

An Interview with Steve Saleen of Saleen Autosports

by Brad Bowling

We have General Tire to thank for bringing Steve Saleen to Biloxi for the Great Southern Grand National this year. Steve was at the show most of Saturday to meet with the participants and talk with them about Mustangs in general (no pun intended) and Saleens in particular.

That evening, we got a chance to talk with Steve at length about Saleen Autosports' racing efforts, their production cars, plans for the future, and his thoughts on the Mustang. The interview lasted almost two hours. We have divided it into two parts and will run the second, longer section in next month's issue.

Teresa and I had some able help coming up with questions. Tom Bader is a long-time Saleen fan. He has been slowly modifying his '85 GT to Saleen specs (the car appeared on the cover of the August, 1987 Mustang Times) over the past year and was very anxious to talk with the man responsible for the car. Gary Stein has contributed photographs to Mustang Times in the past (his car, the Sport Pun'kin, appeared in the September issue along with some of his pictures) and sat in with us on the interview.

MT — For starters, how about giving us some background information on yourself?

SS — OK, we can go back to when I was born, my years as a child . . .

MT — We're thinking somewhere between driving age and your racing years.

SS — Not back to my childhood, huh? My racing career actually started with a Shelby Mustang in B Production. From there I went into Formula Super Vees, then Formula Atlantics, which is where I got the majority of my racing experience. Then I landed a



Steve Saleen (left) with MCA member Donna Mathias at the recent GreatSouthern Grand National in Biloxi, Mississippi.

ride in the Trans Am series with the Pontiac Trans Am team; we were the winning team that year (this was in 1982) and Ford was just getting back into high-performance motorsports. Because we were always beating the Fords, I got to know the guys fairly well from SVO. Through some of the

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background I had with the Pontiac effort in building special edition cars, one thing lead to another so in 1983 I approached Ford and the people at SVO about building a special-edition Mustang, similar in concept to what the Shelby was in the '60s. They were interested and, after a lot of meetings, I got the "go-ahead" (November, 1983). We built our first car and debuted it in June of 1984 at Sears Point Racetrack in San Francisco.

MT — This was off of an '84 model?

SS — It was an '84 LX base. It was very similar to what we have today. It had basically the same changes that

we do with the suspension and the aerodynamic pieces. Not so much was done with the interior initially. That was at the tail-end of the '84 model year; in fact, you couldn't order any more cars by then. May is typically when they take the last orders for the model year so we built a little less than fifty of them. They went to dealers predominately throughout the state of California. In '85 the Mustang had a power increase and they (Ford) changed the front a little bit. We refined our treatments to it. We started working with dealers on a national basis. We made district sales people a little more knowledgeable about what we were doing. That's when things started to take off for us.

We've refined the car every year and feel that it gets better. In 1986, as a result of a sufficient number of cars being built, we were able to get the

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Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) to recognize the car as a legitimate production vehicle so we could compete in the Showroom Stock category. We started racing the car in '86 and did very well with it; we always finished in the top three somewhere and we were fortunate to win 24 Hours of Mosport (Ontario, Canada), which was the first time Ford and General Tire had ever won a professional Showroom Stock race before. Then we went back in 1987 with an even better effort and finished six laps ahead of the nearest competitor.

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MT — Are improvements on the Saleen production cars developed solely by Saleen Autosport or do you work closely with Ford and share information?

SS — We have a car back in Detroit that Ford drives around and evaluates and we work a lot with them. Jim Kennedy, who is the chief engineer for the Mustang project, has driven both our street cars and our race cars at a number of tracks. Some of the parts that we've used in our development are prototype pieces that Ford is considering for actual production.

MT — Would you consider Saleen Autosport a car manufacturer or an aftermarket parts supplier?

SS — We are marketing and merchandising the car as a total entity. That is our main business. The aftermarket is not really our main business. Everything we've done with the car with the springs, track width (the track is wider than the stock Mustang), height, front and rear sway bars, and shocks is all done as a total concept. They will work fine individually but as a whole, even down to changing the size of the steering wheel, we have changed the basic characteristics of the Mustang platform. I think that that is why we are successful. The addition of the four-wheel disc brakes has been a

major leap for us and, this year especially, the improvements we've made to the Saleens have really proven themselves.

MT — When did you start the four-wheel disc setup?

SS — We added it this year. Again, a lot of the lessons we learned came from their practical applications on the street car and a lot of the lessons we've learned came from racing the Showroom Stock product. Not a silhouette like Roush does, where there is no relationship whatever to the street car. There's not a part he uses on his car that is a production piece. What we race is actually available for the street. That's why I think that Showroom Stock is so much more relevant to what a person buys because the cars that are winning are actually the fastest, most durable cars. If you beat an IROC Camaro on the track, the average person can go buy that car and beat the IROC on the street, whether it is accelerating, or going around corners, or braking.

MT — Ford doesn't even offer the four-wheel disc, five-lug set up on their GT. Where do you get them?

SS — These are basically from the SVO Mustang that is no longer in production. We get them supplied directly from Ford to our facility and we are the only ones that have access to them.

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MT — Were the SVO people not apprehensive about your "special edition, modified Mustang" coming out about the same time as their own special edition turbo-four?

SS — As far as there being any jealousy between the Saleen Mustang and the SVO Mustang, I would say, initially, yes. With any major manufacturer you have what is called the "not-invented-here" syndrome and there had been some reluctance. But you've

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got to realize that they get bombarded about five times a week with someone who says, "I'm going to build a special edition of this car" and it's always hard to figure out what will work and what won't. We were very persistent and determined about what we were doing and it eventually led to the relationship that we now have with Ford. We are the only company in North America that has what is called bailment pooling on the car line. The only other group that had that was Shelby back in the '60s. There are truck and van converters that have it, but they don't have access to the automobile line. They have now invited us to the new-car showing in Anaheim, displaying the cars for all 6500 Ford dealers.

MT — Would you compare the Saleen cars to the ASC/McLaren product?

SS — ASC is a very big, successful company but their primary concern has been in the cosmetic area and building convertibles. Our approach has been strictly in the area of performance enhancement. We are geared very much to cars for enthusiasts; that's where we've carved our niche. Everything done on the car is for a specific reason, down to the way the rear valance is designed. Our car will go seven miles an hour faster than a stock GT, with no change to the drivetrain and that's only because of the aerodynamic pieces. Everything we do to the car is a performance improvement; it's not just something we do for cosmetic reasons.

MT — We know that you are the stimulus behind the Saleen group, but are you also the one who has the engineering brainstorm?

SS — It's a combination of different things. You know, I come from a racing background and have discovered a few things about making a car faster through trial and error. You have to ask questions like, "Do you want the

wheel to stand up in a corner?" or "How much camber?" or "What is the drag going to be down the straight?" Our production manager has a degree in engineering. He was with Ford for fourteen years and was one of the guys in charge of the San Jose plant before it was shut down. There are other people with the team that have degrees in engineering. But, typically, if we can't find what we want from our own racing endeavors, we do have access to engineering people at Ford who have been very helpful. There is always going to be a compromise because what we are building is an OEM-spec car for the street. You can build a really radical car but it's not going to handle the car-wash, the five-mile an hour crash barrier and be able to be an acceptable street car.

MT — Did you have any qualms about the way Ford changed the look of the Mustang for '87 as far as what would have to change on your own car?

SS — We just decided where we wanted to go from a performance standpoint and then balanced that with the aesthetic value of the designs. We used a couple of outside people that helped us with that. We came up with what I feel is a good design.

MT — California has always been "car heaven" and it only seems natural that



"For All The Right Reasons . . ."

you should be at work out there. Is there any chance of getting an east coast distributor?

SS — Our race team is based in Omaha, Nebraska. The reason it is there is because our crew chief lives there. Our truck race team is in Rochester, Michigan, which is a suburb of Detroit. We service our press cars there and over the next year we

are looking to expand that facility to possibly include the production of some parts. That would work well considering its proximity to Ford. We're trying to establish a good selection of Ford dealers throughout the states and hopefully our distribution will get us to more customers.

Don't miss Part II in next month's issue. — Ed.



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