

Autos

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More Mustang

For 1987, you can choose mild or world-class fast

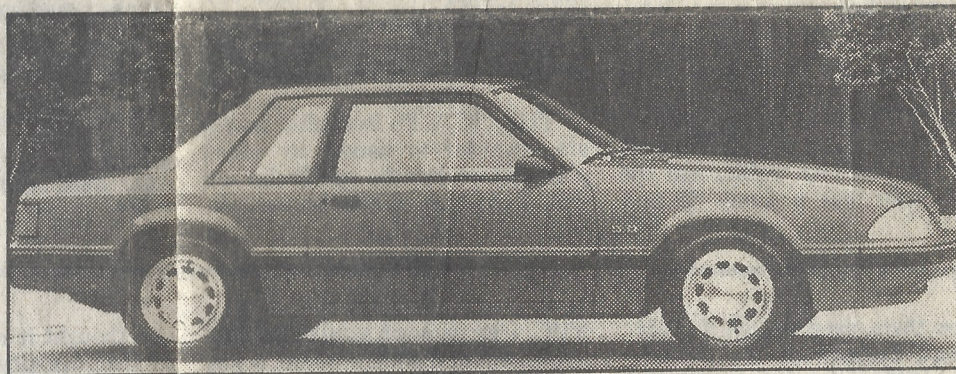
By Gary Witzenburg
News Special Writer

Ford's Mustang is a truly remarkable car.

For starters, it's been around 23 years this April. How many cars can top that? Corvette, Thunderbird, Pontiac Bonneville, Lincoln Continental...perhaps a few others.

In its best year, 1966, Mustang sold 547,500 units. In its worst, 1982 — the year GM launched the Chevy Camaro and Pontiac Firebird — it still scored nearly 120,000. Last year it was up to a healthy 168,000, despite heavy competition from every major domestic and Japanese automaker.

WHEN FORD invented the "ponycar" in April, 1964, the original Mustang was available with four different engines (170-cubic-inch six, 260 V-8, 289 V-8 or high-performance 289 V-8) and in two body styles, hardtop and convertible. A racy fastback model was added and the engine selection expanded that fall. Available power (under the old, very optimistic "gross" horsepower rating system) then ranged from 120 to a tire-frying 306 with four stages in between.



Mustang LX is available as a sedan, hatchback or convertible.

Through the next nine years, the Mustang and its powerplants grew steadily larger, heavier and more muscular. That was until the '74 model year, with the industry facing runaway regulation, skyrocketing insurance rates and a new-found economy consciousness America. Then, the once-mighty Mustang shrank to a four-cylinder-powered, Pinto-based shadow of its former self. The far superior current-generation Mustang replaced it for 1979.

A 1965 Mustang with the 306-hp 289 V-8 engine could be launched from rest to 60 mph in less than seven seconds on what

(by today's standards) were skinny bias-ply tires. It could do a standing quarter mile in about 15 seconds at well over 90 mph. Flat-out, it was good for maybe 120 mph.

Today's 1987 Mustang GT, with 225 more honest net horsepower from 302 cubic inches (5.0 liters) of sequential multi-port fuel-injected V-8, can do 0-60 in 6.7 seconds, sail through the quarter-mile in about 15 seconds at 93-plus mph and top out at nearly 150 mph.

That's world-class fast and without a world-class price: the '87 Mustang GT hatchback with five-speed manual trans-

mission starts at \$12,480, while the GT ragtop goes out the door for a bit over \$16,000.

BY CONTRAST, the rival Camaro IROC-Z hatchback with its optional 5.7-liter 220-hp Corvette V-8 and required automatic transmission lists for around \$15,000.

Then there's the other Mustang, the mild-mannered one. Powered by a 90-hp, 2.3-liter overhead-cam four and starting at just \$8,645, it's a favorite of students and young working types of both genders.

Unfortunately, that's the only other flavor at Ford's Mustang stand for '87. You can have it hot (GT) or cold (LX), but not lukewarm any more; the previously available V-6 has been discontinued.

Fewer than 20 percent of last year's Mustang buyers opted for the V-6, while 25 percent chose V-8 power and more than half (55 percent) settled for the four. Since Ford needed more V-6s for other car lines, (including Thunderbird and Cougar) and because the four-cylinder got a slight performance boost with new electronic fuel injection for '87, the marketers and planners decided they didn't need the V-6 in the Mustang.

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Mustang

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THAT MAY be a mistake, but time will tell.

Like the original, the standard Mustang LX is available in three configurations: coupe, hatchback and convertible. Unlike the '65, it comes with such niceties as gas-preserved rear shocks, power steering and brakes, full instrumentation, dual remote mirrors, interval windshield wipers, a center console, even an AM/FM-stereo radio.

The Mustang's most-obvious change for '87 is its fashionable new face. The hood is longer, and new flush aerodynamic headlamps flank a more understated grille. Round fog lamps, a lower front airdam, full-length rocker panel extensions with simulated air scoops and a unique multi-louvered taillamp

treatment set off the aggressive-looking GT hatchback and convertible models.

The latest GT's styling has been criticized by some as gimmicky and it is. There's just too much stuff hanging all over it. Still, it is distinctive and it looks better in the metal than in photos.

MORE SIGNIFICANT, however, is the Mustang's all new interior. From dash to doors to form-fitting seats, it looks good, feels good and functions well. Controls for the optional power windows and door locks are fingertip handy on the driver's door armrest, the power mirror adjuster lives on the center console and most other important switches are on convenient pods at both ends of the shaded instrument binnacle. Cruise controls are thumb buttons on the steering wheel spokes. Climate controls are three Taurus-type rotary dials.

I was surprised to find no open storage bins in either the door panels or the console — a very un-Ford-like omission. The hatchback's wide rear roof pillars made for bothersome blind spots in city traffic, and the speedometer was a dumb 85-mph

unit left over from the Carter/Claybrook regime. The otherwise excellent premium stereo had no station "scan" function, its volume control was the stepped-type and its lowest step was sometimes too loud.

The '87 GT's 5.0-liter "H.O. Plus" V-8 engine gains a full 25 hp over last year's 200, largely due to cylinder head improvements that allow it to breathe more freely. It's available with standard five-speed manual or optional four-speed automatic transmission, both smooth in operation and suitably beefed to take the engine's hefty 300 pound-feet of stump-pulling torque.

While Mustang GTs in recent years have been known more for brute power than handling finesse when the road turns twisty, the '87s suspension and big Goodyear "gatorback" tires — though a trifle stiff on rough surfaces — can handle anything a skilled driver can dish out. The car sticks to the road like a burr to a hound, with none of the previous front-end "push" under pressure.

THE '87 GT's front disc brakes are upgraded to handle its added performance, but the rear brakes are still drum-type. GM's hottest IR-

OC-Zs and Trans Ams boast four-wheel discs for better fade resistance and stopping power, which is one reason they're more expensive. In fairness, though, they are heavier cars and equally able to heat their brakes with a little hard use.

Nevertheless, Ford's Mustang remains a breath of fresh air even eight model years after its last major redesign. With the addition of the hot GT for 1982, revival of the convertible for '83 and a program of continuous improvement, it's been made better and more appealing every year. And now its last two major weaknesses — cheap interior and front-heavy handling — have been nicely eliminated.

The V-6 Mustang may be gone, but the four-cylinder LX is reasonably equipped and adequately powered for fun-lovers on a budget, while the GT honestly evokes the best serious muscle cars of the past and, in most ways, surpasses them.

Either way, it's one of the best fun-car bargains on wheels.

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AMC

How will firm survive without its daily crisis?

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Then the new generation of Jeep Cherokee and Wagoneer came along, and they managed somehow to be better in many respects than sport-utility trucks made by Ford and GM.

In good times, Jeep formed a solid core of profitability and value. But more than many other vehicles, Jeep

goes on there, even though its vehicles and dealerships will remain highly visible.

In short, AMC won't be as interesting as it used to be.

Can it be daring and feisty when it becomes the fourth vehicle division of a much larger car company, a comparative giant where battles are won by infighting and bureaucratic spadework? Will Jeep lose the rough edge that its buyers liked?

ALL OF this remains to be seen. But we've already witnessed the miracle of AMC's ongoing existence, and perhaps we should just try to reflect on some of the difficulties that were involved in that.

AMC's biggest historical problem

AMC, with its much smaller production base, lost a point of share, it was a disaster, robbing the company of the resources it needed to continue planning and investing.

AMC recognized this, of course,

Nash

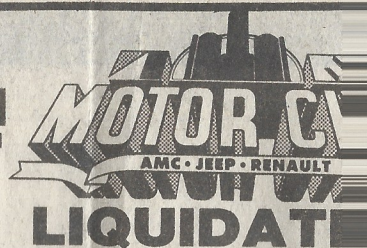
The spirit has outlived several changes before

and thought it had arranged an end to that one-sided struggle when it formed its Renault partnership. Soon, all of those may be gone — AMC, the partnership and the struggle.

acquire an image of stodginess, dull, unexciting and not suited for the youth of America. (Or, more importantly, for middle-aged folk who would be young.)

This happened despite the fact that in 1958 at least one enthusiast magazine discovered to everyone's shock and disgust that the Rambler V-8 was the fastest car in America and, a decade later, the astonishingly

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