

Heart of Carolina Mustang Club

by Wayne Demers

When you close your eyes and you think about your Mustang, do you picture it in your garage or do you picture it in the driveway getting its weekly or monthly wash? Maybe you picture yourself in the car driving it to work? But maybe you picture yourself driving that Mustang fast. Not 55 mph fast, but 100 mph plus. Some think of it in quarter mile terms at the track, but certainly not on the street! Do you imagine driving your car over hills, around corners, blipping the throttle and downshifting then laying your foot heavy into the brake anticipating the upcoming turn? For some of the members of the Heart of Carolina Mustang Club (HCMC) closing their eyes and thinking about their Mustang is reliving the most anticipated event of the year. They picture their Mustang in motion. The corners of their mouth begin to move upward forming a grin. Those grins turn into a smile. And while they are reliving this experience in their heads, all one has to do to get their adrenaline gland pumping is say three simple letters: V I R.

VIR stands for Virginia International Raceway (www.virclub.com). Located east of Danville, VA, VIR opened in 1957 and was host to many races until it shut down in 1974. Famous racing legends such as Carol Shelby, Roger Penske, Richard Petty, and Walt Hansgen all have left some rubber on the track during that time. Unfortunately, facing financial issues the track closed. There were no crowds, no racing fans, and no competition for the next 25 years. The facility became a cow pasture and the only thing being over-run was the track as the grass gained ground and cow patties littered the parking areas.

In 2000, the facility was reopened. The smell of race fuel again adorned the air and the barns were treated with a fresh coat of red stain. The best way I can explain it is this: Imagine a tranquil golf course and instead of driving your golf cart on a path, put yourself in a Ford GT and let your foot have at it!

Today, VIR is host to the Rolex Sports Car Series, amateur and professional automobile and motorcycle events, driving schools, club days, and private test rentals. One specific event that the HCMC attends each year is VIR's "Holiday Laps" to benefit the Salvation Army.

The Holiday Laps is a driving event held the first Friday of December and is opened to anyone who donates \$25 in cash, toys, or non-perishable food. Their donation allows them one session in their car under controlled conditions behind a pace car. Each



HCMC members line up in preparation for a session on the track.



An HCMC member is excited that he's parked in line and ready to go!



Prior to driving, the club members get a quick safety briefing and then make their donation for track time.



Drivers brake as a leading driver kicks up some dirt in the corner (by Jeremy Lupien)



There are some great locations at VIR off the track for a quick photo opportunity.

session lasts approximately 20 minutes and for the novice or intermediate driver you will get every penny's worth of fun! Owners of Mustangs of all generations bring their cars out and line up for their opportunity to run the 3.27-mile natural terrain course. With elevation changes of 100 ft, 12 turns, and 2 straight-aways this course has enough to challenge any level of experience.

And because the course is so challenging, the event is controlled with a pace car and a trailing pace car. No passing is allowed, however we often see first-time attendees who ride shotgun appear to be a little pale in the face. Those who have Mustangs that are built for more—oh, how should I put it?—spirited ambitions and the intestinal fortitude to push their ride are sure to line up as close to the pace car as possible. First-time drivers, those who don't feel they have anything to prove or those who just wish to enjoy a more casual experience, are asked to line up further back in line. Doing things this way allows everyone to get the experience they want and more importantly allows for some safe fun.

Over the years, the HCMC has seen an increase in attendance. Our club participation has grown from two members the first year, to over 30 members 4 years later. Overall participation has also grown and many have found themselves forming a line before the gates even open. The event is not restricted to Mustangs alone and there always seems to be a member or two who likes to take a car that may be more—ummm—track enthusiastic. Track speeds vary from 50 mph to 120+ mph in the straights. The fun doesn't end until spotters that are positioned at strategic locations throughout the track waive the checker flag. And as you finish that cool down lap, you may notice yourself breathing a little heavy, your fingers are tired because you didn't realize how tight you were gripping the steering wheel, and for some odd reason you feel as if doing 55 mph is more like doing 15mph. Within two seconds of drivers getting out of their cars you'll know who really enjoyed themselves. Many participants get more out of this event that they thought they would, beginners and experienced drivers alike.

This year was very special for me as my grandmother, over 80 years old, trusted me to take her for a ride. She had never been 80 mph before, so it was great to hear her response when I told her we were doing 125mph. "Really? It doesn't feel that fast."

And did I mention that this was for charity?