

NEW VROOM

South African manufacturer Superformance has swept through the Shelby Daytona Coupé of legend and, with the original designer, created a 200mph road car. This is the exclusive first test of the UK version

Words: Peter Morgan Photography: Michael Bailie



By the time I saw my first Shelby Daytona Coupé, it was 1965 or 1966. The V8-powered monster had been overtaken on the racing scene, but as an impressionable lad attending the Ilford 500 miles at Brands Hatch for the first time, it worked for me. The big Cobra was my initiation to the American muscle car.

I had to have my own Daytona Coupé and, within weeks, I did. Painted in dark blue with two white stripes – the Shelby colours, of course – my 1:32 scale slot car proudly lined up next to my prized 330P3 and GT40 to race on my very own versions of Spa, Monza and Reims...

I would learn much later that this was the kind of effect the Coupé had on grown-ups as well. Because, aside from being noticeably faster than a regular Cobra roadster, what set it apart were those drop-dead gorgeous curves and, particularly, the never-ending fall of the

roofline. And it was that roofline that was at the heart of the car's purpose.

In 1963, a young General Motors engineer named Peter Brock picked up on the pre-war studies of Professor W Kamm. He argued that the best aerodynamic profile was the classic raindrop. But accepting its inherent impracticality for a vehicle, he demonstrated that drag reduction showed diminishing returns as the length of the raindrop's tail increased. He proposed the best compromise would have the curving, raindrop-inspired roofline, but with an abruptly cut-off (and far more practical) tail. That, in essence, was the theory behind Brock's coupé.

Brock persuaded Carroll Shelby to build a prototype and the new car debuted in the 1964 Daytona 2000km. Driven by Bob Holbert and Dave McDonald, it blitzed the field, leading by four laps until stopped by a pit fire.

In the coming season, the 'Daytona'

Coupés became a serious thorn in the side of Ferrari. Phil Hill set a new lap record at Spa, while Dan Gurney and Bob Bondurant finished 4th at Le Mans, winning the GT class.

The Coupé's 1965 season was blunted by the emergence of the Shelby-prepared Ford GT40s, but one still finished second at Daytona and then fourth at Sebring. The Europeans weren't slow to pick up on a good thing either: Alan Mann's cars dominated the GT class of the International Championship of Makes and John Willment cars became regulars in European and South African racing.

In all, just six Shelby Coupés were built in the 1960s, and today they are worth millions. Demand significantly outstrips supply. It was that thought that kept returning to Jim Price, the man behind Superformance cars.

Superformance are based in Port Elizabeth, South Africa and stake a claim to be the third-largest independent car



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manufacturer in the world. Some 630 staff turn out around 700 chassis a year, everything from Cobra replicas and specification racers to the Noble M12 built under agreement.

Jim's build and quality standards are legendary and, following the success of his Cobra replicas, he wanted to build a Coupé. But he didn't want to build a replica this time. His vision was for a modern supercar with the mystique – and driving challenge – of the original.

For genuine authenticity, there was only one man he could ask to design it – Peter Brock. He took some convincing that this wasn't just another half-baked plan, but Price's ideas and his company's resources persuaded Brock to sign up.

Brock had his friend Bob Negstad design the chassis. Negstad had been responsible for the original GT40 and 427 Cobra chassis design. And working with NASCAR preparation specialists Roush Technology, they revitalised the design.

Most importantly, the new car had to

take into account modern requirements for passive safety protection. This rendered the old Cobra's ladder frame obsolete. After computer modelling, they settled on a much stiffer, triangulated tube-frame. The driver and passenger now sit lower, between the chassis tubes and (unlike the original) are protected from side impacts and roll-overs. The design also incorporates one of Negstad's wish-list items for the original (and notoriously nervous) Cobra – the wheelbase was extended by three inches.

The original Cobras used single transverse leaf springs front and rear and for obvious ride and handling reasons, this wasn't considered satisfactory for the new car. The new rose-jointed suspension is by unequal length wishbones with coil springs over gas dampers. Superformance make the uprights themselves and the ventilated disc brakes have Australian PBR calipers.

The Halibrand lookalike 18in alloys are also manufactured in-house, complete

with the correct 'spinner' wheel nuts. The car sits on 8 and 10in rims and Dunlop's Sport 9000 tyres complete the package.

While keeping the car's proportions faithful to the original, Brock has allowed the new car to grow some 2%, mainly to improve practicality and interior space. But there's no doubt it has worked and he has cleverly updated the visual appeal of the car compared to the rather rough-edged build of the 1964 racers.

Looking at the engine bay is almost as fine an experience as admiring the lines of the car itself. The 500bhp Roush 'small block' 402 cubic inch (6.6-litre) motor has been developed especially for the Le Mans Coupé. It has a forged crankshaft and pistons along with MSD electronic ignition. The polished aluminium and chrome is topped by a huge four-barrel Holley 750 carburettor feeding a single plane Edelbrock induction manifold.

The power is transmitted to the wheels by a Tremec six-speed gearbox (as used by its arch-competitors, the

Above Bubble roof and abruptly cut-off tail – the most practical interpretation of Kamm's aerodynamic theories on the road.





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Above
Spirit of the original is still there, plus a little added room. It's all new underneath, though.

Corvette and Viper) and a Hydratrack limited slip differential, an excellent combination that is long-legged but the most of all the torque.

A combined oil/water radiator is housed in a large carbonfibre composite ducting that exhausts hot air out through the bonnet opening. Large cooling fans set in the floor and ceramic-coated exhaust headers help reduce engine bay heat build-up still further. The long pipes emerge at the sides of the car (as on the original), but these have been set cleverly into the body to avoid burning legs. For street use, the side pipes are capped and the exhaust is routed out under the rear.

The first two production cars have recently arrived in Britain, after prototypes completed more than three years of exhaustive testing. Production began last year and already some 50 cars

have been delivered, mostly to the USA.

Well-known Cobra and Lola T70 racer Nigel Hulme put his hand up to import the cars into the UK. He based his decision solely on Superformance's previous reputation and the calibre of the people involved with the new car. Nigel has obtained UK Special Vehicle Approval for the cars, which will be sold through Rod Leach's Nostalgia car sales business.

'This car is on a different level to a Cobra replica,' he says. 'Peter Brock has done just enough to make the car completely comfortable and pleasant to drive on the road, yet devastatingly quick if you need it to be.' Having driven the car recently, I have to agree.

You can compare the build quality of the Le Mans with the best prestige manufacturers. The extra 2% on the dimensions ensures the cabin is roomy

enough for all drivers, and the seats are just right for this type of machine – not soft, but not wannabe race items so hard that your cheeks are numb.

A modern Moto-Lita steering wheel falls to hand and the dash beyond has Stewart Warner (as in the original Cobras) speedometer and tachometer. The generously-curved windscreen (another Kamm-inspired detail) is tinted, heated and shatterproof.

In the centre dash there is a battery of little dials to record all the engine's vital signs. On the move, you don't register much more than the fact that all the needles are vertical. If something serious goes wrong up front, you rely on the warning lights between the main dials. Below the little dials are SVA-challenging toggle switches to operate everything from starter to lights and air con.



SPECIFICATION

Le Mans Coupé

Engine
Roush 402R 402ci (6.6-litre) pushrod V8, MSD electronic ignition with single Holley 750 carb

Power
500bhp @6250rpm

Torque
590lb ft @ 4900rpm

Transmission
Six-speed Tremec T56

Suspension
Fully independent with unequal length wishbones, coil springs telescopic dampers.

Brakes
Vacuum-assisted with ventilated discs and 2-piston calipers

Weight
2750lbs (1247kg)

Performance
0-60mph 3.9 seconds;
Top speed 207mph

Cost
£85,775 in the UK

**Below**

Great attention to period detail, with an awesome small-block V8 for performance to match.

'It takes me a while to find the right cornering technique, coming back to the pits a few times to let my brain catch up with my hands and feet. My grin, though, is fixed'



Yes, air conditioning. With that big V8 pumping out 500bhp, I almost assumed I would be cooked inside the cabin. But heat management has clearly received a lot of attention. Even the footwells are both triple skinned. And to my surprise, the air conditioning is superb.

But if the car's specification to this point is impressive, nothing prepares you for the moment the key is turned and you toggle the starter switch. That race-bred pushrod V8 will do for you what telematics and high materials technology cannot – it will move your soul.

This engine assaults you and the noise is astonishing. At idle, you hear every engine detonation, and you get every tingle and vibration through the steering wheel, pedals and the gear lever. It is the kind of tactile automotive experience that modern car designers have forgotten.

The car needs 2000rpm and careful use of the clutch to get moving. Press the throttle further and the thunder – there's no other word for it – builds relentlessly.

My early laps of the Chobham proving grounds are very careful. I'm trying to absorb how the car is behaving but in truth, I'm enjoying myself too much. The ride is firm, and the non-ABS brakes are reassuringly powerful. It takes me a while to find the right cornering technique, coming back to the pits a few times to let my brain catch up with my hands and feet. My grin, though, is fixed.

In a straight line, the engine really gets down and goes once the Holley's second pair of chokes come online at around 4000rpm. From there, the power comes in a torrent all the way up to 6250rpm. And in a 1250kg car, the acceleration through the gears is fierce.

The suspension is fully adjustable, so there is some margin for tuning the handling. Nevertheless, on this car the nose tucks in nicely through fast bends. The cornering confidence is also helped by those tall Dunlops, which give it a reassuringly progressive breakaway.

Superformance have delivered a unique car in the Le Mans Coupé. It has a blockbuster first impression thanks to those nostalgic looks, incredible sound and shattering performance. But behind these key attributes is a thoroughly modern design that bristles with its engineers' obvious experience. Did it live up to my schoolboy memories of the original? You bet it did!

The Superformance Le Mans Coupé is available in the UK for £85,775 from Rod Leach's Nostalgia (01992 500007 or email rodleach@waitrose.com)



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