



HOT PURSUIT

THERE'S A scene in the "Blues Brothers" movie that illustrates how this story began. Dan Akroyd (Elwood) is explaining to John Belushi (Jake) why he swapped the band's Cadillac for a seedy-looking ex-cop car. Addressing Jake in the deliberate style one uses with children and half-wits, Elwood says, "It's got cop tires, cop shocks and a cop motor."

In other words, even if the car looks like a destruction derby also-ran, cop components automatically guarantee that it's gotta be a bullet.

Think about this for a second. If you're like us, you've accepted this notion as an ancient and immutable truth of automotive life, dating almost to the dawn of cars in police work. However hot your ride might be, the cops had something hotter.

This perception was not without foundation. The concept of the police interceptor special dawned in the '30s, but reached its zenith during the

When the chase goes on for 24 hours, only the strong survive.

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PM Team at Nelson Ledges (l to r): Editor Swan, Art Director Canniff; Editors Frank, Allen, Taylor; Crew Stefan Frank, Nigri, Handlemeyer Jr., Blosser, Handlemeyer Sr.; Chief Mechanic Tison, Henderson, Crew chief Sprafka.

heyday of big-inch V8 engines in the '50s and '60s. All the major manufacturers offered special police packages that included plenty of extra muscle, and some departments specified powertrains that tiptoed along the edge of race-ready.

Legendary police units evolved during this era. The Signal Hill Mercurys, near Long Beach, California. The LAPD 421-cu.-in. Pontiacs. The dreaded Pennsylvania Turnpike Chryslers, booted along by 300 series hemis.

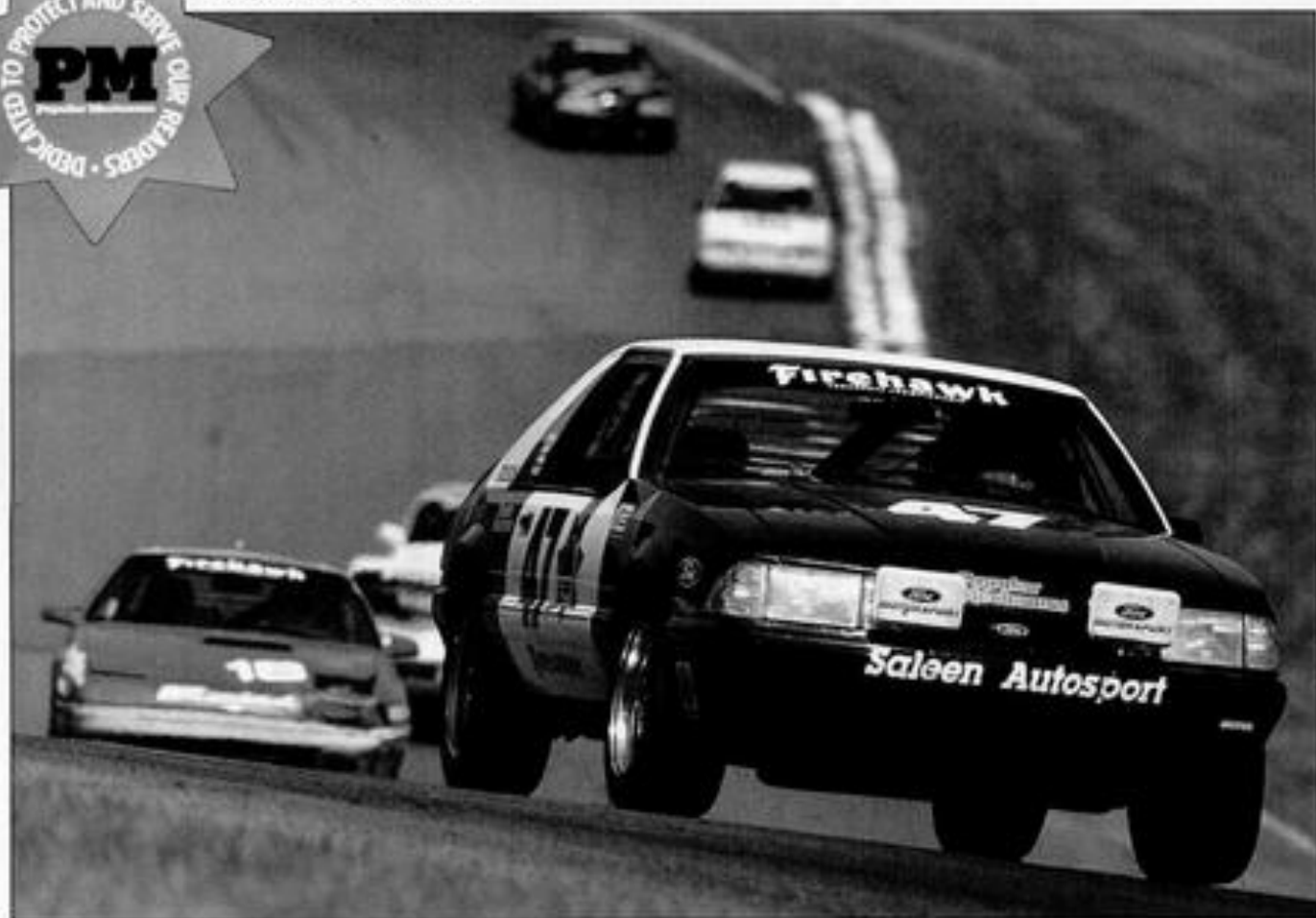
But the question that intrigued us was whether the police interceptor special continues to be the tire-smokin' bad boy of days gone by—or has it become a car that's very much like its civilian counterparts.

We leaned toward the latter, and to test our theory we devised one of the toughest road tests ever attempted.

We began by targeting the hottest police car in wide use today. Employed as a high-speed pursuit unit by a number of state highway patrol organizations, the Ford 5.0-liter Mustang is as good a performance buy at the fleet sales level as it is for the average enthusiast. Its power-to-weight ratio (in cop trim) of 13.5 lbs./hp gives it an edge over all but a handful of cars when it

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comes to the thrills of the chase.

Naturally, we wanted to see what a combat-ready police Mustang could do, so we obtained the loan of a cop-spec car in California for basic performance testing (see sidebar). The results were what we expected—0-to-60 in 7.1 seconds, with a quarter-mile time of 15.48 seconds at 94.32.

Those numbers aren't the worst we've seen for a 5.0-liter HO Mustang, but they aren't the best, either. In fact, our own homemade police special was somewhat quicker: 6.8 seconds 0-to-60, 15.1 seconds at 95.62 mph for the quarter. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here.

While West Coast Editor Len Frank was busy logging performance data on the cop-spec Mustang, we decided to escalate the entire exercise by creating a Mustang that would be the performance equal of any police edition in the country and the endurance champ of them all.

In short, we decided to create a Mustang capable of running flat-out, around the clock, under the most demanding conditions.

And it was this decision that led us to take on a pair of 24-hour showroom stock races, one at Watkins Glen, in upstate New York, the second at Nelson Ledges, Ohio, where endurance racing of this kind got its start.

The 135-mph straightaway speeds at Watkins Glen necessitated repeated brake-pad replacement, which PM's pit crew ultimately managed to complete in sub-2-minute pit stops.



The Saleen connection

We called our friends at Ford, who generously donated an '88 LX hatchback Mustang. Then we sat down and took a realistic look at the race dates bearing down on us—at that point, little more than a month away—and realized we needed help. Even in showroom stock racing, where the only major modifications to the car are safety related—roll cages, fire systems and so on—there's an enormous amount of preparation.

After drawing up a list of everything that would need to be optimized to make a decent showing at the Glen, we decided to call the most successful Mustang racers we knew. And to anyone who's been following the Sports Car Club of America Escort Endur-

ance series recently, that can only mean Steve Saleen and the Saleen Autosport organization.

Based in Anaheim, California, Saleen is emerging as Ford's new Carroll Shelby. His Saleen Mustang street cars, available through selected Ford dealers, bring out the latent grand touring machine that lurks within every 5.0-liter Mustang. And his showroom stock racers reinforce the technical credibility of the organization. Led by the driving skills of Rick Titus and Saleen himself, the Saleen Mustangs raced to GT-class honors in the 1987 Escort series.

Clearly, we could be in no better hands. And even though his group has its hands full campaigning vehicles in two professional series—the SCCA



Nelson's high temps, short straights, poor track conditions, unpredictable traffic and second-place Camaro kept PM drivers and pit crew busy through the race.



Escort Endurance races and the Coors Racetrack Challenge—Saleen adopted us and agreed to get the car ready for its 2-race campaign. The execution of this project was left to Howard Comstock, who runs the new Saleen shops in Livonia, Michigan.

We gratefully left the car in Howard's capable hands and turned our energies to logistics and personnel. The preparations for a 24-hour race resemble nothing so closely as buildup for a small invasion.

First there's equipment to be gathered. Besides basic hand tools, we needed radios, air wrenches, floor jacks, nitrogen bottles, a compressor, a generator, an overhead fuel rig, assorted lights for night pit work, lumber, a wagon for hauling local small

freight, fire extinguishers, special tools for brake changes, engine oil, brake fluid, spare wheels, tires, windshields, brake rotors and brake pads. Especially brake pads.

On the human side of the ledger there's the problem of assembling enough crew to get you through the night, and assembling sufficient food and drink to keep everyone happy.

Stock around the clock

We expected Watkins Glen to be the tougher of the two races, which proved to be the case. This was due in some measure to our state of readiness—on the morning of race day Federal Express was still stopping by at intervals, bringing us more stuff to bolt onto the car, and crew members

were still learning each other's first names—but it was due even more to the quality of the field.

This event was part of the 13-race Firestone Firehawk series, sanctioned by the International Motor Sports Assn. (IMSA). Now in its fourth season, the Firehawk series is basically identical in concept to the rival SCCA series—optimized stock cars running in three classes—but with two major distinctions. First, the series allows unmuffled exhausts, lending a more authentic racing sound. Second, all Firehawk competitors must use Firestone Firehawk tires, which the manufacturer supplies at a friendly price.

When this series was launched in 1985, it was presumed that the restriction to a single make of tire would limit sponsorship potential and thus give the edge in growth to the SCCA. However, just the opposite seems to have occurred. Stimulated by better exposure—Firehawk races are more often teamed with real crowd-producing events and have also had an edge in TV coverage—the IMSA series regularly draws fields that are twice the size of Escort races.

Winning a Firehawk race of any duration requires exceptional driving and pit work. Without putting too fine a point on it, we didn't expect our de-