

The Last of a Fast Triumvirate

Fairlane Cobra CJ

by Joe Oldham

THAT ROAD RUNNER really started something, didn't it? The Road Runner started the "economy supercar" thing in much the same way that the GTO started the whole concept of the supercar itself.

Or, maybe cars in this category shouldn't really be called economy supercars, because when you finish adding up the price tag, especially after you add all the options you want, there's not much "economy" left.

Maybe we could call them specialty supercars. In this category, you'd have to include the Road Runner, the Super Bee, the GTO/Judge and the Fairlane Cobra.

To be a specialty supercar, you have to offer, as standard equipment, a big powerful engine, real heavy duty suspension, wide tread tires, plenty of identification emblems and trim items and most of the time, a bench seat interior and 4-speed transmission.

Ford's new-for-'69 Fairlane Cobra is a perfect example of a specialty supercar.

The loaded version of Ford's economy performer was quite a surprise; fun but not fast.

It comes with things like the non-Ram Air 428 Cobra Jet engine, 4-speed transmission, bench seat interior, heavy duty suspension, styled steel wheels, fiberglass belted wide tread tires, "Cobra" emblems all over the place, NASCAR hood pins and a non-functional hood scoop. A really groovy package.

We wanted to test a standard run-of-the-mill Fairlane Cobra just like the one we've just described. Unfortunately, there wasn't a car like this available. The only Cobra that was available was a loaded fastback that had all kinds of non-standard items in it.

This is the way our test car stacked up: Ram Air 428 Cobra Jet engine, 3-speed SelectShift automatic, 3.50 rear axle ratio with Traction Lok limited slip differential, bucket seats, console, AM radio, power steering, power front disc brakes, wood steering wheel with rim-blow horn, tachometer and tinted glass in addition to the normal Fairlane and Cobra equipment.

Some of the things we liked—like the Ram Air engine with its functional hood scoop—and some of the things we didn't like—like the 6000 rpm tach which ran out of numbers before the engine ran out of revs.

Optioned out the way it was, our Cobra really surprised us. We expected a real rocking wailer, a car that could cut it in street bashes as well as make it to the trophy stand in its class at the dragstrip.

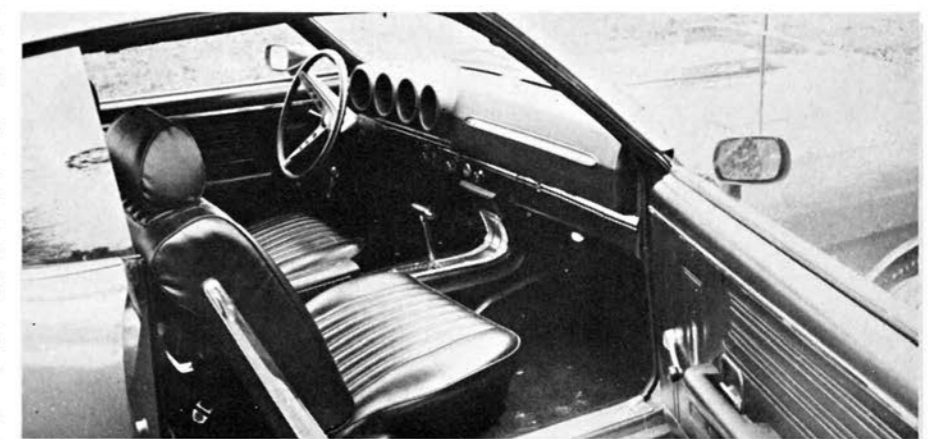
Our car did neither. What it was, though, was an outstanding road car, a car in the Grand Touring tradition, a car that was capable of transporting us and a couple of people with our luggage over long distances in a very fast, comfortable manner.

We made a couple of long trips with our Cobra, one up through western New York and Canada, and another along the eastern seaboard. On both trips, the Cobra moved us along at a very brisk pace, indeed. We were able to cover 750 miles a day with no sweat or strain at the end of the day.

On one stretch of highway in Canada—Route 401, the MacDonald-Cartier Highway—we could cruise at 95-100 mph in complete comfort and safety. The heavy duty suspension kept the car stable even at these high speeds. The power front disc brakes made stopping safe from any speed. And the fiberglass belted tires prevented heat build-up during the period of our fast cruising so that we never had to worry about blowouts.

The tires also gave us peace of mind in the rain. And it rained plenty during our test period. The Goodyear Polyglas tires were F70-14s and they gripped well even in hard downpours and through deep puddles. The tires never aquaplaned on us as some people have stated that the Polyglas tires do. On damp ground, though, we found the fiberglass belted rubber to be rather unpredictable. They broke loose a couple of times on us very quickly and without warning. It was very unnerving, to say the least. On dry pavement, though, and for turnpike driving, the tires performed excellently.

FEBRUARY 1969



TOP—Bird's eye view of the cold air intake flap atop the 428 CJ hummer. 335 horsepower motor is strangled by smog controls. ABOVE—All-vinyl interior, complete with head rests, comes as an option with the Fairlane Cobra. If you aren't too short or too tall, the seats will fit just right. The SelectShift transmission responded quickly and positively every time. BELOW—On corners, with use of the throttle, the car comes around to almost neutral. The CJ really excelled on the highway with its 3.50 gear.



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ABOVE LEFT—Zazz! Take heed, birds, the snake may just do it to ya. ABOVE RIGHT—The Goodyear Polyglas rubber gripped well except in damp weather. In the wet and dry, they were above average. ABOVE—The functional scoop and hood pins come standard.

Turnpike driving is a real blast with the Cobra, especially if you have the functional Ram Air setup. Say you're cruising along at 60 and you want to pass. Here's the procedure. First, check your left racing mirror. OK, no one's coming. Put on your left directional. Pull out into the left lane and check ahead. All clear.

Now, floor it. Bang! Zoom! Waaaahhh-HHH! So many things happen at once that it's hard to keep track. First of all, the automatic transmission downshifts into second gear. And at 60 mph, the 428 cubic inches of Cobra Jet engine is producing enough torque to push you back into the seat so hard that you feel like someone just hit you in the chest with a medicine ball. Then when the downshift comes, forget it. There's not much you can do to lift yourself away from the seat.

Of course by this time, all four throats of the 735 Holley carb are yawning wide and the engine is starting to wind out.

But a split second after the rearbarrels open, there's a second lunge forward when the air cleaner flap opens up to let all that nice cool air in.

Top end power? Unreal. Enough to push you to at least 125 with the fast-back roof and the 3.50 gears. At least that's where we quit. The engine still had revs left though so who knows how fast it will go. We weren't about to find out on a public highway.

As we told you before, our whole test period was hampered by one of the wettest Decembers on record for the eastern seaboard. The one thing we were thankful for was that it wasn't snow. Then, the test would have been off completely. As it was, our Fairlane Cobra had to work a little harder out on the ride and handling course.

All Cobras come stock with one of the best suspensions we've come across. It's not the stiffest, just one of the best. Sort of proves something about suspension

SPECIFICATIONS

Ford Fairlane Cobra

ENGINE

Type.....OHV V-8
 Displacement.....428 cubic inches
 Compression Ratio.....10.6-to-1
 Carburetion.....Holley 4-barrel, 735 cfm
 Camshaft.....Hydraulic, 270/290 degrees duration, intake/exhaust
 Horsepower.....335 at 5200 rpm
 Torque.....440 at 3400 rpm
 Exhaust.....Stock cast iron headers
 Ignition.....Stock, single point

TRANSMISSION

Type.....SelectShift C-6 automatic
 Control.....Console-mounted

REAR END

Type.....HD Traction Lok
 Ratio.....3.50

BRAKES

Front.....11.3-inch power assisted discs
 Rear.....10.0-inch power assisted drums

SUSPENSION

Front.....Independent, HD coil springs, HD shocks, HD stabilizer bar
 Rear.....Rigid axle, HD leaf springs, HD shocks
 Steering.....Power, 21.6-to-1 ratio
 Tires.....Goodyear Polyglas, F70-14

GENERAL

Weight.....3620 pounds
 Wheelbase.....116 inches
 Overall length.....201 inches

PERFORMANCE

0 to 30 mph.....3.4 seconds
 0 to 60 mph.....7.0 seconds
 Standing start, 1/4-mile.....101 mph
 Elapsed time.....14.82 seconds
 Top speed (est.).....125 mph
 Fuel consumption.....9-11 mpg

stiffness in relation to handling qualities.

The package on Cobras is called the "Competition Suspension Package" by Ford. We don't know if we'd want to go this far, but it does do the job for basically a street machine. The package includes extra high rate springs and shocks all around plus a 1-inch stabilizer bar in front. On stick shift cars, it also includes a special rear shock layout that puts one shock ahead of the axle and one shock behind the axle. Does a lot to control wheelhop as big-inch Camaro and Firebird owners have been finding out for a year.

Ford engineers concluded that cars with automatic transmission don't need the staggered shocks. We'll have to admit that we never got any wheelhop with our car, but we didn't have wild rear gears and we never had the car at the strip with slicks or with any tire that really dug in coming off the line. So we'll have to wait and see if Ford's engineers are right.

Back to the handling. Our car handled even in the rain. We could push it on our road course and the car could be driven through with little or no dramatics necessary for fast lap times. The car is a basic understeerer. On fast curves, and with judicious use of the throttle, it comes around to almost neutral. The torque is pretty well controlled by the numerically low 3.50 gearing so that you really

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have to go wild to induce power oversteer. On wet roads, it's easy. On dry roads, it's hard.

For a heavy duty suspension, the package fitted to our Cobra was one of the most comfortable we've experienced. The shocks were very slightly on the soft side, but not enough to hinder the handling. Just enough to make the car ride well. We don't like soft-riding cars and the Cobra felt just about perfect according to our pants seat.

We saved the worst for last. Our Cobra was a dog at the dragstrip. For a car that's powered by a 428 cubic inch high performance engine and looks like a cross between a NASCAR stocker and a drag class record holder, the car just didn't make it. It wasn't the slowest car we've ever taken through the quarter, but we've certainly recorded better times than 14.82-101 mph which was the best our Cobra could deliver. No amount of trick stuff, like coming off at different rpms, changing front and rear tire pressures and loosening the accessory drive belts did any good. Neither did changing shift points.

We found that the best method for getting out of the hole was to rev up on the line to about 2500 rpm with the brakes locked. This broke the rear tires loose and started them spinning slightly even before the car moved. Then on the green, we just floored it. The tires really broke then, but surprisingly, this was the only way to get a clean start and we recorded our best et's this way.

Coming off at an idle only raised the et's and so did trying to ease out. It's unusual for a car to record best et's by burning out hard but that's what happened with the Cobra. Throwing manual shifts with the SelectShift 3-speed auto didn't do much either. Leaving the stick in Drive gave us 5500 rpm shift points and our best times. The engine would rev higher than the 5500 but it just didn't produce much power above that.

The stock tach is nice and visible and built right into the dash in the Cobra. But it doesn't have a redline. The speedometer does. No, we're not kidding you. Also, the tach only goes to 6000 rpm and while it doesn't give you any better times to rev over this, the engine *can* rev higher and it would be nice to know how high.

The culprit of our bad times was the rear axle gearing. While the 3.50's make a beautiful highway tourer out of the Cobra, they all but emasculate it at the dragstrip. Optional are 3.91 and 4.30 ratios, either of which would probably drop our et's by a half-second.

The 428 Cobra Jet doesn't produce that much torque under 3000 rpm so it needs a high numerical axle ratio to multiply what torque it does put out at low revs. We think the 3.91 ratio should be standard with this engine and have the 3.50s

and 4.30s as optional.

Frankly, we don't think our et's would have been improved if we had the stock 4-speed stick. The SelectShift C-6 is a good trans and the shifts are quick and positive. Just as fast as a stick, in our opinion. Miles per hour may have been up slightly with the 4-speed due to less slippage.

The interior of our Fairlane Cobra was first cabin all the way. It should be. It's the same interior you get when you order the premium priced Torino GT. Standard interior for Cobras is a cloth-and-vinyl bench seat. Our test car had all-black vinyl buckets with a center console for the shift lever. This is a \$140 option for all Cobras and worth it, we think. The buckets are mucho comfortable but don't give as much side support as we'd like.

The dash layout is good with the inadequate tach right next to the speedometer. However, the only other gauge is fuel level. And to top it off, there's a big blank round housing in the dash. On a car packing 428 inches, we think a full complement of gauges should be standard equipment.

Styling is something very personal. Our test car was the fastback model and it was painted a beautiful shade of rust brown. With the black interior, hood pins, big scoop, mag wheels and fat black tires, there's no doubt that our Cobra turned a few heads. But frankly, we don't think the fastback roof makes it on a car with a 116-inch wheelbase. We think the car would be out of sight with the regular two door hardtop body.

One thing we're thankful for—Ford has decided *not* to use the ugly huge coiled snake decals on the front fenders of all Cobras. Instead, they use the tasteful emblems that used to be on the Shelby Cobras. By the way, the decals come in the glove compartment when you order a Cobra so that you *can* put them on if that's your bag.

If you really want to have a honkin' Cobra, one that's guaranteed to eat birds for breakfast (as they say in the ads), opt for the racing 427 engine that's been detuned to 390 horsepower for street use. This is a horse of another color, a completely different engine from the 428. The 427 traces its heritage back to every Ford racing triumph for the last few years. For street use, they've stuffed in a hydraulic cam and tacked on one 4-barrel carb. But it's still a thumper.

If you'll remember back to the early days of the 1968 model run, Ford introduced the street 427 for Fairlanes and Mustangs. But the strike knocked the engine out of the option list. When the 428 Cobra Jet came along, everyone sort of forgot about the strong 427. It's back.

Ford isn't advertising the fact that you can order this engine because it is expensive. But if you've got to have the fastest set of wheels on the block, try the 427.

And while you're at it, don't forget to order the super heavy duty 85-amp battery mounted in the trunk over the right rear wheel. Does wonders for traction when you go shopping in your Fairlane Cobra. ■

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