



■ Ford Mustang GT
■ Pontiac GTO

Goat and Pony showdown.

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he selection process for this comparison began with a mental gathering of four-seat coupes costing from \$25,000 to \$35,000. Included were the 238-hp Mazda RX-8 and the 298-hp Infiniti G35 coupe, and even a 240-hp Honda Accord V-6 coupe was briefly considered. In the end we decided you had to have a V-8 to play, so we were left with two cars—the Ford Mustang GT and the Pontiac GTO.

The all-new Mustang is about as all-new as you can get these days. Loosely

based on the Lincoln LS platform, the Mustang received some much-needed solidity and modernity. Having a solid rear axle is a cost-cutting move that may turn off some car buyers, but with 300 horsepower for \$24,995, transgressions can be forgiven. Fresh off a 10Best victory, the Mustang looked like the clear favorite, but we hadn't yet driven the enlivened 2005 GTO.

Sales of the Australian-built GTO amounted to a trickle in 2004, but the Goat's unremarkable skin hides a refined and fast performance car. As in the Mus-

tang, a near-luxury-sedan platform underpins the GTO—it's a massaged version of the Cadillac Catera architecture. This platform's independent suspension remains intact, as does its solid and refined nature, but those advantages come at a cost—its as-tested price is about \$5000 higher than the Mustang's.

Many upgrades were lavished on the GTO for 2005. The major change is under the hood, but there are sprinklings of changes throughout. It's a stronger participant, but is the GTO hot enough to take the Mustang?



Second Place Pontiac GTO

Big surprise, right? The Goat finishes second; it's a goat after all, and that's what goats do. Second place might be the expected finish for what some cynics would call the Blunder from Down Under, but despite selling far fewer than the expected 18,000 units in 2004, the GTO has enough upgrades for 2005 to transform itself into a wonder.

Some cosmetic changes have been

made to correct the much-maligned inadequacies of the Pontiac's lozenge-like exterior. Two hood scoops protrude in hopes of giving a bit more snarl to the Goat's front end. Nice try. Imagine your aunt Clara penciling in some more angry eyebrows, and you get the idea. She might look a bit more volatile, but she's still your aunt. Around back, there is a new bumper that better separates the two exhaust tips and gives slow stoplight challengers something to think about. Exhaust gases flow freely, and the drum beat is enough to

cause meek dogs to cower. The surface changes are a step in the right direction, but the GTO's profile still looks too much like a bloated Cavalier.

The sound piped out of the exhaust comes from the new LS2 6.0-liter V-8 lifted nearly intact from the C6 Corvette. It makes 50 more horses than last year's 5.7-liter LS1, for a total of 400, and 400 pound-feet of torque. Last year's GTO was 0.2 second slower to 60 and in the quarter than the new Mustang GT; if you'd driven them back-to-back, it's unlikely you'd be

Vehicle	Ford Mustang GT	Pontiac GTO
base price/price as tested	\$24,995/ \$28,865	\$33,500*/ \$33,500*
length	188.0	189.8
width	73.9	72.5
height	55.4	55.0
wheelbase	107.1	109.8
track, front/rear	62.3/62.5	61.8/61.8
weight, pounds	3575	3787
weight distribution, % front/rear	52.5/47.5	53.8/46.2
fuel tank, gallons	16.0	18.5
recommended octane rating	87	92
interior volume, cu ft	front	53
	rear	30
	trunk	13

*Estimated. **Best in test.**



2 Pontiac GTO

Highs: 400 horsepower, M3-grade acceleration, refined interior, playful chassis.

Lows: High-effort shifter, hopeless pedals, bland styling, costs more than 30K.

The Verdict: A fast and refined player that doesn't inspire coveting or lust.



able to differentiate between the two. Now the disparity is quite apparent as the GTO has moved below five seconds for the 0-to-60 sprint—that's M3 territory.

It's easy to get going quickly in the GTO, but the six-speed manual transmission is about as fun to use as that Soloflex collecting dust in your basement. Throws are long, rubbery, and high effort and drew universal criticism. Even the GTO's staunchest advocate here conceded that the shifter might be enough to keep him from spending the extra dough for the GTO.

Worse yet were the foot pedals. In a car that encourages and embraces delinquent behavior, you expect the pedals to be placed for a heel-and-toe downshift. That's not the case; it's nearly impossible to brake and blip the throttle. The brake pedal is nearly a shoe width away from the accelerator. Making matters more difficult is a hinged accelerator pedal; if you do manage to brake and blip, the pedal swings on its hinge instead of opening the throttle. Luckily, the brakes don't require much effort as they scrub off speed easily. Stand

on them, and you can erase 70 mph in 167 feet—a sizable improvement over the 185-foot performance of the 2004 model [C/D, December 2003]. Since we're down here in the footwell, we should point out that Pontiac's literature promises a dead pedal for 2005, but our test car did not have one. The issues from down under the dash aside, the rest of the car is frisky and willing to satisfy.

Bend the GTO into a series of corners that require no downshifting, and it's easy to be seduced. Steering is far more com-

Powertrain		Ford Mustang GT	Pontiac GTO	
engine	type	SOHC 24-valve V-8	pushrod 16-valve V-8	
	displacement, cu in (cc)	281 (4601)	364 (5967)	
	power, bhp @ rpm	300 @ 5750	400 @ 6000	
	torque, lb-ft @ rpm	320 @ 4500	400 @ 4400	
	redline, rpm	6000	6500	
	lb per bhp	11.9	9.5	
driveline	transmission	5-sp man	6-sp man	
	driven wheels	rear	rear	
	gear ratios:1	3.34, 2.00, 1.32, 1.00, 0.67	2.97, 2.07, 1.43, 1.00, 0.84, 0.57	
	axle ratio:1	3.55	3.46	
C/D test results	mph/1000 rpm	6.6, 11.0, 16.7, 22.0, 32.8	7.2, 10.3, 15.0, 21.4, 25.5, 37.6	
	acceleration, seconds	0-60 mph	5.1	4.8
		0-100 mph	13.0	11.7
		0-130 mph	25.6	19.6
		1/4-mile @ mph	13.8 @ 103	13.3 @ 107
		rolling 5-60 mph	5.6	5.1
		top-gear	30-50 mph	9.8
	sound level, dBA	50-70 mph	9.6	9.2
		top speed, mph	147 (drag limited)	158 (governor limited)
		idle	55	54
fuel economy, mpg	full-throttle	83	81	
	70-mph cruise	73	73	
	EPA city	17	15 (C/D est)	
C/D 400-mile trip	EPA highway	25	27 (C/D est)	
		16	14	

Best in test.

Test Avg





municative than the system in the Mustang; the effort increases as cornering loads increase. Turn the wheel off-center, and the GTO dives into the corner as predictably and voraciously as a goat at an all-you-can-eat tin-can buffet. A bit of body roll accompanies maneuvers near the 0.88-g threshold, but understeer almost never rears its head.

For the high-schooler in all of us, oversteer is only a foot tap away. Gently roll into the throttle at the exit, and the GTO will kick out the tail slightly to rotate the chassis through the corner. Intemperate amounts of throttle send enough juice to the 245/45R-17 BFGoodrich KDWS all-season rear tires to drift luridly through the corner. A sideways GTO might look hairy to oncoming traffic, but from inside the cockpit everything is copasetic.

Most of the serene nature of the GTO comes from the way the driver is treated. Aside from three chintzy climate-control knobs, there is a lot to admire. Backlit gauges and several digital readouts provide easy-to-read information. One bizarre display even suggested we take a break after two hours by showing an Atari-grade tree and park bench and then beeping at us in an R2-D2 dialect common to some parts of Australia. The display is completely

unnecessary because the Goat's expensively leathered seats that electrically adjust in six directions are far better than any park bench we've ever tried—they're even better than the Vette's new seats. Driver comfort is further enhanced by the tilting and telescoping steering wheel that allows for a just-right fit. Taken in from the driver's seat, the interior impresses with its tight tolerances and contrasting materials and textures. There's even a knee-high swath of pseudo-suede that runs from one door to the other.

The voting was as tight as the recent presidential-election spread; in the end, only one point separated the two combatants. Clearly, the Goat is evolving into an incredibly gratifying car. All the changes Pontiac bestowed on its slow seller improved the beast, and dynamically, there really wasn't much wrong with it. With 6.0 liters of power, it won most of the performance tests as well as the fun-to-drive category, but what the GTO lacked last year it lacks this year: Watch one go by on the street, and the design still won't trigger an arrhythmia like a 400-hp coupe should. If only it looked as stunning as the new Mustang, we might have forgiven the mislaid pedals, the stubborn shifter, and even the roughly \$5000 difference in price. Unfortunately for Pontiac, our comparo jury wasn't blind.

First Place Ford Mustang GT

As a 10Best winner, the Mustang GT seemed as if it would be the natural choice for the top spot in this comparison. But it wasn't that easy. The Goat fought hard and kicked even harder, and there were moments when we thought the GTO would prevail and we'd be left to explain how our 10Best muscle car came in second to the only other valid competitor. We'd have to reveal that Pontiac couldn't deliver a 2005 GTO in time for our 10Best testing, which put it out of contention. In the end, the Mustang prevailed because the same attributes that charmed 10Best voters seduced us during the comparison.

and louder than the Blaupunkt in the GTO.

With a starting price of \$24,995, the Mustang GT is the least-expensive 300-hp new car you can buy. Even when it's wearing a tarted-up \$28,865 price tag, the Mustang still earned a 10 in the value category. Essentially a loaded car at that price, the Mustang even included the pricey Shaker 1000. No, the Shaker 1000 isn't the solid rear axle—that's standard. The Shaker 1000 is the powerful \$1295 stereo whose subwoofer takes up a sizable amount of trunk space. It's probably not worth the extra cash, but dial some bass out of the system, and the sound is clean

The stereo isn't the Mustang's only source of music. There are the two pipes that connect you with the metered explosions in the combustion chamber. That exhaust note is slightly less guttural and angry than the GTO's, but it calls the faithful to worship nonetheless. Cane the 4.6-liter SOHC 24-valve V-8 from idle to redline, and enjoy the constant surge of power. If the last Mustang you drove wore 5.0 badges, the power above 4000 rpm will blow your mind. Torque peaks at 320 pound-feet at a high 4500 rpm, but

enough is available just off idle that you can play the fiddle while the 235/55R-17 Pirelli P Zero Nero all-season tires burn. This Mustang had a few more miles on the odo than the one we tested last month and clocked a 0-to-60 time of 5.1 seconds, an improvement of 0.1 second. The quarter fell in 13.8 seconds at 103 mph, 1 mph faster. The Goat outran the Pony, but those are still serious numbers for not-so-serious cash.

Our GT came equipped with the standard short-throw five-speed manual. Although a complaint surfaced regarding



1 Ford Mustang GT

Highs: Price of entry, solid structure, stare-at-me styling, willing shifter.

Lows: Light and too-fast steering, giant steering wheel, occasional side-step from the rear axle.

The Verdict: The 300-hp pony car celebrates the potential of the plebeian and the popularity of its past.





the gearshift knob being set too far forward, the rest of us reveled in the light effort, mechanical feel, and short throws. Unlike the GTO, the Mustang has its pedals set in the right places, which makes matching revs under braking an instinctive task. When the going gets fast, the Mustang is obedient and gains your trust rapidly.

In objective handling tests, the Mustang beat out the GTO. The Mustang's skidpad grip and lane-change speed just barely topped the GTO's, but in this close competition every point mattered. On the road,

the Mustang understeered more than the GTO, and the proclivity to tighten the line with the rear end was largely absent. The Mustang will power-oversteer, but it occurs at lower speeds and is short-lived. If drifting is your need, get the Goat.

The Mustang's rear end did occasionally step out on imperfect pavement. Despite Ford's best efforts, the convulsions from under the back seat haven't been completely cured, and there's a slightly disconcerting hop when you encounter a midcorner bump. It's not likely to send you spinning off into someone's geraniums, but the GTO's independent rear end exhibited no such spasms over the same roads.

Travel in a straight line over patched roads, and the Mustang impresses with its solid feel and ability to deal with the rough stuff. It feels like there's more wheel travel and isolation than in the GTO, and that benefits the ride when the impacts are severe. Although the Mustang is not something you'd choose to travel in after having those pesky hemorrhoids removed, it is lighter on its feet and far more compliant than the 0.89 g of grip would have you believe.

There might be a lot of grip on tap, but enter a corner, and you'll find the car difficult to place. The problem lies in the light and fast steering that is too eager to turn in. Dial in even the slightest provocation off-center, and you're on the inside of the corner. Venturing through a turn rapidly requires constant correction to keep the Mustang on course. Making the task more difficult is the lack of feedback coming through the giant steering wheel. Not much information as to what the front tires are experiencing comes through.

The height-adjustable retro steering wheel is not only retro in its design but in its massive size. It has to be big; otherwise, the widely spaced throwback gauges would be hidden by the rim. Moving the gauges closer together would allow for a

smaller, more contemporary steering wheel, but that idea must have been shouted down in-house. Those gauges can be lit in a variety of colors, but why bother? Of the 132 colors available, only the green matches the green of the rest of the displays. One cycle through the many permutations, and the whole idea seems quite silly.

The rest of the interior follows a similar '60s theme. However, the fit and finish is beyond anything previously seen in a Mustang, and the driving position, despite the lack of a telescopic wheel, will come as a revelation. New seats support you in all the right places and are positioned so you aren't perched above the steering wheel, as in the last incarnation. Optional aluminum and chrome accents (\$450) please the eye as much as the optional red floor mats will sear your retinas. The red interior accents are part of an extra-cost package (\$175) that adds red leather seats and some much needed color to the black cabin, garish floor mats aside. There's a certain rustic charm to the Mustang cabin, but it's clearly more austere than the Pontiac's more expensive cockpit.

So what was the Mustang's appeal? Well, we're suckers for a great body, and the Mustang looks a lot better than the GTO. Disparage the Mustang's '60s styling if you must, but get ready to face the reality that the GTO's banality is pure '90s. Furthermore, the Mustang wins because when you take it in, as a total package, the Ford makes better sense. Pick apart the Mustang's laundry list of simple components, and it will seem to be less of a car than the GTO, but drive the Mustang, and it feels like far more than the sum of its parts. That is the draw of the Mustang: It makes the most of what it has, doesn't suffer for what it doesn't have, charges you less than you'd expect, and beckons from the showroom until you come and take it home. ■

Results			
		Ford Mustang	Pontiac GTO
vehicle	driver comfort (10)	9	10
	front-seat space* (10)	9	10
	ergonomics (10)	9	9
	rear-seat comfort (5)	4	5
	rear-seat space* (5)	3	5
	trunk space* (5)	5	3
	features/amenities* (10)	9	10
	fit and finish (10)	9	9
	styling (10)	10	8
	value (10)	10	8
	total (85)	77	77
powertrain	engine output* (10)	8	10
	performance* (10)	8	10
	throttle response (10)	9	10
	engine NVH (10)	9	9
	transmission (10)	10	7
		total (50)	44
chassis	performance* (10)	10	9
	steering feel (10)	7	10
	brake feel (10)	9	9
	handling (10)	8	9
	ride (10)	9	9
		total (50)	43
gotta-have-it factor (25)		25	18
fun to drive (25)		22	23
grand total (235)		211	210
finishing order		1	2

*These objective scores are calculated from the vehicles' dimensions, capacities, and/or test results. **Best in test.**