

UNBRIDLED ENTHUSIASM



JIM FRENNAK PHOTOS

"Hey, mind if I take a few pictures?" the passer-by asked, propping up his sunglasses to eye the array of 1994 Mustangs parked outside a mountainside eatery. "I'd like a few bootleg shots to send to the car magazines."

What the young Californian didn't realize was that he stumbled upon the press introduction of the 1994 Mustang in the mountains outside Santa Barbara, and that he was talking to none other than C. John Roberts, Ford's director of North American Automotive Operations public affairs office.

"We're with Ford," Roberts replied as journalists were busy swapping cars for the next leg of the 320-mile ride-and-drive program. "And these folks you see carrying cameras are from the car magazines."

It's not as if we needed any last-minute proof of just what kind of interest there is in the long-awaited redesign of Ford's beloved ponycar. Everyone's well aware that it's been nearly 15 years since an all-new Mustang hit the showrooms. Some doubted it would ever happen at all, at least as a rear-driver. But more on that later.

The Mustang is an icon. After nearly three decades of production with more than 6 million units sold, its name carries an identity of legendary proportions. So it comes as no surprise that the Mustang's rich heritage is not lost on this 1994 model.

Still touting the long hood/short deck proportions of the original

After a 15-year wait, an all-new Mustang arrives with solid credentials, unafraid to battle some bigger guns out on the streets

By John M. Clor



design, the new car's overall look is a contemporary melding of traditional Mustang styling cues over the years. The open-mouthed grille, raised hoodlines, deeply scooped flanks and three-lens (albeit now horizontal) taillamps are all throwbacks to the recurring theme the car carried during its formative years in the '60s.

None of it was by accident. Heavily market-studied since 1989, the '94 Mustang is one of the most researched cars in the company's history. Using members of the more than 450 Mustang clubs worldwide as a base for focus groups, stylists had plenty of input on how to proceed. Discounting one of the three resulting designs

as too soft, too Japanese and another as too radical, they chose the middle ground, a look that was more American and decidedly Mustang, right down to the famed galloping horse logo.

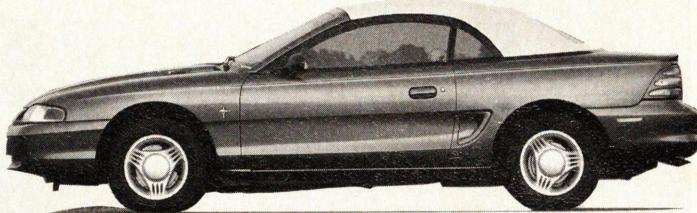
But if there was a major goal for this new car beyond its looks, it was that of a far stronger, more rigid platform, with the emphasis on Noise/Vibration/Harshness improvements and build quality.

And if the prototypes we've driven are any indication of how they'll all be screwed together in Dearborn, we'd say they succeeded. The re-engineering effort can best be appreciated out on the pavement, so we got behind the wheels of the various new models for eight challenging hours of slinging through canyon roads and hurtling along twisting mountain passes. This car has never been known for build quality; the passion a Mustang elicits has owners overlooking many of its shortcomings. But we've driven nearly all of them over the years and can tell you the fit and finish on the '94s is better than any we remember. The redesigned Fox 4 platform has a 101.3-inch wheelbase, nearly an inch longer than the previous car's, with a wider track by about three-and-a-half inches in front and some two inches rear. Overall length has grown two inches, and width three-and-a-half inches. The four-bar rear suspension carries over, with the addition of an antiroll bar standard. Up front the MacPherson strut setup has all new geometry with increased caster for better steering feel and front grip. Larger, four-wheel disc brakes—long at the top of many a Mustang owner's wish list, are now standard, and ABS is finally available as an option.

The increased footprint and wider stance pay dividends during hard driving, offering noticeable improvement in steering re-

of all, there's never been a Mustang convertible this solid: Bending stiffness is almost 70 percent greater, with an 80-percent improvement in torsional rigidity. What's more, a removable custom hardtop option will be available in spring. Ford expects to double ragtop sales—to about 30 percent of the model mix—for '94.

The all-new interior is nothing short of a design triumph. Incor-



sponse and body roll. Together with the stiffer body there's much greater predictability, especially when out at the edge of the car's roadholding ability—a sore spot with the last-generation's V8 versions. This car transfers its weight better, both side-to-side when kicking the tail out under power and fore-aft during hard braking. With such handling improvements ride usually suffers, yet the '94 feels supple over nasty surfaces and far more composed at speed.

The 1994 Mustang is offered in two forms, Coupe and Convertible. Gone for the sake of body integrity is the hatchback model, though the coupes get fold-down pass-through rear seats. Convertible production moves in-house for the first time in two decades. With the ragtop's extra reinforcement being designed-in and built on the same assembly line instead of added on later someplace else, this model shows perhaps the greatest overall improvement.

The power top fits flush to the windshield header and the windshield rake angle is increased, so it's much quieter inside with the top up or down. Folded, the top doesn't protrude like the old model, and the semi-hard boot is easier to install and remove. Best

Striking wraparound interior recalls twin-pod dash theme from the '69 Mustang, though some see influence of early Corvette. Dual airbags are standard. No waiting for still-handsome convertible, among the quietest, most solid Ford's built

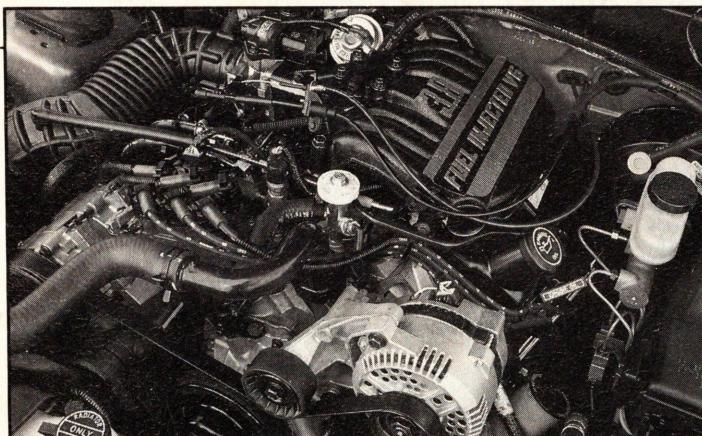
porating a wraparound twin-pod theme, it's a blending of the '69 Mustang dash with the early Corvette. Round dials and rotary switchgear complement each other, with dual airbags standard. A "Mach 460" (460-watt) sound system, CD and—an industry first—new MiniDisc player, are options.

If there's room for improvement here, it's that the seats could use more support and bigger side bolsters, and that the color-keying on the lower dash, especially in white and red interiors, looks sprayed-on instead of molded-in. We were told the interior color is sprayed on, but it would look better left matte black like the rest of the dashboard, regardless of upholstery color.

But if there was a lesson learned in the lackluster years of the '70s, it was that a Mustang can't be all show and no go. Its legend was bred on Shelbys (see "Escape Road," page 48) and Bosses, not on tape-striped, four-cylinder Mustang IIs or ratty GLX convertibles. Hence, when it came time to examine powertrains for the new car, the first order of business was to rid the lineup of the old 2.3-liter four-banger. Ford's 145-hp 3.8-liter V6 best known from Taurus duty got the nod as the new base engine, with extra development needed to mate the T5 Borg Warner five-speed manual.

The key here was not just gaining the smoothness and reliability of a V6, but also its 215 lb ft of torque to push a somewhat larger car that's nearly 300 pounds heavier than last year's base car. The addition of electronic engine controls and an optional AOD-E four-speed automatic transmission helps the V6 nearly match the EPA mileage of the old 2.3. The result is a vastly superior base car.

Of course the 5.0-liter is back, but if you opt for V8 power you must get the GT; there's no more in-between LX model. An intake manifold rework was necessary for the venerable small-block to fit



Ford says upgrade to 145-hp 3.8-liter V6 (left) as base engine will swing majority away from 5.0-liter V8, which gains 10 hp for '94 but falls 60 hp short of GM F-body's 275. Spoiler, twin pipes—not tacked-on ground effects—identify GT (bottom)

beneath the lower hoodline, but with a bonus: 10 more horses were gained (now at 215 hp), meaning the '94s should yield 0-60 mph (mid-sevens) and quarter-mile (high 14s) times nearly identical to the lighter '93s.

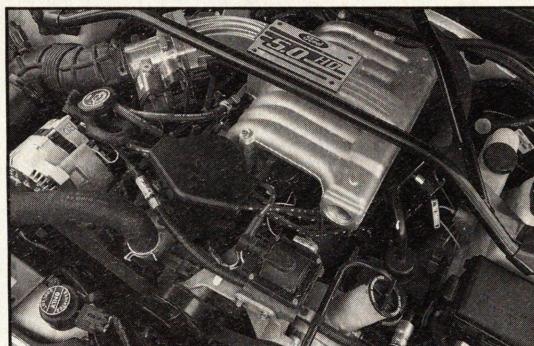
Ford's Special Vehicle Team will have a new Cobra (AW, July 26) ready around the time Mustang celebrates its 30th anniversary April 17, with a convertible version set to pace the Indy 500 (see page 3). But even with the Cobra's 240 or so hp on tap, there's still not enough ponies in the '94 Mustang corral to stay ahead of the herd.

Just as the '94 was finalized, its rivalry with GM re-emerged to cut some enthusiasm off at the pass: The inclusion of the Corvette LT1 powerplant as a 275-hp option in the redesigned '93 Camaro/Firebird is easily the biggest burr under the new Mustang's saddle.

How could Ford introduce a new Mustang and with it not regain the leadership role it recently enjoyed on the street? Ford officials are quick to resurrect the old "almost a Probe" story, noting that the fact there's a new rear-drive model at all is no small feat.

With Ford's corporate philosophy being volume production, it wasn't about to cater to mere niche appeal for the rear-drive Mustang to battle an aging Camaro and a flood of front-drive competition. "Hey, we had Probes running around Dearborn with Mustang badges on them, all set to go," Mustang engineering manager Kurt Achenbach pointed out. But Mustang backers within Ford begged for the chance to re-think the car. Though a decade's worth of production off the same basic tooling had long since amortized much of the cost and gave the car a distinct price/value advantage, sales of 5.0-liters had begun their swing to beyond 60 percent of all Mustangs sold, which wasn't helping Ford's CAFE numbers.

But with a massive outcry from Mustang fans behind them, they



were able to persuade Ford brass to keep it going while a 10-member team was formed to see if the car could be saved. Probe was born in May of '88 and Mustang soldiered on as the same basic car with only a series of performance upgrades to keep it alive.

As it turned out, that was just the ticket. When the 5.0-liter gained a segment-leading 225 hp in '87, Mustang sales peaked at more than 172,000. While that was some 55,000 units better than Camaro, it was still 18,000 less than combined Camaro/Firebird sales. But it was also the last time to this day that Ford's Mustang would trail its pricier, heavier and slower GM counterparts in sales.

As the 5.0-liter Mustang was becoming the performance value of the '80s thanks to its bang-for-the-buck quotient, "Team Mustang" grew from 10 to more than 400 members and SN95 was a go under strict time and budget restraints. Given full freedom to streamline the development process, the \$700-million project was completed in 35 months instead of the usual four years, at a cost savings of nearly 30 percent.

But an industry insider who preferred we not use his name sees another story: "Basically, Team Mustang got caught with its pants down," he said. "It didn't design the car for a more powerful engine simply because it never dreamed GM's F-body team (which he says was known at the Tech Center as 'Beat Mustang') would even dream of using the LT1. Now it has got to play catch-up."

So do we celebrate that there's a new rear-drive Mustang at all, or bemoan the 60-hp deficit it gives up to Camaro/Firebird?

Actually, a little of both. Program manager Mike Zevalkink said the team mission was to build a Mustang with three main attributes: "beauty, power and affordability." Beauty is subjective, and the team believes the 5.0-liter's down-low power best suits the character of the Mustang. That helps with price, which is yet to be determined. Guesstimates put the Mustang below comparable Camaros, around \$13,000 for the base car and \$17,000+ for the GT, which is still a performance bargain by anybody's yardstick.

Job One was Oct. 4, and dealer launch is set for Dec. 9. Ford says it will sell all of the 100,000 or so '94s it can build on pent-up demand alone. But it also knows another horsepower war may be needed to keep interest in the new Mustang riding high. Rumors peg a 320 hp dohc 4.6-liter for a face-lifted Mustang by 1996.

For at least six years now, Mustang was a terrific engine in search of a better car; now it's a better car in search of even more power. With that remedy on the horizon, we prefer to celebrate. ■

