

# *How the Meteor Influenced the 1960's*

By Bob Mannel



**T**he demise of the Meteor had profound repercussions throughout Ford and Mercury. The decision to pull the Meteor from the 1964 lineup left Mercury without an intermediate as an upscale alternative to the Fairlane. This left a void big enough to ripple all the way through the 1960s. Had it not been for Carroll Shelby putting a big demand on performance engines for his Cobra and racing projects, even the Fairlane might have been rocked by the waves. John Onken was a Fairlane planner during this time. In a letter to me he stated, "My recollection is that we developed the high performance version of the 289 because we needed a lower cost 'hot' engine to sell to Shelby for the Cobra. We had been selling him engines that were virtually hand-built by Engine Engineering, and we were losing a lot of money on every one. To get the cost down meant tooling for a reasonable production line volume and using it in our cars as well as selling some to Shelby." The production car for this engine was the Fairlane. None were installed in 1963 Meteors. Dropping the Meteor for 1964 meant Mercury was out this hot engine—or come up with a new plan. The Comet was that plan! Yes, Mercury still had the Comet, which was really modeled after the Falcon, but with a stretch behind the rear wheels to give more trunk space. For 1964, the Comet was 13½" longer than the Falcon, but still on the same chassis! In fact, it was only 2" shorter than the Fairlane! This fact positioned the Comet to compete with the Fairlane and Falcon. All that was now needed was a performance image, something none of the compacts were noted for. They were economical cars, with performance being the domain of the full-sized Ford. If Mercury was going to make a dent in the intermediate field against the Fairlane, it needed a performance image to match the Fairlane's, and without competition from the Falcon. So, for 1964, the Falcon was held to a 260 2V as the top engine option, keeping the Falcon image away from performance. Even the Fairlane took a hit with the 289 4V being kept off the option list. Of course the Fairlane retained the fi re-breathing 289 High Performance from 1963, because Ford needed to sell "hot" engines to Shelby! Mercury launched its campaign for performance

domination by stuffing five brand-new '64 Comets with '63 Fairlane 289 High Performance engines and 3-speeds, courtesy of Andy Hotton of Dearborn Steel Tubing. Then in September 1963 these five Comets began the famous 100,000-Mile Daytona Durability Run. Over 100 worldwide records for speed and distance were broken in the 40 days and 40 nights it took to rack up 100,000 miles. This event was exploited for all it was worth and sales climbed. Of course, the Daytona package had to be offered to the public or it would all be seen as just a lot of hype. Mercury did so on special order, which included the high performance 289, heavy-duty, columnshift 3-speed, transistorized ignition, 42-amp Ford alternators,

## "Graphic proof that performance does help sell cars . . ."

**A detailed accounting by Ben D. Mills, Vice President and General Manager, Lincoln-Mercury Division, Ford Motor Co.**

**T**HE SALES SUCCESS of the 1964 Comet following the Comet Durability Run at the Daytona International Speedway last fall presents graphic proof that performance does help sell cars.

The 100,000-miles-at-100-mph run began on Sept. 21 and ended a month later, but press announcement of the event was made on Oct. 8 at the 40,000-mile mark and newspaper, radio and television advertising began on Oct. 11. These dates provide a good bench mark for recording the immediate effect of the run on Comet sales.

For control purposes, the auto industry measures retail sales in 10-day periods. Accordingly, in the first 10-day period of October—before the Durability Run became public knowledge—Comet sales trailed the year-before period by 6%. But in the second 10-day period (Oct. 11–20), the situation reversed as the Run began to be publicized and advertised, and sales were 12% ahead. In the third 10-day period of



October, sales were up 28%. After that, sales continued to gain momentum, reaching a high of 187% ahead in the final 10-day period of February.

For the model-year-to-date, Comet sales are up 47% and since Jan. 1 they are up 57%—a remarkable performance any way you count it.

Lincoln-Mercury Division has two other measures of the effect of the Durability Run on sales. In order to get sales, you have to have public awareness, and a national survey conducted in December showed that a remarkably high proportion of 52% of the public were aware of the Durability Run, and 33% associated Comet with the Run. In addition, the research showed the Comet image substantially improved in such areas as durability, performance, road-holding, economy, best-built body, most improved over previous model, and so forth.

Finally, the Comet Caliente 2-door hardtop, similar to the specially equipped Comets which ran at Daytona, has replaced the lowest-priced Comet 2-door sedan as the most popular model, accounting for nearly 18% of production to date, with the Caliente 4-door sedan as second most popular. Also, the installation rate of V-8 engines in Comets is 50% so far this model year, compared with only 30% in the months of the 1963 model run during which V-8s were available.

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heavy-duty brakes, 1" sway bar, and 2.71:1 9" rear. Later in the year Mercury offered another high performance 289 package on special order, this time substituting in a 4-speed, 3.89:1 9" rear, and 27/32" sway bar. But, Mercury had no intentions of being a major supplier of Comets with high performance engines. In fact, you won't find the option in its sales literature for 1964. Instead, a standard 289 with a 4-V carburetor was pushed as the performance choice. Even the engine code of K was used, creating no end to the confusion with the Fairlane K-coded 289 High Performance engine. Ford coded the same regular-fueled 289 4-V engine as D in the late-year Mustang, which is what the Comet code should have been all along. Mercury never coded the 289 High Performance when installed as a special order option. Standard serial numbers were used. Only on the build sheet would you find the engine option listed, in the notes area at the bottom! It worked! Mercury sold more '64 Comets than it had sold '63 Comets and Meteors combined. At the same time, Ford saw a 90,000 unit reduction in combined Fairlane/Falcon sales for '64 in comparison to the year before. For 1965, Mercury improved its ratio of Comets sold in comparison to Fairlanes and Falcons combined, but quite honestly, the emphasis had now switched to the Mustang, and Ford was giving nothing away to Mercury in terms of the Mustang's performance image. In 1966, it was all over. Mercury

left the compact field and competed head-to-head on the same chassis as the Fairlane. Ford still had the Falcon, but it could hardly be called a compact anymore. It shared the Fairlane chassis until just forward of the rear wheels where the rear was lopped off in favor of a shorter wheelbase and smaller trunk. It gave the illusion of a smaller car. The length was a foot shorter, but it was just as wide and tall as the Fairlane. When it came to the station wagons, Fairlanes, Falcons, and Comets were all the same—same chassis, length, width, and height. All that was different was the look and trim. And any of them could house the 390/427 family of engines, although the Falcon was held to just a 289 4-V as its top engine option. Falcon would wait until late 1970 before it too became a full-sized intermediate, only to be dropped by year's end.



One of the '64 Comet Durability cars, on tour, at Niagara Falls.

FORD PHOTOMEDIA

## THE DURABILITY RUN COMETS

In 1971, both the Fairlane and Falcon names would be gone from the American scene. It would be our good friends down-under in Australia that would keep both names alive and well, even as they do today. But, back in 1964, the Meteor's departure was just beginning its ripple effect. In 1964, Mercury had the go-ahead to promote the Comet as a performance car with the hopes of seeing a significant sales increase despite the demise of the Meteor. The Comet Durability Run was heavily used in advertising throughout the year. Mercury also participated in the East African Safari road rally with five specially prepared Comets (and five more as spares). The rally was a rugged one with bad roads and collapsing bridges. The Comets' success was limited to two of the five Comets completing the race, something only 21 cars out of the 94 cars entered managed to do. However, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> place finishes reduced the advertising value of the event. For 1965, Mercury sent three Aquamarine (Ford called the color Tropical Turquoise) 1965 Comet Caliente hardtops on a 16,200 mile run from Cape Horn, South America, to Fairbanks, Alaska in 40 days and nights to prove the durability of the Comet. With these promotions, Mercury hardly missed a beat in spite of the absence of the Meteor.

## 1965 Cape Horn to Fairbanks Durability Run



### Why we drove these beautiful Comets from Cape Horn to Fairbanks in 40 days and 40 nights

Because we wanted to show you that Comet's packed with stamina--and hot performance. That's why! Last year, specially equipped Comets became the World's 100,000-Mile Durability Champion at Daytona. Now our regular production '65 has demonstrated it's just as tough... through 16,200 miles of mountain,

desert, jungle, ice and snow... from the bottom to the top of the world. The result: any shorter drive will be a picnic with Comet. Try it and see!

*FREE! An exciting, 16-page, full-color booklet covering Comet's run through 14 fascinating countries. Ask your nearby Mercury dealer.*



# Mercury Comet

the world's 100,000-mile durability champion