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2020 Saleen S302 Review – GT Alternative

By [Seth Parks](#) on July 30, 2020



First, a disclaimer. I appreciate the Mustang and maintain that it belongs on the short list of anyone shopping sub-\$50,000 performance cars. However, this is not a Mustang review. This is a Saleen S302 White Label review. Saleen has been a purveyor of modified Mustangs since 1984.

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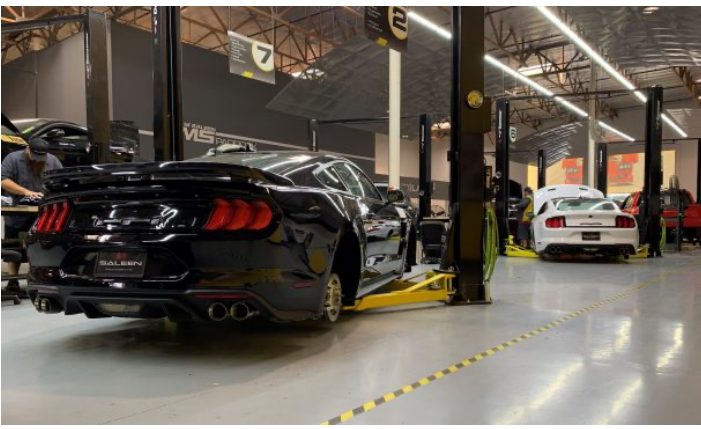
The White Label is the entry offering from their S302 White, Yellow, Black Label range.

At a glance, the S302 White Label's over-car stripe and copious badging place it in good company with its predecessors. They also put it at risk of presenting as a stripe and sticker package. There are no fewer than 12 Saleen badges on the exterior, 10 on the interior, and one under hood (I may have missed some). A look beyond the badges reveals bespoke 20-inch wheels (20×9.5 front, 20×11 rear) wrapped in ZR-rated rubber tucked neatly into the wheel arches, a relatively subtle high air-flow grill, and a high down-force rear spoiler. In addition to the interior brand *reminders* are a substantial shift knob on shortened shaft, white-face gauges, Alcantara-trimmed steering wheel, and the obligatory serialized plaque under the passenger side binnacle. Underneath are RaceCraft front and rear springs and sway bar pivot bushings, as well as mildly upgraded brakes. Saleen also adds its PowerFlash calibration, which nets owners a 15 horsepower bump over stock to a new peak of 475 horsepower.

All this comes at about an \$8,000 premium over whatever Mustang GT you select. So, is Saleen trading on its racing heritage and hoping some supercar over-boost will sell Mustangs, or has it built a compelling performance proposition? To address this burning question, I sacrificed one long weekend.

Prior to taking delivery, I toured the Saleen facility with Steve Saleen. The tour included a pair of immaculate Fox body cars, numerous S1 race cars, an S7 supercar, a peek into the future, and most important for this review, the production facility.

This is neither your typical auto factory, nor is it a common tuner shop.



Stock F-150s and Mustangs arrive by car carrier to a warehouse. As their numbers come up, they transition through a non-descript roll-up door into a spotless production facility. There, the vehicles are placed along a parallel line of lift-equipped stations. Once on the line, each vehicle is elevated and carefully stripped of unnecessary components such as wheels, brakes, fenders, taillight trim, front fascia, hood, and more. Then the upgraded and modified components are added. When complete, each car goes through a quality check before being covered like a Christmas present waiting to be unwrapped by its eager new owner.

This is not mass production. It is, however, an OEM-informed batched-driven process that reduces cost and lends itself to improved quality control.



Steve's office is on the second floor, some distance from production, but it's clear when touring the complex he is not only intimate with each of his products, he knows all of his employees. The tour was

a bit like joining him for a **gemba walk**. And what would an interview be without a small-world moment? In 1984 Saleen sold its third production Mustang to my former employer, a long defunct Bay Area dealer called Lutz Ford.



I lived with the car as my daily for nearly 400 miles, pressing it into grocery-getting and family hauling duties. My two boys, six and eight, are big fans but then they never met a media car they didn't like. To me, four things stood out in daily driving.

First, the exhaust note. As my neighbors have attested, it is aggressive in both tone and volume. It is nonetheless satisfying for the enthusiast driver, clearly communicating throttle position while providing a constant reminder that this is not your normal Mustang. It can drone on the freeway. At its worst on a long shallow interstate uphill at 75 miles per hour, it registered 81 to 83 decibels. That is conversation-impacting volume, but then the S302 is not optimized for passenger comfort.



Second, throttle tip-in is direct, linear, and intuitive. Why couldn't the stock GT be tuned this way? Drive

them back to back, as I did, and the tip-in combined with the clutch uptake and shift throw are worlds apart. Third, not only is throttle tip-in demonstrably superior, but it feels like there are more than the claimed 15 additional ponies. Fourth, the ride quality is composed and imminently livable over all manner of surfaces. Few people attracted to this car will be put off by the ride. Yes, the S302 White Label could be employed as a daily driver, though unless you consider attracting attention a super power, its real value is not found in the daily grind.



Palomar Mountain is 50 miles northeast of San Diego. The fun bit begins at 2,600 feet above sea level in the arid citrus dotted Pauma Valley. Take the northbound Y off California Highway 76 onto South Grade Road. Arrive at the Y by 7:30 am to have the road to yourself. And it's worth the crack of dawn alarm because by 9:00 am the South Grade's 6.7 twisting miles, 7.3-percent average grade, 21 switchbacks, and stunning views all the way to the Pacific on the way to 5,200 feet will be swarmed by car clubs, cyclists, motorcycles, and of course LEO.

Or, go on a weekday.



Deep breath. Hands at 9 and 3. Ease out the clutch, apply smooth assertive throttle, and hear the RPMs build. Tick through a quick upshift, all the while taking in the S302's gloriously violent sounds. The radio is off, though Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries would be an appropriate soundtrack.

The entry to South Grade Road is the longest straight you will see for the next seven miles. It's a good place to get your head straight and heart pounding. The road transitions through a gentle right, keeping this driver in 4th, before the straight terminates at a sharp left. The car still has more to give, but the pine-studded run-off increasingly consumes the forward view. Apply firm braking in advance of turn-in, downshift to third. And where some performance cars with automatic rev-matching are less willing, this car has no trouble with rapid high-RPM third-to-second downshifts. Look through the corner, set the wheel, feed in maintenance throttle, butt shifting slightly to the right. And as the road straightens, mash the right foot to the floor. In second gear the car rockets out of the corner steady and flat; you may even earn a satisfying tire chirp.



The RPMs pass through 6,500 almost instantly, on the way to redline, as the Coyote continues producing willing sounds and vibrations fore and aft. Upshift. Eyes focused well down the road, the exhaust is in sync with the throttle, obviating the need to look down at the tach. The corners unfold rapidly from there – this is second and third gear territory. And this is where the S302 super powers shine. I had so much fun I did the up-down circuit, twice.



What struck me about the S302 during aggressive

driving was its balance and accessibility. Many modified performance cars have difficulty synchronizing handling, steering, braking, and acceleration. Not this car. For example, though self-preservation ranks high on my to-do list, I found myself in the rare circumstance of using full throttle in a V8-powered car numerous times on South Grade.



This environment also underlines the difference in power delivery between a stock GT and the White Label that is hinted at in daily driving. At 475 hp and 430 ft-lbs, this car does not offer eye-popping peak power. However, the S302 crosses through 200 hp at 3,200 rpm, whereas the stock mill requires another 700 rpm to get there. Likewise, the Saleen delivers about 40 more horsepower than stock from 3,500 RPM through 5,000. The delta narrows after 5,000, but the car maintains an advantage to reline.

Torque is similarly bountiful as compared to when it rolled out of Flat Rock. Peak torque in the Saleen increases just 10 ft-lbs from stock, but provides a highly usable 50 ft-lb bump between 3,000 and 5,000 RPM, again with an advantage all the way to red line. This is power you will use. With the exception of the seats, which I found unobjectionable in daily driving, but under-bolstered in performance driving, the White Label is a wonderfully balanced and accessible car.



This unit started as a GT Fastback (read: base), the singular option being the 301A package including selectable drive modes, dual-zone climate control, six-way power driver seat, and the full-size screen. Its original MSRP would have been around \$39,000. As tested, this unit is priced at \$47,195. And this White Label is well suited to near base trim, because it is all about the drive. Not only that, but for the same price as an un-optioned GT Bullitt, the superior balance of a White Label can be enjoyed without sacrificing the factory warranty or limiting access to factory incentives.

The Ford Mustang has been an exceptionally popular aftermarket performance platforms for decades. From spoilers to coilovers, thousands of performance parts manufacturers and tuners are lined up to personalize your Mustang. But only a short list of companies make a living packaging their mods and serializing them for sale through Ford dealers. You know the names – Roush, Shelby, and Saleen. There are others, but these top of mind brands are battling it out at the top for your more-than-a-regular-Mustang dollars.

So, do you prefer your modified Mustang from a name that helped Ford win Le Mans, a NASCAR-connected brand, or a brand that builds super cars and was trusted to assemble each of Ford's 4,038 GTs. Regardless, competition is good.



And for anyone attracted to the impressive performance of the Mustang GT, the S302 offers a relatively affordable and highly accessible way to dial up the joy of driving. I asked Steve to identify the best part of his job. He talked about design and engineering, but realized his favorite part is, "Getting into my car at the end of each day (his daily is an S302 White Label) and driving home, it reminds me why I do what I do."

And I think that comes through in the car. I'll take mine with a sticker and stripe delete, please.



[Images: Seth Parks/TTAC, Saleen]

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