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Road Test: 2006 Ford Mustang Shelby GT-H

We Rent It, We Race It-Nothing is more fun than driving someone else's car

From the September, 2006 issue of Motor Trend

It's 1966 and you, Mr. Jet Setter, are blowing into [Malibu](#) for the weekend. Being a hip man-about-town, driving a rented Galaxy or Belvedere isn't your scene, even with Bobby Darin playing on the eight-track. You have people to see, parties to hit, and skirts to chase. But don't sweat it, sport. There's a better deal: Drive into a Hertz location and sign up for a 306-horsepower Shelby GT350H. Sure, \$17 a day and 17 a mile is a lot for a rental car. But not for a high-roller like you.

Such was the dreamscape Hertz painted for its original Shelby GT350H rental car program: a fast, beautiful ride available to fast, beautiful people at the flick of a Diners Club card. The visuals were accurate, and the dazzling (mostly) black-and-gold Mustangs were popular for executives on business travel or those looking to enhance their Sixties weekend getaway. But these special machines occasionally led a second, less talked-about life.

The tales of GT350Hs being returned to a Hertz lot with holes in the floor to facilitate the mounting of rollbars and/or racing harnesses are the stuff of urban legend. Instead of cruising along the coast highway or languishing at a resort in Palm Beach, some of them spent their weekends on road courses and at dragstrips. Tires-fresh only days before, but now worn to the cord-were another clue to the action they'd seen. One war story recounts a late-night engine swap, the poor [Mustang](#) being dumped back on Hertz with a well-worn 260 under the hood, instead of the fresh, Shelby-modified 289 it came with. The GT350H didn't earn the nickname "Rent-a-Racer" for nothing.

Automotive folklore notwithstanding, the program was a success. Hertz rented a lot of cars, and original H-model Shelys are now worth a mint. It must have been good P. R., too, as we're still talking about it, four decades later. So much so that the Hertz Corporation, Shelby Automobiles, and [Ford](#) Motor Company have decided to launch a sequel. Meet the new GT-H.

One insider confides that some folks at [Ford](#) were squeamish about the program initially, thinking the GT-H might cause confusion with the 500-horsepower [Ford Shelby GT500](#) coming to market this fall. But as talks continued, everyone concluded they're different cars with differing appeal. Since Shelby's customer is Hertz, not the public, the GT500's sales, Ford dealer agreements, and Shelby Automobile's contract prohibiting the company from retailing its own Shelby Mustangs won't be affected.

What morphs a GT into a GT-H? A combination of Shelby and Ford Racing Performance Group sourced parts. All 500 GT-Hs will be painted black, accented with those trademark gold stripes on the hood, top, trunk, and rocker panels. The "GT" emblems on the front fenders are replaced by Hertz badges, and the individual chrome letters that spell "S-H-E-L-B-Y" across the trunk are the same as those on a 1968 GT350 and 500. Body armor consists of side scoops, a new lower front fascia, and a more aggressive hood, including 1960s-style hood pins. The factory grille gives way to a brushed-aluminum replacement wearing an original-style pony badge.

Under that bulging hood is an internally stock 4.6-liter, SOHC three-valve V-8 treated to a Ford Racing Power Pack, which kicks the horsepower rating from 300 to 325. Torque increases by 10 pound-feet. The package (FR1 in the Ford Racing catalog) consists of a 90mm cold-air intake, freer-flowing (read: louder) mufflers, and a reflash of the engine-management system for a more aggressive timing curve. Premium fuel is now required. The exhaust's standard H-pipe crossover is swapped for a less restrictive X-pipe.

What really helps off-the-line punch, especially for a relatively heavy car like the [Mustang](#), is the change from the standard 3.31:1 rear gear to a more aggressive 3.55. It's more cost- and time-effective to swap the entire rearend than to open up the diff and change the ring and pinion, so that's what Shelby does. All GT-Hs are equipped with five-speed automatic transmissions, for self-protection reasons, and the brake calipers are refinished in black.

Construction at our test facility kept us off the slalom, so we have no handling numbers for comparison. Subjectively, the stiffer underpinnings and lowered ride height feel as if they improve the car's cornering response without a significant ride penalty. Body motions are more controlled, and the steering is sharper, although you'll feel big whoop-di-dos in your spleen more so than in a stocker.

Deleting the rear wing would've been a nice touch. The original GT350H didn't have one, and some feel the [Mustang](#) looks better without it anyway. Shelby Mustangs always had unique alloys-why not Shelby-specific wheels this time out? Simple: cost. And why no functional cold-air hood? Because this piece was originally designed for a SEMA show car called the CS-6, which predates the GT-H. Perhaps some special interior touches, too-Shelby floor mats, even-might better complete the package. But overall, the GT-H looks and drives as a special car should.

How to rent one and how to buy one? Renting is as simple as visiting one of the 19 Hertz select airport locations, in California, Arizona, Nevada, [Colorado](#), and Florida, that offer them. Buying one, however, will require patience and timing.

Rental-car rates fluctuate with the season and demand, but the Hertz Reservation Center quoted us \$149.99 per day in Los Angeles and West Palm Beach (but \$189.99 in Las Vegas), which includes the first 75 miles. Add 39 per mile thereafter. You must be 25 or older to rent a GT-H. In the spirit of providing the car for business and recreational travelers-not weekend bracket-racers-you must produce a plane ticket or itinerary documenting your out-of-town residency and recent arrival, or you'll be denied. Any concerns about abuse? "We've built that into the cost of the rental. We'll also do a pre- and post-rental inspection with the buyer to make sure everything's as it should be," says Rivera. Shelby vice president of sales Gary Patterson adds, with a cocked eyebrow, that the "factory traction-control defeat switch has been, uh, defeated."

Back In Business

From 1965 through 1967, Shelby Mustangs were built by Shelby. Cars were assembled by [Ford](#) to a certain spec and then delivered to Shelby's Los Angeles area facilities. Mustangs were converted using a combination of Shelby and aftermarket parts, then reserialized and delivered to Ford dealers or, in the case of the H models, to Hertz. With the exception of the shop now being located in Las Vegas, and the fact that this model isn't available new from Ford, today's GT-H program is startlingly similar to the original.

The assembly building-the same used for the Shelby Series I-is outfitted with six lifts, each of which is the epicenter of a [Mustang's](#) transformation from GT to GT-H. Two-man teams are responsible for the process from stem to stern. They receive the car, inspect it, and begin the assembly process. The rearend is swapped, as are the exhaust system, shocks, anti-roll bars, intake system, and so on. The hood, fascias, and side scoops are painted on-site in Shelby's own booth. The same guys who bolt on the bodywork are responsible for putting on the ID badges, although a separate team focuses on the gold-stripe appliques. About 10 man-hours are required for the conversion, not including paintwork.

The quality-assurance checklists are highly detailed, including each team test-driving the car and placing their signatures on it. "We want every guy on the line to have ownership in the car and the process" says production manager Akos Feher.



"It's their responsibility to get the car right from every aspect. The team also has been the source of many process-improvement suggestions. These cars are their babies." The quality of the finished cars we saw on the production line backs that up.

What's even more heartwarming to Shelbyphiles is that this is real. It's not a licensee agreement, an arrangement with a subcontractor, or a backyard Shelby clone operation. The guys at the Cobra prototype of 1962-CSX2000-sits in the lobby. And the man who owns the place is a Texan named Carroll. Just as it should be.

We Race It And It Hertz So Good

By John Kiewicz

In order to relive the Rent-a-Racer experience, we head for the tight curves of L.A.'s Mulholland Drive, the famed site of decade's worth of illicit road-racing battles. The GT-H's tighter suspension, increased power, and more aggressive 3.55:1 rear gearing make for a lively drive compared with that of a stock GT. Handling is crisp and predictable, and when pushed the GT-H delivers controllable tailout oversteer and wide grins.

Later that day, we cruise to Irwindale Speedway for some heads-up drag racing on a VHT-prepped launch pad with proper Christmas-tree starting lights. In the staging lanes, our GT-H receives mixed reviews. Young guys think it looks cool but have no idea who Shelby is, and they're clueless to GT350H history. The over-40 crowd knows exactly what the black-and-gold Mustang is all about, but thinks the car lacks enough raw power-interesting, as the original Shelby GT350H had only 35 more SAE gross horsepower than did the original HiPo Mustang; this one has 25 net horsepower more than a standard GT's, which equates to a similar power increase.

Rent me, I'm yours

- 1. At 4.0-inches, exhaust tips are an inch larger than stock
- 2. Wish there were no wing, like the original
- 3. Stock wheels retained due to cost issues
- 4. Rear-side windows originated on 1966 Shelby
- 5. Shelby side scoops recall 1966 model
- 6. Revised suspension lowers ride height 1.25 inches
- 7. Hertz badge replaces "GT"
- 8. Brake calipers now black
- 9. Hood is beefy enough but nonfunctional
- 10. Watch low to the ground front spoiler

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