

2001 Roush Stage III Ford Mustang

The best-kept secret no longer

BY LARRY EDSALL



Well-known on racing circuits, Roush Racing is bringing its 360-horsepower Mustang to the streets.

Jack Roush's work for the Big Three has been one of Detroit's most closely guarded secrets. Finally, Roush's engineers get to go public. They're still not sharing any proprietary secrets, but they do get to show off some of their skills as they launch their 360-horsepower Stage III Mustang.

Let's play the word association game. I say, "Jack Roush." You say... well, what you say depends on who you are and especially on what you do for a living.

If you are a motorsports fan, you recognize Jack Roush because of his racing teams—and because of his trademark straw hat. He's "the cat in the hat," as Benny Parsons puts it, the cat whose cars dominated the SCCA's Trans-Am series and claimed 10 consecutive class victories in the 24 Hours of Daytona. But where

Roush's name really has gained national prominence is in NASCAR's Winston Cup series, with Mark Martin and Jeff Burton winning nearly 50 races in Roush-prepared Fords.

But if you work for the Big Three automakers, and especially if you are involved in product development, you know Jack Roush as Detroit's best-kept secret, and you're probably not allowed to respond in public when someone mentions his name. Nobody's supposed to talk about how much work Roush Industries—with its 2000 employees in 50 locations in the United States, Mexico and England—does for the Big Three.

About all Roush's own company can say is that it does "contract engineering, design, development, prototyping and pre-production projects for all of the Big

Three automotive companies" and that it also has electronics and other divisions that do everything from boundary element analysis (NVH control) to producing vibration dampers for hammers and computer hard drives and rebuilding Rolls-Royce Merlin motors for vintage aircraft.

Roush Racing is a huge operation with multiple cars in NASCAR's Winston Cup, Busch and Craftsman Truck series, and it builds engines for various customers (the Oldsmobile engines that won the Indianapolis 500 in two of the last four years were built by Roush). "We also did a weight-reduction program for John Force... for his dragster, not for John," a Roush staffer confides.

Yet as big and as busy as Roush Racing may be, it

accounts for only 30 percent of the Roush Industries' business. And most of that is top secret. Until now.

"I guess we're coming out," Jack Roush says as he sits on the pit wall at Firebird International Raceway in Chandler, Arizona, where Roush's new Performance Products division unveils the Roush Stage III Ford Mustang. Roush has quietly been selling Stage I (appearance package with side exhaust) and Stage II (modified suspension) Mustangs for several years, and also offers a Ford F-150 pickup truck with suspension and exhaust enhancements.

"We've been so careful not to call attention to Roush Industries," adds Evan Lyall, president of the company Roush founded. "We don't even call much attention to Roush Racing," Lyall adds.

"The emphasis there is on the drivers and the sponsors."

Roush Industries has been like an iceberg, keeping most of its business submerged. That won't change, but Roush and his team think there's a niche to fill, one that draws to their strengths in engineering and motorsports. They will build a series of limited-production, high-performance cars.

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"We recognized that we had a great brand, through motorsports and through the credibility of the engineering programs with all of the car companies," Roush says. "It was just a matter of timing, an opportunity to do something that doesn't seem to be competitive [with the work for clients]."

The idea of his own Mustang began a decade ago, when the pony car celebrated its 25th anniversary. Roush made two proposals to Ford for anniversary-edition Mustangs. Ford didn't buy the package, but Roush realized there was a niche market for what he calls the "perform-

ance enthusiast."

But Roush couldn't just rush into the void. "You have to have sufficient volume, a network of dealers and a product that's attractive to customers and not competitive with the manufacturer," he says.

Ford already builds Mustangs in four versions—the base, V6-powered coupe and convertible, the 260-horsepower Mustang GT, the Bullitt Mustang with its enhanced torque and appearance package, and the 320-horsepower SVT Cobra.

Even the \$29,000 Cobra doesn't figure to be competitive with the Roush Stage III, in price or performance. Roush's version comes with an Eaton Model 90 Gen 4 supercharger, an aluminum intake manifold and alterations that combine to

extract 360 hp and 375 lb-ft of torque from the 4.6-liter Ford V8. That's only part of a package that includes an aluminum flywheel (on cars with manual transmissions), suspension modifications, Brembo or Roush-Alcon brakes, 17- or 18-inch aluminum wheels, BFGoodrich tires, special seats and instruments, and an exhaust system with choice of side- or rear-exit pipes.

The basic Stage III package is \$39,500 and includes the supercharged engine, Brembo brakes (with 13-inch front rotors), 17-inch wheels, a high-volume fuel system and front fascia. For \$44,050 you can get the Rally package that adds 18-inch wheels, full suspension modifica-

tions, billet pedals and special gauges. There's also a Premium version, for \$48,975, that includes a full body kit with a rear wing, side exhaust, special seats, Alcon brakes with 14-inch front and 13-inch rear grooved rotors and subframe connectors to stiffen the Mustang convertible's body.

Will anyone pay up to \$50,000 for a Mustang? Roush already has orders (225 Ford dealers have signed up to sell Roush Mustangs) and the company plans to build 750 cars this year, and some 2000 over the time that the current Mustang platform remains in production.

Roush Performance says its Stage III Mustang will compete for the same audience—and at the same level of performance—as the \$46,000 BMW M3, \$48,000 Chevrolet Z06 Corvette, \$50,200 Porsche Boxster S and the \$70,000 Dodge Viper.

Roush Performance says preliminary testing of its Mustang produced a 0-to-60-mph time of 4.9 seconds (5.3 with an automatic transmission), a quarter-mile sprint in 12.7 seconds at more than 109 mph, 60-to-0 braking in 120 feet and skidpad performance of 0.96 g to 0.98 g (with the standard tires; the figure was 1.0 g with prototypes of the BFGoodrich g-Forces that will be available this fall).

On the road course at Firebird, we drove Premium version prototypes (production begins March 15 near Detroit, in a former Fisher Body plant renovated to build the performance vehicles).

The five-speed coupe prototype was powerful, but not brutal. Fast—in fact, very fast—but smooth. Responsive, not harsh. It remained bal-

anced through the curves, settling quickly after being banged over the alligator curbs. The Alcon brakes and BFGoodrich tires allowed for late braking into the turns. The car could be steered with the wheel on entry and with the accelerator pedal on exit.

The convertible prototype had an automatic transmission and wasn't as responsive as the manual model, but the stiffened chassis stayed planted and balanced when pushed through the turns.

Roush's Stage III Mustang is not a typical tuner car. There's nothing cartoonish about the vehicle, and Roush badging will be limited to an insignia on the seatbacks and a small "Roush III" emblem on the car's tail.

Roush engineers bristle if you mention "tuner" around them. This, they say, is an OEM product that carries a standard Ford warranty, though Roush provides the backing for the top end of the engine (because of its intake manifold and supercharger installation).

"No one else could do this," one engineer said, explaining that Roush did full certification of its vehicle, just like a Big Three manufacturer. The car was tested at altitude and in weather extremes on roads in the United States and Mexico and at Ford proving grounds in Michigan and Arizona. The engineers are particularly proud that the Stage III meets federal drive-by noise limits, even with its side-exhaust pipes.

Roush and his team hinted that there could be more such vehicles coming in the future. They plan to launch a Roush owners club at the '01 Woodward Dream Cruise. ■