

1994 Ford Mustang Saleen SR- Meanest Saleen

The Limited-Edition SR Was the Ultimate Saleen Mustang

by Brad Bowling

To fully appreciate the rare and powerful Saleen SR, it is necessary to take a look at the car on which it is based and the events leading to its creation. Saleen Autosport's annual sales figures peaked in 1989 with production of 895 high-performance Mustang hatchbacks, convertibles, and limited-edition SSC models, then plummeted as the entire auto industry was hit with the worst recession in 25 years. In 1992, when Saleen sold only 17 Mustangs equipped with his unique combination of suspension, aerodynamics, interior and engine enhancements, many observers wrote-off the California-based company as another victim of the slow economy.

Saleen may very well have become an automotive history footnote, a "whatever happened to?" story, had it not been for Steve Saleen's willpower and the type of outrageous luck that usually only happens in movies. Three men became involved in the Saleen program around 1993, just as the company was facing its most radical product redesign ever, each bringing a special skill or influence. Comedian Tim Allen had one of the hottest sitcoms on television at the time and lent his celebrity status and popularity to Saleen; designer Phil Frank had an uncanny ability to translate Steve's vision to full-scale prototype models; and businessman Tony Johnson brought crucial financial backing.

This talented trio enabled Saleen to elevate Ford's SN-95 Mustang to the same supercar shelf as the Corvette, with the centerpiece of the new model being a 351ci V-8 plucked from SVT's Lightning truck and massaged to 371 hp. Aiding the transformation from pick-up powerplant to Mustang motor were Edelbrock aluminum heads, a roller camshaft, a 65mm throttle body, a 77mm mass air sensor, and an EEC-IV engine management system. Stuffing a 351 into the prototype's tight compartment required lowering the engine mounts, modifying a GT40 intake plenum, and according to fabricator Joe Gosinski, gaining "an eighth of an inch here and there."

Saleen wanted the '94 bearing his name to be a quantum leap above anything else based on the Mustang; he was looking for a real Neil Armstrong moment. AER Manufacturing was hired to build the production 351s once Saleen received its certification from the Environmental Protection Agency.

For the S-351-the first time Steve Saleen named one of his cars after its engine-a heavy-duty Tremec five-speed transmission was hooked up to the V-8, and the stock rear axle gear ratio was 3.27:1. Suspension improvements included Racecraft struts and shocks, variable-rate coil springs, urethane sway bar bushings, and caster/camber plates. The new

S-351 would have won any automotive limbo contest as the new springs provided nearly three inches of drop.

Standard on the S-351 were front P235/40ZR18 and rear P245/40ZR18 BFGoodrich Comp T/A radials, which could be upgraded with Dunlop SP8000s measuring P255/40ZR18 and P285/40ZR18 on magnesium wheels. Speedline, the Italian rim manufacturer, built them with a process developed with Ferrari to prevent the corrosion that had historically plagued magnesium wheels. The S-351 wore the stock Mustang GT four-wheel disc brakes, 10.8-inch up front, 10.5-inch at the rear, unless ordered with the Saleen/Alcon four-piston front caliper and 13-inch grooved front disc.

The exterior benefited from Phil Frank's new body package, which included an entirely new front fascia with five pronounced air scoops below the bumper. The sides were shored up and given a new look with Saleen's traditional treatment plus a flat panel at the base of the door that blended into the lower skirt. Just as with the front fascia, a Saleen rear valance replaced the entire Ford bumper cover starting in '94. A pedestal-mount wing visually extended the width of the car when seen from the rear, and black-out taillamp surrounds were installed over the stock Mustang pieces. Gone were the days of pop-riveting fiberglass parts over an existing factory piece; composite technologies had given Saleen the ability to replace entire front and rear caps economically.

Interior upgrades followed the traditional Saleen lines with Recaro front seats and matching rears, a Saleen shift knob, white-faced gauges including a 200-mph speedometer, a Racecraft steering wheel cover, and floor mats. Ford's Mach 460 stereo was stock equipment unless the optional Pioneer sound system was ordered. The S-351 had the company's highest level of Saleen content to date. After stripping a Mustang coupe or convertible to its bare shell, it took Saleen's craftsmen more than 120 hours to create an S-351. Because all Mustangs underwent this teardown upon entering the Saleen facility, it has been erroneously reported over the years that all S-351s were built from the less-expensive V-6 chassis. According to production records, the majority started life as V-6 models, but a few were created from GTs.

With the basic S-351 platform sorted out, Saleen worked with AER to develop a supercharged version that cranked out a reported 480 hp. There was no model distinction between the blown and unblown S-351s, Saleen simply considered the Vortech centrifugal supercharger as an option.

The plain S-351 would sticker that year for \$34,990; the Vortech installation added \$6,000. Just north of these two on the gotta-have-it list at \$59,990 sat the SR, the closest thing to a racing Mustang to ever wear a license plate.

Built on the S-351 platform but considered a separate model with its own serial-number line, the SR model came standard with the 480hp Vortech-blown V-8, plus a wild appearance package that included a dual-plane rear wing and carbon-fiber hood. Inside was a rear race tray taking the place of the back seat, a four-point roll bar, four-point safety harnesses, drilled racing pedals, a trunk-mounted battery box, and racing Recaro

SPG seats trimmed in purposeful cloth. A Torsen locking rear differential with 3.27:1 gears was standard with the SR, as were boxed lower control arms and a Panhard bar. The front 18x8.5-inch and rear 18x10-inch magnesium wheels and front Dunlop P255/35ZR18 SP8000 and rear P285/35ZR18 SP8000 tires were standard equipment on the SR. Brakes were Alcon-built 13-inch grooved discs in the front and 12-inch at the rear. Company literature advertised the SR as weighing 3,094 pounds, compared to the GT's 3,280, and having a more competitive weight distribution of 56 percent in front, 44 percent in the rear.

Only two SRs were built in the first year. The first SR, 94-0011, was cosmetically completed (still fitted with its stock engine, the body parts were held on with tape and other shortcuts) on April 8, just in time to be shipped to Charlotte, North Carolina, where it debuted alongside the first S-351 at Young Ford the evening before the Mustang Club of America's 30th anniversary show. Fifty thousand people viewed the roped-off display during the four-day event, amazed that the future of performance Mustangs was so bright. The second SR, 94-0001, was built as a press car and stayed with the company at its new facility in Irvine.

Saleen used the SR to homologate parts and equipment for a planned return to racing, which he undertook the following year in the SCCA World Challenge with Tim Allen and the Saleen/Allen RRR Speedlab. The RRR crew would take the racing SRs to victory several times in the United States and to Le Mans in 1997.

The Owners Registry section of *The Saleen Book: 20 Years of Saleen Mustangs* records a total of 27 SRs built during the model's run: 2 in 1994, 7 in 1995, 2 in 1996, 5 in 1997, 3 in 1998, 2 in 1999, 5 in 2000, and 1 in 2001, but these numbers are a bit misleading. In order to keep the SR legal for competition, Saleen renumbered a few cars and updated a few others; some were sold as street cars that later became racers, so the true count of these rare and potent performers is still to be worked out by Mustang historians. We're certain, however, that the first '94 SR was taken back to California after its Charlotte debut, where it was properly outfitted with production bodywork, Racecraft suspension, and a blown 351 engine.



The first Saleen SR, S/N 94-0011.

Mark Tcherkezian purchased the yellow show car immediately after seeing it on display at Charlotte and eagerly awaited its return to the East Coast. As with any prototype, it had certain deviations from the rest of the model run. For example, most S-351s and SRs have a Saleen identification plate on the firewall, but it was posted on the driver-side fender on 94-0011. The yellow coupe was also equipped with a custom set of caster/camber plates that never made it into production.

Ten years and 6,600 miles later, the SR found its way to Mark LaMaskin's Performance Autosport dealership in Richmond, Virginia, where we captured it on our camera. It now belongs to Larry and Carol Moneypenny, who have dreamed of owning Saleen's yellow supercar since its debut.

Brad Bowling is the author of *The Saleen Book: 20 Years of Saleen Mustangs*. For more information about the book, visit www.thesaleenbook.com.

Mustang Monthly, June 1994.