

CAR LIFE
ROAD TESTFAIRLANE
COBRA

The man says 'This one eats birds for breakfast.'

It's one of Ford's best Supercar tries—budget or not.

FORD'S PUBLIC RELATIONS man wasn't at the track when CAR LIFE tested the Cobra. From our standpoint, it's just as well. He was supposed to have been the victim of a joke, but it backfired.

As a rule, we don't welcome factory representatives when we're testing their cars. They make us nervous. When Ford's man asked if he could come, we said he'd be welcome. Then, we made some plans. The test Road Runner (see page 54) was going to be there at the same time. We wouldn't tell the PR man that the Plymouth wasn't fresh from the showroom floor.

He would have to watch the original budget performance car blow the doors off Ford's version, run after run, and wouldn't learn about the joke until he'd spent a month waiting for the tests to be printed, and hoping it wouldn't be as bad as it looked.

The joke was on us. No, the Ford wasn't faster, but the Cobra pulled a hole shot on the Road Runner most runs, and never lost by more than two lengths. We expected to show how much the enthusiast can get with extra money and parts, but we learned that the big, plush Cobra can hold its own, even in a rigged match race.

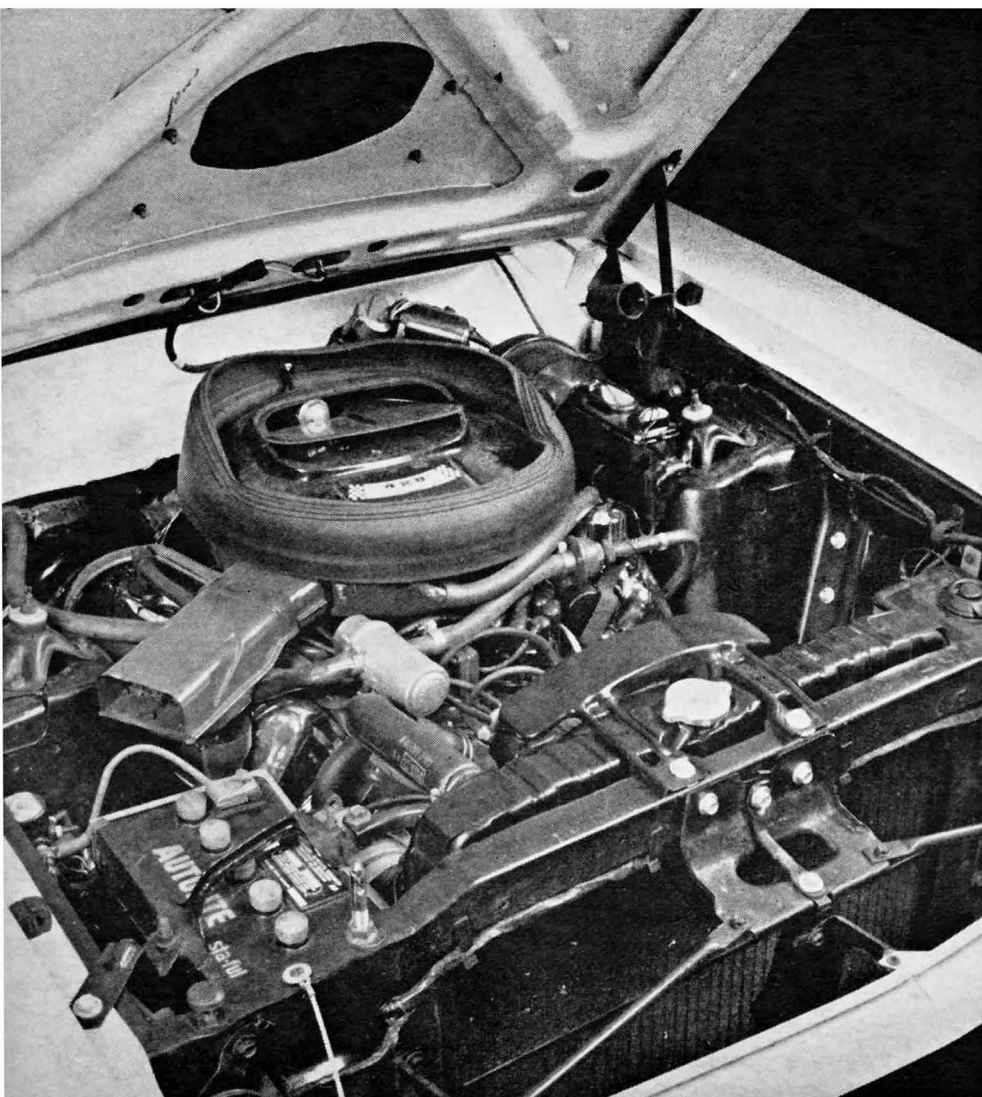
Best part of the Cobra is the Cobra-Jet engine. Ford thinks so, too. Every time the company has a car that needs a performance image, it gets the 428. We've tested the engine in three cars now. While it isn't always suited to the car, the 428 is always strong, and never temperamental. Rated power this year is the same as last year: 335. We've made some guesses about the actual power and been sorry later. CAR LIFE's horsepower guesswork chart (part of the *ACTION LINE* horsepower story in the Dec. 1968 issue) showed that the Cobra-Jet in the two-ton-plus Cobra produced close to

EXPLOSION IN BUDGET SUPERCARS



LEAN PRODUCED by hard cornering was more pronounced than we expected. Standard stiff suspension isn't very stiff.

VALVE CONTROLLING cool air scoop is closed by engine vacuum, opens when accelerator is floored. Cool air produces more power, but warm air controls emissions.



FAIRLANE COBRA

continued

the 335 claimed for it, maybe a few horses more. It doesn't have too much torque at low engine speeds, but it feels very strong at the top end.

The only new feature for the engine this year is a vacuum control valve, in the top of the air cleaner, for the cold-air scoop. Vacuum from the intake manifold holds the valve closed so the engine uses warmed underhood air. When the throttle is wide open, the valve opens, and admits cooler, denser, outside air. Very sensible and clever. The cool air is only useful at full power, and the warm air during normal operation makes meeting the emission requirements much easier.

Stiff springs, bigger shock absorbers, wide-rim wheels and belted, cross-ply tires are standard for the Cobra, again in the budget Supercar tradition. The rear shock absorbers are staggered, with one mounted in front on the axle, the other behind, to prevent spring wind-up under acceleration. This, they do. Aided by the tires, the Cobra made clean, fast starts. Full power couldn't

be used from rest, but once the car had moved one or two feet, the tires coped with all the horses.

The Cobra wasn't as impressive on the handling course. The heavy engine caused understeer, and the powerful engine would put the tail out on command, but the Cobra had more body lean than the other cars in the group. It leaned farther than the Mercury Cyclone tested last year. Why this was so, we don't know. The two cars are nearly identical, although the Cyclone was lighter by about 100 lb. The Cyclone had the optional handling package. Possibly the standard stiff springs aren't as stiff as the optional stiff springs, on the theory that most buyers prefer comfort, even in a Supercar.

The Cobra was comfortable—in town, on freeways and on winding country roads. It felt stable at high speeds, and could be maneuvered easily. The steering doesn't turn as far as it might, though. In several places where a smaller car could make a U-turn, the Cobra could only shuttle back and forth through 180°. The Cobra and the Road Runner were being driven by the same people at the same time. The Cobra wasn't as agile as the 'Runner, but then few intermediates are. The Cobra was quieter and smoother.

And solid. After spending the '68 model year carping about Ford's rattlers, justice requires that Ford be given credit for this test Cobra. No rattles, no hood shake, no thumps from underneath, no dangling wires or flapping upholstery. (All those Ford fans who were so mad last year can show their appreciation by rushing down to the newsstand and buying another copy. Make it two.)

The brakes—optional power-assisted discs in front, drums in back—also deserved praise. The first all-out stop was better than average, although one rear brake had a tendency to lock and the car swerved slightly. By the fourth stop, the rear drums had faded, and full power could be used. The deceleration rate went back up. This Cobra was one car that could be driven up Pikes Peak and coasted down without drama.

The test car had the standard Cobra rear axle, higher numerically than the ratio used in a smaller engined Fairlane, but not as low as an all-drag car. The 3.50:1 is a good choice. The Cobra is slower (by a fraction of a second) than last year's Cyclone, but it's much better suited to ordinary driving than was the 3.91:1 in the Cyclone. That car drove us bananas on the freeway, and even the guys at Holman & Moody, who made sure the Cyclone was running right, thought the car was in second all the time. (Didn't know we knew, did you, Ford? Next

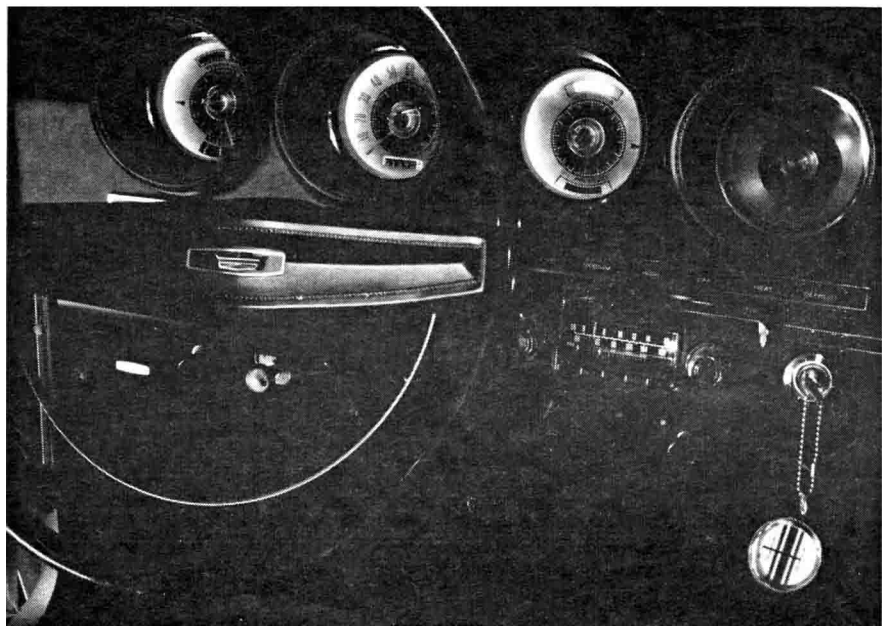
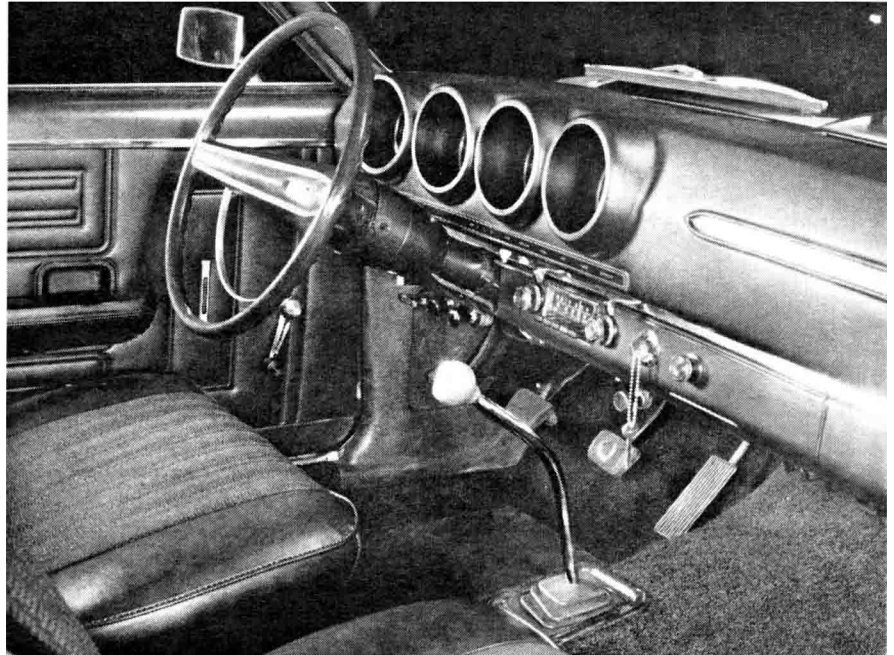
time, we'll come up with a practical joke that works.)

Interesting, trying to decide where the makers cut costs and prices on budget Supercars. The 'Runner had a bench seat and instruments, and the elegant Cobra had semi-buckets and no instruments. Just speedometer, fuel gauge and warning lights. The panel has a place for a tachometer. With an automatic transmission, it would be nice to have. With the Cobra's standard four-speed manual transmission, a tachometer would have been a

definite plus. Before the acceleration runs, we worked out the maximum engine speed in each gear, in miles per hour, and shifted by the speedometer, after calibrating it. Not hard, but bothersome. The test car's speedometer was slow. Most are fast, and the owner who doesn't work out the speeds, and check the speedometer, won't get the performance he's paid for.

The gearshift was disappointing. The lever moved easily, but it lacked precision. More like groping through

INTERIOR IS comfortable and elegant, with carpeting and semi-bucket seats. Only three of the four spaces in the instrument panel were occupied by instruments.



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continued

molasses than slicing through butter with a hot knife. With the seat positioned at a comfortable distance from the steering wheel, third gear was a long way off. Shifting down, from third to second, was risky. Reverse is next to second. The spring detent wasn't strong, and on one occasion the driver overrode it, and bounced off reverse while the car was going forward. No damage, but terrible noises, and the transmission refused to go into any gear at all. Luckily, two of the CAR LIFE staffers own racing cars with English Ford transmissions—with the same shift patterns and the same flaw. Selection can only be restored by coming to a stop, and putting the transmission into reverse. That clears the board, and forward motion can be resumed. The Road Runner shift pattern, with reverse



TRUNK SPACE is adequate, but limited. The sill is high, the trunk lid is small and most of the room is far forward. The spare tire rides in back, within easy reach.

next to first, doesn't have this problem, so the 'Runner had a reverse lock out.

A few more gripes about the interior and controls: The slanted rear window, or the mirror, or both, gave a distorted view of traffic behind, and made it hard to judge how far back

the cars were. The clutch pedal has a very long travel. Only the last half works the clutch. The first half only stretches a return spring. Lifting left leg to chin for nothing becomes very tiresome very quickly. As a real nit-picker, the amber lights on the back of the hood scoop, which blinked in uni-

1969 COBRA FORD FAIRLANE



DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in.	116
Track, f/r, in.	58.8/58.5
Overall length, in.	201.1
width	74.8
height	52.2
Front seat hip room, in.	25.5 x 2
shoulder room	57.5
head room	37.4
pedal-seatback, max.	40
Rear seat hip room, in.	58
shoulder room	56.7
leg room	31.9
head room	36.7
Door opening width, in.	42.5
Trunk liftover height, in.	33

PRICES

List, FOB factory	\$3139
Equipped as tested	\$3945
Options included:	ram-air hood scoop, \$133.44; limited-slip differential, \$63.51; power steering, \$100.26; power disc brakes, \$64.77; AM-FM radio, \$181.36; dual rear speakers, \$25.91, and styled steel wheels, \$116.59.

CAPACITIES

No. of passengers	5
Luggage space, cu. ft.	17
Fuel tank, gal.	20
Crankcase, qt.	4
Transmission/dif., pt.	4/5
Radiator coolant, qt.	19.6

CHASSIS/SUSPENSION

Frame type:	Unitized
Front suspension type:	Independent by s.l.a., telescopic shock absorbers and coil springs.
ride rate at wheel, lb./in.	137
antiroll bar dia., in.	0.85
Rear suspension type:	Hotchkiss live axle, multileaf springs, telescopic shock absorbers.
ride rate at wheel, lb./in.	145
Steering system:	recirculating ball gear, linkage booster power assist, parallelogram linkage behind front wheels.
overall ratio	21.6:1
turns, lock to lock	3.5
turning circle, ft. curb-to-curb	41.45
Curb weight, lb.	3845
Test weight	4105
Distribution (driver)	% f/r
	56.9/43.1

BRAKES

Type:	disc front, drums rear.
Front rotor, dia. x width, in.	11.3 x 2.07
Rear drum, dia. x width	10 x 2.5
total swept area, sq. in.	214
Power assist	
line psi at 100 lb. pedal	795

WHEELS/TIRES

Wheel rim size	14 x 6JJ
optional size	N.A.
bolt no./circle dia. in.	5/4.5
Tires:	Goodyear Polyglas
size	F70 x 14
normal inflation, psi f/r	28/28
Capacity @ psi	6,000 @ 32

ENGINE

Type, no. of cyl.	ohv V-8
Bore x stroke, in.	4.132 x 3.984
Displacement, cu. in.	428
Compression ratio	10.6:1
Fuel required	premium
Rated bhp @ rpm	335 @ 5200
equivalent mph	108.7
Rated torque @ rpm	440 @ 3400
equivalent mph	71
Carburetion:	Holley 1x4
throttle dia., pri./sec.	1.562/1.562
Valve train:	hydraulic lifters, push rods and overhead rocker arms.
cam timing	
deg., int./exh.	18-72/82-28
duration, int./exh.	270°/290°
Exhaust system:	dual with branched headers, 2 reverse-flow mufflers.
pipe dia., exh./tail	2.25/2.00
Normal oil press.	40-60
Electrical supply, v./amp.	12/55
Battery, plates/amp. hr.	78/80

DRIVE TRAIN

Clutch type:	single dry plate
dia., in.	11.5
Transmission type:	four-speed manual
Gear ratio 4th (1.00) overall	3.50:1
3rd (1.29)	4.52:1
2nd (1.69)	5.92:1
1st (2.32)	8.12:1
Shift lever location:	driveshaft tunnel
Differential type:	Hypoid
axle ratio	3.50:1



ACCELERATION WAS surprisingly good: Highway gearing and interior insulation made the Cobra so quiet that it was faster than it felt. The big Polyglas tires are standard.

son with the turn signal lights and the green lights in the panel, gave the testers the giggles. Even the guy who invented Buick's portholes took the blinking lights out before the gimmick went into production.

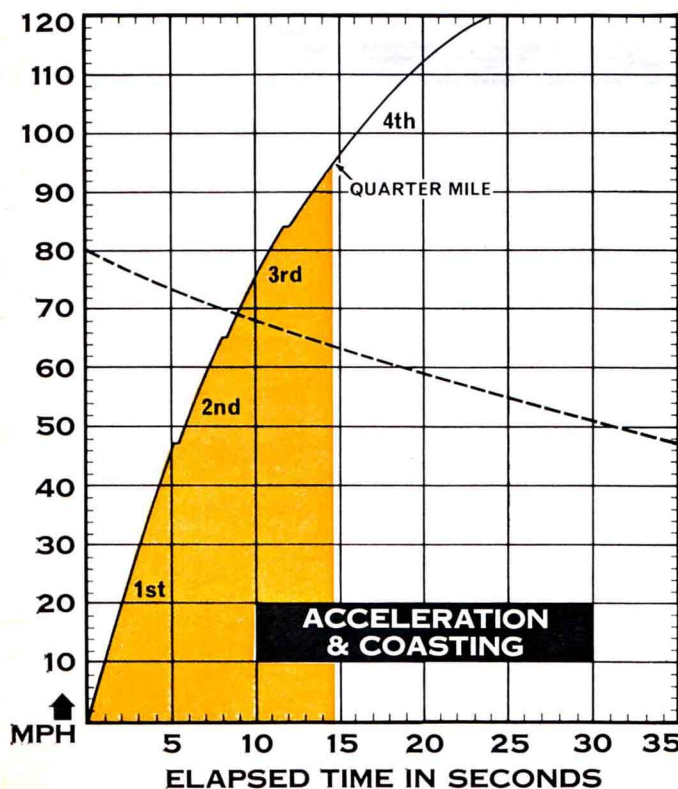
The front seats were habitable to all the test drivers. The heaviest is almost

twice as heavy as the lightest, so the range is wide indeed. The rear seat was cramped for all adults, but so are the rear seats in every domestic hard-top we've tested. Complaining about that is like assuring the reader the Cobra had a wheel at each corner.

The Cobra's performance was sur-

prisingly good, the price is within reason, the fastback roof (we think) is the best looking around. The car wasn't nimble, but it was pleasant (and rather elegant). The Cobra may not eat all birds for breakfast; but when it does, it doesn't chew with its mouth open. ■

CAR LIFE ROAD TEST



CALCULATED DATA

Lb./bhp (test weight).....	12.22
Cu. ft./ton mile.....	168.3
Mph/1000 rpm (high gear).....	20.9
Engine revs/mile (60 mph).....	2797
Piston travel, ft./mile.....	1857
CAR LIFE wear index.....	51.95
Frontal area, sq. ft.....	21.69

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph, actual.....	30.36
40 mph.....	40.70
50 mph.....	51.02
60 mph.....	61.34
70 mph.....	71.70
80 mph.....	82.05
90 mph.....	92.40

MAINTENANCE

Engine oil, miles/days.....	6000/180
oil filter, miles/days.....	6000/180
Chassis lubrication, miles.....	36,000
Antismog servicing, type/miles.....	
Check PCV valve, 6,000; replace valve, 12,000; ignition and carburetor tune-up, 12,000.	
Air cleaner, miles.....	replace 24,000.
Spark plugs: Autolite BF-32.	
gap, (in.).....	0.032-0.036
Basic timing, deg./rpm.....	0°-4°/950
max. cent. adv., deg./rpm.....	22-27°/4000
max. vac. adv., deg./in.	
Hg.....	17-22°/17
Ignition point gap, in.....	0.014-0.020
cam dwell angle, deg.....	26-31
arm tension, oz.....	17-21
Tappet clearance, int./exh.....	0/0
Fuel pressure at idle, psi.....	4.5-5.5
Radiator cap relief press., psi.....	12-15

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (6000), mph.....	125.5
Test shift points (rpm) @ mph	
3rd to 4th (5200).....	84
2nd to 3rd (5200).....	65
1st to 2nd (5200).....	47

ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec.....	3.2
0-40 mph.....	4.3
0-50 mph.....	5.9
0-60 mph.....	7.3
0-70 mph.....	9.1
0-80 mph.....	11.0
0-90 mph.....	13.6
0-100 mph.....	15.5
Standing 1/4-mile, sec.....	14.9
speed at end, mph.....	95.2
Passing, 30-70 mph, sec.....	5.9

BRAKING

Max. deceleration rate from 80 mph ft./sec./sec.....	25
No. of stops from 80 mph (60-sec. intervals) before 20% loss in deceleration rate.....	3
Control loss? Slight.	
Overall brake performance.....	good

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Test conditions, mpg.....	8.8
Normal cond., mpg.....	10.2-11.2
Cruising range, miles.....	204-224