

# Mustang Goes International

*Dearborn's bully gets even more good old American ponies, only now the handling shows old-world refinement and the interior shines with the light of the Rising Sun*

*By Phil Berg*

**T**here are as many reasons for the birth this year of a 148mph 225bhp Mustang GT (13mph and 25bhp more than last year) as there are slots in the car's tacky louvered taillights:

**The mountain climber's credo** Because it's there, and has been since Ford's Fairmont platform was shortened for 1979 to accommodate the present body style (Mustang, generation four), it'll be cheaper for Ford to build and sell about 150,000 total '87 Mustangs (up to 25,000 GTs) than an all-new coupe of this size.

**As market test-tube baby** You don't think Ford put odd-looking body-colored louvers, along with a lower airdam and aeroskirts, on the Mustang for '87 to curb sales, do you? But with a revised 5.0liter V8 pumped up an extra 25bhp over last year's fuel injected motor—thanks to a free-breathing intake manifold, bigger throttle body, resurrected hot rod heads and a punchy cam—who's going to notice brake and tail lights? It's much safer for the junior design team to practice on a hot-running car that sells before the stylists move up to Taurus/Sable drawing board territory.

**A subversion tactic** Someone noticed that it's costing Ford way too much to store all those outdated brake drums in a Dearborn warehouse, hence they're being smug-

gled out under the new cars' 7x15in rear alloy wheels and 225/60VR15 gatorbacks.

**The Hatfield-McCoy feud escalation** Ford goofed in 1974, like many others, when the fuel tap was turned down to a trickle. It stretched a Pinto and dubbed it Mustang even as General Motors styled up a slick Italian-inspired low slung Camaro, and sister car Firebird. The General thus built an army of buyers out of the ranks of Ford's old Mustang believers, and though most of the Ford guys responsible for this fiasco are now either retired or toiling for Chairman Lee (who knew a thing or two about Mustang Ones himself), their successors have been toiling for over a dozen years to get the magic back. Kick GM somewhere south of the C-pillar. Make the modern Mustang a worthy great-grandson of the car that started all this pony car business way back there in 1964½.

Judging from our drive in an '87 Mustang GT, we think they may just have pulled it off, for a couple of outstanding reasons.

First, because of the Mustang/Camaro duel, Ford has been constantly refining the Mustang's drivetrain for more performance. The '87 Mustang GT accelerates to 60mph in six and a half seconds—well into Corvette, Porsche 928S and Lotus Turbo Esprit territory. Two years ago it was about a sec-





Phil Berg photos

and slower. Top speed of the new Mustang GT has also risen from the mid 130s to just under 150mph. Not only is that faster than the high-tech coupes from Toyota, Nissan and Mazda, it beats Ferrari's Mondial and closes in on the 328.

The icing: It'll only cost you approximately \$12,000 to get into this top-flight speed arena in the Mustang GT (the IROC-Z Camaro's about \$1500 more; for the Trans Am GTA add over \$2000). This is the cheapest car in America that will even come close to the revered one-five-oh.

That, in itself, is good news. But it's just the beginning. Ford's approaching this competition from a perspective other than a street rodder's workbench. The numbers say both Camaro and Mustang are almost identical in performance; the race is so close we'll call it even. Numbers, as usual, don't tell the whole story.

The Mustang is a hedonist's car, one that makes you want to go somewhere—anywhere—alone. Somewhere out in the tules with little road-hogging traffic and a variety of terrific roads. You look forward to corners with a passionate grip on the steering wheel. You start to believe the only reason for the quick motor is to keep you from wasting valuable time on straights so you

can find more rewarding sections of two-lane. It's a very personal thing.

The Camaro/Trans Am, by contrast, makes you want to drive smack in the middle of a crowd, so you can soak up stares.

The more you drive the Mustang, the farther it drifts in feel from the other American two-plus-two muscle coupes, Camaro and Trans Am. On a balance sheet, you'd list the Mustang's 5speed (the GM cars are available—still—only with automatics) as a plus, and its styling—still—as a minus.

It's not that the Mustang is particularly ugly, but Ford is spending its Mustang development dollars mostly on hardware, not fashion. What it did allocate for new clothes bought flush headlights and rear side windows, and enough plastic below the beltline to build a Honda CRX. Door windows, however, remain recessed.

Still, where the Camaro/Trans Am is out there showing off, the Mustang is somewhere in the shadows, practicing karate.

We get this impression of the Mustang from its little details. As already noted, it's still built off the late '70s Fairmont chassis, shortened a bit, with struts and A-arms locating the front wheels; four trailing arms holding the live rear axle. It remains a sound set-up for a rear-driver, though like

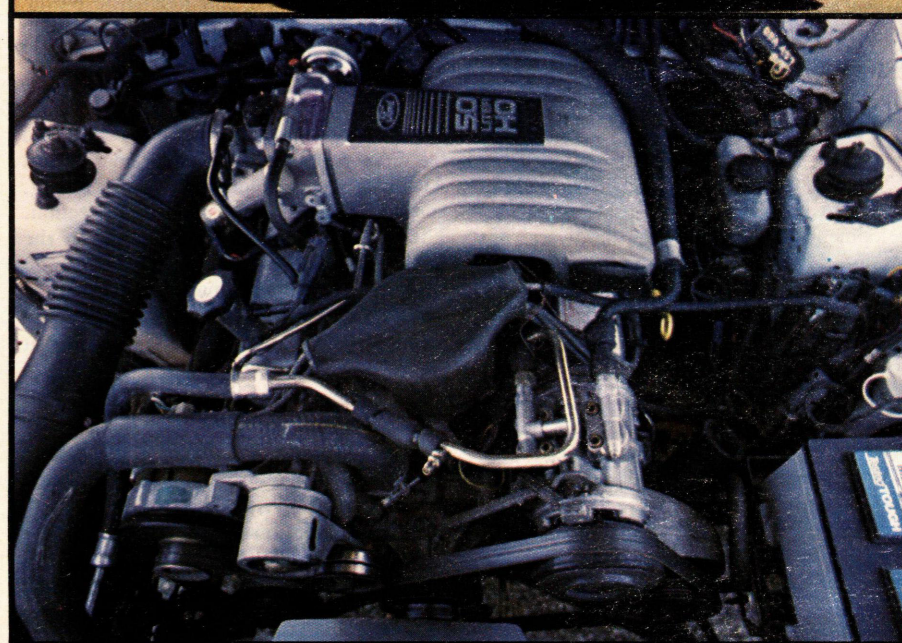
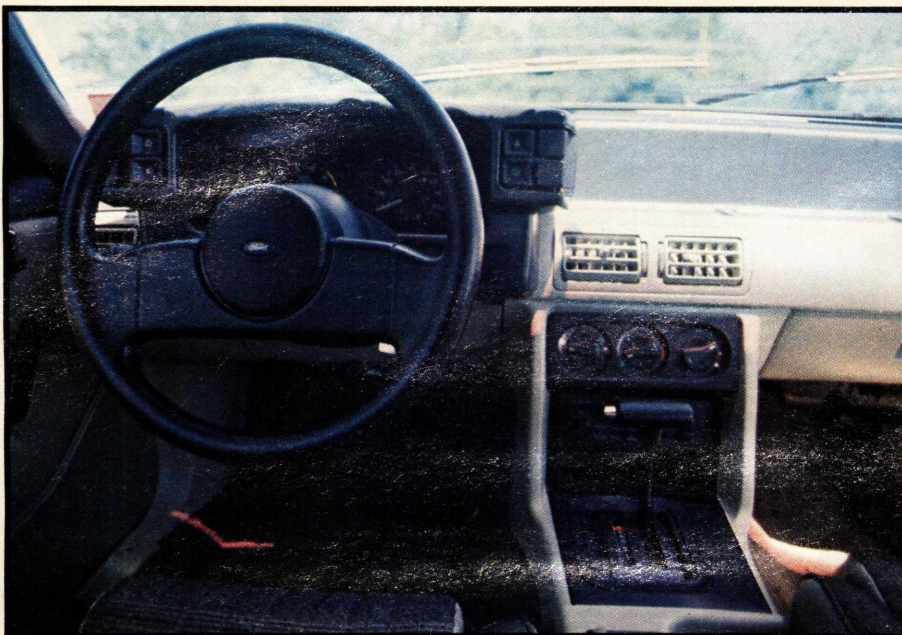
every pony car ever built it's treacherous in the winter because of its power and front-heavy weight distribution. Steering response, though, is improved, the result of some fine tuning of the front struts. It's a small improvement, and somewhat difficult to sense through the still over-done power assist, but it's a move in a direction we like. It caters to a more sophisticated driver than the steer-by-wire feel of its competition.

The Mustang's ride, as well, is soft and far more compliant than the Camaro/Trans Am. Part of this is coil spring/shock tuning, and part is the Mustang's taller tire section. The Mustang doesn't feel slower in the turns, even with tires two section sizes and an inch in diameter smaller than the Camaro/Trans Am's. Because of this we applaud Ford's restraining the tendency to fit bigger rubber just to give the Mustang a more aggressive appearance. (Though our praise may be misdirected since there seems to be a wheel supply problem at Ford, anyway. See story page 25.) The Mustang, as a result, is relatively soft, but still nimble.

Sophistication, once again.

Ford's statement to Mustang buyers is becoming clearer: If it can't compete on a styling level, it will score by rewarding a driver in other ways. Like road manners.





Taking the Mustang through twisty sections of road you notice its quick turn-in, though on the sharpest of corners the front tires scrub too much. You can balance the car with power, but you can also balance it using fine steering corrections. You don't, then, really need all of the car's power to compensate for a basically off-balance chassis. Mustang veterans take note: You don't need to drive around the limitations of the chassis anymore. Unless you want to.

The car is more forgiving than last year's. Nasty thrusts at the brake pedal don't upset the Mustang much in corners. The brakes, however, take some driver adjustment. Pedal travel is long, and using the brakes is the single most unrewarding action you can take in the Mustang.

One unusual Mustang feature, carried over from '86, is its super long-legged manual transmission (a 4-speed automatic is available) and rear axle. Cruising in fifth gear, the engine produces an astonishing 38mph per 1000rpm. Which means the engine's revving at a mere 1500rpm at 55mph. Maximum torque comes at around 3000rpm (or 110mph in fifth), but even at 1500 there's enough in reserve for passing. Fuel mileage was Ford's—and the government's—concern here. We averaged 17mpg in an '86 GT; Ford claims better for '87. We'll have to wait until we put more miles on the new one to verify that claim, but we won't be the slightest bit surprised if we do.

Overall, the way the Mustang behaves on the road suggests it is courting pickier drivers. It doesn't seem like any muscle car approach we're familiar with from Dearborn—it handles more like something from the land of cuckoo clocks and heady brew. Dare we call it European?

Inside the car is evidence of more outside-Detroit influence. On the sides of the notably complete gauge cluster are switches for head and fog lights, emergency flashers and rear defogger—all very Japanese in location. The same goes for the shape and placement of the interior air vents, though Ford will argue the design came from its Taurus. The wacky tail lights, in any event, look like something turned out by the Nissan Pulsar design team after too many hours in the sushi bar.

Direct from Taurus is the climate control system, with rotating knobs instead of sliding levers, and the interior has more than a touch of Saab as well: Down from the climate control you find an easily reached console for the radio, and further back, behind the shifter, the ashtray. The ashtray itself is a great improvement over the previous Mustang design, one which our staff smokers called Mount Vesuvius, but the new one still looks as if it was lifted straight from a Nissan or Honda.

The seats, front and back, are pure Ford, and that's not an insult anymore. If you haven't been paying attention lately, Ford has been making some dandy seats since it introduced them in the now-deceased SVO Mustang in 1983. Covered in cloth, they



support you as much as you need when you're pressing hard in corners. There is also a dead pedal, again from the SVO, to help you push yourself into those seats on really fun roads.

The Mustang's new attitude has plenty of international influence—all to its advantage. But it is also a blend of worldwide good features, US 5.0liter V8 included.

In short, it's more a personal driver's car than a muscle car fashion statement. That may sound odd, especially when you consider that the Mustang's rear seats can, though barely, turn it into a legitimate car-pool cruiser.

With Ford's new attitude toward the Mustang and its buyers, it also has quite a few paths it can take with its performance flagship in the future. It's lesser-outfitted LX version, which comes in coupe, hatchback and convertible forms, is expected to be replaced in 1988 by a Mazda 626-design front-driver, leaving the GT as Ford's only

## Specifications

Base Price: ..... \$12,000 (est)  
 Wheelbase, (in): ..... 100.5  
 Length/Width (in): ..... 179.3/69.1  
 Curb weight (lb): ..... 2782  
 Powertrain: Front-mounted 302cu in/  
 5.0liter ohv V8, iron block and heads,  
 225bhp @4200rpm, 300lb ft @3000rpm,  
 rear-drive five-speed manual  
 0-60 (sec): ..... 6.3  
 Top speed: ..... 148mph  
 Mph at 1000rpm in top: ..... 38.0  
 Suspension: Ind front MacPherson strut,  
 separate coil springs, A-arms, anti-roll  
 bar; live rear axle, four trailing links, hori-  
 zontal gas bag shocks, anti-roll bar  
 Brakes: Vented front disc, rear drum  
 Tires: ..... 225/60VR15  
 Mpg/range: ..... (est) 19.0mpg x 15.4gal  
 = 287miles

rear-driver Mustang (*AutoWeek*, June 30). The division of Mustangs should be similar to the way Toyota disassociated its Celica and Supra, when the lower line cars went front-drive for the '86 model year.

Don't fret, Mustang GT fans, even though there are touches of Japan aplenty—we found it odd, for example, that there *wasn't* a coin-holder tucked away somewhere in the cabin—you won't be Mazda-ized. For the present, you get a real World Car, with the best features of America (as in V8 power), Europe (as in deviating from a straight line when the road calls for it) and Japan (those interior touches are handy, and who notices one's own tail-lights anyway?). This happy blend should be with us at least through 1990, when it is likely that a shorter version of the planned-for-'89 Thunderbird replacement, with independent rear suspension and other modern chassis tweaks, will become the next-generation Mustang GT.

In the meantime, enjoy. **AW**

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