its ability—with the seat folded—to swallow as much luggage as a Cadillac Seville. Its behavior fully loaded was as pleasant and consistent as when I drove the Prelude hard, alone in the car.

Lovelorn I am not, and were I to acquire a Prelude for myself it would have neither yellow paint nor four directable wheels, but I did really, really like "Jaunette." —Robert Cumberland

HONDA PRELUDE Si 4WS

which, at 23,000 miles, were approaching treadlessness. The worst of the four was the right front, on which 90 percent of the outer rib was bald; only one-sixteenth-inch of tread was left in the center rib. (Yes, we had followed the prescribed tire rotation schedule.) Because the tires were still safe and would easily carry us through the nonsnowy conclusion of our Four Seasons test, we did not compute the expense of replacement tires in our overall operating costs. Still, as we bade farewell to the Prelude, we felt conscience-stricken about putting it into somebody else's hands in that condition and thus accepted Michelin's offer of a set of new XGT-Vs (which, by the way, are perfectly matched to this car, are spectacular in the rain, are V-rated, and are highly recommended). Had Michelin not been so generous, the new rubber would have added \$350 or more to our out-of-pocket expenses.

Tires notwithstanding, when we computed running costs, we were delighted to find that we had spent on our Prelude only \$99.53 a month, which works out to slightly more than four cents per mile. That is less per mile than *any* Four Seasons car we have so far examined, including our previous record holder, a Volkswagen GTI. A truly incredible feat, the sort of performance for which Honda has become deservedly famous.

When it was new, our '88 Prelude Si 4WS sold for \$18,355 (the '89 model is \$100 higher). According to two oft quoted used-car guides, "Jaunette" is now worth approximately \$13,000, yet another encouraging sign.

It is rare that a vehicle driven daily as a sports car, filled with as many electronic accouterments as a luxury automobile, and carrying an entirely new and fairly complicated subassembly should deliver such a reliable, inexpensive, perpetually enjoyable performance. Wrote contributor Ronald Ahrens after a jaunt to the Hershey classic-car meet in Pennsylvania: "That makes 4500 miles I've put on this car in only three outings. I look forward to driving it: smooth, comfortable, accommodating. And such a lovely engine and transmission."

The final note in the car's logbook was written by lovelorn Cumberland, who was cruelly assigned the task of handing the Prelude's keys to *another man*. His touching entry: "Gone, but remembered with affection." Robert was always a sucker for a cheap date. ●

HONDA PRELUDE Si 4WS

Life with the four-wheel-steer Prelude was nearly perfect, marred only by a recalcitrant electric window lift, a weak air conditioner, and a noisy front damper. The running cost per mile was the lowest we've ever recorded. The four-wheel steering was mechanically

sound and of modest benefit in parking, but if we were to order another Prelude, we'd bypass that \$1300 option. Throughout, Honda's service was courteous and efficient. When new, our '88 model sold for \$18,355; it is now worth about \$13,000.



	EXCELLENT	GOOD	FAIR	POOR
ENGINE				●
HANDLING				●
RIDE QUALITY				●
COMFORT				●
ISOLATION				●
BODY INTEGRITY				●
INTERIOR INTEGRITY				●
RELIABILITY				●

REVIEW PERIOD:
Twelve months
28,414 miles

SCHEDULED MAINTENANCE:
Parts \$134.78
Labor \$377.10
Fluids \$51.90

WARRANTY REPAIRS:
Parts \$176.09
Labor \$138.60 (calculated at \$42 per hour)

NONWARRANTY REPAIRS:
Parts \$0.00
Labor \$31.50

FUEL ECONOMY:
26.3 mpg

RUNNING COSTS (gas, oil added between changes, and nonwarranty maintenance and repairs):
\$99.53 per month
4.2¢ per mile

PROBLEM AREAS:
Front shock absorber
Driver's-side electric window
Air conditioner
Premature tire wear

The Prelude had nearly overtaxed its Michelin MXVs at the 23,000-mile mark.



ROGER HART

STEERING A NEW COURSE

Waterford Hills, Michigan—

We lived with a four-wheel-steer Prelude for fifty-two weeks, collecting opinions and observations at a plodding pace. The system is subtle, and first-time drivers are slow to make judgments, slower still to reach conclusions. Early on, contributor Ronald Ahrens spoke for all of us when he observed: "I keep waiting for a big epiphany about four-wheel steering. I had hoped it would feel like riding a sofa with good casters. Actually, something like that comes through when the car is swinging into a parking space—you have the sense the rear end gets into line quicker. But on the open road, you're aware of no special sensation."

He's right. In the first hour behind the Prelude's wheel, you notice only an increased maneuverability in parking (the turning circle is, after all, 3.3 feet tighter than the two-wheel-steer Prelude's) and an increased likelihood of making early apexes. "In town, when you round corners at 25 or so mph," said automotive design editor Robert Cumberland, "it's awfully easy to put the inside rear wheel on a curb."

On the Prelude Si 4WS, the amount the rear wheels turn depends upon how far you've cranked the steering wheel in one direction or another. If the steering wheel is rotated up to 140 degrees off center, the rear wheels turn the same direction as the fronts, to a maximum angle of 1.5 degrees. As you turn the

steering wheel beyond 140 degrees, the rear wheels head back to their straight-ahead position, reaching that point when you've finally turned the steering wheel an impressive 246 degrees. Should you turn it beyond 246 degrees—the sort of maneuver you'd perform only at low speeds while parking—the rear wheels begin to steer in a direction *opposite* the fronts, attaining a maximum "out of phase" angle of 5.3 degrees at full steering lock.

With 5.3 degrees of rear steering dialed in, the system is no longer subtle. Suddenly, you're a grand master of parallel parking, and entry into normally diabolical parking stalls requires no back-and-fill. Of course, Honda also asserts that the system delivers "better high-speed handling." Here the case is not so clear cut.

At highway speeds, it's exceedingly rare that you make an abrupt 140-degree turn, which is the amount required to trigger 1.5 degrees of rear steer. You find yourself in that particular pickle only when a dog runs in front of your car or a garbage truck overturns in the oncoming lane. It's in flinging the Prelude into a clear lane that we proved, at least to our own satisfaction, that the four-wheel-steer Si is, indeed, adept.

We took two brand-new '89 Preludes, one with four-wheel steer, the other without, to a racetrack and set up our own controlled emergency lane-change maneuver. The idea was that each of three testers would drive the cars back to back, each driver working up to an entry speed of roughly 50 mph. The results were illuminating.

"The four-wheel-steer car requires just a flick of the steering wheel," observed associate editor Barry Winfield. "Its tires don't even squeal. It practically leaps into the next lane. But the two-wheel-steer car requires a violent toss followed by a massive correction to prevent the rear end from rotating."

Honda is right. The four-wheel-steer car feels more firmly balanced in that crucial instant before the vehicle actually changes direction. In fact, as we stood there agreeing that four-wheel steering might, at least in this instance, be of particular benefit, our art director discovered in dramatic fashion that the two-wheel-steer car would *not*, like its competitor, make the lane change at 55 mph. It took us five minutes to clear pylons and turf from the poor Prelude's floorpan.

Two-wheel steer versus four-wheel steer:

The issue is still not crystal clear, but we're closer to a couple of Minor Truths.

BY JOHN PHILLIPS III

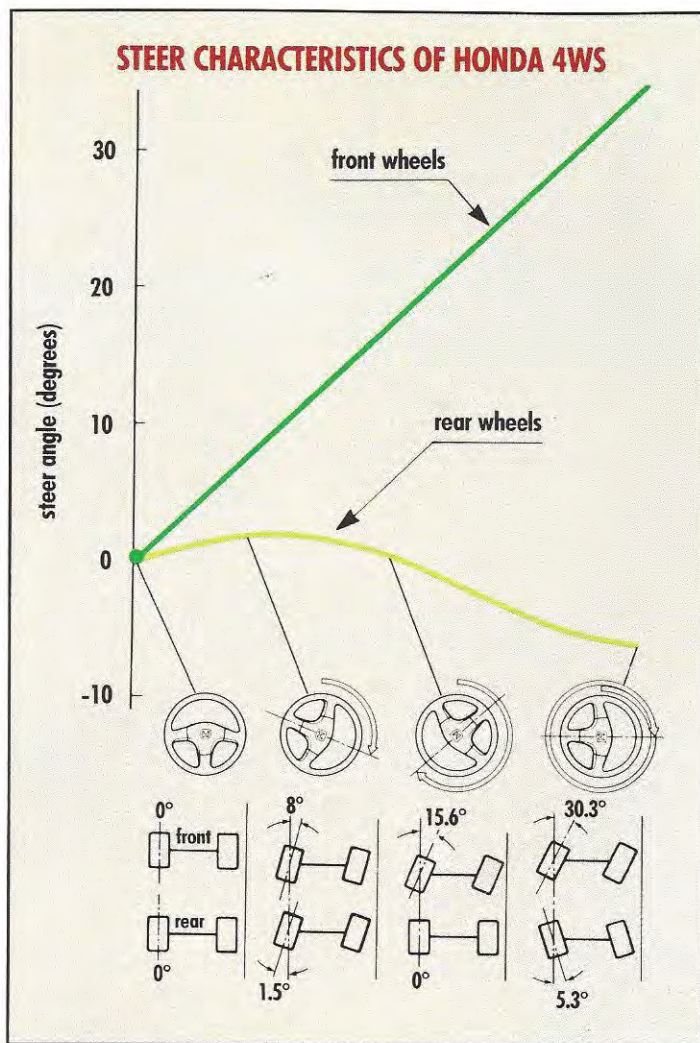
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG JAREM

Art director Larry Crane attempted to force the two-wheel-steer Prelude through the emergency lane-change maneuver at the same speed he had just attained in the four-wheel-steer car. He was not entirely successful.



Unfortunately, the clear-cut results in the lane-change test did not translate into a simple nine-cone slalom course, where all three drivers unhesitatingly nominated the *two-wheel-steer* car a winner. "When you reach the limit of adhesion in the conventional car, you simply make the rear end pivot neatly through the pylons," said one driver. "When you lose adhesion in the four-wheel-steer car, there seems less you can do to correct. To make matters worse, the steering begins to feel like it's way behind."

In a series of back-to-back runs, the two-wheel-steer car averaged 8.5 seconds through the slalom, and the four-wheel-steer car was consistently two-tenths of a second slower. We previously had discovered the same thing in a Nissan Skyline equipped with Super Hicas four-wheel steering [Front Of the Book, September 1987]. Back then, we all wondered if, given more experience behind the wheel, we might eventually modify our slalom styles to accommodate the quirks of four-wheel steering. After living with the Honda for a year, the answer now is, "No, we can't." Of course, driving through a slalom is a maneuver rarely duplicated on the road, so its value is perhaps suspect.



During normal driving, the rear wheels turn in phase to a maximum angle of 1.5 degrees, but for parking maneuvers, the rear wheels turn out of phase as much as 5.3 degrees.

H O N D A