

COUGAR XR7-G: THE

Mercury's entry to the pony car stable offered a unique combination of style, performance and luxury

text and photography By Richard Truesdell

THE HERTZ XR7-GS

Like their Mustang counterparts, the XR7-G also has a Hertz connection. Of the 621 XR7Gs built, prior to being made available to the general public, 188 were delivered to Hertz for its fleet, an early instance of where manufacturers used their rental affiliates to help promote the introduction of a new model. A few noteworthy features distinguish the Hertz XR7s. The driver's door tag will read "Product of Ford" rather than "Product of Mercury." A second label, imprinted in a smaller box in the upper right corner reads "Special Performance Vehicle" and designates the car as one of the 621 XR7-Gs.

All Hertz Gs have a six-digit D.S.O. number, rather than the normal two; the last four digits end in "8050." The first two digits of the six-digit number are part of the standard D.S.O. code. The last four digits signify the special production order number of "8050".

All the Hertz XR7-Gs that were ordered by Hertz were equipped with the Marauder 390-4V GTV-8, C-6 Select-shift Merc-o-matic transmission, Performance Handling Package, power steering, power disc brakes, air conditioning, tilt-wheel, and the A.S.C. power sunroof.

While there are rumors that some of the Hertz-designated cars may have been sold directly to the general public, there is no concrete evidence to back up this claim. The process was that the cars were leased to Hertz by Ford, and then after being returned to Ford were later sold through the dealer network as used cars. Think of them as some of the first certified used program cars, a unique footnote to musclecar history.



While it was late to the pony car party, Mercury made a big splash when the Cougar was publicly unveiled in the fall of 1966. Billed as a more luxurious version of Ford's popular Mustang, the Cougar got an unexpected sales boost when it was also named Motor Trend's Car of the Year, one of the industry's most coveted awards.

Mercury's product planners went to great lengths to distance their new prodigy from its more proletarian counterpart, and established the XR7

series as an even more luxurious top model, available with a wide choice of powertrain combinations. Also available in 1967, the dealer-installed Dan

Gurney Special package was offered which consisted of special wheel covers, an engine dress-up kit, special badges and a unique window decal.

In 1968 the Dan Gurney link was expanded since Gurney was running a Bud Moore-prepared Cougar in the increasingly popular SCCA Trans Am racing series. A specially-equipped Cougar labeled the XR7-G headed the Cougar lineup, first appearing in the spring of 1968. Although the 621 XR7-Gs have not quite attained quite the cult status

GURNEY CONNECTION



1 390ci four-barrel big-block rated at 320hp was most popular powerplant in 1968 XR7-G.

2 Porsche buckets with original-style upholstery are marked improvement over original seats.

of the GT-350 Mustangs, the XR7-Gs do have a Shelby connection of their own.

Shelby Link

After Shelby American ceased actual production of the GT-350 in Los Angeles, Ford established Shelby Automotive Inc. in Michigan with Carroll Shelby as its president. In addition to the Mustangs, Shelby Automotive was also responsible for production of the XR7-G...well, in a way they were, since both models were subcontracted out to A. O. Smith, www.musclecarenthusiast.com

previously the supplier to Chevrolet of fiberglass bodies used in the Corvette.

A further complication to the XR7-G's production process was that 499 of the cars were then shipped by rail to the facilities of the American Sunroof Company (A.S.C.) where they received a power-operated sunroof, along with a replacement headliner and vinyl top.

What it all added up to was a car that was a distinctive American-built GT with no direct counterpart in the Mustang line. Hitting dealer showrooms

in March of 1968, it was not heavily promoted by the Mercury Division, which explains its relative rarity. For Art and Wanda Hopkins, this turns out to be part of its appeal. Two motor heads of the first order, Art is a longtime fan of air-cooled Volkswagens and Porsches (Wanda still owns a show-quality 914-6). But in 1988, Art had his musclecar yearnings reawakened when he encountered a big-block 390 1968 Mercury Cougar with a sunroof at an insurance auction.

COUGAR XR7-G: THE GURNEY CONNECTION



GURNEY GEAR

- Special XR7-G badges on the right headlamp door, both roof pillars and the trunk latch cover
- Lucas Fog Lamps mounted in a custom front valance
- Racing style hood pins with cables; see links below
- A third, extra loud horn
- A unique Fiberglas hood scoop
- Bullet shaped remote adjustable racing mirror
- Specially wrapped steering wheel with cat in center
- Leather covered console with switches marked "Roof" and "Fog," standard AM radio and rally clock
- Special shift knob made of real wood with inlaid cat
- Gold dash logo reading "Cougar XR7-G"
- Leather-covered door pulls on both door panels
- Styled steel or spoked wheels (made by Rader Wheel Co.) and a unique hubcap with XR7-G logo



3 Dan Gurney (center, with helmet) at Bud Moore Engineering with namesake Cougar.



Finding the Prize

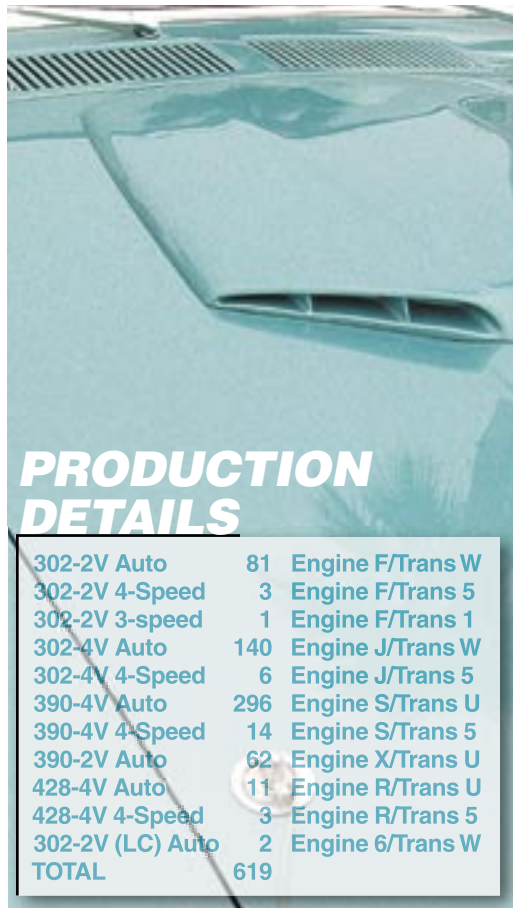
While researching the Cougar during the restoration process and after putting about 30,000 miles on his first Cougar, he learned about the XR7-G special and started his search to acquire one. His efforts led him to Maryland and in 1995 he became the owner of the spectacular specimen pictured here and had it shipped to California. It was a one-owner car with 44,000 miles. It was a rust-free, complete, driving car that needed freshened.

He decided he wanted a "new" as possible restoration so the car was completely disassembled and rebuilt with every component refreshed. The 390GT Marauder engine was rebuilt with a slightly lower compression ratio. The C-6 Transmission, nine-inch rear-end, and disc brakes were all rebuilt.

The modifications incorporated into the restoration are as follows: Global West suspension, Koni adjustable shocks and a Total Performance Rack and pinion steering. The car now handles and performs like a new car. Because this was to be a car that

would be driven, Art felt that the original seats required replacement so a pair of Porsche 911 eight-way power seats was installed after being reupholstered with leather stitched to match the original upholstery pattern.

"I believe that show cars should be driven," says Art. "Wanda and I like to drive to various car shows throughout California. Our vacation was a 1,000-mile trip from Southern California to the Sequoia National Park. The trip was without incident. We certainly enjoyed and appreciated the excellent air



PRODUCTION DETAILS

302-2V Auto	81	Engine F/Trans W
302-2V 4-Speed	3	Engine F/Trans 5
302-2V 3-speed	1	Engine F/Trans 1
302-4V Auto	140	Engine J/Trans W
302-4V 4-Speed	6	Engine J/Trans 5
390-4V Auto	296	Engine S/Trans U
390-4V 4-Speed	14	Engine S/Trans 5
390-2V Auto	62	Engine X/Trans U
428-4V Auto	11	Engine R/Trans U
428-4V 4-Speed	3	Engine R/Trans 5
302-2V (LC) Auto	2	Engine 6/Trans W
TOTAL	619	

NOTE: This wouldn't fit in the Gurney Gear sidebar, and please check it carefully - I edited a lot to fit what DID fit in - as always, my edits are just to give an idea of space.

- Dual exhaust system with special "pipe-in-a-pipe" slash tips and chrome trimmed rear valance cutout.

Also, please check my edits on the last paragraph and the note at the end which I made to get the Web site addresses on one line. Thank you.

conditioning on this 106-degree weekend but our 'G' did not appreciate the 5,000-foot altitude! Maybe an Edelbrock fuel injection system will fix that...along with a Lentec AOD." For the record, the Cougar did just fine as part of the California speedshop tour in our March issue.

Hopkins notes that the XR7-G gets up to 10 miles per gallon and is noteworthy in that it is one of the 122 of the series that lacks the optional American sunroof. His XR7-G has won many trophies including the West Coast Cougar Club 2002 first place award, along with many local Cougar Club event victories. The most appreciated attention was when Ford Motor Co. chose this car as "Best of Show" at the 2002 Knotts Berry Farm All Ford Show, this out of approximately 1,600 cars, was quite an honor.

If you have an interest in the XR7-G, Hopkins suggests you check out the registry at www.theclassiccougarnetwork.com/xr7g/. There you'll find a wealth of information on this somewhat neglected part of where the Pony and Musclecar eras collided.

MC

—Sidebar materials courtesy of Royce Peterson. Check out his Web site at www.myteesamoyeds.com/ginfo.html.
www.musclecarenthusiast.com