

THE OLD 'SHEL' GAME

*Is this latest pony in the performance pipeline really a Shelby?
Or is it simply a sleight of hand—and name—with stripes?*

By Cynthia Claes

Rick Kopec and Ken Eber may reside on the East Coast, but their hearts are still buried in Venice, Calif., circa 1965. And now the two directors of the Shelby American Automobile Club (SAAC) are taking it where few, if any, car clubs have gone before—into the business of building automobiles.

Not just any cars, of course. They're going to build Shelbys. 1992 Shelbys. And that's the quandary. Because we're not talking Chryslers here, Lee.

Built around a Ford Mustang GT chassis, its official name is the Shelby American Automobile Club Mk I, or Shelby AAC Mk I for short. Or as Kopec hopes, "Just plain 'Shelby' for shorthand."

And with its wide hood stripes, its signature LeMans side stripes and the word "Shelby" in the rear deck lid and steering wheel ovals, not to mention the "CS" wheel centers, there's little doubt about the association the club is aiming for.

But "What's in a name?" is a question that's cropped up often lately in the auto industry: Lexus, Beretta, and the frequent fights over Ferrari look-a-likes come to mind. And not too many years ago Carroll Shelby took Ford to court in a dispute over the use of the GT350 name.

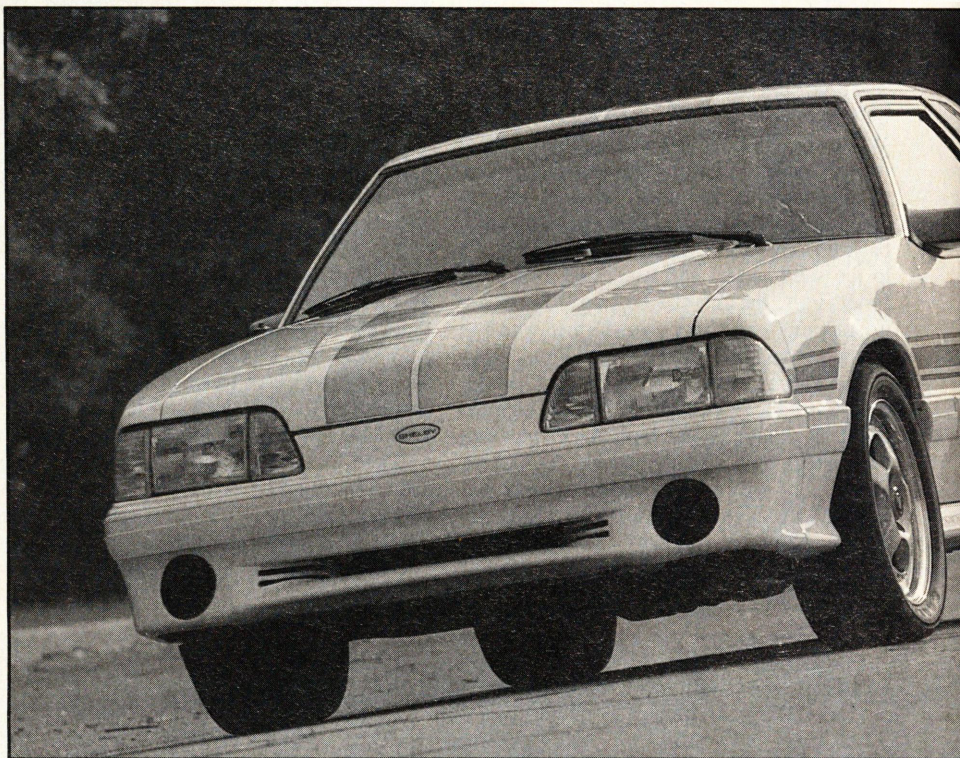
So, is this a Shelby? SAAC thinks so.

Eleven months ago, Kopec and Eber decided to offer a "Ford-powered Shelby" to people who could not afford an original; or who owned Cobras and Shelbys so pricey that they were uninsurable for road use.

The Shelby AAC Mk I, according to Kopec, fills this niche. Here, in modern guise, are the guttural vibrations, brute horsepower and ear-ripping resonance that characterized Ford's Shelby lineup.

When the car appeared at our office, however, we had lots of questions, the obvious one being: How does Shelby The Original, now with Chrysler, feel about this latest Mustang variant?

"I want it perfectly clear that I have no official involvement, monetarily or otherwise, with the Shelby AAC Mk I," said



Carroll Shelby. "And let's be sure to call it that—the Shelby AAC Mk I. Hell, I told them they can't just call it a 'Shelby.' I'm building cars for Chrysler now. We're making Vipers!" he stated emphatically.

He indicated, however, the project has his tacit approval since he couldn't challenge the car as presently badged.

When asked about repercussions from points of the Pentastar over the car's name, Kopec said they've heard nothing.

But then the car's been kept well under wraps during its prototype stages. When contacted, Chrysler spokesman Tony Cervone was surprised. "As far as I know, no one here (Chrysler) knows anything about it. I would have to agree with Carroll, though. I hope people will realize he's now closely tied to the Dodge division as a performance consultant. I hope they wouldn't confuse past history with the present.

"But until we see the car, there's not much we can comment on."

It was only at the SAAC convention in late June, when the three prototypes were unveiled, that anyone saw the car.

"Very few people knew about this project," said Kopec. "We had a meeting with Carroll back in March. We told him what we were going to do. Originally we wanted to call it the Shelby GT but Carroll didn't want his name on it. Since we own the name 'Shelby American Automobile Club' we called it the Shelby AAC."

Sounds simple enough. But bringing a niche vehicle to market would seem to be an overwhelming venture for a car club.

Enter Ford SVO. These guys hold the keys to the Ford toy box when it comes to high performance and horsepower goodies.

With a propitiously timed phone call, Kopec and Eber contacted Dave Wagner,

then of Ford Power Products, to propose the Shelby AAC Mk I. Wagner informed the duo that SVO had the hardware to do a complete car. Coincidentally, SVO's parts catalog was being scrutinized by the EPA. Kopec and Eber needed performance parts as well as EPA certification (good for all 50 states). SVO performance operations manager Lee Morse needed a test mule to prove his SVO parts were in compliance. Wagner introduced the principles and what followed was a marriage of convenience if not love.

SVO handled the car's development and certification, with only two stipulations from Ford: no blue ovals on the car and only Ford recognized suppliers be used to source componentry. Livernois Engineering in Dearborn, Mich., builder of Steve Saleen's SCCA race-

age like this as a 25th-anniversary Mustang.

True to its heritage, the Shelby AAC exhibits some of its older sibling's traditional Mustang characteristics. Steering is very numb off center, especially at low speeds. There's resistance, weight, but little *feel*. At higher speeds it feels much more connected.

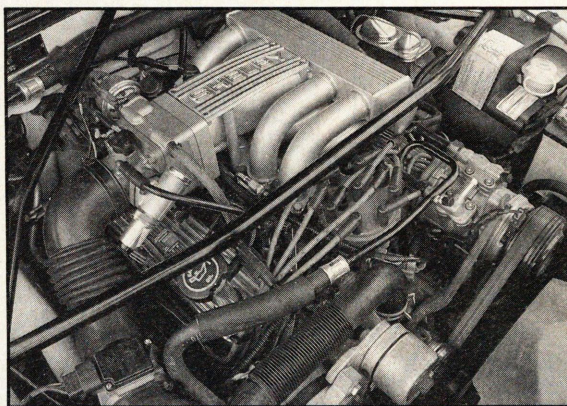
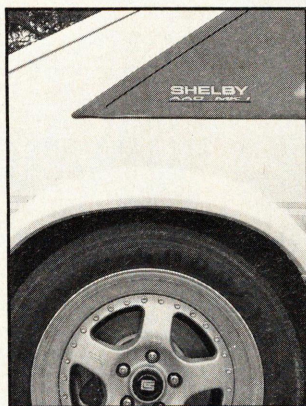
The suspension has been tweaked, but this is not the unsophisticated Saleen spleen-crusher Mustang. It's surprisingly compliant yet definitely stiffer-than-stock. Through uneven corners at speed it'll shy quicker than its four-legged namesake. Hit a bump mid-turn and the tail will come around quickly. It's a handful to drive smoothly through corners as it tends to follow every groove in the pavement. But it's oh-so-satisfying when done properly. And, did we mention it's fast?!

blue-and-white diagonal stripes with interwoven "CS" logos stitched into their backs and also into the leather door panels. At the lower edge of each door there's now a zipper pocket; above and behind there's a leather-wrapped roll bar.

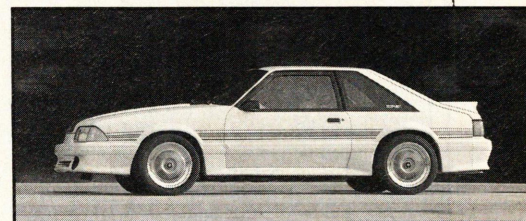
Unlike the original which had only a parcel shelf in back, the 1992 version comes with a rear seat along with a few other modern touches like a Pioneer sound system with trunk-mounted CD changer (production models will have a Ford JBL system), driver-side airbag and cruise control.

Currently the car sports a slightly notchy but very sturdy Hurst shifter. Unfortunately, it may be replaced with a standard gearshift on production versions.

Only 250 Shelby AAC Mk Is will be



Powered by a 295 hp, 302 V8 with Ford SVO's GT40 heads and intake (left), the Shelby AAC Mk I sports official badging (far left), but visual cues of the original remain (below), as does comparable acceleration and straight-line speed (opposite)



trucks, was contracted by SAAC to assemble the cars, which, according to Wagner, have a 70 percent SVO content.

Available in "any color you want as long as it's white with blue stripes," this latest iteration in the Mustang performance pipeline is powered by a dyno-tested 302 V8 with the SVO catalog's GT40 heads and intake and 65 mm throttle body; a package which the SAAC Car Co. claims will generate 295 hp at 5250 rpm and a hefty 334 lb ft of torque at 3750 rpm.

Add a Traction-Lok rear end with optional 3.55 live axle, a centerforce clutch, 2.5-inch stainless steel exhaust with Flowmaster mufflers and ceramic-coated exhaust headers, four-wheel disc brakes with semi-metallic linings and a revised suspension with SVO springs, Koni shocks, five-bolt wheels and 245/50ZR-17 Goodyears, and you wonder why Ford didn't offer a pack-

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Overall, it has a good smooth-road ride, especially considering its performance potential. Kopec reported independent tests show 0-60 in 5.2 seconds, top speed of 155 mph and a quarter-mile time of 13.6 seconds. There's heaps of horsepower and straight-line speed, tires searching for grip off the line, lots of neck wrenching through the gears.

But if any one thing is most reminiscent of the original GT350, it's the noise—engine and exhaust. Cruise the boulevard in fourth gear, keep the revs just below 2500 and the cabin reverberates with the sounds of the '60s. Back off the throttle and the exhaust note changes to a deep, throaty burble.

But all that may change. When the car left *AutoWeek* it was on its way to a noise test. Hopefully it'll pass without modifications.

The interior, available in black only, definitely passes muster, with more leather about than a tack room. The seats have

built. "Fewer than that if we don't get 250 deposits by the September cut-off date," said Kopec. The second version—the Mk II—will be available in a few more (original Shelby) colors but again, no more than 250 per model year will be made.

Cars will carry a standard Ford warranty on all non-modified parts and components. Parts unique to the Shelby AAC Mk I will carry a separate 12-month/12,000-mile SAAC Car Co. warranty. The 12 to 15 dealers nationwide who will sell and service the cars are currently under selection.

And that brings us to the bottom line—its \$39,995 price tag which seems, at the very least, a trifle on the high side. Kopec defended it saying "We decided we'd build the best car we could, regardless of cost. We didn't want to set a price and then have to compromise to meet price parameters."

Arguably, there are a great many cars of late that fall into this price category—everything from a Lotus to a Lexus. But if a trip back through time is in your future, this just could be your starship. ■