

# Tribute

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE SAGE

**T**here are three models in the Dodge Challenger lineup, and it seems we've been working our way down the line (though up in terms of seat time—and fuel mileage). We started with the SRT8 as a sight-unseen teaser feature before its release, moved to the R/T at a local media launch event, which we drove a few miles around downtown and south Phoenix, and now have driven the V6-powered base-model SE for a full week.



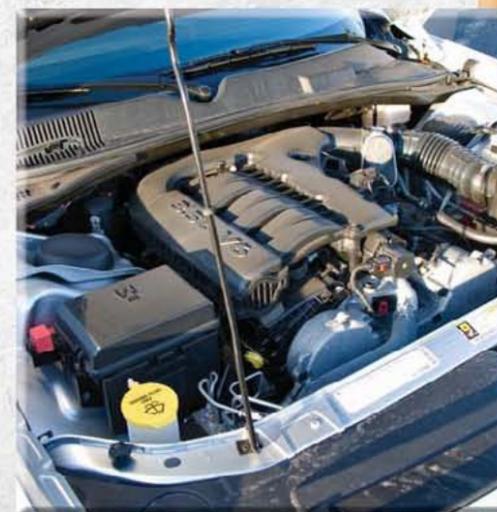
Comparisons—or requests for comparisons—are inevitable and constant with the Challenger. First, there are the three Challenger models: SE, R/T and SRT8. Second, there are the Mustang and Camaro, each with its own wide range of trim and performance levels, especially the Mustang. And third, there are comparisons between the 21st century models and those from the '60s and '70s. To do a complete comparison with all those variables would require a five-dimensional holographic chart that could fill a three-car garage.

But here are some fundamentals on the Challenger:

CHALLENGER	ENGINE	HP	EPA	\$ W/DEST
SE	(5-auto) 3.5L V6	250	17/25	\$23,460
R/T	(5-auto) 5.7L HEMI V8	372	16/25	\$31,585
R/T	(6-man) 5.7L HEMI V8	376	16/25	\$32,580
SRT8	(5-auto) 6.1L HEMI V8	425	13/19	\$43,655
SRT8	(6-man) 6.1L HEMI V8	425	14/22	\$44,350

Other variables grow from there. Brake size and power increase along with horsepower. Suspension is essentially the same on all, other than the available R/T Super Track Pack, which adds gas-shock enhancements. The SE Rallye package dresses up the base model a bit, from graphics to wheel size, and the R/T Classic package does similarly for the midrange model. Press materials show the manual transmission at a lower price than the automatic for the SRT8 (with no mention for the R/T). But current consumer info online shows the manual at a premium. (They apparently noticed that people who want a manual *really* want a manual.) They all share the same classic Challenger stance and general road presence, horsepower and performance aside.

Our test Challenger SE added an amp-and-speakers Sound Group (\$645), Leather Interior Group with heated leather-trimmed buckets (\$885), the slam-dunk Rallye Group with 18" aluminum wheels, bright fuel filler door, dual stripes, instrument panel mini-carbon bezel and body-color rear spoiler (a \$750 makeover), power sunroof (\$950) and a Media Center with CD/DVD/HDD, radio, GPS navigation, one year of Sirius Traffic included, auto-dimming rearview mirror with microphone for Uconnect Phone with Voice Command, steering-wheel-mounted audio controls and an iPod interface (\$1775), for a total of \$31,175 with destination charge. All the add-ons bring it right up to the cost of the V8-powered R/T, but then it would have its add-ons, too. Or would



KEEP RIGHT >>

## CHALLENGER SE LOGBOOK

### FEATURES

- All the basic functions and controls are very straightforward, simple, easy—the shifter, lights, wipers, ceiling lights, interior lights, gas cap, hood, trunk.
- We love the simplicity but miss having a rear camera, as visibility is slightly limited.
- Seat adjustment has tons of range. Came to us really low and far back; even though we're tall, we moved it forward and up a little. Gives the option of a low-slung cruiser feeling or a more sedan-like posture.
- Turn signal lever is really low.
- Side view mirrors are very small.
- Big trunk, a '60s feature we like on this.
- Sequence of using the radio interface was frustrating.

### PERFORMANCE

- We wish it were a stick, but basically it's as fun to drive as its '60s/'70s origins, maybe moreso as it's locked down so tight.
- Early on, we note that it corners great, and it's only the SE. Later, we wish for wider rubber, just for normal cornering. Feel it sort of wallowing in the rear.
- Automatic shifter feels kind of light... works fine but slides through the gates.
- Of course we spend some time wishing we were at least trying the SRT8.
- We noted at one point that the brakes had no bottom. We tried to kind of stand on them in case we were to get rear-ended at a semi-blind red light, and we just push until they mush, they're at the floor, and they could mush some more.
- Nice tight turning circle.

### STYLE

- Size is fine. You might think this is going to be a really large car, and we suppose of course it's bigger than some pony or muscle cars, but it doesn't seem that big sitting in it, same as our prior R/T experience.
- This car is WIDE by today's standards.
- The hooded headlights are very cool.
- Basically this SE is somewhat of a strip-pper, not a "horsepower model."
- There is quite a bit of form over function in the Challenger. But form is what it's all about, or you'd stick with the Charger. The trunk for example is a little tricky to open and close, because its shape has little to do with having a grip to pull down. Driver's 3/4 rear view is pretty bad, on either side, especially the driver's side. But that's exactly what you'd expect... and that's not why you bought it, you bought it to perform and to look cool, which it does.
- We note that *AutoWeek* is comparing the Hyundai Genesis Coupe to the Mustang and the Nissan 370Z. You're unlikely to find the Challenger compared thus.
- Bodywork rules; great sheet metal job.



it? It'd be hard to resist the step up, and since fundamental simplicity is part of the car's appeal, it actually wouldn't be that hard to forego many of the options.

So how does the Challenger compare with Mustang and Camaro? Some more fundamentals:

BASE MODELS	ENGINE	HP	EPA	W/DEST
Challenger SE	3.5L V6	250	17/25	\$23,460
Mustang V6	3.7L V6	305	19/31	\$22,995
Camaro LS	3.6L V6	304	17/29	\$23,530
MID MODELS	ENGINE	HP	EPA	W/DEST
Challenger R/T	5.7L H V8	372	16/25	\$31,585
Mustang GT	5.0L V8	412	17/26	\$30,495
Camaro 2LT	3.7L V6	304	17/29	\$27,725
TOP MODELS	ENGINE	HP	EPA	W/DEST
Challenger SRT8	6.1L H V8	425	13/19	\$43,655
Shelby GT500	5.4L sc V8	540	15/23	\$49,495
Camaro 2SS	6.2L V8	426	16/24	\$34,795

Unlike the Challenger, the Mustangs are also available as convertibles (for about \$5000 additional) and the Camaro will be very soon. The Mustang's manual transmission models are more affordable than automatics, the kind of win-win we would favor. Both Mustang and Camaro, especially Mustang, also have a wide range of third-party modified models extending the performance level (and cost) up considerably. Roush, Saleen, UBB and others offer Mustangs up into the 500-to-1000-hp range, some running over \$100,000.

On the basics in our chart, the Mustang knocks down the Challenger in horsepower, fuel mileage and price in the base and mid models. At the top, the Shelby commands a price for its 500-plus-horsepower performance, in a league of its own among these nine, and it still delivers considerably better fuel mileage than the Challenger. The Mustang also edges out the Camaro in base trim, but only just. In the middle range, Camaro suffers the comparison by virtue of retaining its V6. In the top performance models, ignoring the superlative Shelby GT500, Camaro beats Challenger by a wide margin on price and fuel mileage, while basically matching power.

So how does one decide? Despite all these statistics and specifics, this segment remains a very emotional one. Most buyers will know exactly which car rings their bell. The best that most people will get from the comparatives will be debating points after their purchase.

In some ways, the subjective comparatives directly relate to the relationship of current models with their legendary forebears. Mustang is generally considered to benefit from its non-stop continuity, from 1964-1/2 until present day. On the other hand, Camaro's deep breath and rebirth has allowed longing and anticipation to build for a reasonable number of years among basically its same audience, while the Challenger's reappearance after decades speaks much more to a heritage model.

The Mustang's continuity brought us a few forgettable models through intervening years, but the last generation's restyling, also a heritage move, gave the lineup an enormous dose of adrenaline. The current model, less so, in our opinion, becoming smaller and with much less distinctive rear sheet metal. But the full lineup still does what Mustang has always done best: it offers something for everyone, each with its own sufficient panache. Then again, there are an awful lot on the road.

Camaro is just getting started in that same game, or restarted. Its evolution from the '60s till it was suspend-

ed after 2002 brought it to a completely different point. But the new Camaro has achieved a very successful balance between its roots and the modern era. Being such a recently introduced new-again vehicle, honed during different times and a gas-price crunch, GM's decision to go with a solid V6 in most models, reserving the V8 for just the SS, is arguably sound—as long as they did indeed provide the V8 model, ultimately. New Camaros are sprouting up like wildfire, though they so far still succeed in turning heads.

Challenger, though, does the best job of recreating its original magic. Whether that's desirable or not—more of a flashback than a reinvention—is a subjective point, but we very much like what they've achieved. We'd love to spend more time with the R/T, and we'd welcome the SRT8 into the test fleet most of all, but we were quite happy driving the SE for a week. It looks about the same, it feels and drives about the same, and barring any major challenges on the mean streets of metro Phoenix, it handles its mission very well. And the relative rarity of any Challenger over the ubiquitous Mustangs and growing legion of Camaros is surely an advantage.

Every Dodge Challenger is a driver's car. With its style, stance and commanding driving position, you have a strong feeling of control over your steed and surroundings. The Challenger has a full-size American cockpit, straightforward instrument panel and controls, and full-size windows including a nice big windshield (its rear window is probably as big as the Camaro's windshield). The Challenger is considerably wider than the others, has a great big trunk, and feels almost like a classic full-size Dodge or Chevy when seated behind the wheel. Nonetheless, it appeals to the same buyers as Mustang and Camaro, but it's really not quite the same type of car. The Challenger has the *cojones* it was born with.

On the other hand, no sooner did we formulate these thoughts than a black Camaro with red stripes zoomed by on the freeway looking very cool indeed. Then again, if our Challenger were black with red stripes, it would look just as cool, we remind ourselves. No sooner do we say that than a very hot Shelby Mustang (of the immediately prior generation we prefer) came zooming down the road, silver-blue with black stripes. The brands all have their contenders.

So, indeed, everybody wants to know how the Challenger compares with the Camaro (mostly, as both are new), which of course always brings up the Mustang. We soon realize you don't find people looking at a Mustang or Camaro and asking how it compares with the Challenger. And we take that as a victory for the Challenger. It's a little more off the radar, quite a bit less common, and therefore quite a bit more special.

Driving the Challenger SE with no major face-offs against the more powerful models, we felt that the six was okay. But since there is also the Dodge Charger (and everything else with a six), we couldn't help thinking the Challenger is really a tribute car, evoking the best of its '70s predecessors, and as such would be best with a V8 throughout the lineup. But to look at it another way, perhaps the six can be considered a tribute to that.

You'll have conversations in a Mustang, you'll start conversations in a Camaro (for awhile yet), but with a Dodge Challenger, you'll likely dominate conversations, if for no other reason than its relative rarity. ■

