

THE 1964 INDY PACE CAR HARDTOPS

Some Are Still Alive

by Jim Haskell

It's been over 22 years since the 1964½ Indianapolis 500 Pace Car Mustangs rolled off the assembly line in Dearborn. And within 6 weeks of their birth, most of the approximately 190 hardtops were in the hands of John Q. Public, excited owners of one of the most limited edition Mustangs ever produced.

Their excitement centered on owning and driving a new Mustang, not necessarily because it happened to be a Pace Car. Unfortunately, many first owners didn't realize they had purchased one of the Indy 500 units. It was common practice for the dealership to remove the racing stripes and lettering — the most obvious identifying characteristic of the Pace Cars — prior to sale. In large part, the Pace Cars quickly joined thousands of others as "just another white Mustang". The Pace Cars were rarely recognized or mentioned, anywhere, until recently.

Like most early Mustangs, the Pace Cars were subject to two common diseases, rust and accidents. A few Pace Cars were totaled in accidents even before 1965 Mustang production began. One never finished the trip home to California from the "Checkered Flag Winners Day in Dearborn" in May 1964.

Another premature death was a checkered flag Pace Car won by Rachal Ford (now Bob Lacy Ford) of Robstown, Texas. A Corpus Christi resident purchased the Mustang for his sons' 16th birthday. The car was driven daily for several years until it was disabled in a 1971 accident. It was temporarily parked under a large tree while awaiting necessary repairs and the cash to buy them. Then, along came hurricane Celia; incessant gale force winds caused the tree to split and collapse — directly on top of the Pace Car. The remains were sold cheap to a Corpus Christi scrapper.



Pete Semetis is the only known owner of two Pace Cars. Both are in A-1 condition.

It doesn't take rust 22 year to finish off a Pace Car either, particularly if it's exposed to Midwest weather conditions. One green flag Mustang from Bettendorf, Iowa was "melted down" in 1975 after its frame, and essentially all sheet metal, rusted completely through.

But not all the news is bad. Some of the Pace Cars have survived the two-plus decades in surprisingly good shape. Several others are currently undergoing ground-up restorations. And undoubtedly there are still others out there whose owners never heard of the Indy 500 Pace Cars.

As of February this year, 32 Pace Car hardtops have been "rediscovered". By category, 13 are confirmed dead (either having paid a visit to the crusher or otherwise unrestorable), 15 are confirmed alive (restorable or better), and three are unconfirmed. The latter category includes those bearing assembly date and/or consecutive unit codes that are inconsistent with now known Pace Car production patterns.

The "good shape" Pace Cars can largely be explained by the two owned by Pete Semetis of East Northport, New York. That's right and what a pair they make! His #1 car, purchased in 1983 via an ad in *Hemmings*, is a totally unrestored original that's near perfect. It's the only Pace Car found to date that still sports the original blue racing stripes (the blue, black, and gold lettering decals were reinstalled in 1984). John C. Stewart of Cuttingsville, Vermont was the fortunate dealer who initially won the Pace Car in the checkered flag contest.

Pete ran across another Pace Car less than a year later and immediately purchased it too. This car turned out to be one of the rare DSO 84 units assembled on May 1, 1964 to fill the need for additional Mustangs so that all checkered flag winners could receive a free Pace Car at the May 14 ceremonies in Dearborn. Impellittiere Motors of Cold Springs, New York was the originating dealership of Pete's #2 Pace Car.

After an extensive restoration, the

2nd Mustang is in as good, or better, shape as the first. The Pace Car duo consistently win high honors at shows throughout the Northeast. Pete Semetis is rightfully proud of the two rarest ponies in his corral.

Most Pace Car hardtops in the "alive" category do need quite a bit of work to get them in show condition. Some are currently being restored and several others will soon enter that process. Let's take a look at a few of them.

Doug Myers of Anchorage, Alaska has nearly finished a complete restoration of a real "basket case" Pace Car Mustang. He and a friend just happened to spot an abandoned 1964½ Mustang near Chickaloon about a year ago. After confirming it as legitimate Pace Car hardtop, Doug managed not only to obtain a clear title to the car but also traced its history back to the originating green flag dealership in Seattle. Doug Myers is the 9th owner of this now reborn Mustang Pace Car.

One of the first green flag Mustang to be "rediscovered" is owned by Ted Thuli of Darlington, Wisconsin. Another Pace Car needing substantial tender loving care, Ted is just getting started on the project. He's traced the car back through its previous three owners to, guess where — Darlington Motor Sales, Darlington, Wisconsin. Ted also has the original invoice, purchase contract, and even an old local newspaper containing a photograph and story on the Pace Car that is now his.

Another Pace car about to become "new" is owned by Pam and Duane Purvis of Watseka, Illinois. (Look at the January cover story for an example of a Purvis restoration.) Pam and Duane have their work cut out for them on this green flag Mustang. Not only does it have the usual dings, dents, and rust, but also a painted-on vinyl top, triple taillights, and even remnants of GT stripes. The Purvis' have traced the car through four previous owners to a Gilman, Illinois dealership. They also have been searching for Pace Car information since 1980. One of their findings — a Ford Technical Service Bulletin dated June 22, 1964 which gives instructions on the "Special White Enamel In-



Doug Myers found this long abandoned Pace Car in a river bed near Chickaloon, Alaska.



Ted Thuli's Pace Car isn't a 100 pointer yet, but it's completely original — even down to the outside rear view mirror delete.



Pam and Duane Purvis' "modified" Pace Car. Note the GT stripes and painted on vinyl roof.



Mr. and Mrs. Harbold of Dillsburg, Pennsylvania receiving keys to their Pace Car from then Ford Division Chief Lee Iacocca. (Photo courtesy Ford PhotoMedia)

dianapolis 500 Units” and the fact that the Pace Cars have a color code of “C” on their warranty plates.

Not all the Pace Cars are found close to their original home. Palm City, Florida’s Tom Bebout purchased one of the hardtops at Jensen Beach in August, 1983. After a time consuming and sometimes frustrating search, Tom discovered several significant pieces of information on his Pace Car. First, it was a checkered flag car originally won by Harbold’s Garage in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania. Second, it checked out as one of the few DSO 84 units given to some of the checkered flag winners. And finally, Tom found the original broadcast sheet under the rear seat which clearly spells out the words PACE CAR along with other identifying letters and numbers. Fifth owner Tom Bebout is just starting restoration of his thoroughly researched Pace Car hardtop.



The Harbold Mustang today. Tom Debout has a little restoration work left.

One of the difficulties in quickly identifying the Indy 500 hardtops is that many of them have been repainted — and not always white. Illustrative is the “Chevy Blue” Mustang Pace Car owned by Rodney Dodds of Wichita, Kansas. Despite insistence by Mustang “experts” that color code “C” meant Honey Gold, Rodney knew his car was originally white because the underside of the deck lid had not been repainted and preliminary paint stripping revealed an obvious white color beneath the now faded Chevy Blue. Like several other Pace Car owners once frus-



How about a Chevy Blue Pace Car? Rodney Dodds discovered the Pace Car White paint after stripping parts of the door and trunk lid.



Most Pace Car engine compartments need some detailing but some are otherwise perfect. Note the correct Eaton power steering, generator, and oil filler cap on the valve cover.

trated by published color codes, Rodney now knows what he has and is in the process of restoring the Pace Car to original specifications.

So far, eight other Pace Cars are known to have been repainted a color other than Pace Car White. Included are two Wimbledon Whites, two Candyapple Reds, a Rangoon Red (currently being painted the correct color) a Skylight Blue, a Silver Blue, and a non-descript, dark blue color.

Where are the rest of the Pace Cars located? We've looked at just a few, from Alaska to New York and from Texas to Florida. There are several others — one in Europe for example — that also have interesting histories. But let's save something for later. In the meantime, you might start checking out that junk Mustang you pass every day on the way to work. Or that one hidden deep in your neighbors back yard. A small chance perhaps, but you never know when or where the next Indianapolis 500 Mustang Pace Car will turn up.

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A perfectly detailed Pace car engine compartment.

