

# The History of Shelby-American Cars

by Ken Yeager

## Part III

In 1967 Shelby made a major change in the Shelby GT-350s. The first change was the outside appearance of the car. The fiberglass hood remained but an entire front nose section made of fiberglass was added to reduce the weight. Fiberglass upper scoops were added which gave the car better ventilation, whereas the lower scoops remained the same as the previous year. The back end of the car changed because Ford Thunderbird taillights along with a fiberglass housing were used. Next Shelby added a newly styled fiberglass deck lid with a built-in rear spoiler for aerodynamics. This gave the Shelby GT-350 a very unique look that distinguished it from the Mustang.

The inside appearance change that year was the optional GT interior package that Mustang had. This included specially molded door panels and better quality seats. Other changes on the interior were a special woodgrain steering wheel imported from Italy and another set of Stewart and Wagner gauges under the dash, which included a gauge for amperes and oil pressure. Another change was the addition of special racing harnesses attached to the roll bar that could be used during racing.

The biggest change of 1967 was the addition of a new model called the Shelby GT-500. This car was exactly like the GT-350 except for the engine. This car used a big block 428 cubic inch engine. The reason Shelby came out with this engine was that Ford had introduced a big block engine in the Mustang that was 390 cubic inches. Shelby took the 428 engine and added a medium riser intake manifold with two Holley four barrel carburetors. The GT-500 became very popular because of its brute acceleration. The big block Shelby out-sold the GT-350 by a two to one margin.

Even after all this success Shelby still had his problems. First the add-on fiberglass parts were poor in quality and they did not fit the car properly. Second, Shelby's lease had expired at his airport factory, because the two hangars were zoned for airport-related business. Carroll Shelby recalls, "Even if our lease hadn't expired, we did not have the capacity to build the number of Shelys that Ford wanted to sell."

When Shelby-American ran into production problems Ford officials began to realize the truth of what they had undoubtedly suspected all along — that they could probably





do a more efficient job of building Shelbys than Shelby could. Ford ordered the airport plant closed and the remaining cars to be finished. From now on the Shelby cars would be built on a special assembly line in Detroit where a larger quantity of cars could be built.

The 1968 Shelby received a face lift; it had a new hood in which the scoop was moved forward to get a better air flow into the engine. Another addition was the use of turn signal lights on the side of the car which was supposed to be a safety feature. The car also received a set of Lucas road lights in the center of the grille, which gave the car a more racey look. The name Shelby was used all over the car, spelled out across the front of the hood and the deck lid. The year 1968 was also the first and only time the Cobra name was actually applied to the Mustang-based Shelbys. All of this was to help distinguish the car from its' sister the Mustang.

The interior of the car was greatly improved over the previous year. The optional GT Mustang interior was used again. One of the big additions was the use of a console in between the two front bucket seats. The center of the console opened to make a nice compartment for storage. The cars still had the Stewart and Wagner gauges as in the year before, but now mounted in the console. Also added was a tilt-steering wheel, which moved when the driver's door was opened. Other options offered to add to the driver's comfort was air conditioning, automatic transmission, AM-FM stereo and tinted glass. All of these added more luxury and less performance.

Nineteen sixty-eight was the best year for Shelbys with a grand total of 4,450 cars being sold. Major reason was the addition of new models. The convertible was added which



Ford offered in GT-350 and GT-500 versions. A lot of people liked that idea of performance in a convertible. The other big change was the introduction of a new engine which had already made a name for itself on the local drag racing circuit. It was a 428 cubic inch engine called the Cobra Jet, but when it was in the Shelby the car was called GT-500 KR, with "KR" standing for "King of the Road." GT-350 owners found a change when they opened the hoods of their cars that year. Their cars were no longer powered by the high performance 289 cubic inch engine, but by a milder 302 cubic inch engine to which Ford made no major modifications.

For 1969, Ford's Shelby was once again subtly changed. A new snake logo appeared in ads and in the center of the steering wheel. Still round, the logo had a more stylized snakes that formed a gentle "S" curve.

Ford's new Mustang sheet metal allowed Shelby-American

designers to assemble a total package that looked very polished. Previous Shelys had an added-on look that worked visually, but they were not very refined looking. The 1969 Shelby was the best looking of all Shelby Mustangs.

The Mustang had gained weight over the years. In order to cut down on some of this, the Ford designers came up with the idea to use fiberglass front fenders. This along with the fiberglass hood considerably lessened the weight of the car. The hood had five openings, three in front and two out the rear. This provided fresh air for the engine compartment.

The convertible was continued for 1969 and available in the 350 and 500 models. Both fastback and convertible had fiberglass side scoops that tunneled air toward the rear brakes, but they were attached at different locations on both cars. On the fastback, the side scoops were located up high, even with the door handles. On the convertible, they were mounted lower, even with the center of the door.

All 1969 Shelys had deluxe Mustang interiors with high-backed bucket seats and a vinyl-covered steering wheel with a "rim-blow" horn. The center console again housed Stewart and Wagner gauges — oil pressure and ampers. The door panels had wood grain insert and carried round "Shelby Cobra" emblems. The interior was finished off with a built-in roll bar which by now had become a Shelby trademark.

The 1969 GT-350s used the new 351 Windsor engine rated at 290 horsepower. The GT-500 used the same 428 Cobra Jet engine, which was rated at a mere 335 horsepower. Along with these engines there were several different rear end ratios that could be ordered. Such as Traction-Lok 3.00 and 3.50 ratios that were optional on the GT-350s. Traction-Lok 3.91 and 4.30 were optional on the GT-500s. All these options made the 1969 Shelby a nice little performance package.

Nineteen seventy was the last year that the Shelby was produced. What a lot of people don't realize is that the cars were basically left over 1969 models that did not sell. Cars uncompleted at the factory were completed as 1969 models

and then modified into 1970 models at Ford's Kar Kraft facility (famous for Ford GT MK II and IV production in 1966-67). Cars in dealers' inventories were changed by the dealers. These modifications were made to provide a model year differentiation. First, the first number of the serial plate as changed to '0' (to indicate 1970. Cars were then given black hood stripes (between the intake scoops and exhaust ducts on each side of the hood) and front spoilers made of black plastic. In order to complete Shelby production, some cars that had originally begun to be built as Mach 1's were used. This explains why some of the last Shelys had red or tan interiors and other variations that were not on the Shelby order form.

A total of six hundred and one Shelys were converted into 1970 models, three hundred and fifteen into GT-350s and two hundred eighty-six into GT-500s. Shelby and Ford Motor Company decided to cease production for several reasons. The first reason was that government regulations of emission controls were getting tougher, making it impossible to continue producing the high performance cars. When he learned of this, Shelby decided that rather than see his cars become just a bunch of flashy stripes and spoilers he would rather stop while the name "Shelby" still meant a high performance car. Thus ended the Shelby legend.

Today Shelby Cobras and Shelby Mustangs are some of the most sought after classic cars. One reason for this enthusiasm is the efforts of the Shelby Club and the Mustang Club. The Shelby-American Automobile Club sponsors vintage car races and car shows. The Mustang Club of America deals with the showing of cars and restoration to condition as original as possible. Cobras and Shelys handle like no other cars today. They recall an era when driving was something to be savored, not merely a form of transportation. They were and are truly in a class by themselves, one of the best performance cars around.





GT 500 Convertible



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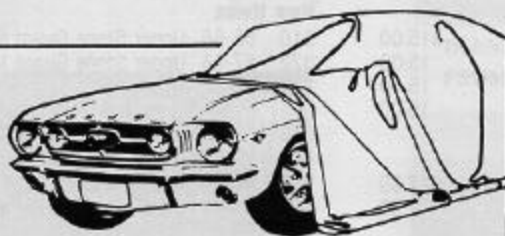
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