

2006 Roush Mustang Stage 3
Dreams of what Dad Could Have Driven...
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For: The Wheel



When I was a kid, my Dad always looked at the really cool cars in the dealer showroom. The Shelby GT 350, Datsun 240Z, Chevy Camaro Z28. But he always “settled” and bought the Cutlass, Galaxie, or Riviera. Such was a childhood existence of being teased but not treated to the hot rods of the day. Ok, I know – you’re saying “You spoiled brat – the Galaxie was a perfectly good car! There are people in Africa who don’t even have wheels!” Alright already...we’re just having fun here... Oops...I’m now the Dad – and we’ve owned a parade of minivans, SUV’s, and God forbid, I towed my first race car to Sears Point Raceway with a Buick Electra (hey...it was a “T” Type, the really cool one). So when, through our support from Shell and their mutual relationship, Roush offered a Stage 3 Mustang for our new DVD, we pounced on the opportunity. But here we go again – the car was brought to Reno-Fernley Raceway by a Roush Corporate executive, and Bill Haener, one of our HOD coaches, and a current SCCA racer, ended up playing with it for two days on track as we shot it from every angle six times each. And I got four laps. Left at the altar once again. Fast forward two months – the Roush representative and I were chatting one day and we came to discover he wouldn’t mind showing off the car in Northern California at our Hooked On Driving events at Thunderhill and Laguna. I immediately found an urgent reason to fly to LA to pick it up and drive it home....A month with a Stage 3 Roush Mustang, and a chance to track it – now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!! Now we’ll get to see if a traditional sports car-oriented soul can be converted by the charm of torque, appeal of being stared at by the crowd, and catching people running their fingers over the spoiler. Is this just an ego trip or a real driving machine and experience?

First, the most relevant specs on the car:

Roush starts with a very good Mustang GT that comes standard with a 300hp, 320 ft lbs of torque, 4.6 liter V8 and five speed manual transmission. With McPherson struts front, live rear axle supported by coil springs and a panhard rod, the platform is a strong one – but Mr. Roush has found some secrets in the setup of the car (well, supercharging is not a secret), to make this very good GT into a street beater. To the GT, Roush added to our test car all three Roush “Stages” – levels of options corresponding with your pocketbook. The first stage is primarily cosmetic, with some menu items optional. Stripes, front and rear fascia, my least favorite item, the quarter window louvers, reupholstered seats in leather two-tone, carbon fiber look on dash and console, and a very purposeful billet steel shift lever that is reminiscent of a Hurst from the past. But get beyond the Stage 1 and the fun begins. Roush has done a complete redo of the car’s suspension. They actually assigned a group of engineers to drive it hard on race tracks to develop it and test durability. They did a nice job – the car is a huge surprise in both ride and handling. This Stage 2 suspension includes everything: Struts, shocks, springs and sway bars, to set this car up for both normal day to day, as well as spirited driving – including on track play time. Sport exhaust and 18” five spoke wheels with 275/40 ZR 18 Goodrich G-Force T/A tires round out the functional improvements – and then to the real fun, Stage 3: A supercharger takes the 4.6liter to 420hp and 385 ft lbs of torque and, as they say one thing leads to another...a major brake upgrade of front brakes with a proprietary Roush caliper and rotor combination to whoa those horses when needed. Message to the Roush guys - one thing is missing – we’ll pay the price, but you gotta add upgraded rear calipers and rotors...the stock Mustang GT’s setup just seems like a potential weak spot for the advanced track driver.

First glance of the Roush finds a pleasant and comfortable, if somewhat conservative, Gran Turismo style interior. But it’s the outside that shines. With the exception of chrome wheels, the Roush cosmetic package is first-cabin muscle car, without being over the top. With the lowered suspension and upgraded tire and wheel sizes, especially in front, the Roush Mustang has a quiet, purposeful, and dramatic appearance on the road. Our test car, with the Ford dark blue – and the Roush silver stripe treatment, shows some class while still bragging a bit. We picked the car up in Garden Grove and headed north on the 5. And I immediately experienced what I’d hoped to experience as a teenager with the muscle car of the day. This car is a magnet – a magnet for Camaro’s, GTO’s, Carrera’s, AND minivans. Many want to either race you, or goad you into a run up with the supercharger. OK, so we have a bit of fun with the folks on 5, but caution must be exercised, as any run up of the supercharger advertises to the world that we’re coming, and speeds reach the three figure range very quickly. Mostly, we try to remain mature and confident in our maleness and wave back at the kibitzers...smiling with the knowledge that it is wise to leave the blade in the sheath. By the time we were leaving LA, we had concluded one thing. The Roush Stage 3 that we have has been blessed/cursed with the “off road” exhaust option. Well, we were “on” the road most of the time, and the resonance at 75mph made it almost impossible to leave the car in 5th gear. We had a choice; either drive it in 4th gear and give up gas mileage, or run at 85mph and watch very carefully for the constable. Doing this, it would be a matter of time before that clean record would be washed away. We would definitely advise the more conservative exhaust option on the Stage 3. Running out of LA we got caught

immediately in a grass fire-induced monumental traffic jam on the up side of the grape vine. Now I remember, these clutches are pretty heavy, and by the time we clear the fire and head north, my left knee is starting to remind me of my days as a catcher in high school. Not my favorite part of the car. Without incident we travel straight through to the Bay Area and aside from the loud exhaust, the car is a delight to drive. The suspension settings, springs, shocks etc. have been carefully dialed and provide a firm but surprisingly civilized cruise on the interstate. No compromise here. Getting mid-20's gas mileage, the Roush Mustang shows its practical side well during this day.

And now for the real fun – a beautiful day, world class road course Thunderhill, and a full tank of V-Power. What could be better? On track, there was an immediate sense of the bulk of the car – yes, the Roush Mustang is hefty and feels tall, with the long hood initially hampering your concentration on the apex. But one day of track time, and this started to feel normal (two weeks later, at Laguna, I had forgotten about the long nose problem) – even though it might be nice to have a more stealthy, aero front clip. Taking any street car from street to track is always a crap shoot. You never know whether the engineers were paranoid of novice drivers and took the teeth out of the car, or if true enthusiasts put the finishing touches on the chassis so that a competent driver has a chance to have fun. Well – the competent driver being a huge assumption here – the Roush Stage 3 was a hound for the track. Some Livonia, MI based Roush engineer likes to drive, and not just in a straight line. Then, we had Jeff Glenn, a former pro racer and development driver for Van Diemen race cars, take her for a spin. Jeff got out of the car with a simple quote: “Jack Roush really knows what he’s doing.” Quite a statement from a driver who is more used to open cockpit racers. Jeff and I both agreed that one of the key decisions Roush made was to match rear and front tire wheel sizes in a very effective effort to minimize understeer. The selection of Goodrich G-Force T/A's in the meaty 275/40 X 18's is a perfect match to the capabilities and loads on the car. We have to give kudos to these tires, that took a tough outing and showed no chunking. The Stage 3 turns on a dime – I almost giggled when we went into turn 2 at Thunderhill and she turned on command, then progressively and predictably rotated to offer the back side slide – all I needed to do was give more throttle and the drift came in...feather off and she settled in. This is a good handler that is a pleasure to drive hard. One unique feature for a car like this, and a distinct difference from the Mustang GT is its propensity to take a set in the rear. Really evident in the very fast Turn 1 at Thunderhill. At the end of the 5/8ths mile straight, at approximately 125mph, I gave her a firm but brief brake, began the left hand turn while still releasing the weight off the nose, and the rear noticeably swayed to the outside – the first time I felt this it didn't feel right...but it didn't break loose, it “hunkered” down, took a set, and got to work pushing the car past the apex. At around 3600 lbs, carrying this much mass, we expected that it is going to have body roll and some nosedive. We'd have to give the Roush a B+ in this area. While she takes more attention than a lighter and more agile true sports car, I found that the poundage could be slowed, tossed and recovered – most noticeably at our favorite turn in the world; Laguna's Corkscrew. Back at Thunderhill, both Jeff and I related that the harder we pushed, the more fun we had. As we put several quick laps together, it was a surprise to have the brake pedal remain firm. While we used early brake markers as we should in a test, they still got a workout and did well. However by the end of the day it appeared that

we'd worn the stock Ford rear pads quite a bit. Is it a Lotus Elise or GT3 Porsche? Nope. This is a car that retails in the low to mid \$50K range, with (kind of) a back seat and a trunk. And replacement parts that will not put you in the poor house. We've had a number of HOD customers do the Mustang upgrade process and probably spend less money than the Roush package represents. But the integrated feel of this car, and the obvious R & D that has been done, plus having a warranty and a turn-key car would seem to justify the premium pricing compared to doing it yourself. Another way to explain this car occurred to me – if you look over the other reviews I've written, you'll find an admiration for both the Corvette and the Cadillac CTS-V. “What are you talking about?” you say – this is a FORD Mustang...while I liked the Vette a lot, not everyone wants to step down, in and out of a low slung sports car with no optional seating in back for emergencies. I loved the CTS-V as it felt like a Corvette with four doors. But I didn't want four doors. If you're stuck in between these types of cars, the Roush Stage 3 Mustang fits in nicely – yes, for a large population of car enthusiasts – especially those with fond memories of Mustang's glory years – this car could be just right. And the glory years are back.

And as the end of the month-long drive came – our test was complete. Was the appeal of driving a “dream” muscle car all it was cracked up to be? Are you kidding? Absolutely!