

BUT, TED . . . IT'S A MACH I!

(or how not to buy a car)

by Cheryl Ann Abelson

I have a long history of being one of those people who learn by their mistakes. I am sitting here, surrounded by nuts, bolts and scraps of metal, waiting for the day when the mistakes stop and the learning begins.

I've had a love affair going with the Mustang Mach I ever since my first one was stolen and stripped in 1973. It was a green and black '69 model, clean in and out. I was fresh out of business college and wanted something that would show my new-found independence. With my first paycheck in hand, I hit the bank for a car loan and traded in my '67 Impala for the '69 Mach I.

What an ego trip that started! I felt like I owned the world in that car. When I married Ted in 1973, and took my little green pony from Ohio to New York, I had no idea of what was yet to come. We lived with his parents for a few weeks, with my wedding dress tucked into a closet and the Mustang safely parked in their back yard. When we finally found our first apartment, it had big closets, a cute patio, and no place to park the car. Having relegated the 'Stang to New York City street parking. I tried to console myself by saying, 'Who would want a 4-year-old Mach I, anyway? You've probably guessed how this street duty turned out: by next morning the car was gone and I was walking the neighborhood asking people if they had seen a little green car go by.

Twelve years and three kids later, I finally decided that I needed a Mustang in my life again. With typical impatience I talked Ted into looking at cars I'd circled in the local classifieds. He was a sport about it, lugging tool boxes, flashlights, and me all over the city looking for the perfect car. I had in mind a '69 Mach I (what else?) for \$300 - \$400. You know, something I could rescue from oblivion and learn to love.

I hadn't kept up with the Mustang trends after loosing the '69, and so I didn't know what I was reading about in those classified ads. I knew I didn't

like the new Mustangs — they should have given them another name — but what year would be right? Needless to say, I didn't find the \$400 Mach I, so after several flashlight inspections, we settled on a cute little '75 Mustang II. It was about the size of the car I remembered so fondly, and was good and clean. The price was a little more than I had wanted to spend, but I wanted a Mustang NOW. I was tired of looking. Ted's flashlight batteries were running out, and this little blue car would have to do.

Number one lesson learned — don't buy a car you've only seen at night. That may sound very basic, but when you work from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. that leaves very little time for looking at cars during daylight hours. I had been assured that the Mustang II had 'only been driven by Aunt Ruth for church on Sundays' (sound familiar?) and 'Oh, yeah, she sideswiped somebody . . . I guess.' The passenger side of the car was one long smear of metal and paint. The car had been repainted, including a fine mist of metallic blue over the entire engine. The steering wheel was bent (wonder how that happened?) and the hatchback wouldn't hatch. To make a long, long, story short, she also needed new shocks, new coil springs, new exhaust system, new fan clutch, new starter, etc., etc.

By the end of that first year together, I was regretting my reunion with Mustangs. Everytime I looked at the car I saw a blue and primer shark just waiting till I got on the highway to drop a muffler or break a piston. It was definitely time to try again.

This time I was prepared. I'd found a copy of *Mustang Monthly* and started learning something about Mustangs — the real ones. Ted heard me calling numbers from the classifieds again and patiently dug out his tools and flashlight. I told him to relax, 'I'm not in a hurry. We can look on Sundays, in good weather.'

My quest for a new car started on

Friday, and by Saturday night we were out looking at a '72 fastback — by flashlight. Luckily it was so bad that even darkness couldn't make it look worth while. We passed on that one. Monday night we looked at a '73 coupe with 'minimal front-end damage.' The car would have to be towed. Pass. The batteries were getting low, and so was Ted's patience. I figured I'd better make a daylight appointment next. Sunday afternoon we drove for an hour or so to look at a '73 coupe. I was determined to remember all the 'tips' I'd learned. Check for accident damage, check the ID plate on the driver's door, see how much work the interior needs, let Ted check the engine and underneath.

The car looked good, pale blue, no dents, a few small rust spots. The interior was clean except for the headliner; that would have to be replaced. Ted said the engine was good for a car with 121,000 miles, and it looked tight underneath. It probably needed a brake job, too. I wasn't shot with the profile; I was still yearning for a fastback, but after looking for two weeks and not finding anything, I was ready to compromise. At least it was a real Mustang. We drove home to think about it, and a week later drove back to pick it up.

You never know how thorough your original inspection has been until you've handed over the cash and the car is all yours. During the drive home we discovered that it had been in an accident somewhere along the way; the driver's door and fender were replacements, as well as the windshield. The bad muffler turned out to be a whole new exhaust system. The brakes didn't need any work at all — they were stiff because they were manual brakes (who remembers manual brakes?). At least I could look at this car without comparing it to a leering shark, but it wasn't a Mach I.

Three days later I found an ad in the paper (I know I wasn't supposed to be looking . . .) '1970 Mustang Mark I,

body good, needs interior, \$500 or best offer.' MY CAR! The dumb owner didn't even know it was a Mach I, not a Mark 1. Probably figured he had the original Lincoln. I envisioned a red fastback with pristine paint, good tires, great engine, maybe needing a little TLC on the interior. I still had some money left from selling the Mustang II. We could buy the Mach I, keep it in the garage and teach the boys how to work on a car.

Ted was convinced I was nuts by now, so he just grabbed the flashlight and followed me out the door. An hour later we were looking at the saddest little Mach I in the world. The 'good body' consisted of a 1970 rear-end made of Bondo attached to a 1969 nose. The whole mess had been sprayed primer gray, right over tape stripes, rust and dents. The trunk wouldn't open, the hood was held on by one bolt on one hinge, and the fenders flapped in the wind. The driver's door was a replacement from a '69 coupe, so the window wouldn't shut.

the steering wheel was broken and the back seat was missing; the car had been stripped for light-weight street racing. Perhaps worst of all, the interior was covered with fake-fur bathroom carpeting, held in place by 3" nails! The dash had a hole punched in it for a digital clock the size of most color TVs, the door panels were gone, and the seats were ripped. Actually the only things in good shape were the headliner, the shaker scoop and the hood.

We offered \$300 and never expected to hear from them again. Consequently, I was suprised and a bit leary when they called and asked us to get the car out of their driveway. It was ours! The headaches had just begun.

We drove it home at 15 mph. My brave little sports car could barely move. The brakes didn't work, the radiator overheated, and the steering pulled to the left. The hood would have taken off as we passed Kennedy Airport if we hadn't tied it down first.

We've worked on the car twice since

bringing it home. By flashlight of course; the garage doesn't have electricity yet. We removed the door and fender and found crumbling shock towers that will never see the road again. We removed the hood and found that stress had warped the inside fender aprons permanently. Taking off the '69 nose left us with front end damage.

Now I sit with pieces of my dream-car surrounding me. Is it worth it? I'm not rich, and this is going to take megabucks to repair, if it can be done at all. On the other hand, Ted owns a parts store, and that should help. He knows how to do the engine work and I can do the interior. But do I really want to spend the next five years of my life in a garage? The answer is 'YES!', but I'd better stock up on flashlight batteries first!

(Ed. note — Cheryl and Ted eventually used the Mach I for parts but later purchased 3 Mach I's. They have finally settled on one that has an excellent body but needs an engine. Cheryl stated, "I guess you can't have it all!")



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