

## FORD RACING LINK KEY TO BUILDING A NEW, TRUE 'BOSS'

By John M. Clor

**B**y now I'm sure all the real Ford fans out there have read everything that's been released about the reincarnation of the Boss Mustang for 2012. And I can tell you that all the excitement that this new model is generating is certainly well-deserved. Of course, most Mustang people know that the original Boss 302 was deeply rooted in racing—but few outside of the company have understood just how important a role that racing heritage has played in attempts to resurrect the Boss name on a Mustang over the years.

Yes, the idea of bringing back the Boss Mustang is one that has surfaced more than a few times since I first began working for Ford in 1995—back when SVT was launching its second of three “Cobra R” models. It turned out that for a variety of reasons, only a handful of those who had purchased SVT's first R version of the Mustang Cobra in 1993 had actually raced them. So, taking a page out of the original Boss Mustang's playbook, SVT's then-boss, John Coletti, decided to make the 1995 Cobra R a much more capable track performer, beginning with a unique 351 Cobra R-only V-8 powerplant to go along with its race-ready suspension.



The man behind these efforts was Steve Anderson of Special Vehicle Engineering, who sadly passed away earlier this year at the age of 69. Steve had long championed the idea of a light-weight road-racing Mustang, and was able to work his magic in the SVT realm for a series of “R” race-ready models that to this day are highly sought-after by both racers and collectors alike. Up until his retirement in 1999, Anderson's ties to grassroots racers helped give SVT engineers the direction needed to create all the street-legal SVT “R” models for '93, '95, and 2000. You'll recall that many who campaigned these cars were successful in Grand Am road racing, culminating with a “triple crown”—the Driver, Team and Manufacturer Championship—claimed by Shreiner Racing's Cobra R in the 2002 season. (I actually remember the day when the late Tom Shreiner himself came to SVT headquarters in Allen Park, Michigan, and personally awarded the 2002 Manufacturer's Cup to Coletti—it was a proud moment at the office!)

But understand that SVT was only a small niche performance group at the time, and could not sponsor or financially support a race team anywhere near like Ford Racing or Ford Division Marketing can, so little was made of the on-track SVT Cobra R exploits of independent racers. And even afterward, when Ford Racing began pushing for its new “Cammer” engine to find its way into the hands of racers and onto the racetrack, it was certainly nothing like the marketing importance placed upon Ford competing in the Trans Am racing series in 1969 and '70.

Back then, Ford was in the thick of the Pony Car wars with GM, Chrysler, and AMC. With the Mustang starting to lose grassroots “buzz” to Chevrolet's new Z/28 Camaro, Ford marketing people were clamoring for something more than what Lee Iacocca and his relationship with Carroll Shelby could deliver. The Ford management political winds quickly shifted as Mustang galloped into its fifth model year with a new, “A Steed for Every Need” marketing approach. Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence that this kind of “cover all the bases” strategy was perceived as being very General Motors-like for the time—because on February 6, 1968, GM executive vice president Semon E. “Bunkie” Knudsen became president of Ford Motor Company.

The move by Henry Ford II to give his company's top product post to the GM performance guru not only stunned the entire auto industry, it also blind-sided Iacocca, who had likely felt that the success of his Mustang should have earned him a better fate. The son of William S. Knudsen, a former president at General Motors, Bunkie had reportedly jumped ship to Ford after being passed over for the president's post at GM. Despite the reputation of Shelby Mustangs and the acceptance of the 428 Cobra Jet and the new-for-1969 Mach 1, Knudsen (much like Bob Tasca before him) believed that Ford still had a horsepower image problem where it mattered most: out on the streets. So Bunkie set out to secure Ford corporate bragging rights once and for all.

Most Mustang historians agree that if Henry II hadn't hired Knudsen away from GM, the whole idea of a racing-inspired Mustang model would likely never have surfaced during that era. But the timing couldn't have been better for the new Ford boss when it came to leveraging Ford racing activity. For one thing, Ford needed to come up with a limited-production car to homologate an all new big-block V-8 for stock-car racing. For another, Knudsen wanted a car to champion a hot-rod small-block that he hoped would put the screws to his former project at GM, the Z/28—both on road-racing circuits and out on the streets and dragstrips of America.



Enter the 1969 Boss 302 and Boss 429—built to compete at either end of the performance car arena. Bunkie wanted the Boss 302 developed in response to a need for a competitive Mustang entry in the Trans Am racing series, while the Boss 429 was built to qualify Ford's new “semi-hermi” 429 big-block engine for use in NASCAR racing. Knudsen had tagged GM designer Larry Shinoda to jump ship with him to Ford, and set him about the task of designing this set of new Ford-developed high-performance Mustangs. Shinoda came up with a slick design package that included front and rear spoilers, racy side stripes, a matte-black hood and even rear window louvers—but it was the performance that really helped sell the cars.

Imagine, in 1969 and 1970, a street version of the Boss 302 Mustang much like those seen running in the Trans Am series on Sunday could actually be purchased at your local Ford dealership on Monday! But alas, this direct link to professional racing didn't last very long. Despite Parnelli Jones and George Follmer piloting their Boss 302 Mustang to victory in a hotly contested Trans Am racing championship in the 1970 season, it would be Ford's final year for factory sponsored racing for more than a decade. Worse, sales plummeted from just under 300,000 Mustangs in 1969 to less than 191,000 for the '70 model year ... and the political winds again began shifting among the management at Ford World Headquarters.

Bunkie had already ordered a bigger and heavier Mustang for 1971, and one last Boss model—this time available only with a unique, high-output version of the 351 Cleveland V-8. But within months of the restyled '71 Mustang's introduction, the muscle car market had collapsed and Knudsen faced infighting with career Ford executives, notably Iacocca and those associated with him. Almost as suddenly as he appeared, Knudsen was fired by Henry Ford II on September 2, 1969. Rumors of his dismissal had turned one of Henry Ford's hallmark quotes, "History is bunk," into a widely circulated quip within Ford circles as, "Bunkie is history."

And what of designer Larry Shinoda? Knudsen brought him over to Ford and gave him the design leadership of the 1969 Mustang specifically to help create the Boss 302 and Boss 429 street cars. In fact, the "Boss" name itself was even one of Shinoda's "creations." He would address his former GM-turned-Ford boss simply as "boss," so when it came time to design Bunkie's high-performance race-bred performance Mustang, he referred to it as "the boss' car." The "Boss" nickname stuck—and the rest, as they say, is history.

Yes, since those days, the Cobra Mustang had eventually returned to the marketplace, plus the Mustang Mach 1, the Shelby GT500, the Mustang GT/CS "California Special"—and a host of others. So why was it that we haven't seen the return of the Boss nameplate until now? Well, it's simple, really: If Ford wanted the car to be true to the original (and not just make it an appearance package) then not only would it have to have its own free-breathing unique 302 V-8 powerplant and race-tuned suspension, but a version would also have to be out on the racetrack, competing in a professional road racing series.

No matter what business case ideas were floated in Ford product development in the last 15 years to build a Boss model (and I got to see some of them near the end of my SVT days), the purists in the company always seemed to pooh-pooh it—eventually due to the fact that there were no new, credible links to the car's racing heritage. But that all changed with the introduction of the Ford Racing FR500C turn-key race car program in 2005.

Competitive right out of the box, these factory-built 5.0-liter V-8 powered FR500C racers spread terror in the Koni Challenge road racing series, claiming the manufacturer's titles in 2005 and again in 2008. And most recently, the development of Ford Racing's Boss 302R race model, based on the production Mustang 5.0-liter V-8,

made for the perfect package to serve both as a test-bed to prove out a production version of the Boss, and also to provide a direct and credible link to the Boss platform competing in a professional road racing series.

Indeed, many things that the Boss 302R race teams have been learning on the track this season have been transferred back to the team working on the new production Boss Mustang program. And the fact that the production car team will be offering a highly limited run of "Laguna Seca" street-legal track versions shows that revisiting the "Cobra R" idea can also continue to build a following among grassroots racers as well. Just as with the original Boss 302, racing is what makes the breed—and kudos to the team for seeing the value in building a new Boss Mustang that remains true to the Boss heritage in every possible way.

Noteworthy here is that this new Boss 302 was NOT created by a niche performance vehicle group like an SVO, SVE or SVT, but rather was done via mainstream Team Mustang with the full support of mainstream Ford engineering! After the original Boss Mustang had left an exclamation point on the muscle car years, production vehicles with this much performance heritage engineered into them could only come from the "old-school" hard-core enthusiasts who had gravitated to performance niches within Ford ... until today, that is. The fact a car that is this "connected" to the Mustang and Boss brands can be done so expertly within the confines of mainstream Ford speaks volumes about how well today's Ford Motor Company is in tune with CEO Alan Mulally's plan of "One Team, One Plan, One Goal—One Ford." Developing new products that our customers want and value—even true-Blue Ford performance and Mustang customers like us—without a specialty group shows an uncanny corporate understanding of the brand and a razor sharp execution of customer wants and needs.

So today, the Boss Mustang lives on—both in name and the spirit of the original. As Mustang people, we all owe our thanks to Knudsen for the Boss legend, and to Shinoda for the Boss looks—and the name itself.

And now our thanks also must go to the men and women at Ford who worked so hard to make sure that this new Boss 302 is worthy of that name.

**Editor's Note:** Veteran automotive journalist John Clor has owned, raced, worked on or written about Fords and Mustangs for nearly 30 years. After a 15-year career at *The Detroit News*, Clor shifted to automotive journalism with stints at *AutoWeek* and later *Edmunds.com*. He joined the Ford Special Vehicle Team in 1995 and had spent the better part of the next decade working on SVT communications, PR and Marketing. Today, he manages [www.FordPerformance.com](http://www.FordPerformance.com) for Ford Racing, and is also a columnist for *Mustang Enthusiast* and *Mustang Trader* magazines, editor of SVT *Enthusiast* magazine, and author of a hardcover book, *The Mustang Dynasty*. Clor is also the proud owner of three '70s-era Mustangs, including one he calls "a long-term project."



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