

2003 Ford SVT Mustang Cobra 10th Anniversary Edition: Old Enough To Go Better



Age, it has been said, is only a number. In that vein, we present the following numbers: 10, 390, 32, 6, 4.6, 12.9, 159, and 1495.

All of these pertain in one way or another to the 2003 Ford SVT Mustang Cobra with the 10th Anniversary Package, and we'll sort them out for you by and by. We bring up the matter of age because it seems everyone does when discussing the current Mustang. It's hard enough to ignore that Ford's pony is getting to be an old, gray mare when you consider its basic platform dates back to 1979. Further driving home the point is the fact that Ford has a top-to-bottom new Mustang due out in the fall as a 2005 model, and everybody knows it. The concept car that presaged the next-generation Mustang stirred auto show visitors and the automotive press during 2003.

It probably didn't help quiet the age talk one bit to have Ford hang an anniversary package on the car that called attention to the passage of years. But in the

case of the '03 Cobra, there was a good reason for celebrating the staying power of Dearborn's hardy perennial. The anniversary dress-up package that was applied to a limited number of Cobras commemorated the first decade of fortified Fords prepared by the division's Special Vehicle Team (SVT).

The SVT was created in 1991 with the mission to "polish the Ford oval" by creating specialized "halo" vehicles for enthusiast drivers. The group had its coming-out party at the 1992 Chicago Auto Show when it unveiled the first two products it would offer for the '93 model year: the F-150 Lightning pickup truck and the Mustang Cobra (CA, August 1992). Thus, the clock started running toward the 10-year anniversary.

Since then, the team of engineers, product planners, and marketers has put its distinctive stamp on several Ford vehicles. Now headed by John Coletti, a former Mustang chief engineer who took over as SVT director in 1994, the group

has seen total sales of its products top the 100,000 mark. But judging by its persistence in the SVT lineup, it seems the Mustang is the team's favorite vehicle to modify.

Following that first Cobra in '93, SVT has issued a vitamin-enriched street ponycar in all but the 2000 and 2002 model years. (There have been three racing-oriented Cobra Rs, too.) Only one of the absences was planned, by the way. In 1999, SVT had to weather a bit of embarrassment over the "missing horsepower" affair, in which some owners complained their supposedly 320-bhp serpents seemed to lack venom. It turned out they were right, thanks to faulty intake parts. SVT cancelled the 2000 Cobra while it resolved the problem and repaired the affected '99s. The second gap in Cobra production was deliberate because SVT wanted to clear the decks for the early release of a Mustang it believed would be one trick pony.

The 2003 Cobra came bounding out of the gate with a powertrain designed to top anything ever put in a factory-stock Mustang. Newly bestowed with an inter-cooled Eaton Roots-type supercharger, the 32-valve 4.6-liter V-8 was rated at 390 bhp at 6000 rpm. These were late-Sixties kinds of figures, but back then, they represented gross horsepower generated by 400-plus-cid big blocks, not the more-restrictive net horsepower wrung from just 281 cubic inches in the modern-day V-8. The twin overhead camshafts spun through aluminum cylinder heads mounted on a cast-iron block. A forged-steel crankshaft linked up to forged "H-beam" connecting rods and forged pistons. Torque was rated at a peak 390 pound-feet at 3500 rpm.

The Cobra mill was backed up by another new item, a TTC T-56 six-speed gearbox with overdrive ratios in the top two gears. From it, an aluminum drive-shaft ran back to a 3.55:1 final-drive gear.

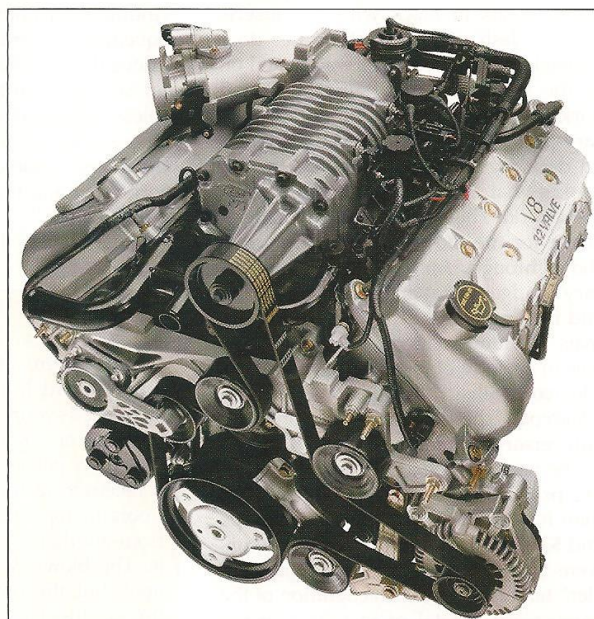
Together, they made the '03 SVT Mustang a memorable spotlight steed. "Cobra's supercharged thrust is spine-compressing and virtually lag-free," said our compatriots at Consumer Guide®. In a side-by-side speed comparison of 10



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1. Not only did Ford's Special Vehicle Team (SVT) release a powerful new version of the Mustang Cobra for 2003, it also marked its 10th year of perking up Ford cars and trucks with a limited-edition anniversary option package for the Cobra coupe and convertible. 2. Of the three colors available for 10th Anniversary Package Cobras, one—Torch Red—was exclusive to the commemoratives. 3. Black leather seats with red leather inserts were one of the package's features. 4. All SVT Mustangs received a 390-bhp supercharged V-8 for 2003.

hot cars staged by *Motor Trend*, it proved it was hardly a field horse, even in the company of some thoroughbred exotics. "Classically American, the Cobra . . . uses every bit of its 390 horsepower to make a smoky, tire-roasting impression," wrote Mark Williams. *MT* posted a 4.82-second 0-to-60-mph run and traversed the quarter-mile in 13.01 at 110.69 mph. *Car and Driver* did even better: 4.6 seconds to 60 and 12.9/112 in the quarter-mile sprint. Somehow, *Motor Trend* managed to coax four additional miles per hour out of the electronic limiter that's sup-

posed to confine top speed to 155 mph.

The engine and transmission weren't all that was new. Enlarged openings below the front bumper not only helped set the Cobra apart from lesser Mustangs, but they gulped in more air, too. Two rear-facing hood scoops were added to channel away hot air from the engine compartment. Along the sides, the rocker panels were reshaped into plainer vertical surfaces than they had been before. Interior enhancements included redesigned front bucket seats and an instrument cluster revised to

accept a supercharger boost gauge.

Before the supercharger and six-speed came along, it was probably the chassis that most set Cobras apart from the other Mustangs in the stable. In 1999, the Cobra gave up its old-school solid axle for independent rear suspension featuring unequal-length control arms, a toe-control link, antiroll bar, and coil springs. For 2003, upgraded bushings and an extra tubular cross brace were installed to help deal with the substantial power boost. Furthermore, spring rates were now differentiated between the coupe

Future Collectibles

and convertible. While closed cars had 600-pound-per-inch springs all around, convertible springs with ratings of 500 pounds front and 470 pounds rear were installed. The 275/40ZR17 Goodyear Eagle F1 tires were wider than those seen on previous Cobras, and a better grade of rear-brake pad material was called upon for added durability and better performance.

This was the extent of what was new about the Mustang Cobra until the summer of 2003. That's when it became available with the 10th Anniversary Package to, as Ford put it, "commemorate the first decade for both Ford SVT and the flagship SVT Mustang Cobra."

In place of the Dark Charcoal Nudo leather seats with suede inserts from the "base" Cobra, anniversary cars got full-leather seats in black with red inserts (plus a dash of red on the inner door panels). Faux carbon fiber was tacked on to the steering wheel, shift boot, and parking brake handle. Unique anniversary-package wheels, which were painted dark argent, consisted of seven thin spokes that resembled the tines of a meat fork. Their open design made it easier for the red disc-brake calipers to show through. An "SVT 10th Anniversary" badge was attached to the decklid, and its design was repeated in the floor mats. Commemorative cars were available in a choice of just three colors: Black Clearcoat, Silver Metallic, or Torch Red Clearcoat, the last available only on anniversary Cobras.

The package added \$1495 to the starting prices of SVT Mustangs, which by then had risen to \$33,440 for the coupe and \$37,780 for the convertible. (The cars were also subject to a \$1000 "gas-guzzler" tax.) As a further recognition of the anniversary, a total of just 2003 of the specials were built; 1003 coupes and 1000 convertibles.

Nothing in the 10th Anniversary Package could make the Mustang Cobra better in a functional sense—unfortunate for a car subject to age-related ailments. While the front seats won praise for support and grip, interior build quality was suspect and layout was questioned. "Cobra's shift lever is shaped differently from that of other Mustangs and is difficult to use without stretching," concluded Consumer Guide®. "Ergonomics and seat/steering-wheel/shifter relationships are all messed up, evidence that



Fork-spoke 17-inch wheels and red brake calipers were added to the anniversary cars.

this pony is getting on in years," said *Motor Trend*. In track testing, *Car and Driver* forgave a lack of steering feel to praise the Cobra's handling abilities. "On winding roads, however, where the consequences of error are so much more serious than on the track, the Cobra feels less secure," wrote Csaba Csere. "The lifeless steering doesn't impart great confidence. Neither does the suspension, which feels underdamped during small motions, giving the car a vague and unsettled feeling."

No matter how the subject is broached,

there's no getting around the issue of the lame-duck Mustang's age. "Of all the vehicles in our Top-Speed test, the Mustang Cobra is the most closely related to the musclecars from the past in look, feel, and sound," said *MT*—a comment that, intentionally or not, reinforces the point. *C/D* was more blunt: "In the end, the pony car does its best work at the track . . . [b]ut on the road, there's more balanced satisfaction to be had from its more modern competitors."

If 1500 bucks worth of two-tone leather seats and spidery sports wheels couldn't make this Cobra better—younger, if you will—it *could* make it potentially more collectible. For all its perceived faults, the SVT Mustang Cobra still gets credit for getting from Point A to Point B in a big hurry, and at a good price for the degree of performance delivered. "The best Mustang ever built," was *Car and Driver's* summary. Now, imagine the "best" Mustang with the most equipment (fully documented as original, of course)—and only 2003 to go around. Considering all the devoted Mustang enthusiasts there are out in the world, if you've got an SVT 10th Anniversary Cobra, in some future age you might find the numbers in your favor.

From the Back Seat

Can you spare a few hundred dollars a month? Ford Motor Company desperately needs your help. Please, oh, please buy this or any other old Mustang so they can get on with the new one. I recently tested a nonbirthday '03 Cobra ragtop, and it felt like something from another age—which, of course, it is. The blown V-8 is a laugh-out-loud hoot, but the brakes aren't up to the thrust, the cockpit is cramped and looks cheap, and the structure has more creaks and shakes than an orthopedic ward. There's a lot of good old-fashioned fun here, but what we really need is some better new-fashioned fun—which might not happen without your support. So, dig deep and buy now. Ford is counting on YOU!

Chris Poole

SVT, AMG, PVO, M. To the uninitiated, these are just letters. To car guys, these letters represent the corporate-sponsored return of performance. It's been

10 years now that Ford's Special Vehicle Team has been working to turn Mustangs into performance cars. The formula has been simple: Take one circa-1978 Fox platform, add a big engine and as much suspension as an antiquated chassis can accept, and revive the legendary Cobra name. The results have been mixed. Sure, the engines are great, but it's hard to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. The Mustang is simply too old. Just about every car produced today is more structurally rigid. And the ergonomics are awful. You sit legs stretched with the steering wheel under your chin, and shifting requires orangutan arms. Will this car be collectible? Probably as much as any of the current Mustangs. But if you want collectibility in a fun-to-drive performance package, I recommend waiting until 2005, when the Mustang is redesigned and SVT can work with some better DNA.

Kirk Bell