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Road Test: 2005 Nissan 350Z Roadster vs 2005 Ford Mustang GT Convertible

Rumble In The Desert: Rival icons from Japan and the United States join the fight for superiority in the valley of death

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The queue starts forming on opposite sides of the domestic/import Maginot Line when it comes to choosing between a [Mustang](#) GT and a Z-Car--either the Mustang tugs at your heartstrings, or you wouldn't be caught dead in one. Forget that one seats four and the other two. The real question is, which car makes the most convincing icon?

The Ford GT may headline the company's 2005 Year of the Car campaign, but the new Mustang is where the showroom action is. It's been 26 years since [Ford](#) rolled out the last all-new Mustang, so interest in the freshly foaled ponycar is understandably high. Fueling the anticipation is the heritage direction the car's design took. The not-so-subtle J Mays rehash blenderizes 1967-1968-vintage proportions with details from 1965-1966 and 1969-1970 models. That just about covers Mustang's glory years, when competitors threw Camaros, Firebirds, Barracudas, Challengers, and Javelins into the booming ponycar market swelled by prosperous Baby Boomers coming of driving age. The long-hood, short-deck look that vaguely suggested European GTs of the time Cinderella'd a pensioner's Ford Falcon into the signature ponycar. Today's Mustang owes much of its DNA to a dumbed-down Lincoln LS with strut front suspension and a live rear axle, but the effect is much the same.

When Carlos Ghosn helped [Nissan](#) pull out of its death spiral in the late 1990s, the company needed an image booster to rally the troops. During most of the previous three decades, the Z-Car filled that role. But a low-volume sports car built on a dedicated platform was out of the question considering Nissan's dire straits. So Nissan took a page out of Ford's book and spun the [350Z](#) off its all-new Skyline sedan ([Infiniti G35](#) in the U.S.). Though Nissan used the original 1970-1978 Datsun 240/260/280Z as psychographic inspiration for the new Z, designers ditched the retro look in favor of Ajay Panchal's sculpted and chiseled new-age exercise. The idea was to capture the spirit of the first Z without relying on its styling cliches. It helped that the Skyline's chassis was no mongrel--a front/mid-engine layout, slick-shifting six-speed manual, and lightweight aluminum suspension made a convincing argument. With a price starting under \$30K, 350Z sales soon rocketed past the [Z4](#), [Boxster](#), [TT](#), SLK, [RX-8](#), and [S2000](#) and challenged the [Corvette](#) for a while for the title of best-selling sports car. The 350Z has helped rekindle interest in Asian rear-drive performance cars, a genre that nearly became extinct in the mid-1990s. And, as the brand's icon, the Z gives Nissan the performance high ground over dowdy [Toyota](#).

[Nissan's 350Z](#) delivers on its sports-car promise with precise, communicative steering, a crisp turn-in response, and taut suspension that keeps the car composed and ready for the driver's next move. In our testing, the Z's 0.87 g of lateral grip and 66.2-mph 600-foot-slalom speed easily bested the [Mustang's](#) 0.81g skidpad and 63.4-mph cone-threading performances. The Nissan's powerful (non-Brembo) four-wheel discs hauled it down without drama from 60 mph in 119 feet, seven shorter than the [Ford's](#). The Z's short-throw shifter is buttery smooth, its throws quick and decisive. Though Nissan's VQ V-6 pumps just 287 horsepower here, it presents a fluid powerband that's enthusiastic all the way to its 6600-rpm rev limit with no sags or dead zones. The 350Z feels like it's geared lower than the Mustang, all the better to exercise its snappy V-6. Variable valve timing gives the four-valve V-6 flexibility. Combined with the better-spaced gearing of the 350Z's six-speed manual transmission, the car is hardly ever in the wrong gear.

The 350Z's driver's seat does a good job of keeping the pilot ringside for the action, too; the seatback enhances lateral support by hugging the love-handle region, and the cushion anchors with effective thigh and crotch support. Gauges move up and down with the steering column; all major controls are within comfortable reach. At least as far as the mechanics of the car are involved, making the transition from coupe to roadster involves few structural compromises. For a coupe-based open-top car, the 350Z doesn't shake much over bumps.

With the new Mustang, Ford has launched the best ponycar ever built. It makes you wonder how good the [Camaro](#) and Firebird would've been had General Motors stayed in the game. But the Mustang's not a sports car. Seats are comfy enough, even on long trips, but you sit on them, not in them as in the Z-Car. The manual shifter's throws are long and shift-action notchy compared with the Z's willing instrument. Turn the steering wheel, and there's an initial reluctance to change direction, a noticeable phase lag in transitions. It's open to conjecture whether that's due to tires with wiggly sidewalls, suspension bushing compliance, steering freeplay, or just a body structure that misses its steel roof. The Mustang feels heavier than the 173-pound difference between it and the Nissan. Brakes are effective, up to a point; barreling down a mountain road, you'll wish it had more. Also, brake dive on hard application is unsettling.

Offering a drop-top just adds to the romantic notion of breezy midnight sojourns. The [Ford](#) looks good top up or top down, something we can't say for the [Nissan](#). Shorn of its long, low, slender fastback roof inspired by the original Datsun 240Z, the [350Z](#) Roadster looks pudgy and ungainly. With the softtop up, as it'll be in all but the sunniest of climes, the 350Z loses its long-hood, short-deck proportions, the rear stack height needed to clear the folding-top apparatus giving the car an acute case of bubble butt. That's a shame, because convertibles in general and icons in particular are just as much about being seen in as making the scene in.

In the final analysis, the 350Z Roadster is the better sports car. It's the one you'll want to take for a spin over a challenging section of tarmac. The exterior is aesthetically challenged but of little concern when your view is from the driver's seat. But the [Mustang](#) GT is still the favorite with classic good looks and the rumble of V-8 power. This Ford offers tremendous bang for the buck, and judging from the admiring looks, walkups in parking lots, and unsolicited thumbs up from a wide cross section of the population, young and old, the Mustang is a crowd pleaser. So good, in fact, that some folks will buy this car without ever taking it for a test-drive. That makes the Mustang GT the better icon.

	2005 Ford Mustang GT conv	2005 Nissan 350Z Roadster
Powertrain/Chassis		
Drivetrain Layout	Front engine, RWD	Front engine, RWD
Engine type	V-8, alum block and heads	V-6, alum block and heads
Valvetrain	SOHC, 3 valves/cyl	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
Displacement	281.0 cu in/4606cc	213.5 cu in/ 3498cc
Compression ratio	9.8:1	10.3:1
Redline	6250 rpm	6600 rpm
Power (Sae Net)	300 hp @ 5750 rpm	287 hp @ 6200 rpm
Torque (Sae Net)	320 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm	274 lb-ft @ 4800 rpm
Specific output	65.2 hp/liter	82.0 hp/liter
Weight to power	12.3 lb/hp	12.3 lb/hp
Transmission	5-speed manual	6-speed manual

Axle/final-drive ratios	3.55:1 / 2.41:1	3.54:1 / 2.81:1
Suspension, front; rear	Struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar; live axle, coil springs, anti-roll bar; anti-roll bar	Control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs
Steering ratio	15.7:1	15.9:1
Turns lock-to-lock	2.8	2.6
Brakes, f;r	12.4-in vented disc; 11.8-in vented disc, ABS	11.7-in vented disc; 11.5-in vented disc, ABS
Wheels	17 x 8.0 cast aluminum	18 x 8.0 cast aluminum
Tires	235/55ZR17 98W Pirelli P Zero Nero	f: 225/45R18 91W; r: 245/45R18 96W Bridgestone Potenza RE040
Dimensions		
Wheelbase	107.1 in	104.3 in
Track, f/r	65.7 / 63.6 in	63.0 / 63.7 in
Length x Width x Height	188.0 x 73.9 x 55.7 in	169.4 x 71.5 x 52.3 in
Turning circle	38.0 ft	35.4 ft
Curb weight	3690 lb	3517 lb
Weight distribution, f/r	51 / 49 %	53 / 47 %
Seating capacity	4 passengers	2 passengers
Headroom, f/r	38.8 / 36.3 in	39.2 in
Legroom, f/r	42.7 / 30.3 in	42.6 in
Shoulder room, f/r	55.4 / 45.0 in	53.6 in
Cargo capacity	9.7 cu ft	6.8 cu ft (w/temp, spare)
Test Data		
Acceleration to mph		
0-30	2.0 sec	2.1 sec
0-40	3.0	3.2
0-50	4.1	4.4
0-60	5.4	5.8
0-70	7.2	7.8
0-80	9.2	9.8
0-90	11.4	12.4
0-100	13.3	15.3
Passing, 45-65 mph	2.8	3.0
1/4 mile	13.9 sec @ 100.8 mph	14.2 sec @ 98.2 mph
Braking, 60-0 mph	126 ft	119 ft
600-ft slalom	63.4 mph avg	66.2 mph avg
Lateral acceleration	0.81 g avg	0.87 g avg
Top gear rpm @ 60 mph	1900 rpm	2250 rpm
Consumer Info		
Base price incl dest	\$31,175	\$37,330
Price as tested	\$33,905	\$41,110
Stability/traction control	No/yes	No/yes
Airbags	Dual front, front sides	Dual front, front sides
Basic warranty	3 yrs/36,000 miles	3 yrs/36,000 miles
Powertrain warranty	3 yrs/36,000 miles	5 yrs/60,000 miles
Roadside assist period	3 yrs/36,000 miles	None
Fuel capacity	16.0 gal	20.0 gal
EPA city/hwy fuel econ	17 / 25 mpg	20 / 26 mpg
Recommended fuel	Unleaded regular	Unleaded premium

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