



pony, bull and box

THREE NEW FORD LINEUPS: MUSTANG, TAURUS AND FLEX

BY JOE SAGE



2013 Ford Mustang California Special



Ford had enough big news brewing that they pulled three of their hottest items into one big session—a couple of days in northwest Oregon, on rainy, snowy, sleety, windy days, trying out their updated 2013 Ford Taurus, Flex and Mustang—quite a few Mustangs, in fact.

The Mustang next year—model year 2014—will be much bigger news, as a highly-anticipated (and well concealed to date) completely new generation comes to life. The current generation of “retro” Mustangs, since 2005, has been very successful—and, to our eye, has possibly had its style just about perfected for 2013. A few Shelby iterations have gotten it right, along the way, but it basically has taken till now for the front end sheet-metal to look as the original concepts suggested. Bravo.

ford family of fine mustangs

Ford delivers “a steed for every need,” in the words of chief Mustang engineer Dave Pericak. Mustang has always excelled at being—in varying guises—all things to all people, a trait that precious few politicians or cars can pull off. Whether a fun little six-cylinder for a twenty-something single, or an all-to-the-wall supercar, the brand delivers, and most amazingly, none of these has ever detracted from the attraction of the others.

The Mustang can become any owner’s dream, and is ripe for customization. This is not necessarily of the wild SEMA or even Shelby variety, but can involve just the standard book of options. Ford has had over one million potential customers custom-building their new Mustang on Facebook since last fall—the most “likes” of any car.

Pericak calls the Mustang “the most iconic car in Ford’s history.” Iconic is a word that gets used too often and too freely for some people’s taste, but it’s hard to dispute in this case. Yet the Mustang never rests on its laurels. Over just the past three model years, they have brought us a new engine in the 2010 Shelby GT500, a 5.4-liter muscled up to 540 hp and 510 lb-ft of torque,



then a 2011 GT500 knocking off over 100 pounds and hitting 550 hp. In 2012, we saw a new V6 boasting record fuel mileage: 31 MPG; an updated version of the venerable 5.0-liter bringing the best of both worlds, with 412 hp and 26 MPG; and the enhanced 5.0-liter (302 cu.in.) V8 in the reborn Boss 302, at 444 hp (see our March/April 2012 issue). By last year, even a regular ol’ Mustang GT would deliver 412 hp.

For 2013, the base price of that GT is under \$31,000, compared with just over \$42,000 for the Boss (or just over \$54,000 for the Shelby GT500). For max affordability, the base V6 Mustang starts at just \$22,895. Best of all, that GT is now matching the Boss 302, at 420 hp, while the Shelby now runs speeds over 200 mph on its 5.8L, the most powerful production V8 in the world.

There is quite a selection of new Mustangs for 2013, but they all benefit from this year’s new laurels. The front bodywork we admire is not all for show: the new fascia applies downforce that makes this the most aerodynamically well-planted Mustang ever produced. The body also benefits from functional hood louvers (on the GT), body-colored rocker panels—and no plastic. Lighting is distinctive, coming or going, with HID headlamps, two LED strips up front (plus LED fogs on the GT),

and all-new LED taillights (with that classic Ford touch, sequential turn signals). To keep the design clean, and to benefit from the attributes of these new light sources, the center brake light shifts from red to white when the car is put in reverse.

Wheels are new, with lots of options. Cloth and leather Recaro seats are available across the lineup. Cars are available in both manual across the full line, as well they should be, and automatic on all but the Boss 302 or Shelby GT500. Ford is proud of the 6-speed SelectShift automatic: upgraded to mimic the kind of control a good manual driver can exert, with gears held longer for quicker acceleration.

Dashboard electronics are plentiful but not overdone. A 4.2-inch LCD screen in the instrument panel puts a wealth of performance information at your fingertips, including not only speed and RPMs, but also a gauge mode with familiar trip and temperature readouts, and on Premium models, a set of Track Apps displaying G-forces and even a Christmas tree timer—dragstrip-style—for your own controlled launches. Audio is new: a 370-watt 8-speaker 6-channel system, or a 550-watt 9-speaker

KEEP RIGHT >>



2013 Ford Taurus SHO



7-channel. In fact, the sound is so powerful, Ford had to reengineer the door handles to handle the vibrations.

There are some very strong packages available for 2013: a factory-installed Track Package on the Mustang GT, a Performance Package for the V6, a California Special Package for the GT Premium model (keeping alive one of the best option names from Mustang in the '60s and, as then, easily distinguished by its off-center running horse grille emblem), and a Laguna Seca Package for the Boss 302 (available, among other things, in School Bus Yellow or black-on-black).

Speaking of colors, a parking lot full of new Mustangs on a gloomy Portland morning will perk you right up: with colors like Race Red, Gotta Have It Green, Grabber Blue or that School Bus Yellow, they leave behind a world too full of black, white and seven shades of grey.

There was nothing gloomy about our time in the Mustangs, even when the sky was grey and the roads were wet. We comfortably drove through suburban hills until we reached winding mountain two-lanes and really let 'em out. The day was capped off with straightaways near the airport, more fun for some than others, once the police caught wind of how hot these cars are. We drove the 5.0L California Special with 6-speed manual most of

the day, and gave the automatic a challenging workout on those straightaways before wrapping things up.

taurus reaches its stride

Chief Taurus engineer Bill Gubing starts out by telling us about the big Ford sedan's powerplants: not one but two EcoBoosts—a 2.0-liter inline four, and a 3.5-liter V6. There is another 3.5-liter V6, too, non-EcoBoost. Not every drivetrain combination is possible, but the pairings are so logical, we foresee very few buyer conflicts. The standard V6 is available with either front-wheel or all-wheel drive, has 288 hp and 254 lb-ft of torque, and gets 19/29/23 MPG (city/highway/combined) with FWD or 18/26/21 with AWD. The twin turbo EcoBoost V6 comes only in the potent Taurus SHO with AWD, and while it pumps power up to 365 hp and 350 lb-ft of torque, it has only a one-point loss in fuel mileage across the board for an all-wheel-driver: 17/25/20 MPG (city/highway/combined). A 5 percent loss in fuel mileage for a 27 percent boost in power is a trade we'd happily make (although we remain a little surprised at the 3- or 4-point loss in highway mileage with AWD). But wait—there's that other EcoBoost. The four-banger is only available with FWD, but comes close to traditional V6 power, at 240 hp

and 270 lb-ft of torque (or with regular fuel, 231 hp, same torque). Fuel mileage has not been announced by the EPA yet, but tests so far indicate 31 MPG. Not bad at all for a large, heavy, comfortable American sedan.

For our drive from Portland to the coast, we chose the same one we'd probably buy: the Taurus SHO with EcoBoost V6. Its AWD was an excellent choice, as we had quite a bit of weather to deal with, and the car handled its additional power with no problems, only benefits. Those who drove the same route the day before—up in elevation from the inland city to Cannon Beach—had encountered a very wet and heavy spring snow. Most of that was gone, but our drive added wind—lots and lots of wind, estimated in the 60-to-70-mph range. A good time to be hugging the ground and gripping the pavement in a nice, solid car like the 2013 Ford Taurus.

And speaking of what we'd probably buy, that powerful AWD Taurus SHO with V6 EcoBoost starts at \$39,200. An AWD standard V6 Taurus Limited starts at \$33,000. The base SE model with that standard V6 and FWD starts at \$26,600. It's a reasonable price spread for the differences among the models, and given what you get, they're all bargains. Think comfort and style that could rival the Germans, but for \$20-30k less. As Gubing says, the Taurus has moved distinctly from being a commodity item for years, to being an aspirational vehicle.

The Taurus looks similar to its predecessor, but is clearly recognizable by its new grille, similar to the new Ford Fusion (and to the Evos concept car, which many consider a clue to the 2014 Mustang). Changes are thorough, however. The wheels, hood and projector beam headlamps are new. Inside, "everything you see or touch" is new or upgraded, says Gubing. Inside and out, adjustments have been made to fit and finish, fine-tuned down to the half-millimeter range.

Ford's declared target for all their new styling and engineering is the Audi A6. Have they achieved that? Don't shop the segment without finding out for yourself.



2013 Ford Flex Limited

As Ford themselves say, over the past few years, while Taurus has gone from once being a midsize sedan to full size, it has also gone from being a low-key "sleeper" to being arguably a standout—very much differentiated from the rest of their lineup and from the competition.

the firm and flexible flex

Ford engineer Tom Ozog is the first to admit that the Ford Flex is perfect for "people who want to stand out from the crowd." The magic of the Flex has always been that for a vehicle with basically a fundamentally boxy and mundane format, it has always been a real eye-catcher. The 2013 model will catch a few more eyes than ever, with its distinctive grille treatment. We're a little surprised that Ford has so many front sheetmetal treatments evolving so quickly right now—from the wide silver bars of the past few years, through last year's Focus (and this year's Escape) look, which was stated to be a benchmark but has already been changed in the Focus Electric, to the new Fusion/Taurus/Evos look. Meanwhile, the new Flex is in a world of its own. When we first saw it at the LA Auto Show last winter, it reminded us of the Frozone character in the Pixar film *The Incredibles*, or Cyclops from *X-Men*. But let's not forget that those characters were both very cool.

Ford's large utility vehicles—including Flex and Explorer—have had sales growth of 34 percent over the past two years, the segment's number one sellers. The huge profile of the Explorer brings customers in, who then discover the Edge and the Flex. With its three-row, seven-passenger layout and huge cargo space, Flex quickly wins over a lot of families.

The Flex itself has huge drawing power. It has the most loyal customers in the whole Ford lineup—67 percent of buyers trade to Flex from within the brand—and it draws massive numbers of new ones: 55 percent of Flex buyers are new to Ford. Demographics are interesting, too: 20 percent of sales are in California, home of



the woody wagon so many years ago, and 45 percent of sales are to women. This is also a vehicle where the MyFord Touch system is highly popular—JD Power and Associates studies indicate it's a big reason people buy the Flex (even though it's available on other models).

The Flex comes with either of the same two V6 engines as its platform-mate Taurus for 2013: the 287-hp standard 3.5-liter or the 365-hp EcoBoost. The EcoBoost four is not available on this one, so far.

An Appearance Package on the midgrade SEL or top grade Limited adds a black painted roof and mirrors, 20-inch aluminum wheels with black details, plus a range of interior upgrades (including gloss black details on the steering wheels). This is a very classy and cool look, all the more when coupled with tinted windows in Arizona.

Handling has received special attention in the new Flex, centered on its electric power-assisted steering (EPAS) system, which Ford states gives 25 percent better steering response than a BMW X5. Steering feel is hard to sum up in one number, but this makes a point.

Our drive in the 2013 Ford Flex was from Cannon Beach on the Oregon coast, up into the high country and via snowy, slushy, icy mountain roads back to Portland. We chose the EcoBoost V6 Limited and loved it. The Flex

can look a mile long, when you discover it for the first time. But, after all, it's built on the same platform as the superb-handling (and SVT-ready) Taurus. And it does have room. We were an army of two that day, but the Flex seats seven. When so populated, cargo capacity behind the third row is 20 cu.ft. Knock down the third row, and cargo exceeds 40 cu.ft.; and with the middle row also down, it exceeds 80 cu.ft. There are a lot of seven-passenger vehicles available, but matching the fuel economy, road-hugging stance and overall volume of the Flex is tough. And as Huey Lewis and the News said long ago, it's hip to be square.

three fine fords ready to rock

We drove our Taurus, Flex and multiple Mustangs during some of the nastier but more exhilarating weather the Pacific Northwest can throw at you. We drove them on smooth open highways at speed, and in traffic on tight maneuvers. Every one is well suited to its mission—and would be equally delighted to spend its life on the dry, open roads of the Sonoran Desert, or on long hauls into the high country or on the highway to San Diego. Each one of these Fords hovers toward the higher end of its respective scale. It's great terrain to explore. ■