

Probably the best street machine for the money anywhere, the Pantera has been long promised and seldom seen. We wanted to know why that was and asked one man, among others, who ought to know/By Kyle Given

## “Mr. Ford Wants It Right!”

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*This is the fifth in a series of reprints from various publications with background on Alejandro de Tomaso and the Pantera.*

Carroll Shelby pulled a something called a Vodka Sall at Donkin's on southern California's Marina del Rey one afternoon a few weeks ago and pondered upon America's last great performance car. No longer the lean and hungry entrepreneur of his Ford racing days, Ol' Shel has matured into a gentleman sage of moderate wealth. There are still Texas Ranger overtones to his attitudes, however, and he remains an engaging maverick.

Donkin's is a good place—a sunny watering spot of weathered wood, grog fetchers who are comely to look at, man-sized drinks and a fair three-piece rock group come the evening tide. Down the pike to the south is Long Beach, where another Ford performance guy, Bill Stroppe, is up to his elbows in the genre.

The subject of Shelby's introspection as well as the object on which Stroppe lavishes his sweat is a low, lithe, 150-mph street machine of Italo-American derivation. The Pantera. It is a car that bears the chromoim imprimatur of a somewhat mysterious Argentine, one Alejandro de Tomaso.

A gang of other guys are also involved in seeing that the arrow-like Pantera hits its target at Lincoln-Mercury showrooms across America. Guys like Henry Ford II, Ray Gaddes and Homer Perry. Guys who were at the point of the phalanx Ford formed in international racing a few years ago. In many ways, at least ideologically, the Pantera is an outgrowth of the racing years, just as it is the product of programs advocated by guys like Jacques Passino and Larry Shinoda, guys no longer with FoMoCo.

In fact, the Pantera's evolutionary chart is marked by as many switchbacks, chicanes and short chutes as is the career of the man whose name it carries. De Tomaso, at 43, has been at

various times a cattle ranch foreman, a playboy, a Maserati team driver and builder of “one-offs” (a polite European term meaning a vastly more sophisticated California Kustom). He has produced vehicles like the Vallelunga and the Mangusta in limited series. Nobody doubts de Tomaso's creativity, energy nor intrinsic worth as an engineer sans portfolio. His shrewdness, temperament and mental toughness are legendary. He is married to the lady with whom he once co-drove to a Sebring index of performance victory. She is healed and probably rates an assist credit in his rise to manufacturing prominence.

What has been doubted about de Tomaso until now has been his ability to put together a complete package—meaning design, parts, production line, financing, distribution, sales and service. He came close with the Mangusta, a Ford-powered, mid-engine coupe of surprising proximity of line with the Pantera. The Mangusta, however, proved to be the sort of car that you wouldn't exactly want to drive right up to the edge, because you might fall off. Shelby bestirs himself, waves an extended forefinger a foot above the table at Donkin's and, magically, the Brunette with the good wheels brings another round. “We weren't having any fun anymore with the Mustang GT program,” Shelby explains. “And old Pete Brock had drawn up this mid-engine coupe. I had met de Tomaso in Modena a while before and I sent him the sketches, thinking we might be able to work something out. Our idea was to stuff a small-block Ford in the thing and then market it in the States.”

“Well, de Tomaso got this car into the project and came up with a backbone chassis for I and I wasn't real sure it'd work. So we dropped it.”

“Then, I guess it was around April of 1970, I saw the Pantera on all the car book covers and heard that Ford had bought 80 points in the de Tomaso conglomerate and was going to go ahead with the Pantera, marketing it through selected Lincoln-Mercury dealers.”

“They've had some problems, but as of now—now that a bunch of guys are in on the



fix—I'd say the Pantera's a pretty good car."

A "pretty good car" to Carroll Shelby is a world-beater in ordinary mortalase—the difference being that Shelby's already clobbered the world and knows what it really takes at places like Nurburgring. By most standards, though, the Pantera *apres* "fix" is a damned good car. Still, there have been, uh, problems with the Pantera.

Not the least of the those problems has been the car's unfortunate resemblance and sibling relationship to the Mangusta, a car capable of looping or going belly up with capricious insouciance. Both cars look good standing still, but the Pantera looks a whole lot better going fast.

Where the Mangusta was built with a limp chassis and body configuration, the Panteras is monocoque-like with the suspension components being nailed, race car style, to the swelle tub. At the Pantera's rear, a 5-speed ZF transaxle melds with a Ford "Cleveland" 351-cu-in. block, and the suspension oddments that aren't tied down by that arrangement are also simply hung from the tub. In terms of design, the Pantera is roughly equivalent to a 5-year-old Cam-Am car. On the road, a properly driven Pantera will put any stock Corvette on the trailer. The Pantera is quick, too—super quick; and it boasts an honest 150 mph top end potential. It is the best ultra performance car that can be bought on the floor of a major American dealership. At \$10,000, it had better be, as any Mercury marketing man realizes. In 1972, it had also better be well-built, reliable and behaviorally predictable. The Pantera qualifies on all counts. It has exceptional evasive capability, outstanding brakes (discs all the way around).

For all the car's obvious glamour, performance and (by comparison) bargain basement price, it has already gotten enough bad ink to paint Italy red. The car has been introduced twice, formally, and glossy color prints and verbose press releases have cluttered magazine editorial offices for almost two years. Still, no Panteras are being made available for serious testing—the accumulation of black box readouts that could absolutely define the car's performance parameters.

Disastrous rumors, too, filter through the ether-like bubbles in sparkling burgundy. The heaviest tale has to do with the Pantera's final FoMoCo approval via testing exercises at Dearborn. A vice-president's son, so the story goes, get ahold of one and then got upside down almost as quickly. He lived and may be regretting it. There are other rumors—that the lock washers used in affixing the rack and pinion

steering to the tub had the consistency of pasta and were digested with the first right turn. Rumors are cheap, of course, which is what this is all about. The point is that the bad ink the Pantera has gotten is not based on fact—but, rather, hearsay, a visible shared heritage with a previous disaster and a decision by Ford to remain silent until the car was made bullet-proof.

Unfortunately a measurable number of cars, 92, were sold before the transformation into thin armor plate. Quite properly, Ford is now recalling those for updating at its own volition. Ford, in other words, is doing the correcting with no outside intervention—although even Ralph Nader would find it hard to translate his championship of the peoples best interests into a diatribe against a kinky, \$10,000 super car.

Exit Shelby, the man who kind of got the ball rolling, enter Bill Stroppe, one of the men who is picking up the pieces. At least Stroppe is picking up the pieces on Panteras brought into L.A. Harbor, the West Coast P.O.E. (There are three geographical locations for the Pantera fix. Others are being remanufactured at John Holman's Charlotte shops and in Detroit. Beyond the 92 cars in private hands, there are some 400 more Panteras needing the fix but remaining as yet unsold.)

Heading up the entire Pantera program, world wide (the car is also sold in a European version on the continent), is Ray Geddes, another Ford racing veteran. Geddes is a tough, forty-ish, solidly built man who resembles the old Cleveland Indian shortstop, Lou Boudreau. He goes after the high hoppers with equal facility; it turns out. Backing him up on the engineering side is Homer Perry, the man who served as Ford's chief logistician at Le Mans and along the Trans-Am turnpike of more recent years.

Geddes made himself available for a report on the Pantera fix by flying out to L.A. from his Detroit base. Early this year, Jim Brokaw (a former staffer at both Holman-Moody and Stroppe's, incidentally) and I met with Geddes and a bunch of other Lincoln-Mercury people in Stroppe's office—a room predictably filled with racing memorabilia dating back to the beach course at Daytona and, surprisingly, Christmas cards signed from guys named Ford. Geddes introduced Jim Carlyle and Nick Bush of L-M and Lyle Otteson, the foreman on the Pantera work at Stroppe's who is on de Tomaso's payroll. "What's the difference," asked Otteson, "the money flows from the same place?" The remark set the tone for the frankness in what followed.



Ford guys are: 1.) Proud of the Pantera, proud that Ford had the guts to bring it out in a low profile era of concern about safety and ecology that seems to be producing drab cars, and proud of the product itself. 2.) They respect de Tomaso's abilities and find working with him to be a reasonably cordial thing. 3.) They are hacked at the response the Pantera has so far evoked from the so-called "satellite press."

"You can ask anything you want and more than likely I'll answer," said Geddes while we hashed out the ground rules. "I reserve the right to check with the bosses when we get into the money talk." Fair enough. The way it turned out, the only question left unanswered was how much the fix was costing FOMoCo per Pantera unit and overall. Geddes shed partial light on the subject by saying that Ford still expects to make a profit on the program . . . providing that production continues through 1973, that is, and that's a matter of public response to the car.

"There have been delays," Geddes continued, "between the car's intro and its general availability for a lot of reasons. For example, we had to restructure the Vignale factory to make it possible for us to produce the car in numbers sufficient to guarantee a profit. We had to build an assembly plant near Modena—a plant, incidentally, that Ford expects to use on other unique automobile concepts in the years to come. There were delays Federalizing the Pantera, getting it to meet Federal safety standards, which it does; and we had some emissions control bugs to work out. The car wouldn't be for sale here if we hadn't complied with those regulations."

"Next a dealer network had to be established. It is now, in the 60 major marketing areas of the U.S. We were also concerned that the car could receive service within the dealer network commensurate with its price and complexity. That meant training men from each of the dealers. We want to do it right, rather than just dumping the car on the public the way some foreign cars have been in the past."

"Also, when some of the cars were brought to Dearborn . . ." He pauses to answer the inevitable question about the weep's son, admits the incident occurred, that he doesn't want to mention any names and is not privy as to how it happened—"Except to say it wasn't the car's fault. Anyway, we tested the Pantera on the proving ground and we really wrung it out. I can say the car exceeds all of the self-imposed standards that we normally place on our other vehicles. Those standards, incidentally, are tougher in many ways than the Federal regs."

Why the fix then? Geddes pauses and gives us the grin of a fighter biting down on a multipiece as a round begins. "There isn't a manufacturer in the world building a mono-coque, mid-engine coupe in the numbers you are. Nor selling what they are making anywhere near the same price. Things happen during the early production stages of any new departure in car merchandising and that came apparent during the Pantera tests. One thing that happened was that the rear subframe structure cracked a few welds on some of the Panteras we tested. Let me add that we received absolutely no complaints of that sort from cars already in private hands. I'd guess, to the sort of pounding we gave ours. The welds were something we decided to strengthen, because they *could* be strengthened. That is the single most drastic thing, structurally, that we're fixing on the Pantera. Later production versions come through with welds acceptable to our standards."

The complete "fix" on the earliest Panteras took 130 man hours to complete. Now Ford's time on the project is down to about 70 hours per unit through Stroppe's plant. That's still a lot of time at current hourly wages in the car business.

"The most time-consuming thing we're doing," Geddes says, "is increasing the capacity of the air conditioning system. We completely rebuilt it, adding additional outlets in the cockpit, shrouding the fan unit, making revisions in the trunk for its installation—and now have a system that will keep the driver cool on the warmest day."

The a/c on the early Panteras roughly equaled an ice cube and a hand fan. The car's immense windshield area meant a lot of sunlight pouring into a black leather interior underneath which large cooling lines were routed to an engine that is separated from the passenger compartment by only an inch or so of insulation. The early Panteras got very warm inside very quickly and the side windows (which don't go all the way down) didn't help much. Nor did the aerodynamics of the car, which directed the air past the windows while it was in motion. Finally, on the early Pantera imports, if you simultaneously triggered both a fuse would blow. "We were using the wrong fuses in the window mechanism on the early models," Ottosen interrupts. "It was the easiest thing of all to fix."

"The rest of the Pantera fix," Geddes goes on, "was simply a matter of bringing the earlier, already shipped Panteras up to later production



line standards. We have fiberglassed the gas tanks as a precaution against leaks, for example, and we've had to add a much longer dipstick so that the owner won't have to take apart the engine cover inside the rear deck space in order to check his oil. Slight oversight, that," he grins, the grin of a fighter spitting out his mouthpiece after a good round.

"The other rap is that the car runs hot, that the engine overheats. Well, it does run hot, as do most engines these days. That's a by-product of the current state of the emissions control act as it is being applied to a mid-engine coupe. Furthermore, the temp gauge on the dash has a very small increment for the readings between 190 and 230 degrees—I'd guess about a quarter of an inch. Consequently, a lot of owners look at the gauge in traffic and see it way over there at the right-hand side of the gauge and think, you know, the motor's going to blow up. That's not so. With the auxiliary fan and the slight revisions we have built into the system it will cool the engine under all but the most extreme conditions. The car is, after all, a performance car and wasn't designed to be driven in five-o'clock rush hour traffic. Although it can be."

During a walk-around of Stroppe's, plant subsequent to the interview, Geddes interjects some numbers. "Looks like a lot of cars, doesn't it?" he asks, waving a hand at the Panteras that are stacked all over the Stroppe property. "It is. But most of these are get-ready cars. We recalled only the 92 and had actually only produced around 900 that got into the country before the longshoreman strikes. We *did* catch the bugs fairly early. Production plans call for 5,000 per year for the next two years, although I'd say that 3,500 a year is a more realistic figure. We might have a problem with 1974, the year the crash-proof bumper becomes mandatory. It'll be tough to redesign the Pantera's front end to accept a unit like that without destroying the styling and the aerodynamics. The plans are to continue the car through 1974, however, and we're working on the bumper right now."

The work being done in Stroppe's plant is as Geddes said it was. The "big Pantera fix" proves to be a straightforward job of debugging new departures in mass car manufacturing and the extent of it is surprisingly small, all things considered.

"The cars will be in the showrooms about the time your story comes out," Geddes says, "and in numbers large enough to supply the demand, whatever it is. It's simple, really. We're in business with the Pantera; it's a good product, the price is right and so is the car." He looks to

Stroppe for confirmation. Stroppe is not one to waste words. "The basic thing is this," he says. "Mr. Ford wants it right."

Back in the office, the keys to a white Pantera were handed over with a few dubious remarks and we dickered over the mileage that could be accumulated on the odometer, finally settling on 250. "We've got to sell this baby," Geddes says, "and right now there simply aren't enough Panteras to go around so that every magazine can pull a road test. We try to be fair with them as well as the public." Geddes knows the geography of Los Angeles makes it impossible to drive a Pantera from Stroppe to the office, then to Riverside, then to Orange County for drag strip and skid pad evaluations, and stay within 250 miles driven. We get what anyone else gets right now, a Pantera and enough mileage to get the feel of the car, but not figures on its performance.

I put 247 miles on the Pantera. Some of it was on twisting, curving Mulholland Drive one Saturday night. Practically speaking the car handles superbly. There is a trace of what is known as "trailing throttle oversteer." The car is not an especially forgiving car. It is certainly not a dangerous car and it is a surprisingly tractable car. Anyone could drive one and stay up with experts in other high performance cars. The clutch is a bit heavy, in terms of pressure on the pedal, and the controls are offset to the right noticeably. You become accustomed to that in a matter of hours or days and never notice it again. The gearbox works well, although with the finger-like gates into which the shift lever must be inserted, it is not a dragbox. Particularly from first to second. The linkage demands that you square off your shifts going through neutral. The steering response is perfect. Just right. I'd guess that the brakes are the best production car brakes in the world—not bad for a car that weighs over 2,800 pounds.

I drove the Pantera on the San Diego Freeway in the heavy morning traffic hours. It never overheated. I didn't try the a/c system, the weather was just too good. There were four problems. The right door lock stopped working with the key, necessitating a hand operation from the driver's seat. Likewise, the hand-brake got balky after a second day. (It felt as if its cable had snapped.)

But the really immense problem, at least psychologically, was finding a place on the shift console to set a six-pack during a drive-in movie. The way I figure it, Ford will take care of that with the Pantera's expected GT version—oh, yes, they've got one in the works. Maybe we'll get to slam a black box in that one. ■