

IT'S A SALEEN

FINALLY A TRUE ALL-AROUND PERFORMANCE MUSTANG



BY HIB HALVERSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DONNA BERGH AND THE AUTHOR

What is the fire that burns within Steve Saleen? Well, first, he's a road racer. Secondly, he's a *Mustang* road racer having run them as far back as the early 1970s. Third, he wants the contemporary Mustang to be taken seriously. If that was to happen, the car needed improvement in some areas. Lastly, he's a bit of the nostalgic type — he wanted to try what Shelby tried. So over the last four years, he has developed and marketed his own version of Ford's sport coupe. He calls it the "Saleen Mustang" and its got a lot of people who appreciate high-performance cars asking, "What the hell is this Saleen Mustang and why is it so fast?"

Just the existence of the 1986 Saleen Mustang is classic proof that a small business can succeed where a large operation with seemingly endless resources can't "see the forest for the trees." It's a case where a good idea

RIGHT — This rear spoiler is part of the Saleen's appearance package. But it does more than just look good and its effects can be noticed even at relatively slow speeds.



and a lot of hard work has paid off. Simply put: Saleen Autosport did what Ford couldn't — *they've made the Mustang into a serious performance car.*

"One lap of the Crest" is what we call our test route. It's one of the most grueling tests a magazine can force on a car. The OLC is a three-leg, 36-mile marathon of hard driving through the San Gabriel Mountains north of Los Angeles, California. It tests a car's acceleration, cornering and braking abilities to their limits and it's where we took the Saleen Mustang.

During the last few years we've run several Mustang GTs over the Crest. Although they're killer cars in a straight line they have two big faults, slow steering response and excessive understeer, and these keep their handling from exceeding the average.

With an integrated package of chassis modifications, Saleen Autosport has successfully dealt with these two problems. The difference in handling between a Mustang GT and the Saleen Mustang is *so dramatic* that, after I ran the first of two all-out loops around the course, I was shaking my head — "Incredible!" From then on, I decided it was just simply "a Saleen."

You quickly figure out that a Saleen offers the driver *some* of the sensory input you'd get in a race car. The ride is stiff — stiff enough that the "average" Mustang GT buyer might not like it. However, the customer Saleen Autosport is after with this car is *not* the average guy who wants to go fast in a straight line. The Saleen appeals to those few who demand a very high-performance Ford in the Porsche 944 Turbo, IROC-Z28 or Corvette Z51 class. To them, the ride is enjoyably firm but not uncomfortable — "pre-

cise" would be a good word. It gives the driver a clearer feel for the car enabling him to be more "precise" in driving. The Saleen has more steering (or yaw) response than anyone's seen in a Mustang before. This quick (possibly *too quick* for the average guy) race car-like response also adds to the car's precise feel. Ask any race driver, precision makes for quick lap times.

Then, there are the rest of the Saleen's competition-style handling characteristics . . . In high-speed cor-

ners the Saleen retains, at a reduced level, the stock Mustang's understeer. However, it tends to *oversteer* a bit in the slow-speed turns. As opposed to the stock example's moderate-to-heavy understeer almost all the time when pushed hard, the Saleen's fast/understeer and slow/oversteer attitude closely approximates the manners that are considered appropriate in a race car. That is *exactly* what a driver who appreciates performance cars such as the Saleen wants - and *exactly* why the Saleen was a blast for us to run over the One Lap of the Crest course.

The modifications Saleen Autosport makes to the Mustang platform are what they call their "Racecraft Suspension" and are relatively simple as far as suspension modifications go. However, it is the specific selection of the parts and how they are packaged that makes the car work so well. Basically, the Saleen chassis differs from the standard Mustang GT in front-strut mounts, springs, antiroll bar mountings, tire and wheels, shocks and ride height.

The spring rates of the Racecraft setup are about 40 percent higher in front and 15 percent higher in back over what comes stock on the Mustang. The factory antiroll bars (1.30-inches, front and 0.83 rear) are retained but the front bar gets pillow-blocks

and end-links made of graphite-impregnated urethane. The urethane is harder than the stock rubber items, and as a result, deflection of antiroll bar mountings and connections are reduced and the pay off is an increase in roll stiffness. This improves handling and adds to that "precise" feel I talked about earlier. The graphite impregnation lubricates as the bar pivots and eliminates squeaks associated with mounting antiroll bars in urethane.

The most important single suspension modification on a Saleen, however, has to be the *spherical-bearing upper-strut mounts*. Ordinarily, the top of the front struts are heavily isolated in rubber. Under load the rubber allows the top of the strut to move around quite a bit. This makes for alignment changes when cornering and screws up handling. The Saleen's spherical bearing eliminates deflection of the strut mounts and holds alignment under cornering loads. The by-product is more precise handling.

When you first see a 1986 Saleen you'll notice something unique about its tires. Like they are made by General Tire. Bet you didn't even know General made performance radials.

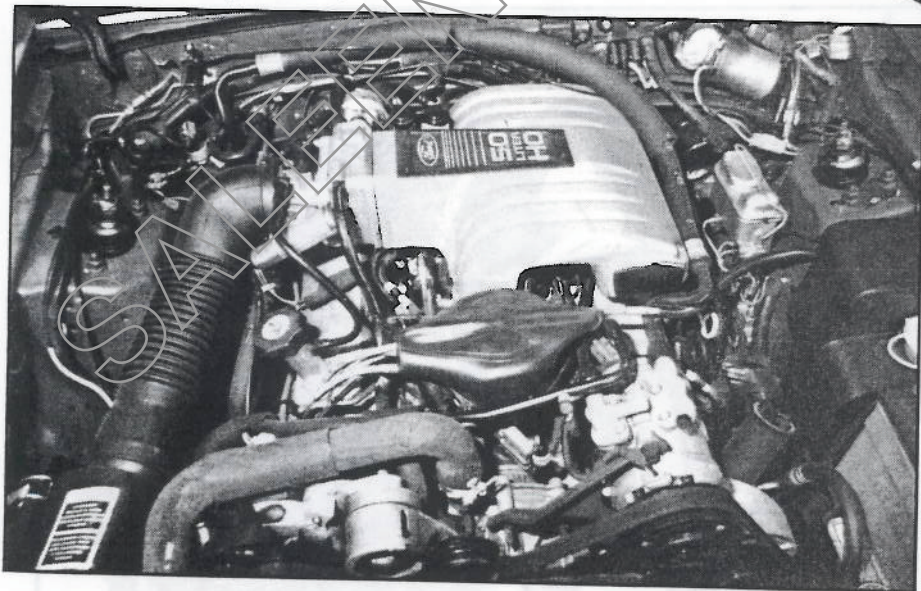
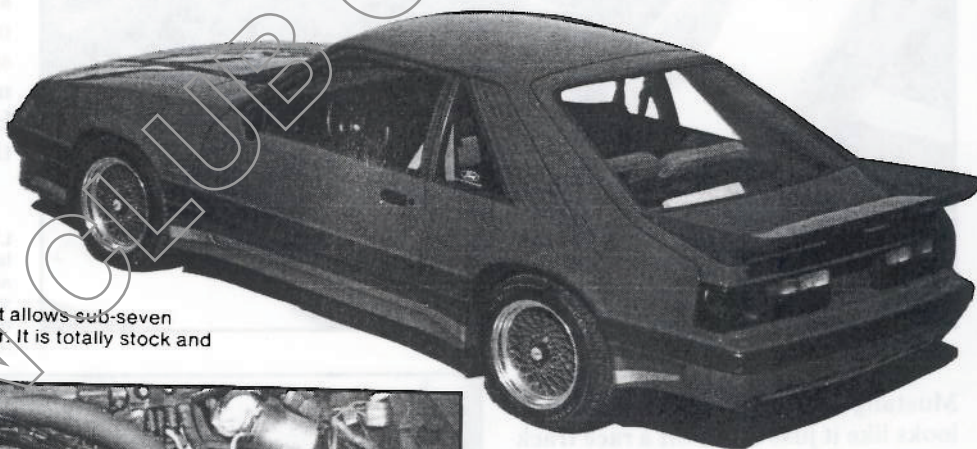
Well, they've jumped into that market in a big way and the Saleen is the first car to come with them as original equipment. They carry General XP2000 V tires in size 225VR5016 mounted on specially-finished 7x16-inch Epsilon modular wheels. The change from the stocker's 15-inch tires to the 16-inch V-rated Generals is probably responsible for a good half of the Saleen's improved handling and most of its yaw response.

All six stock shocks (the Mustang suspension uses four shocks, two vertical and two horizontal, in the rear) are pitched in the trash. In their places go Koni gas-filled units. They are manufactured to Saleen Autosport's unique valving specs and the front and rear vertical shocks are adjustable. This feature allows the Saleen driver to adjust his car's dampening to meet his needs.

There are other modifications that, taken individually, would seem minor, but their collective impact really helps the Saleen's road manners. First, by virtue of the spring changes, the car is lowered about 1.5 inches all the way around. This gives the Saleen an aggressive stance, and aids handling

RIGHT — Besides the rear deck spoiler, the Saleen receives a few other body modifications including wheel flares, side skirts and a front air dam.

BELOW — Under the hood lurks the beast that allows sub-seven second 0-60 times right off the showroom floor. It is totally stock and can be serviced by any Ford dealer.



with decreased body roll due to the lower center of gravity. The Epsilon wheels are supplied in a special offset that widens the car's track by about an inch at both ends. This improves stability and handling. Lastly, underneath the car at the front suspension there is some added bracing to cut deflection of the front end structure under heavy cornering loads.

About the only vice the car has from a performance standpoint is its brakes. The Mustang GT still uses the inadequate front disc/rear drum setup

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that we've been complaining about for years. As the expense of an upgrade would add greatly to the cost of a Saleen, they carry the stock Ford brakes. These brakes, even with semi-metallic brake pads in the front, are prone to fade under heavy use. Fortunately, we'll be seeing heavier-duty four-wheel discs on the GT in 1987 and the Saleen will also carry those brakes.

Handling that does in all the nasty Camaros you see (as they disappear in the rearview mirror!) is all good and well when you're gettin' serious on a windy road. But if the car doesn't look good on the street for Saturday night, why have it, right? Well, there's no doubt, the Saleen is the best looking

spoiler, are a result of Saleen Autosport's IMSA GTO race car of 1984. The package is topped off with some smart Saleen Mustang graphics and a set of clear headlight covers.

The inside of the car continues the enthusiast theme started with the chassis and body through several subtle modifications. Good control of a high-performance car is established with precise movements of hands and feet. For the hands, the control process is made even more accurate through the switch to a Momo three-spoked leather wrapped steering wheel. For the feet, the Saleen customer gets the pretty fair arrangement of the Mustang pedals along with the left foot rest that is used in the Mustang SVO. The stock speedometer, which reads to 85, is

replaced with a 170 mile-per-hour unit. The stock shifter is replaced with a unit from Hurst that is a country mile better than the Ford piece. It has a short throw and allows the driver to throw quick, surgically precise shifts with the Warner T5 five-speed.

Then, there's the sound system (very important for CFE, according to the PC staff). Saleen Autosport, as an option, will replace the stock Ford unit with a Kenwood KRC 6000 AM/FM stereo/cassette radio. With this go four excellent two-way speaker systems. This selection of equipment is an improvement over the standard Ford pieces. Lastly, in what is a totally unique touch that could only appear on a car destined for serious "road warrior" use, Saleen Autosport includes an Escort radar detector. It's pretty easy to see how they figure each owner will drive the car, eh?

The basis of the Saleen is a story in itself. Saleen Autosport has a special agreement with the Ford Motor Company. Ford builds them, in lots of about 30 at a time, a unique version of the Mustang LX hatchback. It is not available to the public, and is optioned much like the Mustangs used as pursuit vehicles by various law enforcement agencies such as the California Highway Patrol. The reason for this is that much of the exterior trim on a



LEFT & BELOW — The Saleen interior interfaces well with the driver. It uses the GT's articulated sport seats and the GT dash. The stock wheel is replaced with a Momo unit and the 85 mph speedo is dumped in favor of one reading double that number.

Mustang to come along in a while. It looks like it just drove off a race track and definitely attracts attention.

One Saturday night I took it out for a CFE (that's "cruise-for-effect"). The "girlfriend" was with me and she was driving. Within four blocks, she had three offers for dates along with several "hey, chick, cool car, wanna race?" and other assorted comments from jealous Camaro drivers. The lesson here is: "If you want to get noticed, buy a Saleen."

The bodywork package was designed by Saleen Autosport and is unique to the car. It consists of a front air dam, side skirts and a very racy and very functional rear deck spoiler. Some of these parts, particularly the rear



Mustang GT would be discarded in the conversion to a Saleen. Starting with an LX eliminates work and allows Saleen Autosport to offer their product at a lower price. The "special LXs" come to Saleen with the GT suspension and interior that has specific options like the GT dashboard and the articulated sport seats.

For power, all 1986 Saleens have Ford's fuel-injected, roller-lifter, 200-horse, 302-inch HO engine. This offers the lightening quick, sub-seven-second 0-60 times that today's Mustangs are known for. The drivetrain consists of the five-speed trans and a 3.08 Traction Lok rear end.

Ford ships the cars to Saleen Autosport's production facility in La Habra, California. There, a team of workers under Production Manager Jim Schield, convert the Mustangs to Saleens. It's an amazing process to watch and is done *mainly by hand*. Each car gets attention to detail that continues right down to delivery to the dealer via closed race car transporter.

The first Saleens were built in 1984 and are quite rare with only 50 cars being completed. In 1985, about 200 cars were built and in 1986, with a move to new and larger quarters in nearby Industry, California, Saleen Autosport hopes to build nearly 1,000 of these interesting (and entertaining!) high-performance cars. Looking into 1987, the Saleen will carry all the mechanical improvements expected from Ford for the Mustang, along with some even more radical aerodynamic Saleen bodywork and perhaps a set of unique Saleen 8x16-inch wheels.

So how does one get ahold of a Saleen? That's easy. You can buy them at many Ford dealers, but if for some reason (Like maybe your dealer is in Egypt or something) your local Blue Oval store is not familiar with the Saleen, contact Saleen Autosport directly at 313 N. Lake St., Burbank, CA 91502, (213) 849-1017, and they will assist with finding a dealer. Additionally, if you already have a Mustang GT, it is possible in most cases to update it to Saleen specifications. For

information on conversions, contact Saleen Autosport.

Service of limited production cars such as Saleens has had a history of being, at best, difficult. Say you have a DeLorean or something like that; where do you get parts and service now? The beauty of the Saleen is that before Saleen Autosport began producing the car, they cut a deal with Ford where the Saleen would be covered under FoMoCo's standard new car warranty. Additionally, the car is not far enough removed from a Mustang GT that a Ford dealer cannot service it and handle spare parts. So, what you get with the Saleen is a commanding road car that can be serviced at the dealer down the street. In our book that spells "convenience."

After I run a car through the OLC, I usually pull into a turnout, preferably one with a view, turn up the Kenwood stereo, and mentally summarize my perceptions of the car. With the Saleen it was reduced to two simple phrases: "serious performance car" and "fun to drive!" 