

UNLIKE MUSTANG'S REAWAKENED RIVALS, FORD'S PONY CAR SALES ARE ENDURING

By John M. Clor

Well, the 45th consecutive year of the Ford Mustang is now in the books, and with the 2011 model year already upon us, I think it's finally time that we recalibrate our Mustang thinking. Let me explain why a "recalibration" of sorts is necessary right about now:

Yes, we ALL love classic Mustangs—that's what the MCA and the entire Mustang hobby is all about. But there's a new feeling going around the Mustang community these days that



is changing the way we and other automotive enthusiasts think about our cars—and it's nothing short of amazing. By that I mean the latest Mustang has not-so-quietly gone about its business of redefining the pony car market again—just like it is has done over and over during each new generation since creating the segment in 1964. And more important, it has found a way to remain relevant and oh-so desirable, even in today's ever-changing, ever-greening and ever-volatile automotive landscape.

You can see it everywhere. If you got out to any Mustang show (heck—any car show at all) last year, you should have noticed how many of the newer, 2005-and-up S197-based Mustangs are involved in the enthusiast hobby of late. Not just are the newer Mustangs dominating many of the show fields, many are also leading the way in showcasing the very latest in modern appearance and performance modifications—and are gaining the attention and interest of both new and old Mustang fans alike while they are at it.



I can't even begin to tell you how many owners of 1965 through 2004 Mustangs that I've talked to who, 1.) already have a current-platform Mustang, either as a companion show car or a daily driver;

2.) plan to buy a current-platform Mustang for those same purposes; or 3.) have test-driven a newer or brand-new Mustang and now want to buy one as soon as they are able. I have never seen a new Mustang platform gain such widespread acceptance and desirability with owners of all the previous-generation cars!

When you look back on the history of our club, the original 1964½-1966 cars were at "ground zero" of the hobby, with the 1967 through 1970 models right along with them. After that, it took a fair amount of years for the 1971-'73s to gain a footprint at Mustang shows and gatherings as the so-called "muscle car era" came to an abrupt end—and then that's pretty much where things had stayed for a long while.

The majority of enthusiast clubs and aftermarket suppliers had ignored the poor Mustang II and its owners' attempts to have it take its rightful place in the Mustang collector community. And do you remember when the Fox Body cars were called the "late model" Mustangs? The show flyers and parts catalogs would all read the same: 1965-70 Mustangs, 1971-73 Mustangs—and eventually, 1979-Present Mustangs. The "late-model" Fox owners used to be somewhat segregated from the show fields—but can you imagine the frustration of a "II" owner whose model years weren't even listed on registration forms or catalog orders? Talk about the carrying the stigma of being the family's shunned, red-headed stepchild!



Somehow the SN95 folks had no trouble earning their place among the Mustang faithful—although I suspect much of that was because of the efforts of people like then-Ford VP Neil Ressler and SVT guru John Coletti. Coletti could easily be credited with writing both the opening and closing SN95 chapters—thanks to his managing the development program and launch of the new-for-1994 car, and then closing the run with the performance benchmark that became known as the "Terminator" SVT Mustang Cobra.

But no such issues exist for the S197s, which have for the past several years re-energized not only the Mustang brand



and its followers, but the entire pony car market to boot! Proof of that can be summed up in three words: Challenger, Camaro, (and soon) Toyota. The return of the Dodge Challenger is singularly based on Chrysler's hope to cash in on Mustang's success in fanning the flames of the modern muscle car market. Not to be outdone, General Motors quickly followed suit by resurrecting its Camaro. And now, word out of Japan is that the new head of Toyota wants to design and build a new four-place sporty car that evokes "passion" and "spirit" ... or some such reference to Ford's Mustang. (I guess the now defunct Celica and Supra didn't quite do the trick ...)

And that's just the beginning. So desperate is Mustang's newly reawakened rival from GM that press has been flowing about the 2010 Camaro's sales numbers, and how they stacked up against the Mustang's 2010 numbers. I've been on the receiving end of emails from Camaro fans yapping about how well their new version is selling, and how "Mustang's days are numbered."

Oh, really?

I just had to burst their bubble. Yes, over the past 45-model-years Camaro had been able to edge out the Mustang in sales once and a while. So what? The old American muscle car



wars were a game of cat-and-mouse and one-upmanship back then—especially when it came to the almighty horsepower numbers. But guess what? Each time that GM would attempt to take the lead, Ford would respond, and then the buyers would respond as well. And over the past four and a half decades, the winner is clear: Mustang! It has overwhelmingly outsold the competition for the vast majority of years in the marketplace, and remains the only pony car entry to survive the test of time.

To that end, I had to chuckle when I heard the editor of one of those online auto pricing websites had said that, "...It's unclear how long the sales surge can last for the Camaro. Consumers are fickle and historically, it's been difficult for a novelty car to maintain its popularity over a long period of time."

Oh, really? Maybe that means—unlike the Camaro, the Mustang is not a so-called novelty—because its appeal has lasted a long time! While I agree that healthy sales of new muscle cars show that the auto market is still a highly diverse place, what some folks (and most politicians) simply fail to understand is that even in this area of fuel economy and talk of electric vehicles, for some of us it's still all about the horsepower.

I can tell you that we at Ford don't think the reintroduction of the Camaro has had much impact on Mustang sales one way or another. As George Pipas, Ford's top sales analyst, has noted, "There are people who buy Chevys just like there are people who buy Fords. The passion for one brand or another is strong. What we are seeing right now is 10 years of pent-up demand (for them) ... rather than some positive indicator about the economy."

Well, technically it's at least seven years of pent-up demand, as GM killed the Camaro (and its Pontiac Firebird sibling) way back in 2002, leaving Camaro fans in the dark for quite some

time. On the other hand, Mustang has been in-market continuously since 1964. And while the press calls it a "new muscle car war," you won't confuse it with the sales volumes of yesteryear. Consider that Mustang-Camaro-Challenger sales amount to roughly 2 percent of the new car market—or about the same number as hybrid sales.

But as word about the 2011 Mustang comes out, you'll soon find that the Camaro celebration may be short-lived. Admittedly, "We've seen a few people go over to Camaro," Steve Ling, Ford's North American car marketing manager, had told one publication. But he also noted that, "We never stand still with Mustang. We have a track record of improving it every year. ... And that will continue to be the case."

For many of us, our interest level seems to rise and fall with that of V-6 and V-8 horsepower numbers. And the 2011 Mustang has again delivered a powerful Ford response to the market with an impressive new powertrain lineup. Like the old saying goes, "If you build it, they will come."

Today, fellow Mustang lovers, Ford is really building it. And best of all, this time additional power comes with lower emissions and better fuel economy at the same time! That means to an all-new generation of buyers, Mustang can now be had with more of the fun, and none of the guilt! (So, who says you can't have your cake, and eat it too?).

That's what I meant when I said that it's time we recalibrate what we think Mustang is all about. A classic shape? Yes. Purposeful design? Yes. Power? Of course. And fun to drive? It goes without saying. And now we can add clean, and green with our new power? Yes—and fuel efficiency never felt so good!

If there's one thing the new-car market has shown us, it's that one year does not a legend make. The competition will eventually learn that, on the road to becoming an American automotive icon like Mustang, sales numbers are a marathon, not a sprint.

But make no mistake: By delivering both added performance AND efficiency this time around, Mustang will only add to its unmatched legacy of leadership. As Dave Pericak, the Mustang's chief engineer, had put it, the 2011 Mustang is "a true sports car for the new generation, and a smart choice for the environmentally conscious enthusiast."

To paraphrase Bill Ford, Jr. all I can add to that is, "Make mine a red convertible!"



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