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Dodge Challenger: History of the Dodge Pony Car

February 5, 2008, Chicago - Although the Dodge Challenger was the last entrant in the pony car ranks of Detroit's Big Three, it arrived with something its competitors didn't have: the greatest range of powertrain choices in the industry, from the small but durable 225-cubic-inch "Slant Six" to the fearsome "Elephant Motor" – the 426 HEMI®.

And although it lasted only five model years, the Dodge Challenger became one of the most storied muscle car nameplates in automotive history, with meticulously restored and rare examples today selling for six-figure prices.

1970

The Dodge Challenger made its debut in the fall of 1969 as a 1970 model. While it shared Chrysler's "E-body" short-deck, long-hood platform with the third-generation Plymouth Barracuda, Dodge Challenger's wheelbase was two inches longer, creating more interior space.

The Dodge Challenger was originally offered as either a two-door hardtop or convertible, in base, SE (Special Edition), R/T (Road/Track) and T/A (Trans Am) trim. But it was the range of powertrain choices that was truly remarkable:

- 225-cubic-inch I-6; 145 horsepower
- 318-cubic-inch V-8; 230 horsepower
- 340-cubic-inch V-8; 275 horsepower (290 horsepower in the T/A)
- 383-cubic-inch V-8; 290 horsepower
- 383-cubic-inch V-8; 330 horsepower
- 383-cubic-inch V-8; 335 horsepower
- 426-cubic-inch HEMI V-8; 425 horsepower
- 440-cubic-inch V-8; 375 horsepower
- 440-cubic-inch V-8; 390 horsepower

Driveline choices for various engines included Chrysler's TorqueFlite automatic transmission and a three- or four-speed manual which could be equipped with a Hurst "pistol-grip" shifter. Big-block Challengers could be ordered with a heavy-duty Dana 60 differential equipped with limited-slip differential.

Even the paint schemes said "performance," with colors including Plum Crazy and HEMI® Orange, accented with "bumblebee" stripes. Customers could further customize their cars with twin-scooped hoods, "shaker" hoods and rear deck wings.

Befitting the brand's performance heritage, the Dodge Challenger went racing in its first year. For the street, it was offered in the limited-edition T/A model to meet homologation requirements for Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) Trans Am racing. The T/A was one of the first production vehicles to offer different size tires, front and back; E60 x 15 in the front, G60 x 15 in the rear.

In 1970, Sam Posey drove the lone Trans Am racing Challenger, prepared and run by Ray Caldwell's Autodynamics Race Shop. While he didn't win a race in the No. 77 car, Posey finished fourth overall in points.

Drag racers including Dick Landy and Ted Spehar also campaigned Challengers in the National Hot Rod Association's new Pro Stock class. In 1970 and '71, the HEMI-powered Challengers (and Plymouth 'Cudas) virtually ruled the class.

On the big screen, a 1970 Challenger R/T starred in the film *Vanishing Point*, a high-speed pursuit movie that has become a cult favorite with muscle car fans. The movie was remade for television in 1997. Other 1970 Dodge Challengers have been seen in films including *Used Cars*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Phantasm I and II*; and in

television shows including The Mod Squad.

For the 1970 model year, just over 83,000 Dodge Challengers were sold.

1971

In 1971, designers made subtle styling changes to the Dodge Challenger, providing new treatments to the tail lamps and grille. The single tail lamp design from 1970 became two distinct lights for '71, and a new-for-'71 twin-inlet Challenger grille was painted silver on standard models and black on R/Ts. Challenger R/T models also got a set of fiberglass quarter-panel louvers. An additional coupe model with fixed quarter windows was added to the lineup.

As in 1970, a wide range of trim levels, exterior colors and striping options made the Dodge Challenger easy for customers to create a special car. However, for 1971, Dodge dropped the T/A (it was no longer racing in Trans Am), SE models and R/T convertible.

New EPA emission standards led to some powertrain changes; the optional 375-horsepower 440 cubic-inch was eliminated, as was the six pack-equipped 340 cubic-inch powerplant. The 383 cubic-inch Magnum engine was detuned to 300 horsepower by lowering the compression ratio for improved emissions. However, a 390 horsepower six pack 440 V-8 was available, and the 425 horsepower 426 cubic-inch HEMI® still topped the vast engine offerings.

A Dodge Challenger paced the Indianapolis 500 race in 1971. Dodge produced 50 Challenger convertible pace car replicas, all painted HEMI Orange with white tops and interiors.

1972

With escalating insurance rates and new EPA emissions mandates, more changes came to the Dodge Challenger in 1972. Also, SAE revised the Torque and Horsepower rating test from a "Gross" to a "Net" as installed in the cars. This reduced all ratings 20-30 percent, making them non-comparable to previous ratings.

Only three engines were available in the 1972 Dodge Challenger: the 225 cubic-inch Slant Six with 110 horsepower, the 318 cubic-inch V-8 with 150 horsepower and the 340 cubic-inch V-8 with 240 horsepower. All were equipped to use the then-new unleaded fuel.

With convertible sales in steady decline over several years, the 1972 Dodge Challenger was offered in hardtop form only. The sun roof had become a more popular alternative, and was offered as an option for just over \$400.

New front-end styling in 1972 featured a larger, "egg-crate" grille. It was painted argent for standard Challengers, and black on the Challenger Rallye performance model, which replaced the R/T. The Challenger's tail lamp design included twin lights on each side, with the center panel painted the same color as the grille. The Rallye model was also equipped with four small scoops on the front fenders.

1973

Beginning in 1973, the federal government mandated new bumper-impact standards that resulted in the only changes to the Dodge Challenger exterior – 5-mph bumpers equipped with large rubber guards that extended out from the bodywork.

Inside, grained vinyl was the only available seating material, but a new instrument-cluster design was part of the Rallye option package. The Rallye was eliminated as a separate model, although customers could create one with options.

Under the hood, the six-cylinder engine was no longer available; the 150 horsepower 318 cubic-inch V-8 was standard, with the 240 horsepower 340 cubic-inch V-8 as the only option.

1974

With insurance rates for performance cars skyrocketing, more safety equipment led the short list of changes for the 1974 model-year Dodge Challengers.

Inside, the lap and shoulder belts were equipped with an inertia reel. In addition, there was a federally mandated seatbelt-ignition interlock, which prevented the car from being started if the driver or passenger didn't buckle up.

The Dodge Challenger offered a different engine option for 1974. With the 318 cubic-inch V-8 still standard, a 360 cubic-inch V-8 producing 245 horsepower replaced the 340 V-8 as the only option.

In April 1974, Challenger production ceased. Over a five-year span, approximately 188,600 Dodge Challengers were sold.

1978-1984

Beginning in 1978 – the year the U.S. Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standard took effect – Dodge offered a new Challenger two-door coupe imported from Mitsubishi. It was offered with a standard 1.6-liter, 77-horsepower I-4 engine, with a 2.6-liter, 105-horsepower four-cylinder as an option.

Slightly restyled in 1981, the Dodge Challenger soldiered on until 1984, replaced by the growing stable of Chrysler corporation's K-platform compacts and a new import from Mitsubishi, the Dodge/Plymouth Conquest.

Over its six-year run, sales of the imported Dodge Challenger averaged between 12,000 and 14,000 units per year.

2006

At the North America International Auto Show in Detroit in January, Chrysler unveiled the Dodge Challenger concept to immediate acclaim. Based on the company's advanced rear-wheel-drive "LX" platform and its fabled HEMI® engine, the Challenger concept featured the long hood, short deck, wide stance and two-door coupe body style that distinguished the iconic Challengers of the 1970s.

Over the next several months, the company received repeated pleas from consumers and the media to build the car.

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