

FIRST DRIVE

2003

FORD GT

Or a reasonably close facsimile
by Todd Lassa

Drizzle peppers the handling course. What a day to work the kinks out of a million-dollar development mule. The lone windshield wiper is out of a Focus or an Escape, and it works, but only if you push the wiper lever down for one swipe at a time. Four-point-six liters of V-8 make a high-pitched race-car whine behind our ears as the intercooled Roots-type supercharger kicks in. We're in third, exiting a phony chicane constructed with orange cones to keep us from getting too hot around this replica of Ford's Dearborn test track.

Despite the lightly wet (and thus potentially slippery) tarmac here at the Harley-Davidson test facility in Naples, Florida, we're able to plant enough power into a right-hand sweeper to enter the next turn hitting about 75 mph. What's it like out there? For one thing, it's cool. We're chilling out with the factory A/C on, concentrating on making faster and faster laps, an easy thing to do when you're the only car on the track.

The blown 4.6's whine keeps us alert, but it's not intrusively loud. It's the wrong engine, anyway, and we wonder whether the torque from the correct 5.4-liter supercharged aluminum V-8 will scare someone when the aluminum-bodied production car arrives. But, for now, this car is docile and progressively quick. It has the kind of power we've seen in all the good sports cars before: It comes on so smoothly, you'll think you're going 10-20 mph slower than the

speedometer says. It's road-racer torque, not drag-racer torque.

Nor does the tail snap out, despite the long-standing polar-moment reputation of mid-engine cars. When the tail gets loose, a slight correction of the wheel brings it in line, and you won't find yourself off-kilter going into the next turn. This is a good thing, because the production car won't have traction control.

The Ford GT's lack of traction control is a personal issue for chief project engineer Neil Hannemann. He challenged another driver on metro Detroit's Woodward Avenue one day, but forgot to switch off the traction control in his Mustang. "I made a fool of myself," he says. "I never want that to happen to anyone in a GT."

The GT at 11/10ths is much more benign than a Ferrari 360 Modena at 11/10ths, chassis and body manager Hubert Mees says.



• RANDY LORENTZEN/PLANETR COURTESY FORD



Detroit Editor Lassa crawled under, on top of, and ultimately behind the wheels of Ford GT prototypes. The aluminum structures and suspensions are clearly visible on these hard-working, but none too pretty, test mules. The rear undertray diffusers that channel air below the car and out the back weren't an element of the original Ford GT race cars, but apparently will, in a somewhat neater form, make up part of the aero package for the modern-day street version.



Fords on History's Track



1901—Sweepstakes Car: In Henry Ford's only auto race, he beats favored Winton and gains funding for creation of Ford Motor Company.

1902—Barney Oldfield drives Ford 999 to victory in Manufacturer's Challenge Cup in Grosse Pointe, Michigan.



1935—Flathead V-8s power team of Miller Fords at Indy, but DNF because exhaust heat boils grease in steering boxes.

1952—Lincoln wins Panamericana road race in Mexico against stiff European competition.



1963—Galaxie 500 XL driven by Tiny Lund gives Ford first NASCAR Daytona 500 win. Decade of Ford's Total Performance begins.

1964—Bob Bondurant and Dan Gurney beat out Ferrari for top GT honors in Le Mans 24 Hours.



1965—Ford wins Indy 500 with Jim Clark behind wheel of Lotus-Ford. Cars powered by DOHC V-8 take first four positions.

That is, you'll have an easier time gathering up a GT than a Modena when you exceed the limits. It's certainly more innocuous than the car it evokes, the original Ford GT that won the 24 Hours of Le Mans four years in a row. That car, it turns out, had horrid aerodynamic lift, which Ford engineers have corrected with a splitter under the nose. The managed air exits the smooth underbody via channels that form ahead of the rear wheels on the production cars. These channels are aft of the rear axle on the three development mules.

Ford has no reason to challenge Ferrari except for heritage, but Le Mans 1966-1969 may just be its proudest moment.

By now you're wondering why we're driving prototypes. The unpainted black car, plastic body over a tube frame that's showing off some aluminum extrusions, is the first of three at our disposal (among nine built). It's the one Jamie Cullen, the steering and brakes engineer, uses to show how quick, precise, and linear the steering is and how powerful and balanced the brakes are. The steering is quick and precise, but Cullen is still working on the on-center feel. If the production cars are like the black mule, a 60-0 mph stopping distance of 110 feet or less should be a snap. Moreover, its stops are short enough from 100 mph to make you doubt the speedometer readout's claim of 100 mph. It's also the first of two GTs we drive, and we're amazed at how light and progressive the clutch is in both cars. It's close to Honda and a far cry from the knee-busters in Porsche 911 Turbos, Dodge Vipers, Camaro Z28s, or Mustang Cobras.

The red-and-white car, painted like the '67 Le Mans winner, with decals of Carroll Shelby's Terlingua race team on the front fenders, is the one ride-and-handling engineer Jeff Walsh uses to show us how he's tweaking the chassis. (We didn't get into the car painted in blue and orange Gulf Oil colors—it's a noise/vibration/harshness mule. Makes for a nice three-car photo, though.)

Ford cites its centenary as the reason for this car. It probably has a lot to do with Ford being late with its all-new Mustang. Intended as an '04 model, which would have been in time for the June 16 festivities, the Mustang's now scheduled for late 2004 as an '05. You want heritage? Ford also has built a number of T-100s (new Model Ts, not the first-generation Toyota pickup) for this celebration.

Anyway, the answer to "why?" is this: The GT's mission is to be a performance flagship, the savior of Ford as an automaker. "Ford is a truck company," it admitted when

unveiling details of the '04 hybrid-powered Escape a few months ago. That's what Ford has been doing best for a decade and a half, and now it's time to remind the world it can build world-class cars. It began the GT program a few years ago, in time to unveil the beautiful GT40 concept at the 2002 North American International Auto Show in Detroit. While Ford will never admit to being late on this project, its obvious intent was to have for sale three '03 models (at about \$150,000 each) ready earlier this year in time for a big media blitz.

So what's with Ford aiming at Ferrari, again? "To polish the Blue Oval," Ford and SVT employees will repeat, ad infinitum. While Ford Motor Co. struggles to play catch up in the car market, Ford's Special Vehicles Team, creator of the GT, figures it has the Chevrolet Corvette Z06 and even the Dodge Viper in its sights with the next-generation '06 SVT Mustang.

Now it's on to bigger targets. In the '60s,



The GT cabin will be unabashedly heritage-inspired, including the instrument panel shape and breathing holes in the seats. The prototype interior (inset) is obviously that of a working tool, and not for show.

2003 Ford GT

POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS

Drivetrain layout	Mid engine, RWD
Engine type	90° V-8, alum block and heads
Valve gear	Supercharged DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
Bore x stroke, in/mm	3.55x4.17 / 90.2x105.8
Displacement, ci/cc	330.8 / 5409
Max horsepower @ rpm	500 @ 6000
Max torque @ rpm	500 @ 4000
Transmission	6-speed manual
Suspension, front; rear	Upper & lower control arms, coil-over shocks, anti-roll bar; upper & lower control arms, coil-over shocks, anti-roll bar
Brakes, f; r	14-in vented disc; 13-in vented disc, ABS
Wheels, f; r	18x8.0-in; 19x11.5-in aluminum alloy
Tires, f; r	235/45ZR18; 315/40ZR19 Goodyear Eagle F1 Supercar

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in	106.7
Length, in	183.0
Width, in	76.9
Height, in	44.3
Curb weight, lb	3200

MT ESTIMATED PERFORMANCE

0-60 mph, sec	3.5
1/4 mile, sec @ mph	11.70 @ 120
Braking, 60-0 mph, ft	100
600-ft slalom, mph	70.0

the most heroic, most storied, and most beautiful car ever to wear the Blue Oval. That makes us a kind of development driver. Walsh, the ride and handling guy, who a few years ago worked for Lotus on the Elise, changes the dampers and anti-roll bars, twice, to show us what some tweaking can do.

On the first setup, there's a bit of pivot in left-right-left transitions. Harmless oversteer is most noticeable at light throttle, just a slight step out that you catch with a quick flick of the wheel. From our notes: "The car doesn't beat you up like a Viper. It's not a neck-slapper, either, but it's waiting for another 100 horsepower."

That 25-percent power boost won't come at the penalty of added weight, Hannemann notes, with the production car's aluminum unibody and all-aluminum engine mostly offsetting the 5.4-liter's larger displacement. Weight target is in the 3200-3300-pound range.

Enzo Ferrari rebuffed Henry Ford II's efforts to scoop up the red car company for Ford Motor's portfolio. Ford exacted its revenge by building the new small-block-equipped GT for the 1964 24 Hours of Le Mans. In 1965, Ford installed a 7.0-liter stock-car V-8 in the MkII, and in 1966 it took first, second, and third at the race in Ferrari's backyard. Ford considers 1967 the pinnacle of the program, when Dan Gurney and A.J. Foyt won Le Mans, beating several formidable Ferraris. The GT40 won again in 1968 and 1969, even after Ford pulled back its factory involvement. Nearly four decades later, Ford has no reason to challenge Ferrari other than for heritage's sake. But Le Mans 1966-1969 may just be its proudest moment.

So here we are, in steamy Naples, not quite at the end of this crash program to rush to market the street-production version of

Walsh shows us a VBox printout of the best lap from the first setup. Maximum lateral acceleration was 1.015 g, it indicates. Whew. We lap consistently, safely, quickly. Most of the drama involves the question of whether or not you should drop down into second for the two orange-cone chicanes.

The engineering team credits the mid-engine layout (which, of course, was a given) and the stiff, lightweight extruded-aluminum frame structure of the car yet to come for its docile feel.

"The production frame will be stiffer and a lot lighter," Hannemann says. How much of the real production car are we actually driving? Getting in and out of the GT, we're careful not to come in contact with the hot rocker-panel sills with the back of our legs or our hands. But it's cool to the touch, along with the center console, which

is counterintuitive for anyone who's driven a Viper. The test mules don't have the production car's catalytic converters, which could account for the cool attitude, Hannemann tells us.

Other differences: The production car will have an air intake on the B-pillar, just behind the driver's left ear, and it'll have double-pane glass separating driver from engine. The comfortable Sparco carbon-fiber racing seat is close to the production version.

After Walsh's first suspension-setup change, the car has more roll and understeer. The first setup already was comfortable for a sports car on bumpy pavement, so more roll and understeer are less satisfying. Walsh says the second setup is stiffer, with bigger anti-roll bars, but less damping.

Walsh's third setup is a charm. It's running stiffer damping, but less anti-roll bar, 18mm versus 22-24mm, than in the earlier setups. Turn-in feels sharper, with minimal understeer and roll. And yet there's enough compliance to keep it connected and not uncomfortable over beat-up roads. With instant, yet predictable feedback, our confidence level grows, and we feel like we're running laps quicker than ever, even though the drizzle is growing into a steadier rain. Walsh nods in agreement when we describe our satisfaction with No. Three. Of course, this is what he has intended all along.

What'll the production car be like? Three different chassis setups can confuse as much as they can predict. If Ford SVT's objective was to show how much its savvy engineers understand about good ride/handling trade-off in a sports car, it succeeded. It gave us a good idea of SVT's goals. We do know the car will feel light and lively and as easy for William Clay Ford as Dan Gurney to drive fast and drive well. And we know that staging a one-two-three finish in the rain looks good, even when the Ford GTs are just development mules. **MT**

1966—Ford GT40 MkIIs sweep Le Mans 24 Hours, 1-2-3.



1967—Jerry Titus takes 1967 Trans-Am championship in Mustang.

1972—Stroppe-prepared "Big Oly" Bronco wins first of two Baja 500 off-road races with Parnelli Jones behind wheel.



1973—Escort RS 1600 wins Finland's 1000 Lakes Rally with Timo Makinen behind wheel, first of 33 Escort WRC wins between 1973 and 1977.

1985—"Aero Bird" piloted by Bill Elliott sets 500-mile-race speed record of 186.288 mph at Talladega.



1994—Driving Benetton-Ford, Michael Schumacher takes Ford to its first F1 championship in 12 years.



2003—Cosworth powers entire CART series.