

Every model of the Mustang makes its mark. Always has. From its inception in the mid-'60s, equally adept at providing—in its 6-cylinder base model—simple function and a sense of style and fun to the proverbial young, single office worker—to providing all-out heavy-hammer performance and machismo to, well, you know who you are—the Ford Mustang has successfully tackled the serious challenge of being all things to all people. There's little question that the high-performance Mustangs make the most indelible mark on our psyche. Always have—from the early GTs through Boss 302, Boss 429 and Mach I versions in the mid-to-late '60s and early '70s, through generations of Shelby and Saleen builds and more—and they always will.

Despite the early Mustang's success in creating the pony car niche (and the name of the niche), the Camaro

—arriving two and a half years later—was dusting it in competition. To counter this, Ford put serious effort into its 428 Cobra Jet V8, another story for another time, and into a modified 302 cu.in. V8 built from a Windsor block and larger Cleveland heads. This package was built for Trans Am racing, but since that is a homologated sport—the vehicles must be volume production models—the special new 302 was built as a 1969 showroom Mustang, the Boss 302. There are a couple of stories on the Boss name. (Bear in mind this was years before Springsteen made his mark with that moniker.) Legendary Ford designer Larry Shinoda reportedly kept the project secret by telling others simply that he was disappearing to work on the boss's car. Once the car proved victorious on the track—at the hands of Parnelli Jones—the name was set in concrete.

Model years 1969 and 1970. That was it. Amazingly, with several decades of GTs, Shelybys, Bullitts and other performance iterations, the Boss 302 name remained dormant. And over the past twenty years, original examples sold at auction or among collectors climbed from about \$5000 to \$25,000 to \$75,000 or more.

In 2007, Saleen teamed up with Parnelli Jones to create the Mustang-bodied Saleen S302, an homage car with its own modified 302 V8, plus side stripes, rear louvers and front and rear spoilers evocative of the original.

That may or may not have been a factor in sparking Ford to bring the model back to life. But for 2012, here it is: the all-new Ford Mustang Boss 302.

Maybe it's because Ford has done so well



THE BOSS WILL SEE YOU NOW

BY JOE SAGE

POWERED BY FORD

All in all, the new Mustang Boss 302 has the aura of the original (1970 Boss 302 shown third photo down, at right). Stripes, spoilers and exhaust tips reflect the original. The cabin is all Mustang: comfortable, clean and functional. The new Boss 302 echoes the original, coming in such colors as Grabber Blue (the only Grabber in the modern set), Race Red (our sample), School Bus Yellow or Black with red highlights. At the heart of it all is a track-capable 302 cu.in. V8 and 6-speed manual.

with the Mustang's retro styling, that we find a lot to love in the Bullitt, the California Special, the GT and now the Boss 302. Or maybe it's because there was so much to love in all of those, that Ford chose to spend the past several years devoted to that retro look. Either way, this suit of armor suits the Mustang very well.

As for performance, and as with the original, the Boss 302's essence goes much deeper than a set of stripes and a spoiler. The modern car is built for acceleration, speed, braking and handling. Included are a 5.0-liter—yes, the same as 302 cu.in. all along—DOHC V8 with an output of 444 hp. This power feeds through a short-throw close-ratio 6-speed manual and optional limited-slip 3.73 rear axle with carbon fiber clutch plates and Torsen differential. A quad exhaust system relieves pressure and generates great V8 sound effects. Suspension adds stiffer coils and bushings at all four corners, an upsized rear stabilizer bar, manually adjustable shocks and struts, and staggered wheels and tires—19-inch lightweight alloys with 255/40 front and 255/35 rear Z-rated tires. Front brakes are 14-inch vented Brembo four-piston disks. The body carries the hockey-stick side signage of the 1970 model, plus front splitter and rear spoiler. A blacked-out hood area echoes the original. Best of all, when you hop in and sit down, your hand goes right to a purposeful shift knob. Yahoo.

The deep bucket seats adjust manually. Settle in, lean back, and the hood with its power bulge feels high and mighty. You are ready to launch. The quad exhaust does its job: the V8 engine note is well done.

We often find that 6-speed manuals have their gates ill-defined and the chosen gear sometimes hard to hit. This one, however, is very smooth and very precise.

We found the seating position—a slinky hunkered-down posture—to be perfect, once you're settled in and, well, slinking around. Our ergonomic nitpicks centered on the console, which was ill-positioned for opening when you wanted to, while too easy to open inadvertently. With windows down, interior acoustics were strained—wind noise and fluttering made conversation difficult. But job one remains driving.

Our car included all the Boss basics, plenty of 'em, plus the optional 3.73 limited slip rear end with Torsen, as well as Recaro sport seats. Base price was listed as \$40,145, and the differential and Recaro combo added \$1995. With destination, the total is \$42,990. Take it to the track, or keep it on the street, and you will find this compares very favorably with a lot of vehicles this Mustang Boss 302 can easily smoke.

That Torsen diff is added to the Mustang's classic solid rear axle. If you like to nail it and let it hang out,



you still can. If you want more control, turn to the car's AdvanTrac electronic stability control (ESC). Our cornering felt solid, while still giving us great wheels-to-hands feel of its traction limits. Perfect.

If you've been enamored by the Camaro, and if you've been enamored by the Challenger, but for some reason are not sure you're enamored with the Mustang, too, then hop in a Boss 302 and take it somewhere, and now you will be.

The Boss 302 has great power for the open road, but thankfully also for around town. It's not so overdone as to be barely usable in traffic, as some of the high-performance iterations are. You like the highway and you like the track, obviously. But if you just want a good sound, a good ride, a good look and a good feel ... but with a ride that's still controllable enough for everyday driving, the Mustang Boss 302 slots in extremely well between a regular Mustang GT and the top-dollar Shelybys. (And there's not a Shelby out there that won't still cautiously wonder just how they'd do against you.)

Da Boss is da bomb. ■

