

# MUSTANG II—FACT vs. WEB FICTION

By John M. Clor

**M**an, I was hoping to make it through the entire year without having to blow the horn about bad Mustang info that I keep finding on the internet, but after suffering through yet another rash of horribly researched, ill-conceived Mustang bashing—well, I can remain silent no longer.

If you've been reading my columns in this or other Mustang magazines from a while back, then you know how I feel about the Mustang II. I tried to once and for all put the car into its proper context in my now out-of-print *Mustang Dynasty* book, and have supported that perspective in more than a few "column rants" before and since. I'm happy to say I've seen evidence that Mustang enthusiasts and collectors are finally seeing the Mustang II in a new light, as the cars are more and more becoming surprise attractions at shows across the country.



Today, you'll even find Mustang magazine editors admitting that Lee Iacocca's "Little Jewel" really was "the right car at the right time," while featuring more owners' cars in their publications. But outside the hobby—especially on the web—the old, misguided opinions and misinformation about the much-maligned 1974-'98 Mustang II keep surfacing. And I'm fed up.

A friend of mine who teases me about being such a big fan of second-generation Mustangs recently sent me a link to a story that ran on a fairly well-known newsmagazine's web site a few years ago, just to get me riled up. (It worked—and no, the guy who sent it to me wasn't *5.0 Mustang & Super Fords* magazine editor-in-chief Steve Turner, who once called me the "chief Mustang II apologist" in print.) Supposedly, the article in question was written by "an award-winning Washington reporter" who claimed to also be a Mustang fan and owner.

His piece, celebrating, "The Short Life and Happy Death of Mustang II" was certainly written like a D.C. scribe, because not only was it lawmaker-like in being poorly supported and highly opinionated, but—much like D.C. politics—it ignored the desires of Main Street America.

The story said that the Mustang II was a "wussy compact car" (as if factory compacts are street beasts?), "on a Pinto frame" (actually the cars are unibody and have no frame—and though

patterned after Pinto's layout, Mustang II was NOT a rebadged Pinto), "with a 4-cylinder, 90hp engine" (which was at least equal to other cars in that segment) "that went from 0-60 in about 12 minutes" (exaggerated for effect here, but again, even the non-V8 Mustang IIs had 0-60 times that were on par with competitors in that era. And oh, it overlooks the numbers most mid-'70s consumers really cared about—the II's EPA rating of 34 mpg highway/24 city.) " ... in pumpkin orange." (As if Ford was wrong to offer color choices that those 1970's customers wanted? Does no one remember avocado green appliances? To be factual, Mustang IIs could only be had in orange in three of the car's five years in market: Medium Goldenrod in '74, Vista Orange in '77, and Tangerine in '78—but NEVER anything called "Pumpkin Orange.")

It closed by saying that, "In the story of this sad little automobile," (Sad? What is sad about more than a million sold in just five model years?) "we recognize that the first reaction of our corporate and political leaders to pending economic discomfort can, as likely as not, result in hideous blunders. In pumpkin orange." (Of course, a talented journalist/historian would have concluded that the final corporate product wasn't really the blunder here, but rather the political attempt to legislate engineering advances in technology that resulted in decreased consumer expectations.)

As with most new web-based auto content and blog sites, the only discernible value for time spent reading them is found not in any of the staff's posts, but in the reader comments that may follow—the voyeuristic written equivalent of watching an argument in a high-school cafeteria turn into a fight. Every once and a while, a reader (often someone with first-hand experience of the car) will respond with true wisdom and a sense of proper context not found in the initial post itself.

Take this response to that story, for example: "I have a 1977 Mustang II Ghia with a 302 V8. It is a great car to drive, and it always turns heads. I had someone in a (real) Shelby Cobra give me a 'thumbs up.' I think that they are good cars, and do not get the credit that they deserve." Or this one: "It's nice to see a lot of people sticking up for the Mustang II. ... This is a very important car in Mustang history. I really think [Ford] went back to [Mustang's] roots with this car. The person who wrote the article makes it sound like GM and Mopar had such fast cars in that era—but they suffered also. I still have mine and I enjoy driving it. Everywhere I go, I always get a positive reaction."

Amen!



A few months later, a former coworker who knows of my fondness for Mustangs sent me a link to a story from a car blog whose name purports to report the truth. Because it was posted on April 1, 2010, I at first thought it was an April Fool's joke—but in reading it I discovered that the only joke was the writer's failed attempt to base the premise for the article on fact, instead of merely his own personal disdain for the Mustang II.



I should have known from the very headline that the writer didn't worry too much about facts: "Ford's Deadly Sin #1—1975 Mustang Cobra II." Of course, we all know that Ford never made a 1975 Cobra II. That option package didn't appear until the 1976 model year. I immediately looked for the byline to see if the piece was penned by an established writer or just another blogger trying to make a living from taking automotive history out of context. The last name didn't ring a bell (despite my nearly 30 years in the journalism business)—but it was the same as the much-hated Omega member and self-righteous ROTC cadet commander from the *Animal House* movie. (Hmmm ... how fitting!)

Journalism 101 teaches us that once you introduce an error, it casts doubt on the validity of all that follows. But hey, we all make mistakes, right? So was this a mere oversight, or was the rest of this posting going to be inaccurate, illogical, ill-researched verbiage based on a horrendously flawed premise? So I made the mistake of reading on, curious to see what this blogger thought had constituted an automotive "sin." And I was hit with yet another affront to my historical senses.

The writer described a peeling "Powered By Ford" logo that was "hastily slapped onto the valve covers of this five-liter Mustang II," supposedly during assembly by Ford, with the suggested irony being that the engine beneath had precious little power and didn't deserve to wear said slogan on the valve covers. Nice try ... but wrong.

I know many Mustang II owners, and have a few V8 versions myself; NONE of them EVER had "Powered by Ford" stickers affixed to the rocker covers from the factory. I have only seen "Ford" script stamped into an oval. The valve covers I think the writer was alluding to were the 1964-'73 "Power by Ford" stamped-steel V8 covers—but he was wrong on both counts.

If he really did see stickers that said "Powered by Ford," they must have been owner installed.

And if so, what's wrong with that? Those black, crinkle-finish aluminum valve covers that have "COBRA" and "Powered by Ford" embossed underneath have been a favorite small-block add-on item in the aftermarket catalogs for years now. And clearly the writer was not referring to the "Powered by Ford" ribbed aluminum Fox Body 5.0 covers, as those didn't appear until the 1983-'85 model years—if I recall correctly—and they were stamped into the metal, not stickers.

Then came the worn-out Mustang II power rip, lamenting the moment "this pathetic lump of an engine" would "unleash its

full 122" horsepower (Like a real enthusiast doesn't know that any 302 Windsor can be made to scream—I hear Ford Racing's 1-800-FORD-788 Tech Line ringing behind me in my office as I write this!). I guess the writer had no idea that federally mandated emission regulations (and NOT bad decision-making by Ford) forced a progressive, industry-wide reduction in auto engine compression ratios beginning in 1972, drastically dropping horsepower numbers.

How could any self-proclaimed enthusiast alive in that era "forget" that the fuel economy standards imposed for 1972—well before the Mustang II was even introduced—forced all horsepower ratings for every car sold in America to plummet? Further what "car guy" from those days never heard of the horsepower ratings switch from SAE Gross to SAE Net that same year?

In Ford terms, cutting a 302 two-barrel's compression to 9.0:1 for 1972 dropped SAE Gross horsepower to 210, and the move to an SAE Net rating system pushed that number down to 140hp. And sure, by 1975 further emissions restrictions landed that 122hp figure for the 302, but that's NOT what drove enthusiasts to the V8 in their Mustang II—it was the 223 lb-ft of torque it made at a mere 2000 rpm! Any self-respecting "car person" knows that you don't feel "horsepower" when you accelerate hard—you feel torque!

The article went on and on about how the "Mustang II was a truly wretched car," but any logical arguments in support of that comment simply imploded. The writer claimed that the "target competition for the Mustang II were {sic} the Toyota Celica, Opel Manta, and Ford's own European import, the Capri" but in reality, most Mustang II owners didn't consider imports as true competitors at all, focusing instead on the Chevy Camaro and Monza, Buick Skyhawk, Olds Starfire, Pontiac Sunbird, Dodge Dart, Plymouth Duster, and even the AMC Hornet.

Next came some lunacy that said the "substance of Ford's enormous mistake with the Mustang II" was that it didn't just build "the highly competent Capri as the Mustang II." Apparently a big "why Ford gave Capri to Mercury" lesson would have helped here, as well as one explaining "why you can't have an import pose as a Mustang" (a la the Ford Probe). Then there's this gem: "Given that the 302 put out a mere 122hp in 1975, one wonders why go to all the trouble," but one also wonders why getting 100 more lb-ft of down-low torque than a V6 Capri isn't worth it.

Naturally, it was only a matter of time before the whole Cobra II issue came under fire: "Anything positive anyone can say about the Mustang II program is instantly offset by this cruel joke made by Lido and his not-so Whiz Kids." The only joke here is on the writer: the Cobra II wasn't Iacocca's idea at all, nor anyone on the Fairlane Committee—so yet another history lesson, about Jim Wangers and his Motortown shop, would have helped him.

Saving the best for last, we then got an "apples to oranges" comparo that would have gotten the writer canned from any professional automotive staff: "Real V8 performance was ... very much available, in the form of the Camaro Z-28. And at a price that put the Mustang II, Mach I, and Cobra II to infinite shame." The only infinite shame here is that there was no such thing as a Z-28 Camaro in 1975. Oh well, no reason facts should get in the way of a good beat-down!

Worse, the writer then launched into a tirade about how much better a 1973 Z-28 was (with road-test info lifted from an old buff-book article) than a 1975 Cobra II 302! Not a head-to-head 245-hp '73 Camaro 350 vs. a 266-hp '73 Mustang 351

comparison, mind you—but one akin to crossing the threshold between two markedly different performance eras. The good news is, his tirade against the power difference, plus the Mustang II's supposed higher price and "miserable handling" was challenged in the reader comments section that followed his posting.

Had he compared the '75 Cobra II against the comparable top-line '75 Camaro (the V8 Rally Sport), the real truth would have emerged: That the RS, like Cobra II, was essentially an exterior appearance package; that fully optioned, prices were within a \$100 or so of a loaded Cobra II; and that it only had a slight power advantage, negated by a weight disadvantage. What's more, Mustang "purists" who bemoan the use of the Cobra name should have been happy with the "II" tag, and understand that Ford presented the Cobras as flashy, sweet-handling little fun-to-drive fastbacks—and did not misrepresent them as quarter-mile muscle cars.



My favorite reader comment to all this II bashing was this one: "Do you understand what presentism is? For those who don't, it's the historian's sin of judging persons, events, and broad patterns and themes of history by our society's current sensibilities, rather in the context of the times. Bashing a car for its deficiencies compared to modern cars—not to mention dissimilar contemporary cars—doesn't really do a lot to help understand the Mustang II."

The reader's retort went on to say that, "In the context of the times, the Mustang II was a winner. It was THE first successfully downsized American car model, anticipating both the fuel crisis of 1973 and the virtually complete downsizing of the entire American car fleet, a trend that lasted into the early 1990s. Mustang II sold VERY well. Better than any Mustang other than the first, and better than most since. The Mustang II also handled better than nearly anything else American on the road at the time. The rack-and-pinion steering (Camaro didn't get rack-and-pinion until 1982) made up in precision and feel what was not available in grip. And '70s Japanese cars? They were known more for rust than reliability in the Midwest."

The author's response to that was, "How well a car sells, especially in America, has little or no relationship to how good a car it actually is." As a final insult, it was good to know that the writer feels we're all stupid, and that car companies are in business to make cars that don't sell well.

Wow.

Another Mustang II pot-shot was sent to me this past April in a speculative piece posted on an automotive site that purports to be "connected." With no actual connection of his own, the writer quoted another website's discussion about the upcoming

2013-'14 Mustang. When talk came to the next generation 'Stang, the writer opined, "a slight downsizing is in the works with the new pony car in the planning stages. Insiders expect shrinkage to be kept to a minimum; a Focus-sized Mustang would be a sales disaster for Ford, and no one wants a repeat of the Mustang II."

Really? No one wants a smaller, lighter, fuel-efficient hot-handling Mustang that sells like crazy?

Finally, I'll share a traffic-grab piece from August on one of the big auto blog sites who, via their expert opinion, research and analysis, decided to list what in their minds were, "The Ten Most Disappointing Car Model Redesigns." Naturally, No. 1 for them was the Mustang II.

Talk about disappointing!

Nominated by that famed auto expert and site-poster the world knows merely as "Stapleface," the writer tried to explain the selection with this mix of fact and fiction: "Granted, in the years following the original Mustang's launch, it had grown in size and weight (fact) and wasn't really the same car it had been in 1964 (fact). Redesigning any car to be smaller and lighter is a good thing (another fact), so it would seem as though Ford's pride and joy would only benefit from a freshening-up (fact). The Mustang II sold a ton of cars (fact), but they were not fast (in context, that's fiction). They did not take corners well (fiction). They were cheaply built (fiction). The Mustang II was a big sales success for Ford (fact), but kind of a failure for everyone else."

I'm gonna have to say "fiction" to that last one on behalf of Mustang II owners, collectors, and fans—all of whom must be included when using the term "everyone else." When you want the real story behind the Mustang II, ask an MCA member who owns one. I know this—there's never a dull moment in defending second-generation Mustangs! IT brings new meaning to the slogan: Mustang II, Boredom 0!

**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 spent the better part of the next decade working on SVT communications, PR and Marketing. Today, he manages the [www.FordPerformanceGroup.com](http://www.FordPerformanceGroup.com) enthusiast outreach program for Ford Racing, and is also editor of SVT Enthusiast magazine and author of the hardcover history book, Mustang Dynasty. A member of several Ford-based car-clubs, Clor is the proud owner of three '70s-era Mustangs, including one that he calls "a long-term project."

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