

How Saleen Shaped The Ford GT Supercar



by **FordAuthority**
April 7, 2020, 10:52 pm

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Ford executives were understandably skeptical as they stared at a dilapidated, abandoned warehouse in Troy, Michigan. All the windows had been busted out with rocks and there were more creatures living inside than outside. But Steve Saleen told the gathered group to overlook the cosmetic deficiencies and to see the potential in the “good bones” of the old 200,000 square-foot building. Saleen looked beyond the broken glass and vermin to visualize the structure’s future as a modern production facility, one with then-new Ford GT supercars rolling out the doors.



Saleen S7

Realizing that his Mustang-based Saleen SR race car had reached the end of its development life, Saleen launched his most ambitious project yet – a two-seater S7 supercar as an American rival to Ferrari, Lamborghini, and other European supercars. Unlike the Mustangs that arrived at Saleen’s Irvine, California, facility as brand-new cars ready to be reborn as S281 Saleens, the S7 would be created from scratch, including a honeycomb-reinforced space frame chassis, sleek aerodynamic body, and an entirely new, Saleen-developed 7.0-liter V8 engine. The project required specialized engineering and prototyping skills, forcing Saleen Inc. to reach beyond its American roots to contract chassis and suspension expertise in Great Britain. Steve Saleen also brought in Neil Hanneman, former Chrysler program manager for the Dodge Viper, as the S7’s chief engineer.



2002 Saleen S7

With its development shrouded in secrecy, the S7's introduction at the 2000 Monterey Historics surprised both press and public. Created entirely by Saleen and built at Saleen's facility in California, the S7 boosted Saleen's reputation as a specialty automotive manufacturer.

Ford Motor Company also took notice of the Saleen two-seat supercar because, deep within Ford's World Headquarters, top executives were eyeing the prospect of an all- new, mid-engine successor to the Ford GT40s that had famously beat Ferrari at Le Mans in the 1960s.



1966 Ford GT40

Through his contacts at Ford, Steve Saleen heard rumors about the project, code-named “Petunia” by Ford insiders. In January 2002, the secret became reality at Detroit’s North American International Auto Show when Ford Motor Company Chairman/CEO Bill Ford and VP of Design J. Mays revealed the Ford GT concept with the sleek silhouette of its 1960s’ namesake. The car was well-received, setting off a frenzy of anticipation for a production version. And that was exactly what Ford had in mind as Saleen soon learned over the following days.

“By the time we got to the Friday night black-tie affair,” Saleen recalls, “a number of Ford executives were talking to me about getting involved to help make the production Ford GT a reality. They knew what we had done with the S7 and they felt that our expertise and OEM quality could help augment their time and budget constraints.”

The time constraint, Saleen would eventually learn, was the goal of having three

running Ford GTs – red, white, and blue – at the Ford Centennial Celebration in June 2003. That, Saleen realized, was just 17 months away.



The "war room" at Saleen Headquarters in Irvina, CA was used to plan the Ford GT project

Quickly, Steve Saleen found himself immersed in the project. One month after the Detroit introduction, in February 2002, Ford engineering, marketing, and design teams flew to Saleen's southern California facility for a month-long session to discuss the viability of bringing the Ford GT to life.

Shrouded in secrecy, Saleen prepared his second- floor conference room by changing door locks, covering the windows, and installing four temporary walls that would accommodate the entire business plan. During those four weeks, the Ford GT team sketched out the engineering and design parameters, cost evaluations, servicing requirements, dealer allotments, pricing structures, and even the exterior color choices. Saleen recalls celebrating a birthday for Camilo Pardo, the talented young designer who was working on the final drawings.

The following month, senior Ford executives, including [Bill Ford](#) and VP of sales and marketing Steve Lyons, signed off on the business plan. The green light was on for Ford's Special Vehicle Team to develop a production Ford GT.



The Ford GT team kicking off the project. Steve Saleen fifth from left.

For Ford Motor Company, the engineering, development, and production of a new supercar pushed the company into uncharted territory. Ford specialized in mass-produced vehicles – F-150 pickup trucks, [Fusion](#) sedans, [Explorer](#) SUVs, and even specialty Mustangs like the 2001 Bullitt GT. But when it came to limited-production, two-seat, mid-engine sports cars, Ford needed a coordinated effort employing a number of partners, from its own niche line at the [Romeo Engine Plant](#) to a street-rod air-conditioning company for an HVAC system that fit into the tight confines of the Ford GT.

Of the nearly 20 companies that were hand-picked to assist with the Ford GT, Saleen would come to play the most important role. Saleen signed two contracts –

one for engineering support and the other for manufacturing and final assembly.

On the engineering side, Steve Saleen plucked Neil Hanneman out of his S7 responsibilities and relocated him to Dearborn for 24/7 immersion as chief engineer for the Ford GT project. As a Saleen employee contracted to Ford, Hanneman would oversee the Ford engineers and report directly to Steve Saleen and SVT chief John Coletti.



Steve Saleen and Ford GT Chief Engineer Neil Hanneman

However, even with his heavy involvement, Steve Saleen had no official title for the Ford GT project other than president/founder of Saleen Inc. Saleen describes it as a “gentleman’s agreement,” a promise to keep a low-profile within the Ford GT program to avoid any perception that it was Saleen-based and to keep everything all-Ford from a marketing viewpoint. While Saleen was included in group photos for in-house documentation, he was not seen in photos distributed to the outside

world, leading to the misconception that he was not involved with the Ford GT.

“Obviously, I did a good job,” he quips today about his behind-the-scenes involvement.



Steve Saleen (far right) with SVT chief John Coletti (in white) and Bill Ford (in turquoise) at Ford GT kickoff meeting

It was the second production contract that set the stage for the visit to an abandoned warehouse in Troy. Initially, Saleen had hoped to build the Ford GT at his facility in California. However, Ford wanted its star supercar to be built near its headquarters in Dearborn, which set off a search for a suitable building within a Ford-established 75-mile radius.

Saleen narrowed the hunt to a former Stanley Door building that had been empty for seven years and showed all the signs of long-term abandonment. However, Saleen convinced Ford that the building's foundation was sound, assuring them that he could remodel the structure into a first-class production facility for the Ford

GT.

“Most of what we were looking at that day was cosmetic,” Saleen says of his first showing to Ford. “I convinced them that we could spruce it up and bring it into the standards of the day.”



A Ford GT rolls off the line at Saleen Special Vehicles facility in Troy, MI

Part of the sprucing included a state-of-the-art paint system isolated from the production line to prevent contamination. The original agreement with Ford stipulated that Ford GT paint quality would be equal to or better than the current Thunderbird. However, that requirement was eventually updated to “perfect paint” with a mirror-like finish.

During the chaos of installing the production line and paint system in what became known as Saleen Special Vehicles (SSV), Saleen’s production team gained valuable experience with the new car by hand-building the first three Ford GTs for their debut

at Ford's Centennial Celebration. On cue, the red, white, and blue Ford GTs roared through the crowd at Ford World Headquarters on their way to a special reveal with former drivers Jackie Stewart and Dan Gurney, performance icon Carroll Shelby, and SVT's John Coletti. In the background, however, was Steve Saleen, standing by on active duty to make sure the three prototypes ran and performed flawlessly.



With the Ford GT introduction formalities out of the way, attention turned to building the actual production cars. Eighty percent of each Ford GT build, including drivetrain installation and paint, was handled at SSV in Troy. However, because a Ford manufacturing label required final assembly at a Ford facility, the nearly complete vehicles were then shipped to Ford's Wixom Assembly Plant where an empty warehouse was put into service for final Ford GT assembly. There, Saleen workers, many of them hired from the United Auto Workers, completed the cars – adding oil and water, installing the seats, etc. – before checking for rattles and water leaks prior to moving to final sign-off, affixing the “Final Assembly Wixom”

stickers, and shipping to dealers.



Over the next three years, Saleen Special Vehicles and Wixom final assembly churned out over 4,000 production Ford GTs, each one equipped with a 5.4-liter V8 placed in the middle of the vehicle, mated to a Ricardo six-speed transaxle.

Saleen contributed to the amazing 550 horsepower by introducing Ford to twin-screw supercharger technology, as used on Saleen Mustangs. Although SVT was already utilizing an Eaton supercharger to generate 390 horsepower from the 5.4-liter V8 in the 2003 Mustang Cobra, Saleen's more efficient twin-screw supercharger offered more horsepower at lower boost levels, which contributed to enhanced durability. With OEM quality and service, the twin-screw supercharger proved a perfect fit for the Ford GT's power and torque goals.



Steve Saleen can tell numerous stories about his experience with engineering and building the 2005-06 Ford GTs. One of his favorites involves Ferrari, which had been embarrassed a few years earlier when the Saleen S7 beat Ferrari's new Maserati MC12 on its home track at Imola in 2004.

While remodeling the Troy facility for Ford GT production, Saleen scheduled visits to major niche manufacturers, including Aston Martin, Lamborghini, and Ferrari. However, when Steve Saleen arrived at Ferrari, they had somehow managed to lose his entry credentials. Saleen got in the final word during the Ford GT's high-speed test at Italy's Nardo Ring test track. "We instructed the driver to take a Ford GT down to the front gates," Saleen recalls. "He did a long, smoky burn-out as an American salute to Ferrari!"



For Ford, the 2005-06 GT rekindled the thrill of LeMans victories in the 1960s while also “polishing the Oval” with an exciting mid-engine Dearborn supercar, one that remains atop collector-car bucket lists more than a decade later. Saleen’s engineering and production contributions, albeit behind-the-scenes, were a major factor in turning a concept to showroom reality in less than 17 months.

Words by Donald Farr. Photos by Saleen, Ford Motor Company and Ford Authority.

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April 7, 2020 at 11:27 pm

Never knew Saleen was so instrumental in the iconic GT. That's really impressive and puts him in a whole different league in my mind.

Congrats Mr. Saleen on a job well-done. Surprised that Ford left him and his name out of the credits.



ker

April 8, 2020 at 5:25 am

I loved these GTs. It wasn't just the looks, performance, and heritage, it was also the fact that I actually saw a few on the road over the years. I've yet to see the latest model, and I think too many are just bought for investment.



ialman

April 8, 2020 at 6:20 am

That GT looks a whole lot better then the latest model to me.



niles

April 8, 2020 at 8:01 am

To think Steve Salem played apart in 2 of Americas greatest automotive accomplishments Ford GT & S7 Is Astonishing. I drove 6 of the Ford GT it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, they look, drive & perform great Job 1 👍

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