

INSIDE LINE

First Drive: 2005 Ford Mustang

Looking Back While Galloping Forward

After reacting like Pavlov's dog every time we saw the 2005 Ford Mustang prototype at the car shows and the production version in pictures, we were beside ourselves. What a looker this car is — they could sell a million of them if they just gave last year's car these new threads. Still, we were hoping that there would be more to Ford's latest pony than head-turning retro looks. The day of reckoning came when we got to spend a full day with the Ford Mustang, both on the road and the track, and let's just say that we weren't disappointed.

As far as exterior design goes, not since the 1970 Fastback has there been a Mustang that's been so right. Like the latest [Ford Thunderbird](#), the designers managed to pay homage to a classic style without having the end result looking like a *caricature* of the original. The canted nose with its big grille and round headlights recalls the '67 to '69 Mustangs, while the side sculpting, fastback roofline and taillights recall those ponies of the 1965 vintage. Even the triangular side windows are reminiscent of what Carol Shelby did when he made the 1965 Ford Mustang "2 + 2" (a.k.a. the Fastback) into his Shelby GT 350.

Unlike the similarly retro-styled Thunderbird, whose cabin borrows its dash and console from its [Lincoln LS](#) cousin, the Mustang's interior is unique and matches the exterior design theme. Look at the instrument panel and it's obvious that the old-school influences are there — a dual-hooded dash with (optional) aluminum accent panels pays tasteful homage to the 1967-'68 Mustang, as do the big speedo and tach, circular air vents and plump, round steering wheel hub. Changeable backlighting illuminates the nostalgic instruments — a modern touch that's intriguing but a little gimmicky for a pony car.

The materials and features aspects of the interior were not overlooked, either. The door panels and release handles are now more substantial in look and feel, and one-touch up-and-down power windows add a bit of unexpected convenience. The climate control setup is the tried-and-true three-knob design, which is fine with us — if it ain't broke, ya don't need to fix it.

We're also glad to report that the sorry ergonomics of previous Mustangs, such as the "sitting on an ottoman" seating position and gorilla's-reach gearshifter location have been exorcised for 2005. With the new car, you sit more *in* rather than *on* the seats. Although they're generally quite comfortable (as we discovered on a rather lengthy ride back from the track — yes, we took a wrong turn), we still think more aggressive lateral bolstering is in order.

Although the previous manual gearshifter was bolted directly to the gearbox, this year's is a remote-linkage setup that puts the stick within easy reach regardless of the driver's height. And lest you worry about the shifter's action feeling disconnected due to the non-direct design, fret not. Compared to the rubbery yet clunky feel of the 2004 car, the '05's shifter is much more precise and simply more satisfying to use whether jockeying in traffic or blasting around a racetrack.

While the handsome style of the 2005 Ford Mustang is obviously rooted in the past, behind the galloping horse in the grille is a thoroughly modern source of motivation. In the GT, no less than 300 horses and 315 pound-feet of torque await the driver's command. Compared to the V8 in the '04 GT, these are substantial increases of 40 horsepower and 13 lb-ft, respectively. This 4.6-liter, all-aluminum

V8 sports three valves per cylinder which, along with variable valve timing, allows for a deliciously broad spread of power. A nice bonus is that one needn't feed this steed expensive oats; 87 octane fuel is just fine. Even the V6 has more muscle this year; specs for the six-shooter now stand at 200 hp and 235 lb-ft, improvements of 10 horses and 15 lb-ft.

Whether you prefer an automatic or a manual gearbox in your new Ford Mustang GT, you'll have five gears at your disposal. The do-it-yourself version has the improved shifter mentioned earlier, and the automatic is sourced from the Lincoln LS/Thunderbird. You already know that we like the stick, but the automatic proved to be the big surprise; it didn't let us down once. Under hard acceleration, changes up through the gears were so swift and smooth that there was no letup in the gratifying shove to our backsides. Downshifts were equally eager — no annoying lag, just a quick dip down into the power to get by those semiconscious sorts who tend to dawdle in the passing lane.

The V6 car comes with a choice of a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic. We drove the automatic and found it did a decent job with keeping the V6 responsive, though it wasn't quite as quick-witted as the five-speed in the GT.

At the track we had the chance to sample both the base V6 and GT Mustangs, as well as a couple of 2004 GT models. Starting out with the '04 GT, we were reminded how seriously wrong the seating position is in that car. If a driver isn't completely comfortable behind the wheel (in terms of feeling secure in the seat and having vital controls close at hand), it tends to diminish the experience, especially when trying to concentrate on driving fast. And we were also reminded how that outgoing GT is essentially a straight-line car — cornering was never this Mustang's forte. Granted, Ford did a nice job with the Bullitt and Mach 1 editions in the handling department, but the base Ford Mustang GT was hurting in this regard when compared to contemporary sport coupes like the front-wheel-drive [Acura RSX](#) or [Toyota Celica](#).

Night and day. That's the difference between the '04 and '05 versions of the Mustang GT when the road throws you a curve. Where the '04 felt like an ornery old pony that was lazy to respond to the reins and not smooth when doing so, the new one handled like a quarter horse, turning crisply into the turns while displaying a flatter and much more composed attitude when charging through them. Many thanks go to the new suspension, which features lighter-weight components (allowing it to react quicker to changes in the road surface), repositioned and lighter coil springs, a stouter rear axle with more effective control arms and bigger brakes. The latter were noticed (and appreciated) as less prone to fading when the going got hot and heavy on the track.

After the adrenaline rush of the track, we just wanted to kick back and be comfy for the long ride back to the hotel. This over-200-mile journey brought to light how easy the '05 Mustang would be to have as a daily driver. Low wind and road noise levels, a supple ride over the bumps and a much more comfortable cabin than before helped us unwind the miles with a minimum of stress.

With the Mustang's competition pretty much nonexistent (those age-old rivals, the Chevy Camaro and Pontiac Firebird were no longer available after 2002), Ford didn't have to make huge changes in the already popular Mustang. But the company did — not only in terms of styling but also in performance, handling and ride dynamics and basic ergonomics.

With pricing slated to be just under \$20,000 for the base V6 and around \$25,000 for the Ford Mustang GT (both nicely equipped, we might add), we expect that once these horses hit the market, the Ford dealers are going to see a stampede of a different kind, that of rabid enthusiasts eager to fill out sales orders.

Speed Read

First Impressions

Not merely a retro reskinning, the newest Mustang improves its performance in all areas and offers V8 enthusiasts a tempting price tag.

Featured Specs

- 300 stampeding horses...
- And more powerful brakes to rein them in
- Revised suspension and steering makes this more than a straight-line car
- Awkward ergonomics are gone...
- As is the clunky manual gearshifter

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