



**Improving the Breed  
with Styling  
and Handling  
Refinements  
that Work**

By Rick Titus

**W**e know what you're thinking: "Great, just what the world needed. Another bone-jarring aftermarket nightmare loaded with decals and enough fiberglass bolt-ons to float a yacht club." Well, usually we'd be forced to agree with you. But don't turn the page yet—this one really is worth knowing about.

If you don't know who Steve Saleen is, you will soon. He's a road racer with an extensive background in race car design and preparation who Ford Motor Company takes very seriously. He's doing what a great many would love to do. Under the name of Saleen Autosport (313 N. Lake St. Burbank, CA 91502, 213/849-1017), he's assembled a small team of automotive experts who are building a car very much in Saleen's own image. And even more significant, he's managed to impress Ford enough that

they've put him on the dealer purchase program

and agreed to fully warranty his product. Remind you of anyone? Not

since Carroll Shelby built trick ponies in the Sixties

and early Seventies

has any "outsider"

had such a close working relationship with

Ford.

# S. SALEEN *Signature* SERIES





## SALEEN

The Saleen Mustang is a purpose-built machine. A car to be driven, not just ridden in. It's a Grand Touring car that makes you want to take the long way home. If you like the Mustang GT, you're goin' to love the Saleen. It has the perfect blend of speed and grace, a car designed to strike a pretty pose, then back it up.

Saleen is quick to point out that there's little magic in designing a car to a particular specification. The hard part is building it to that spec. "We had to have the right people, and we insisted on using the right parts," Saleen says. "We knew Ford wouldn't even look at us if the car was junk."

Saleen started the development of his Mustang in 1984. He designed and built a prototype. Within weeks of the car's preview, orders started to pour in. If it proved nothing else, it showed there was interest. In 1985 he sold 200 cars, and the dealer list was growing. "We could have sold more, but we couldn't get enough cars. We needed Ford's help if we were going to make the whole thing fly." Saleen teamed up with Tom McIntyre, a successful Southern California businessman whose financial and manufacturing management skills were put to good use.

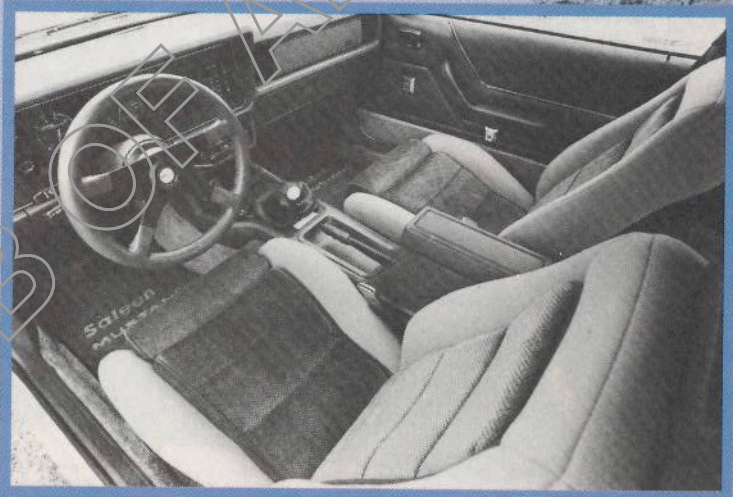
As Saleen worked on developing the car, McIntyre worked on developing a dealer program. Saleen employed Jim Schield to help R&D the chassis and to set up a production line. Schield, a Shelby Mustang racer for many years, has an uncanny eye for detail, and was quick to adjust production to control quality, as well as expedite quantity. Saleen Autosport was starting to gel, and with the inclusion of Jim Moore, the combination of people, product, and automobile could prove its worth. But enough history, let's talk about the car.

Saleen has worked a deal with Ford Motor Company to order cars in special trim. In brief, it's a mainstream Mustang with selected GT hardware. These bits include the Quad-shock 3.08:1 Traction-Lok rearend, the 200-hp H.O. engine and 5-speed transmission (in order to remain factory emission-legal and carry a factory warranty, the drivetrain is not modified), quick-ratio



*Saleen side skirts help clean up airflow over the rear tires. Skirts are made of polymer material and will hold up much longer than fiberglass.*

*The Saleen Mustang in its favorite cornering mode. Okay, maybe we added just a little too much power. Car remains controllable, even when hung out this far.*



*The office, or so it seems. Owners of this car are going to spend a lot of time behind the wheel. So would we.*

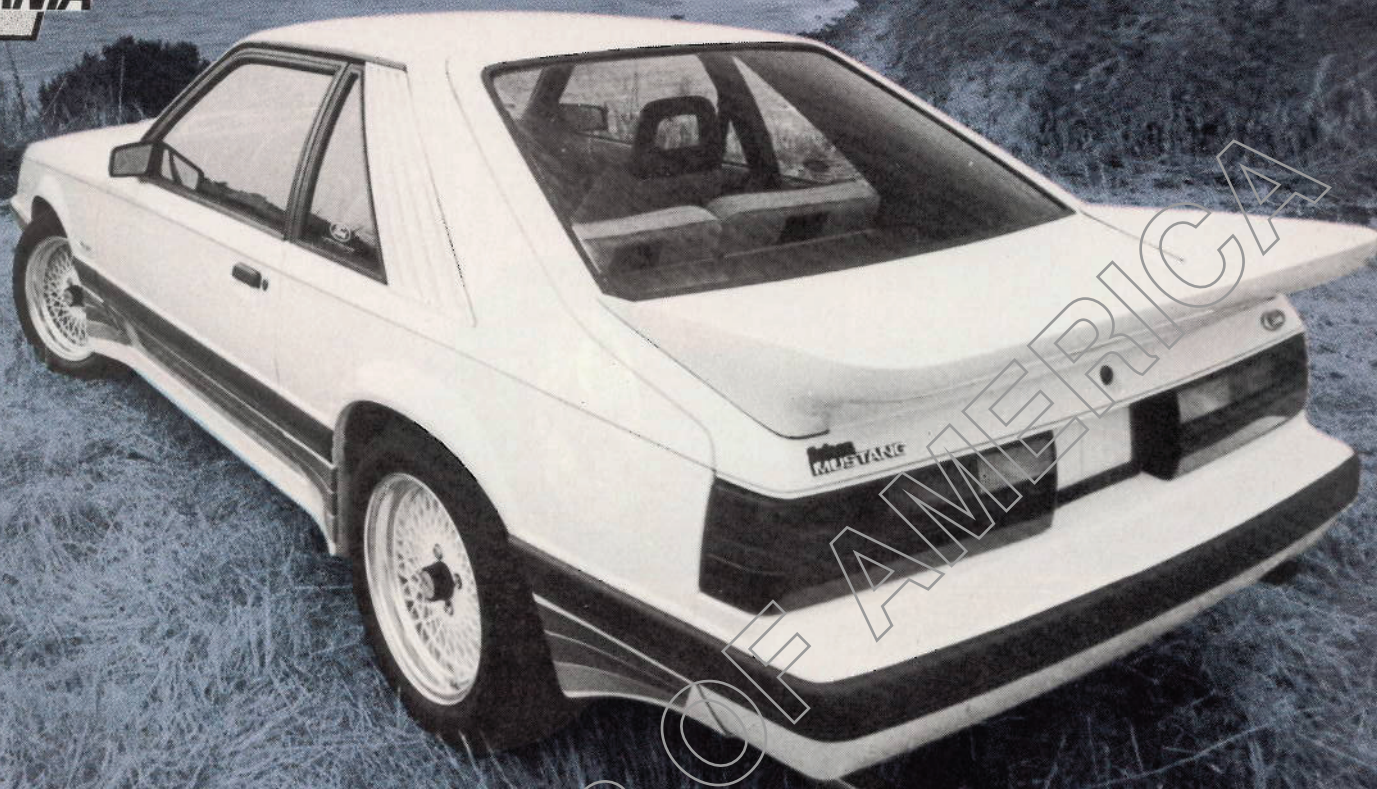
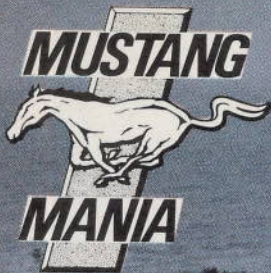


*Saleen graphic is used on the face of both speedo and tach. Note that speedo is upgraded to read 170 mph.*

steering, GT sport seats and GT instrument cluster (these are upgraded with Saleen graphics and a 170-mph readout speed), and an easy-to-overlook item, a left-side "dead pedal."

From there the Saleen hardware is added. Addressing the appearance, Saleen included a front air dam, side skirts, and rear valance, all matched to body color and trimmed in coordinating stripes. The race-proven rear wing (this design was tested and later used on Saleen's Trans Am Racing Mustang) for '86 incorporates the DOT-required "third eye" stoplight.

As much a part of the looks as the suspension, Saleen uses Riken "waffle-iron" 16x7-inch wheels and, much to our surprise,



General 225VR50 performance radials. This tire and wheel package work well together, both in terms of looks and cornering power.

The damping responsibilities are handled by Koni fully adjustable shocks. The strut package in the front is greatly enhanced with the use of Koni's upper tower control yoke. Saleen and Schield tested the car with and without the device, which is designed to help stabilize the struts' lateral and longitudinal movement within its mount, and found that it helped the suspension maintain its static alignment settings. This, added to the engine compartment cross-brace, proved to be worth 2 seconds in a 20-second slalom, where a car's transient response is put to the test. "Just being able to control the front end's alignment throughout its load cycle really helped improve the car's handling," adds Saleen.

Saleen agrees with Ford's choice of front sway bars, but changed their bushings to a graphite-impregnated polymer material to help free up their movement. A side benefit to this addition was a little less front suspension noise being transmitted inside the car.

Springs are a touchy subject with Saleen. He admits they've changed them and he even labels them as "designed rate" springs. But after hours of testing to arrive at the proper setup, he refuses to reveal their numbers. We can tell that they feel progressive, and they work wonders for the car's handling. But we also must add that they can be a bit choppy on some Interstate surfaces. You'll find yourself searching for the right speed with which to break up their rhythm.

As with any "limited-edition" automobile, the Saleen Mustang has its share of distinguishing markings and appointments. Each car is serial-numbered and that number is printed inside the left-front headlight cover, and kept on file. Inside, the gauges, speedo, and tach each have a Saleen ID, and the passenger side of the dash also gets a Saleen tag. Sounds a bit like overkill, but in fact it's well done. The list of little detail items is an

arm long, but things like a top-of-the-line Escort radar warning receiver, Momo leather-wrapped steering wheel, and a Kenwood KRC-6000 sound system are part of this completely packaged Grand Touring car. Obviously, the Saleen is built with no quality compromise.

Saleen Autosport had a pricing goal. "We wanted a car that enthusiasts could get excited about without pricing ourselves out of the ballpark." Saleen adds, "We wanted to offer the car fully loaded for under \$18,000; as it turns out, most of our cars have been in the \$16,000 to \$17,000 range. That pleases me very much." Indeed it should. For the money, it's a package you'd have to search hard to equal, much less beat.

HOT ROD wanted to fling the Saleen Mustang around, and fling it we did. Saleen turned us loose in the shop development car, a beater with over 15,000 hard miles on it. We tried it at Willow Springs International Raceway. We also tried it at the Chrysler/Shelby Tech Center; we even ran it at the Pomona Fairgrounds. In short, we spent some time in the car, little of it going slow. We fell in love!

From fog lamps to spoilers, we wouldn't change a thing. Even the General VR radial tires felt good. Our testing had the car at .87g to .88g on the skidpad; with a shaved-tread depth set of Generals putting us at a .9g, that would keep Corvette troops more than honest. The Saleen Mustang is what a touring car should be, an able-bodied town car with the legs to enjoy the open road. Its basic handling nature is to oversteer, a trait we found most controllable with the gas pedal. It points into a corner well and holds a firm cornering set.

There's already a following for Saleen starting to form. People who like this kind of car tend to gravitate together. They've already formed a club, and several of Saleen's cars have been seen at Cobra Club meetings and track outings. It's that kind of car.

Yes, if you don't know the name Steve Saleen, you will. He's an automotive designer who we're all going to be taking very seriously, very soon. **HR**