

Sitting Pretty: Installing High Back Bucket Seats in an Early Avanti

Readers offended by any noticeable changes from stock to an Avanti, please turn the page and skip this article completely. And frankly, while I'd admit that this group would normally include me, allow me to suggest that whoever designed the front seats in the early Avanti must have been something of a masochist. True, the originals are classic, elegant and understated sculpted works of art, but the non-adjustable backrests and the complete lack of middle-back support are at distinct odds with the needs of my aging, expanding physique. The originals are also really hot and sweaty in the summer months when I drive the most; the smooth vinyl does not breathe at all. If you are curious, even just a little, please read on. This article is a step by step how-to that instructs you how to address this issue for your comfort without cutting or permanently changing anything, substituting far more comfortable leather buckets that almost look like the factory could have installed them there.

Headrests became required safety equipment on all American cars on January 1, 1969. Avanti IIs were often equipped with high-backed bucket seats throughout their run, even before they were required by law. So this change is not one that will look terribly out of place on our cars anyway.

I embarked on this project with three basic rules in mind:

1. The seats had to "look right".
2. No cutting of the car allowed.
3. Ability to easily switch back to the originals without drama

The first thing to consider is that the floor of the Avanti is FLAT from doorsill to console. Most every other car I've ever worked on has a "step down" floor pan, which sits at least 1-3 inches lower than the door sill. Secondly, the Avanti's seat base is molded to the car floor as a part of the fiberglass floor. The raised, horseshoe shaped platforms that the seats sit on are integral to the structure and stiffness

of the floor. These platforms are 2 ½ " tall at the front of the seat, and fade to zero as they slant down towards the back. It is these platforms that give the seats their rake, a rake which is minimal at best.

In searching for suitable replacement seats, the key problem dimension turns out to be seat height. The stock Avanti seats rise only 7" off the floor in the front. If your car has its stock steering wheel (as mine does) you probably already find the clearance tight between your legs and the bottom of the wheel. I realized that any seats I'd consider had to allow the same space—or more—or I'd need to make more changes, like substituting a smaller, non-stock steering wheel, which I did not wish to do.

Brand New Seats?

There are several manufacturers of new bucket seats. Recaro is a high-end brand that was used in Avanti IIs and several other sports cars over the years. They are well made





but pricey and are distributed through relatively few high-end motorsports dealers. Corbeau and Sparco are other popular and well-respected brands (www.corbeau.com) (www.sparcoua.com) that are somewhat more affordable and seem to be more widely distributed. However, among new seats I found most of the styles available to be too modern and zoomy-looking for my tastes, and I frankly wasn't crazy about buying seats I had no opportunity to sit in first. However, ordering this way you get full access to dealer assistance, installation advice, complete measurements, have a wide variety of styles and fabrics to choose from.

There are also many vendors of cheaper "racing seats" that advertise in tuner magazines. It is probably not fair at all to paint these all with the same brush, but at less than half the price of the Corbeaus, I would doubt seriously that these are of the same quality of either brand-name aftermarket seats or used OEM seats. I did not investigate these much at all, partly because I was not looking for high-tech racing seats that are probably aimed at the 20-something crowd, intended for their Hondas, Scions and Toyotas.

Considering Used OEM Seats

Let's start with the same considerations here: what will look right and what will fit? Allow me to (possibly) introduce you to a trick that makes this investigation process a whole lot easier than you might think, and certainly a thousand times easier than it would have been even ten years ago. Go to Google, and select "images" from the top menu bar. Then get busy. In the search bar, type "Avanti Interior" and you will be rewarded with a dozen or more photos of classic Avanti interiors, as well as some photos you weren't looking for, of interiors of jet planes and motor homes.

Get the idea? Now, try some more. Try "1999 Corvette Interior"; "Ford Pinto Seats"; or anything that you might

want to see. When you find something nice, identify the year and make a list.

Look for seats from factory sports or pony cars as a starting point, remembering that you need something with a low base to ensure they will fit leaving room for your legs under the steering wheel. Seats that have a high base integral to the design, like those from many sedans and SUVs will not fit.

How to Buy Used Seats

It's been a lot of years since I used to roam junk yards (ahem—now called auto recycling centers) looking for parts for my 1960s Fords. Back then, such parts were only ten years old, and visiting these god-forsaken places as a teenager in Philadelphia in the mid 70s was an exhilarating but somewhat terrifying experience. Then, if they liked you and, I suspect, if the moon was in the right phase, you might be allowed to walk around yourself through the yard and pick what parts you wanted, and you usually emerged with the part you needed plus a nasty cut or bruise or two, and dozens of mosquito bites on your legs and arms. That concept has all but disappeared in most cities today. In the Philadelphia area like many others, a few large dismantling



centers have hundreds or even thousands of cars stacked in metal racks, with their entire inventory (supposedly) on computer. The people I encountered there are still just as surly, but they are now stationed behind computer terminals in the front office. Customers are usually not allowed to walk around in these yards.

All of this brings up a new challenge: when you go to the yard, they now want to know specifically what you want. “*Black cloth front seats from a 1999 Mazda Miata*” is something they will search for. “Something that is black and will look good in an Avanti” is not. I found this to be incredibly frustrating, as they also could not help with questions like “what car has seats that are low to the floor, say no more than seven inches from the front track base to the top of the cushion. And, “Can I measure?” is a dirty question too. Now, maybe you will have more luck at the yards in your area, but I suspect that the big yards are all about the same, designed to serve repair shops dedicated to fixing late-model cars. One yard I visited told me that they move 500-800 cars through the lot a week, stripping them of desirable parts and sending the hulks to the crusher.

Leather interiors are considered “desirable” by most yards and if are in useable condition are stripped from the hulks and then are stored in a trailer or a warehouse on premises. This means you often must buy the back seats too, even if you don’t want them. Cloth seats, regardless of their condition are often discarded or are left to soak in the rain. When I asked how I might buy cloth buckets, I was told to “call every week with the make model and color your want, and we will tell you if we have them.” I decided that I had better things to do than pursue this option.

Looking on eBay

This may be your best option, because eBay has a wide selection and a nice little utility feature where you can store a search and have it automatically report the new listings to your email every day. Enter the query “*Black seats*” and then sort the results by “Location nearest” to find seats you might be able to actually see and pick up, avoiding shipping costs. Once I settled on black leather seats from a late model Camaro or Firebird. They are almost as low as the Avanti seats, and the pleated and rolled pattern of the seating surface makes them look almost like the factory installed them there. They are available in black, a factory color called “Ebony”. (the Camaro/Firebird seats are also available in a factory tan color that is rather close to the Avanti original fawn colored upholstery.)

Storing my query online, eBay dutifully searched daily for **Seats +(Camaro, Firebird, Z28, Trans Am)**, and it took me only two weeks to find a perfect set less than 100 miles from my home. I paid a total of \$625 and had to take the back seats as part of the deal too, but it was worth it to me. New Recaros or Corbeaus will easily cost from \$1200 to \$2400 a set, so this was a bargain in my mind.

Installing the Seats

Usually, the best way to install new seats into an old car is to completely remove the new seats’ tracks and bolt the old car’s seat tracks onto the new seats. Conveniently, the side to side seat tracks mounting dimensions on both the Camaro and Avanti seats is 14”.

Slide both old and new seats all the way forward on their tracks, and then take measurements of where the leading edge of the front seat cushion is in relation to the track mounting holes on each. The object is to ensure the mounting of the original Avanti tracks onto the donor seats is a close match, so that the fore and aft adjustment when the swap is done will be as close to the originals as possible. Or, use this opportunity to get a little more legroom if you need it by mounting the tracks further forward on the donor seats.





To my delight, I found that my Camaro seat front mounting holes line up nearly perfectly with the holes in the Studebaker tracks. However the back holes are then misaligned and leave a gap of about 1 1/2". The simple solution is to make small adapter brackets to bridge the seat tracks to the seats' holes.

I was pleased that my new drivers' seat was a factory power seat, until my measurements and test-fitting proved to me that there was no way it was going to fit in place with the bottom tracks intact. To have kept it, I'd have had to cut the floor, something we determined I would not do from the very start.

Luckily, the entire power seat track unbolts, leaving a bare stock seat that can be adapted just like the passenger seat, so that the Avanti seat track can be swapped in its place.



Conclusion

They look good and they feel great. The cost and effort were quite reasonable considering the alternatives. The leg room between the top of the seat and the bottom of the steering wheel actually improves by a fraction of an inch.

Complaints? When placed side to side with the original seats, these are not as dark black, and are closer to charcoal gray than the "ebony" that they are named. I am certain they could be sprayed with interior fabric dye if I wanted them to match exactly. However, when installed in a matched set they are acceptable to me without changing them. I can attest that I have spray-dyed vinyl door panels and dash pads before on another car, and they came out just fine.

Also, the high back bucket seats have plastic brackets screwed to the outside tops of the headrests, designed as guides for the shoulder harness belts. These looked out of place and were easily removed with a screwdriver, but doing so left visible a permanently embossed scar on the surface. I am still trying to decide if I can just live with them there, or if I should visit an upholsterer to see if there is any chance of having it addressed.

I am very satisfied with my conversion. The **new seats look like they could have been** installed by the factory. My sore back certainly appreciates the change, and the original seats, stored safely in my attic, can be reinstalled with little trouble in less than an hour, without a trace.

Rocking Chair? Repairing the Avanti's seat mounting anchors

A common Avanti weakness is the seat-front mounting points. Constant stress and movement causes the captive nuts bonded to the back of the seat platform to break loose from their moorings, allowing the seat to rock to and fro. Over time, the movement of the rocking seat will wear an oblong hole at the mooring point, causing an unsafe condition that needs attention.

Close examination reveals that the stylish, angular, leatherette-covered stiffening platforms on the Avanti floor are actually hollow and accessible from underneath the car. It is indeed possible using all the techniques of fiberglass repair to cut out the damaged area, and repair the area from beneath with new fiberglass mat and attach a new mounting point. But such an operation is messy and difficult. An alternative from Classic Enterprises (<http://www.classicent.com/avanti.php>) uses a steel cover plate incorporating welded-in mounting nuts for the seat bolt, riveted on top of the factory floor. When properly installed and then covered with new leatherette from the fabric store, they are indistinguishable from original and probably quite a bit stronger as well.

Step 1: Remove the seat, pull back the carpeting and peel off the glued-on vinyl that covers the floor at the seat's front mounting points. Judicious use of a heat gun may help soften the old adhesive, but be careful not to apply too much heat. If the bolts just spin in their holes, use vice grips from underneath the car to hold the broken captive nuts while you turn the bolts free.

Step 2: Test fit the repair panels in place. You may have to widen the old bolt holes in the floor slightly to allow the repair panel to fit over top. The panel needs to be riveted in place. Drill one hole at a time as you work. Find a helper to assist holding washers in place over the top of each rivet from underneath the car as you install each one from inside the car. Don't skip the washers—they are needed to strengthen the bond. Without them the rivets' bond will lack strength and eventually pull right through the fiberglass.

Step 3: Nothing fancy, the material used to cover the metal repair panel is synthetic leatherette from the local fabric store, glued in place with 3M heavy duty fabric adhesive. Good as new!

