THE BEST CARS OF 1969

Best Ponycar

MUSTANG MACH 1

PHOTO BY GORDON CHITTENDEN

THE FIRST GREAT Mustang, boomed the cover for the test of the Mach 1 with 428-cid Cobra Jet engine, and it was that. The Mustang began as a high-style Falcon. Instant sales success, but not quite the zoomer that it looked to be. Then on to the hotter versions straight from the factory, and the rough and rumbling Shelbys, improvements, but still not really racers (or too much so).

But arrived the Mach 1. It was right on target. As the best argument, it was the quickest Mustang ever, and the quickest Ponycar we've tested this or any year. Fine brakes in what has become a Ford tradition. Skilled selection of springs and shocks, to keep the inevitable understeer at bay until speeds that would send any road car off the road, no matter what the weight balance.

The power came from an engine that's been around for years, in several forms. The factory says it's gone as far as it will go, and that the 428 will be phased out, for the newer, and theoretically stronger, 429. Puts one in mind of the old flathead Ford. For years after production stopped, and while the books all said that overhead valves work better, the flatheads kept winning races. Lots of power now beats more power than that when everything works right, every time. We may be sorry to see the 428 go. To think we never appreciated it before now.

The power comes via a new set of cylinder heads and cold air fed through an air cleaner that sticks into the atmosphere through a hole in the hood. Camshaft timing is mild, and the carburetor isn't overly big, so the Mach 1 trundled around town with only a low growl giving clues to the keen of ear. With the big tires that come with the Mach 1 option, the engine could be loaded against the brakes and it would leap from the line on green. Three testers drove it for the tests. Best E.T. was 13.86 sec., and the third man, who is low man on the totem pole and runs the clocks most days, got a 13.96, on the first time he'd ever been behind the Mach 1's wheel. That quick, that easy, is hard to fault.

For the handling description of the Mach 1, we introduced the British system of tenths, with ten-tenths the maximum speed a given car can be driven on a given piece of pavement, and two-tenths being the speed that a bumbler in command of, say, a sled, would cover the same ground. As a racing car, the Mach 1 has limitations. Pushed to the limit, front end weight took over. But at seven-tenths, the rate a skilled driver would go on a public road because it's fun to drive, the Mach 1 was fine. Good cornering power and response. The car always let the driver know what was happening to those four patches of rubber beneath. It was quiet and the ride wasn't harsh. A good touring car, the sort of car that up to now only went flashing past on mountain roads in the ads.

Ford designs cars for the people that buy them. The interiors of the bigger, more expensive Fords get more elaborate than we like, with more attention seemingly paid to form than function. The Mach 1 is for driving. The high-backed seats were shaped for all the testers, whose physiques vary more than politeness allows us to admit, and the controls were where we expected them to be. Rear vision was limited, and sometimes luggage rode in the back seat, but that just puts the fastback Mustang even with the competition.

About the competition. CAR LIFE is strong for Ponycars. During the 1969 model year, we tested one of almost every Ponycar on the market. Four Mustangs, counting the Mach 1; Camaro with big and little engine; Barracuda likewise; and a driving impression of a Firebird with the hottest 400-cid engine offered and of a Javelin on some high-speed research on spoilers in the desert.

At best, the others delivered what they promised. The Camaro Z/28 and Boss 302 are supposed to be street versions of Trans-Am racers. They are, with engine size limited by the rules, so that they lose displacement without losing weight. Both are fast for their displacement, but cubic inches still rule. Both handle well, and the ride is a series of jolts if the pavement is at all rough. The Firebird had a good street suspension, and a strong engine. Handling approached that of the Mach 1, and the ride was as good; but it wasn't as quick. The 340 'Cuda had an edge in handling, but was nowhere near as fast. And while the installation of the 440-cid V-8 cut valuable time off the 'Cuda acceleration figures, the big engine pushed the normally balanced Barracuda into habitual understeer. We don't think the added power was worth it. The Camaro with 396 was the low point. Good engine and other components, but the rear suspension isn't up to it.

The Boss 429, in ball-and-stick terms, is a wait 'til next year. Altering the front suspension so the engine compartment is wide enough for the massive 429 engine took care of the Mach 1's understeer at ten-tenths. Swell, but neither you nor we ought to be out in public at ten-tenths. The Boss 429 engine, for about $750 more than the 428, didn't produce the power we expected. We'll look at it again, but for 1969, the 428 did more for less.

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase, in.	108
Overall length in.	187
width	71.8
height	50.3
No. of passengers	4
Price, basic	$3122
as tested	$4139
Frame type: Unitized.	
Front suspension: Independent by s.l.a., drag strut, ball joints, coil springs, telescopic shock absorbers.	
Rear suspension: Hotchkiss live axle, semi-elliptical rear springs, telescopic shock absorbers.	
Steering: Linkage assist, recirculating ball gear, parallelogram linkage behind wheels.	
overall ratio	20.3:1
turns, lock to lock	4
turning circle, ft. curb-curb	38
Curb weight	3420
Tires: Goodyear Polyglas F70-14.	
Brakes: Assisted disc front/drum rear.	
dia. x width, F/R front rotor	11.3 x 2.2
rear drum	10.0 x 2.5
total swept area, sq. in.	232
Engine: V-8	
Bore x stroke, in.	4.13 x 3.98
Displacement, cu. in.	428
Compression ratio	10.2:1
Rated bhp @ rpm	335 @ 5200
Transmission: Three-speed automatic with torque converter.	
Gear ratio 3rd (1.00:1) overall	3.50:1
2nd (1.46:1)	5.11:1
1st (2.46:1)	8.62:1
Lb./bhp (test weight)	11.1
Mph/1000 rpm (high gear)	19.35
Engine revs/mile (60 mph)	3100
Piston travel, ft./mile	2580
CAR LIFE Wear Index	63.7

ROAD TEST RESULTS

Speedometer reading @ 30 mph	37.8
Speedometer reading @ 60 mph	66.2
Top Speed (6000)	121
Acceleration 0-30 mph, sec.	2.6
0-40 mph	3.4
0-50 mph	4.4
0-60 mph	5.5
0-70 mph	6.9
0-80 mph	8.4
Standing ¼ mile, sec.	13.90
Speed at end, mph	103.32
Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.	4.3
Braking: Maximum deceleration rate ft./sec./sec.	29
No. of stops from 80 mph (at 60-sec. intervals) before 20% loss in deceleration rate	7
Control loss: Slight.	
performance	very good
Fuel consumption under test conditions, mpg	8.1
Normal cond., mpg	9-12