

Escape Road

'68½ Ford Cobra Jet: An April Fool's gag for the history books

By Jerry Heasley

Hot Rod magazine, in its March 1968 issue, called the 1968½ Cobra Jet "the fastest running pure stock in the history of man"—the highest praise in the Mustang's performance history. And it was well-deserved praise, too. The '68½ Cobra Jet could turn the quarter-mile in the low- to mid-13s, with street tires. This coupe, owned by Rex Hall of Euless, Texas, clips off consistent 11.5s, with slicks and traction bars, but otherwise is as stock as the day he bought it.

Introduced on April 1, 1968, Ford's Cobra Jet played an April Fool's joke on the NHRA. It had been the trend, up until this date, for manufacturers to rate their engines with a full gross horsepower number. Cubic inches and horsepower ratings sold cars, but escalating insurance premiums were becoming a burden. And, Ford reasoned, even more important was that a "conservative" peak output figure would slide the C.J. down the NHRA classes, giving it an unbeatable edge over the competition. As Hot Rod advised, "If you act fast and get one before a lot of them are floating around, you can go to the local strip and single-handedly make a complete shambles out of the class and the eliminator."

In drag racing, the C.J.'s finest hour came at the 1968 "Winternationals" in Pomona, Calif., where a pair of white 428 C.J. Mustangs surprised the drag-racing world by blowing away the competition in their "Super Stock" class, then going head-to-head in the final elimination run, Cobra Jet vs. Cobra Jet, with Al Joniec defeating Hubert Platt, and setting an NHRA record in the process: 11.49 seconds at 120.6 MPH.

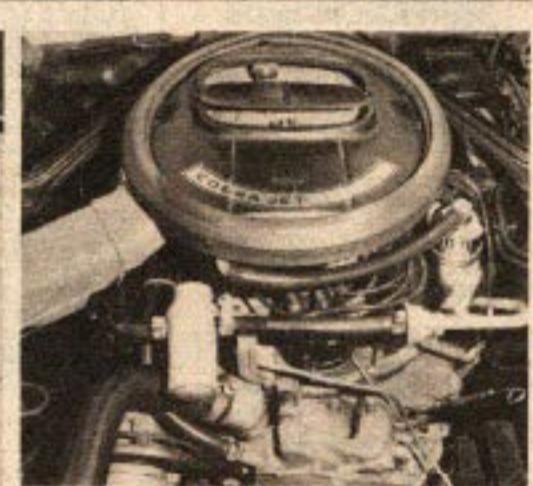
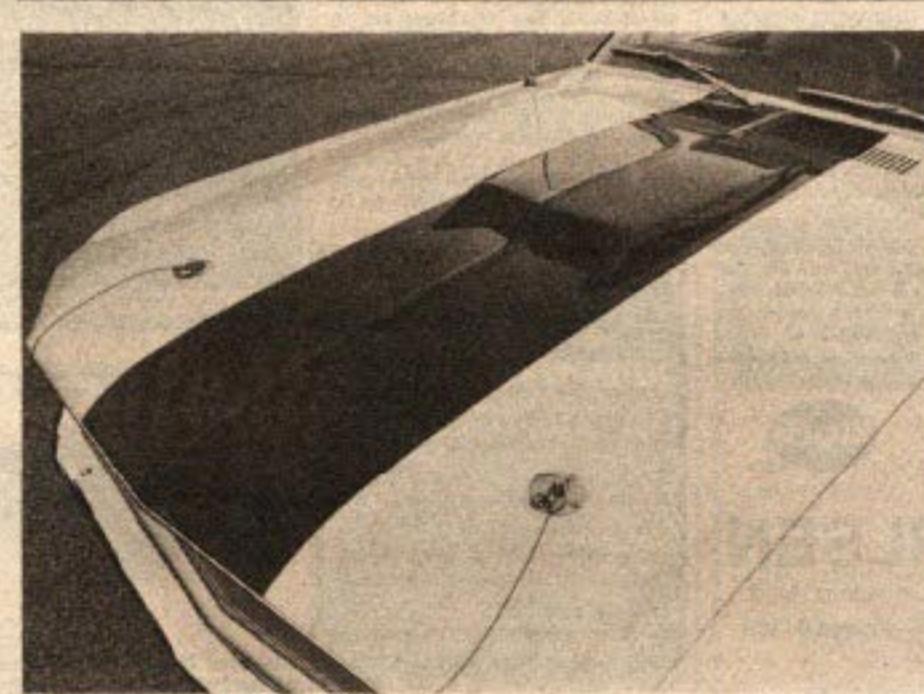
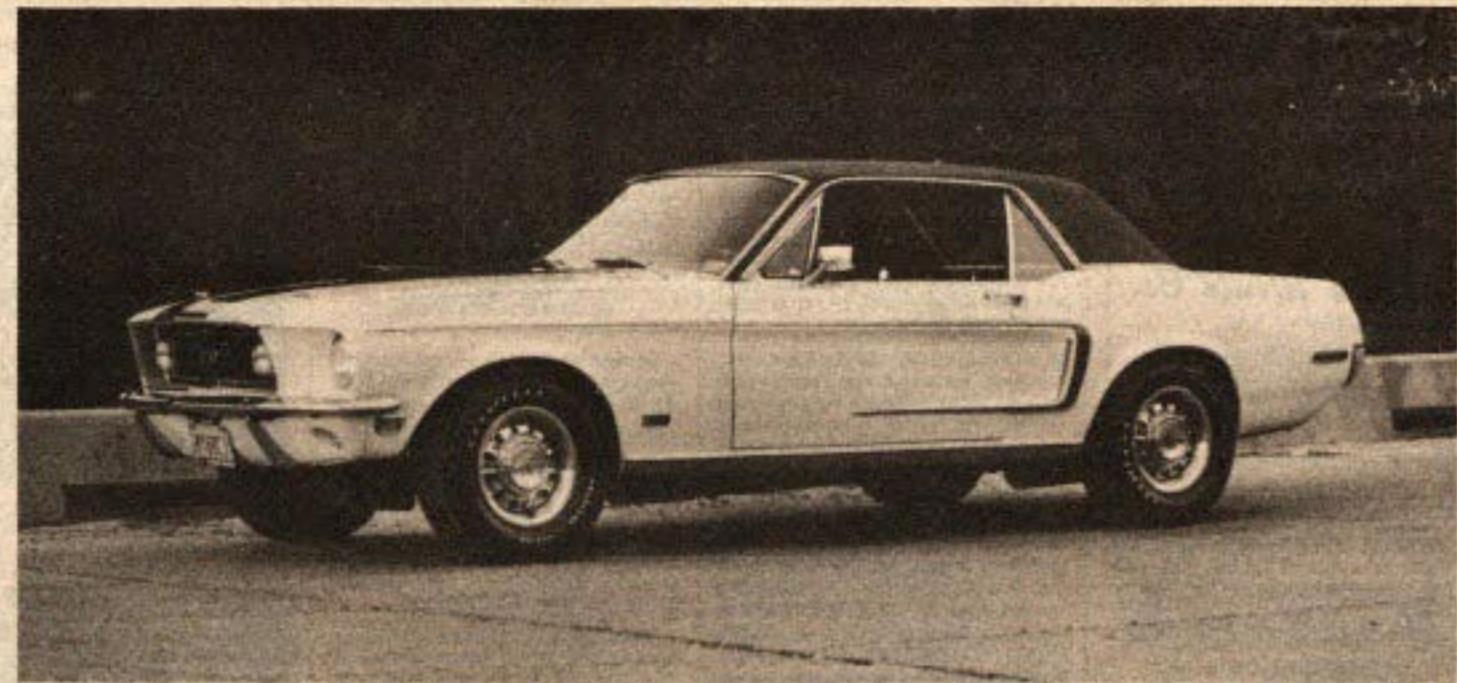
It was a prosperous beginning for Ford's new C.J. big-block, an engine that would be dropped into Mustangs and Cougars, Fairlanes and Comets, Torinos and Montegos. When it hit showrooms, Ford would finally have the vital connection between its victorious racing cars on the track, and its showroom stockers on the street.

The whole idea had begun at Bob Tasca's Ford dealership in Providence, R.I. Tasca, displeased with the performance of Ford's 390 Mustangs and Fairlanes, had put together his own performance big-block, using parts right off his dealership's shelves. In a November 1967 Hot Rod interview, Tasca lamented that the 390 Mustang, and even the new 428 Ford, were not competitive with the 400 Firebird, the GTO, 442 Olds, Buick Special Gran Sport, Plymouth GTX, Dodge R/T or 383 Barracuda.

And it showed in sales too: Out of 634,434 performance vehicles (those with more than 300 HP) sold in the U.S. in '66, Ford had a "shameful" 7.5 percent of the market. So Tasca began offering, through his dealership, stock performance pieces to augment the 390's power. But he didn't stop there. Tasca went ahead and built his own Dearborn "world beater"—the "KR-8," as he called it—using a formula that eventually led to the '68½ Cobra Jet.

He began with a 428 Police Interceptor block, fitted with 1963½ low-riser 427 heads, which immediately cured the 390's major weakness—tiny exhaust valves. Other KR-8 components included a Police Interceptor aluminum intake manifold, the 390 GT cam, a LeMans-type four-barrel Holley, 427 distributor, and 427 Fairlane exhaust manifolds.

The result was a "KR-8" Mustang fastback that blasted through the quarter-mile in 13.39 seconds at 105.5



MPH—with street tires. Tasca took his ideas, and his quick Mustang to Henry Ford II, and with the press from Hot Rod's November 1967 issue, the pressure was on for a new, more muscular Mustang. In fact, that issue contained a ballot that readers could send to Ford, voting yes or no to a new performance Mustang like the KR-8.

With 2,000 positive responses, Ford went to work, and the 428 Cobra Jet, as it was named, was ready for public consumption that auspicious first day of April 1968. Initially, production was very limited, but the popular C.J. would soon be optional in the Mustang GT, the Shelby GT-500 "KR," the Fairlane, plus Mercury's Cougar and Montego.

Ford's C.J. began with a regular production 428 block, same as used for the standard full-size Galaxies, meaning it was plentiful and relatively cheap, unlike the more exotic 427.

From this point, however, Ford outfitted its special Cobra Jet with a bevy of

performance parts, mostly taken from the existing stock, as had Tasca with his KR-8. First, the heads were of 427 low-riser style, but new castings, and with those much-needed larger valves. The 390 GT cam gave the best performance in the low- to mid-range, so it was retained; but instead of the more expensive Police Interceptor aluminum intake, Ford cast an iron copy of it, and matched it to the big-port heads. For durability, connecting rods were larger than the P.I., and the crankshaft, although not a forging, was nodular cast iron, with better grain structure. Resting atop the intake was a 735-CFM Holley, and at the bottom of the engine was a set of new, low-restriction exhausts, which had been engineered especially for this engine, for smooth exit of the burned gases.

Atop the carburetor was Ford's first ram air system, highlighted on the outside of the Mustang GT with a black hood stripe and a long fiberglass scoop.

The suspension was beefed-up, too, to

carry the extra weight and to handle the extra torque of the 428. Shock towers were strengthened up front, and at the rear, Ford staggered the shocks, with the left one mounted behind the rear axle, and the right shock bolted in front of the axle, opposing axle torque on hard acceleration starts.

Every Mustang Cobra Jet had power front disc brakes and the "GT Equipment Group" as standard, which included heavier-duty springs and shocks, plus a larger front stabilizer bar.

Goodyear Polyglas F70x14 tires were introduced on the '68½ C.J., replacing the traditional Firestone Wide Ovals seen on the earlier 390 GTs. They were the best street tires available at the time.

Rex Hall was one of the Ford enthusiasts who read Hot Rod back in 1968, and that's why he walked into a Ford dealership and ordered a brand-new C.J. Total list price would be \$4,069, and Hall would have to pay the full amount to receive the car—no discount. And when his order-form included several dealer-installed performance extras—a medium-riser aluminum intake, eight-quart deep-sump oil pan, heavy-duty oil pump, and 427 dual-point distributor—the warranty was voided right then and there!

But Hall took delivery of perhaps the quickest quarter-mile Mustang that Ford ever built. The 428 C.J. was a favorite in 1969 and 1970, after which it was displaced by the 429 C.J.; but the Mustang grew heavier each succeeding year, and the '68½ C.J. still remains perhaps the fastest running pure stock ever for straight-line, quarter-mile drag racing.