

Mustang Times Evaluates the Fourth Generation V6 Mustang

by Tony Garcia

For 27 out of 33 years, Ford has produced six-cylinder Mustangs. Beginning with the 170 cid in-line six in the 1964 1/2 models, Ford has offered several variations of this power plant missing only the 1987 through 1993 cars. In fact it was the V8 configuration that was missing in 1974 putting the V6 at the top of the list. This is a tribute to the economy, durability, and popularity of the six-cylinder equipped Mustang.

Beginning with the 1994 model year, Ford replaced the standard 105 horsepower 2.3 liter four-banger with a smooth, supple, 3.8 liter OHV V6. You can find 215 ft.lbs. of torque at 2750 rpm and 150 ponies at 4,000 rpm. This equates to over 40% more horsepower in a standard Mustang than in previous years. This motor provides exceptional efficiency and performance, good economy, and has proven very popular with buyers who want smooth predictable power without the added cost of a V8 GT.

We contacted Carl Yarber at Chuck Clancy Ford in Marietta, Georgia, to arrange for an extended test drive of a V6 equipped Mustang. A slightly used 1996 convertible was selected for our test. Equipped with automatic transmission, four-speaker AM/FM cassette stereo, rear window defroster, air conditioning, and the complete list of standard Mustang equipment, this vehicle was typical of many fourth generation V6 Mustangs on the road today. Clad in Crystal White clearcoat with saddle cloth interior and a saddle convertible top, our Mustang was ready for the road test.

Ford had this to say about the updated 1996 3.8 liter Essex V6: "The 1996 Essex V6 is based on components used on the supercharged Thunderbird Super Coupe. It is stronger, quieter, and more durable than the previous design, with improvements to virtually every system in the engine for greater overall performance.

The upgrades are expected to improve durability and fuel economy, and offer quieter operation. All Essex V6 engines now use the heavy-duty cylinder block design previously used on the Super Coupe. The block is stiffer and, when combined with a new structural oil pan design, provides quieter operation. Redesigned water passages provide improved coolant flow.

The 3.8 liter Essex V6 has a new camshaft profile and a lightweight valve train that features a tulip-shaped valve head design with a narrow, 7mm stem (previously 8mm). A high output oil pump provides lubrication.

All Mustang engines have been converted to the new Ford fifth generation electronic engine control system, known as EEC-V, with a 104-pin connector and an expanded memory to meet the requirements of second-phase onboard diagnostic regulations (OBD-II)."

Our first destination in the test car was a ten-mile drive to the Board of Directors meeting of the Mustang Club of America. The first impressions of the six-banger were good. Acceleration was quite smooth throughout the rpm range and one might mistake the general performance as that of a non high-output small block eight cylinder. The car accelerated well in traffic and was quick to downshift to passing gear at a highway speed of 70 mph for surprisingly good interstate driving. The six-cylinder-powered Mustang responded predictably to throttle inputs under most driving conditions. There did seem to be a little delay or lag time in shifting from overdrive to third when traveling about 45 mph under a modest incline. It seemed to require more than expected throttle pressure to get the transmission to downshift for the climb.

Four-wheel disc brakes, standard equipment on all Mustangs since 1994, offered sure-footed stopping. Coil spring four-bar link design rear suspension provides a smooth ride while the cast aluminum 15-inch wheels shod with P205/65Rx15 BSW all-season tires provide a sporty appearance.

Our test vehicle was comfortably equipped with the popular PEP 243A package which includes manual air conditioning, power windows, driver's seat, and door locks, deck lid release, cruise control, electronic AM/FM stereo cassette with premium sound, front floor mats, remote keyless entry, and cloth seating surfaces.

After driving the V6 pony for several days, it was apparent why the Mustang is outselling the Camaro at better than two to one. Ford offers good performance, value, and economy in the base-engined Mustang. Sleek, attractive body lines coupled with a long list of available optional equipment makes the Mustang a smart purchase for many buyers. Add the safety of dual air bags, side door intrusion beams, and outboard three-point shoulder safety belts, and you have a car that many people can enjoy with peace of mind. The six cylinder is a testament to the tried and true combination of good performance and good economy in a Mustang.

If you are considering purchasing a Mustang but are not sure that a GT is for you, give the V6 Mustang a thorough test drive. You'll be glad you did.

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Our Sources

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