

2010 Ford Taurus SHO (Super High Output) Here's Hoping that Ford is Doing the Right Thing

By: David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com

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The Taurus SHO is a breakthrough platform for many excellent engineering features, and an example of how Ford has come a long way in improving quality of materials, overall quality of construction, use of technology and innovation. But I have questions about whether all of these good things have yet to be used with the correct product strategy and marketing. From the enthusiast's perspective, it still seems like Ford is not totally in touch with the market – or maybe I should say, a bit behind the market, rather than leading the way. And vestiges of the management approach that made the shrewd decision to drop the Taurus might still be in place guiding the play calling.

The Taurus SHO is a very good car. With an all-aluminum, state of the art, turbocharged V6 that is direct injected, the internal combustion engine doesn't get much more modern. At 360 bhp, and 350 ft/lbs of torque, this powerplant zips the Taurus along at truly sport sedan speeds with very brisk, smooth and rewarding acceleration. One complaint, mentioned in our previous piece, is that the turbo lag, while minimal on acceleration, has a tendency to not settle down quickly once it's spooled up. In other words – jump on the gas and you get a nice push. Approaching a turn or downshift point, lift from full acceleration, and the boosted V6 pushes you hard for

another second or so before it realizes you're ready to slow. This can be accommodated with familiarity, but it takes the crispness away from the driving style that you'd like to employ.

The gearbox is just flat great. A six-speed automatic, which, in manual mode, allows you to stir your own drink with paddle shifters, is very rewarding and enhances that sport sedan feel while you're motoring aggressively. The all-wheel drive, unique to the SHO is also a boon to performance. This car simply has too much power to even attempt going front-wheel drive without massive torque steer. Even with the all-wheel unit, I noticed just a hint of steering wheel tug upon acceleration, but it was well within the acceptable category.

The suspension is pretty high tech as well, with coilovers in the rear, and "sport-tuned" struts and rear facing L arms (this must have been a major discovery – that A arms weren't good enough?) up front. Translate this to an excellent, taught suspension that was very pleasing in every environment we sought out for the SHO. Ford did this well, as this is a big (subliminal message here: TOO big) car, and they've tamed its girth into a driveable package. We won't call it fun, but will call it satisfying and enjoyable to drive. This is a large sedan that is very composed and will give a driver and four passengers a comfortable and brisk ride anywhere they want to go.

The interior is a source of mixed feelings. This is where you can see and feel Ford's improving quality of materials, fit and finish. I see a difference here over GM competitors. But there is something wrong. The interior just seems to be over-designed and gives a sense of busyness and bulk. The front door panels are just over-done. Think seventies vintage Lincoln Mark IV. What's worse is that this over design yields a less friendly ergonomic package. Things look good, but aren't where you want them when you reach for them. I repeatedly rolled down the rear window when I meant to bring down the front, and the door handle was just out of reach when needed. I know, you're not crying for this intrepid reviewer, but it sometimes is a bit upsetting when it seems that car design goes backwards. I thought we'd be past the point of building from design sketches at the expense of utility. One major thank you goes to the partnership between Ford and Sony on the "best we've tested" radio/navigation package. With its combination of traditional knobs and switches, and the easy to understand touch nav screen, they've found a template to copied by others (BMW, please!!).

Having cheated and seen the commercial for the SHO that showed it passing an Audi on the open road, my radar was out on this comparison. I've spent a moment trying to find the Audi that was used in the commercial, and I'll speculate that it was the A6 V6 sedan. As the A6 is an established, highly regarded sedan, I was quite skeptical about this comparison. Certainly, the turbo-V6 of the SHO will blow the doors off of the Audi base sedan. And, yes, even this base sedan from Germany is up in the \$50K + range, with the nav version of the SHO at \$44K. So, does this comparison hold water? Yes, but you know how complicated life is...it's not quite that simple. The SHO is 9 inches longer and 3 inches wider than the Audi, and admittedly has more room in most dimensions. The Ford has a huger trunk than the Audi. But in the end, it remains a sporty sedan, and the Audi's trunk is big enough, as is its interior. Where I'm heading here, is that the Taurus is TOO big for the segment that it wants to play in. Yes, from a value standpoint, you'd have to go to the Audi A6 4.2V8 to get close to the performance of the SHO, and the V8 Audi becomes a second mortgage inducing \$62K! So, yes – the SHO comes out very well in the comparison. But the twist here has to do with the overall bulk of the Taurus body. This is a BIG, TALL car – weighing in at a massive 4368 lbs, and stretching 202" long. And yes, it is spacious, but not that much more spacious than the Audi, which executes all of the same tasks very well also, with MUCH less bulk (500 lbs less and 9" shorter). It's almost like back in my

youth when I was trying to talk my Mom and Dad into buying a Saab instead of an LTD. Admittedly, the LTD of today is a MUCH better built car and stacks up to the foreigners much more respectably. But it's still an LTD (Taurus). I just don't understand this platform. I know consumers have become accustomed to sitting high, but the height and girth of this car is out of character with that of a sport sedan.

This is where I end up concerned for our domestic manufacturer's product strategies. I hope I am 100% wrong on this subject, but this car doesn't seem to be a focused effort aimed at a specific market. It seems to be a good exercise in engineering capabilities, possibly wasting the credibility of a respected brand from the past (SHO), that could end up falling into comparison with the Impala, Malibu, Fusion, Camry, or Maxima, and coming out looking expensive – rather than stretching upscale against the foreigners and looking like a great value. Is this a lot of car for the money? Yes. Are Ford buyers ready to step up to the \$44K sedan? Sure hope so. Are import sedan buyers going to be tempted by this high performance Taurus? That's the billion dollar question. I fear that many who are, upon close inspection, may detect a trace of that LTD heritage and hesitate when confronted with the buying decision. In the end, as is always the case in this competitive market, the consumer will rule – and we hope that Ford has created a solid niche for this really good car.