

MUSTANG IV NO MORE

Editors, *Mustang Times*



The 1989 Probe is here and we have driven it.

"Wait a minute," we can hear you saying to yourself, "I want my Mustang magazine to have articles extolling the virtues of prized ponycars, pricey pavement-pounders, and the like. Why should I be reading about an econobox with only half the cylinders of a real car?"

For those of you with long-term memory problems, perhaps the term "Maztang" will aid your understanding. This time last year *Mustang Times* and every other Mustang magazine were warning the enthusiast public about Ford Motor Company's attempt to convert the all-American ponycar into a Japanese econobox. Mustangers everywhere were encouraged to start letter-writing campaigns within their clubs to prevent what we knew would be a major mistake for Ford. Ford was inundated with letters threatening all sorts of retaliation if the V-8 Mustangs were cancelled in order to give the name to the Mazda-designed vehicle.

As if to prove an age-old axiom concerning customers and people who are generally considered to be right, the company promised extended life for the decade-old rear-drive design and quickly dug a less controversial moniker out of the files.

As die-hard Mustangers, we congratulated ourselves on our victory against corporate America, sat back and prepared to hate the would-be Mustang — the pony impostor — as soon as the Flat Rock, Michigan plant started turning them out. Anticipating all of the clever things we

would say against the Probe, your *Mustang Times* editors were buying refills for poison pens and eagerly awaiting the opportunity to heap severe criticism on what was to have become the Mustang IV.

The only problem is that, now that we have driven it, we're having a little trouble coming up with abuse for the car. You might say that we've lost that loathing feeling.

Although the Probe models would never have taken the place of the current Mustangs in our hearts, minds, or driveways, we have to report that the Probe GT is a decidedly sporty car that will survive all of the current comparisons to the V-8 GT it was to have replaced and go on to become one of Ford's most popular cars.

Contrary to what rumors suggest, the Probe is not simply a Mazda with Ford ovals stuck on it. Although Mazda was responsible for the mechanical design of the Probe (and Mazda's own MX-6), Ford performed their own tricks to the body, creating a look that is radically different from anything either company offers. Why



did Ford look overseas for a new car? Simple. Ford owns 25% of the Japanese automaker and has already collaborated with them on one project; the Mercury Tracer. The Flat Rock plant that builds the Probe will also be turning out Mazda's U.S.-market MX-6 meaning that Americans will be building American and Japanese cars designed by the Japanese for sale in America. It may be confusing to us non-corporate types but it spells "sweet deal" for both companies.

Looking at the Probe from the outside, the first thing you notice is this car seemingly has no pillars holding up the roof. Ford is playing tricks with your eyes by using special blacked-out glass pieces that hide the pillars. Although Ford is not the first company to use this effect, they are definitely the first to make it work so well to complement the rest of the body.

Pop-up headlamps make for a baby-bottom smooth front end, as your attention moves across the hood and toward the back of the car, you begin to notice the tricks of the aerodynamic trade at work on this slippery coupe. Twin hood blisters were used to give underhood clearance to the shock towers, allowing for a lower front. Door-mounted mirrors sprout from the body. Flush-mounted glass is used all around. Even the door handles and gas tank flap were designed with maximum airflow in mind.

The 1989 Probe is available in three flavors; LX, GL, and GT. Standard engine in the LX and GL models is the 2.2-liter, 12-valve, normally aspirated inline-four. With 110 horsepower, this motor comes hooked up to a five-speed manual transmission unless the automatic four-speed is requested.

In case you think your multiplication tables need rechecking, let us explain about the valve train at work. The current trend in the automobile industry is toward multi-valve (in this case, that means more than the standard two) heads and Mazda is quite fond of their three-per-cylinder design. Two intake, one for exhaust, and a centrally located sparkplug make for efficient combustion.

There are many goodies on the base engine but for techno-minded enthusiasts the turbo-equipped GT is the only way to go. Rated at 145 horsepower, this motor only comes with a five-speed manual and a single-plate performance clutch. The GT designation is not just an indication of a turbocharger; the entire car benefits from well-thought-out equipment that the lesser models cannot have. Four-wheel-disc brakes, not available with the GL and LX,

are standard on the GT. So is the computerized automatic adjusting nitrogen gas-pressurized strut setup, speed sensitive variable-assist steering, 15-inch aluminum wheels, and P195/60VR15 Goodyear Eagles.

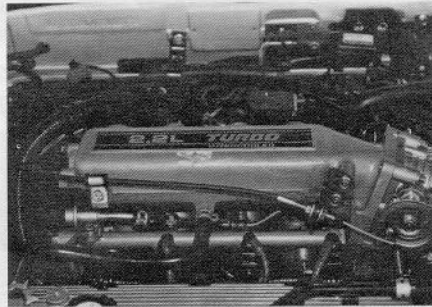
Our Probe GT was well-equipped, missing only the optional Anti-Lock Brake System. ABS is available only with the GT's four-wheel disc system; the GL and LX get by with front discs and rear drums. Ford describes their five-speed shifter as "close-ratio" and it feels very tight. The head of the shifter takes some getting used to because it pivots to the front and rear as you shift, allowing drivers of the palm-down shifting school a smooth gear change without a lot of wrist action.

Once inside the gadget-strewn interior, we experienced a strong feeling of security for the inside was designed with human shapes in mind. With the doors closed, the dash blends in with the soft door panels and occupants become surrounded by the car rather than simply sitting in it. Switches, knobs and dials are all within easy reach for the driver and that is sometimes a disadvantage for such a well-equipped car. For example, the radio controls are small enough and close enough together that tweezers are more appropriate to use than fingers. The steering wheel is so close to the gauge pod behind it that spirited driving is liable to trigger turn signals or windshield wipers.



That steering wheel comes with a unique tilt feature — standard on LX and GT, available on GL — that moves the wheel and the instrument cluster so that above or below average-height drivers will always be comfortably aware of what is happening to the engine vitals.

Many new cars require a good week's worth of familiarization before the owner is able to figure out all of the gadgets and their purposes; for us, the Probe GT was no different. Sitting in the John Bleakley Ford dealership lot, we learned how to use the seats, the tilt steering adjuster, and the air conditioner. We were more interested in



the car's performance and were eager to get it on the road.

With the turbocharger, the 2.2-liter motor is very flexible in its output. It is neither a bottom-end puncher nor a high-rpm screamer but the power kicks in early and stays on as you shift through the gears. The combination of front-wheel-drive and 145 horses takes some practice when you are more familiar with rear drivers so it is advisable to keep an eye on what the car is doing in curves, especially if the accelerator is staying on the floor.

The GT model is not exactly what you would call living-room quiet when driven hard. Then again, neither is any other sport-oriented small car, including our own beloved Mustang GT. The Probe, with its low-profile tires and tight suspension, receives a good bit of noise from the road but it is not an uncomfortable sensation at all. It makes the driver feel that he is in touch with the pavement he is covering. The raspy turbo motor makes a nice growl when the tachometer is dancing around above 2500 and there is a real seat-of-the-pants driving feeling that should appeal to enthusiastic drivers.

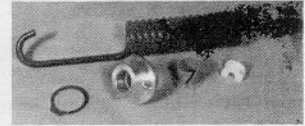
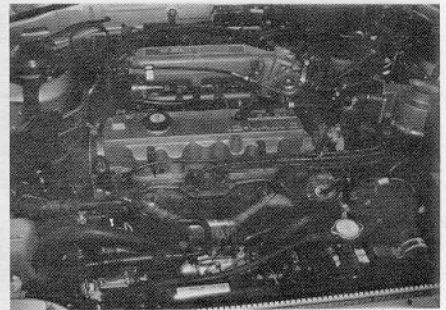
Speaking of seats, the front ones are very snug and comfortable but the back seat, practically a flat bench, just was not made for anyone taller than five-foot six-inches tall. This is understandable in such a small car but only children would be able to ride back there without rubbing their hair off on the headliner. Back seat passengers, however, are not left out in the sightseeing department with the large expanse of glass that serves as a back window. Fold down the back seats and you've got plenty of room to carry equipment, groceries or enough luggage for a week in Disney World.

If not for a very vocal Mustanging public, this car would be the "new" Mustang and we would have hated it and said many bad things about it, then ended the article by saying, "That is the last you will read about this car in *Mustang Times*."

But, Ford listened to some of its most rabid fans, made some very wise decisions,

and this is not the "new" Mustang. We liked it and would recommend the Probe to anyone interested in this type of small sporty car and, since it is not a Mustang, that is the last you will read about this car in *Mustang Times*."

We would like to thank John Bleakley Ford in Atlanta for supplying us with one of the very first Probe GTs in the south for this article. **MT**



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