

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES



This pair of '70 Cougars demonstrates the breadth of Mercury's muscular ponycar offerings

text and photography by Paul Lee

Ford's Mustang got the jump on the competition when it single-handedly created the ponycar market in the spring of 1964, but it wouldn't be alone for long. Barely two years later, a bevy of highly competitive newcomers joined the fray, including Mustang's familial sister, the Mercury Cougar.

From the get-go, Cougar was marketed upscale of the Mustang, and offered a much more distinct corporate personality than the clearly joined-at-

the-hip GM F-bodies. Cougar bodylines shared nothing in common with the original ponycar, and the hidden headlights and frequent upscale

appointments reflect what has to be considered one of the first sporty luxury cars.

Notable packages when the Cougar

debuted in '67 included the XR7 and GT, and by '68, the lineup was expanded to include the XR7G and high-powered GTEs. From the start, Mercury emphasized Cougar performance with a highly competitive Trans-Am racing team that missed the 1967 title by a mere two points. Likewise, drag racing was another venue in which the big cats were meant to be seen—primarily in the stratospheric classes of early Funny Cars, where big names "Dyno Don" Nicholson and "Fast Eddie" Schartman had their 7-second 427 SOHC powered floptops at the head of the class. The high-

performance component seemed to be embraced at Mercury with the same vigor as its luxury, and in Cougar, as our two feature cars from 1970 illustrate, one could order anything from loaded boulevard bruisers, to high-strung, race-inspired small-blocks.

1970 Cougar XR7

Carl Rogers' '70 droptop is in many ways the ultimate Cougar, and the epitome of what the model was created to be. Does ultimate luxury get any better than a retractable roof and the full boat XR7 trim package? You bet it

does—try on a ram-air 428 Cobra Jet, Hurst shifted close-ratio 4-speed, and special-order metallic silver paint. Ford's long stroke 428 is the perfect pairing for the heavier convertible body style, and does a lot more than simply power the many luxury accessories.

Rogers' convertible was more or less rescued from oblivion some six years ago by former owner Todd Aicher. The car was a near basket case, but determined to be worth the resuscitation by virtue of its rarity. Ford production data available through Kevin Marti (www.martiauto.com)

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indicates just 20 four-speed CJ Cougar ragtops were assembled in 1970, and we'd bet few others were topped by a special order hue.

Clearly in need of more than a novice's attention, Aicher turned the restoration over to Snohomish, Washington's West Coast Restorations, where Larry Berkovich and company dove in with both feet. The topless unibody was stripped and dipped in a chemical solution to remove all traces of corrosion; next reconstruction began at the hands of skilled bodyman Randy Sargent. He replaced all damaged sheet metal with NOS or rust free originals, including the floorpans sourced from a virgin donor Cougar. Once the body prep was finished, Sargent laid down the gorgeous and unusual silver topcoat in two-stage Deltron.

Clearly visible atop this matching-number 428 is the vacuum operated ram-air air cleaner. Unlike '69 Cougars and '69-'70 Mustangs, '70 Cougar VINs

didn't differentiate between ram-air and non ram-air versions of the powerful 428 Cobra Jet. The previously mentioned models carried a Q-code for non ram-air CJs, and an R-code for ram-air CJs, whereas all '70 CJ Cougars were Q codes—with the ram-air option simply noted on critical paperwork.

Beyond the high-performance options, Rogers' Cougar sports the extensive XR7 package, which included leather upholstery, woodgrained dash, full instrumentation with clock and six-grand tach, and a host of unique trim. Full power is the name of the game here, with power front discs, power steering, power top, and power windows, though the power we're most appreciative of comes from what many consider the best street musclecar engine to come from FoMoCo.

1970 Cougar Eliminator

At the other end of the spectrum, in both temperament and style, is John

Benoit's Eliminator. While the big-block rag is loaded to the gills, the Eliminator is a comparatively sparse performance platform, and an entirely different animal altogether. Front and center is the look-at-me graphic treatment with hood scoop and spoilers that was standard Eliminator fare, though the base interior for the package is likely one of the plainest to ever be screwed into a Mercury. Options were available however, and while there's no such thing as an XR7 Eliminator, Benoit's did come with the mid-level Décor Group threads and console. Additional upgrades came in the form of an 8-track tape player, front disc brakes, power steering, tinted glass, and styled steel wheels.

Base engine for the 2,267 '70 Eliminators was the 300 horse four-barrel 351 Cleveland, though the package could be teamed with either the 428CJ or Boss 302. A Boss Cougar? Yep, and Benoit's Competition Blue

example is one of just 469 to be so equipped according to Marti's production data. While the 428CJ was available across the entire Cougar line, the Boss was only available in Eliminator guise. It was a strange pairing, the heavy Cougar and the high-revving small-block, but the engine fell right in with the image Mercury was trying to project with the Eliminator.

Just as it did in the Mustang Boss 302, this Trans-Am inspired small-block sported a conservative 290 horsepower rating, and included such serious hardware as 4-bolt mains, forged crankshaft, solid lifters, 2.19/1.71 valves, aluminum intake, and 780 cfm Holley carb. However unlike its '70 Mustang counterparts, Boss 302 Eliminators could not be had with ram-air—odd, considering the ready and willing hood scoop. On the

other hand, Eliminators came standard with a tachometer—eight-grand in the case of a Boss, whereas Mustang owners would be shifting by ear unless they remembered to check the proper option box.

Befitting a high-rev small block, transmission choices in a Boss 302 were limited to Toploader 4-speeds. Benoit's is like most Boss Cougars and Mustangs in that it's equipped with the close-ratio box (2.32 first gear) as opposed to the more unusual wide ratio (2.78 first gear). Either 4-speed was equipped with a factory Hurst shifter and distinctive T-handle, though the shift rods continued to be Ford sourced. Further aft, Boss Cougars were equipped with a beefy nodular-cased, 31-spline 9-inch, running 3.50 gears and a Traction-Lok dif in this instance.

Benoit is no stranger to Cougars; in

fact the ponycar Mercs amount to a high percentage of the work he turns out at his Cascade Classics restoration shop in Edgewood, Washington. As you might expect for someone imbedded in the hobby for the long haul, he's owned quite an array of top cats over the years. A couple of GTEs, an XR7G, a '69 Eliminator, and another Boss '70 are some of the more notable examples, but this particular Eliminator clearly rates as the best. Initially restored in the early 1990s, Benoit acquired the car in 1999, and had the car apart within a week for a freshening to the highest standards—meaning new paint and an abundance of NOS trim and chrome. The effort paid off in July 2000 at the Cougar Club of America Nationals, where the car achieved 498 out of 500 points, and it's been on a roll ever since.

MC

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

