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1964 Ford Mustang Restoration Guide

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RESTORATIONESSENTIALS

1964½ Ford Mustang

Restoration Guide

The Early Cars • March–July 1964 • Generator-Equipped Production

KEY SPECS AT A GLANCE	
Official model year	1965 — '1964½' is the enthusiast name for the early cars
Early production	March through July 31, 1964 scheduled build dates
Signature feature	Generator charging system (alternator came later)
Body styles	Hardtop coupe and convertible only — no fastback yet
Engines	170 six, 260 V8, 289-4V, and the 289 High Performance
VIN year code	5 — every 1964½ carries a 1965-model VIN

Factory-correct data for the hands-on restorer. Every specification in this guide was checked against published factory and marque references.

1. Ford Motor Company and the Road to the Mustang

The Ford Motor Company was founded in 1903 by Henry Ford, and its first half-century was defined by democratization: the Model T put America on wheels, the moving assembly line reinvented manufacturing, and the \$5 workday reshaped labor. By the early 1960s, though, Ford had a problem. Its lineup was competent but dull — full-size Fords, the compact Falcon, trucks — while a generation of young buyers raised on rock and roll wanted something with style. Chevrolet had the Corvair Monza's sporty image (if not its handling), and the baby boom was coming of driving age.

The answer came from Lee Iacocca, then general manager of the Ford Division, who championed a small, stylish, affordable sporty car built as much as possible from Falcon and Fairlane parts to keep costs down. The Mustang — named for the WWII fighter plane, not the horse, in the original telling — was approved, designed, and engineered at a dead run: from approval to production in about eighteen months. It debuted April 17, 1964, at the New York World's Fair, with a simultaneous blitz across television and print. Ford expected to sell 100,000 the first year. It sold more than four times that, and the 'pony car' segment — and the Camaro, Firebird, Javelin, and Challenger built to chase it — was born overnight.

For the restorer, Ford's parts-bin strategy is the permanent gift: the early Mustang shares its basic mechanical DNA with the Falcon and Fairlane, which means mechanical parts remain available and affordable. The year-specific trim, sheet metal details, and early-production quirks are where the money and the detective work live — and this guide is built around telling the early quirks from the later ones.

1.1 Ford's Total Performance era

The Mustang did not emerge from a vacuum — it came from Ford's 'Total Performance' marketing era, when the company was winning on Sunday and selling on Monday with Fairlane-based drag cars, Galaxie stock cars, and the GT40 program taking shape. That performance atmosphere is why the Mustang launched with a credible performance ladder already in place: the K-code 289 High Performance was part of the plan, not an afterthought, and the options list was engineered from day one to let a buyer build a genuine performance car. For the restorer, the era matters because it explains the factory's attitude: this was a car Ford wanted taken seriously, and the engineering — the heavy-duty running gear on K-codes, the careful option structure — reflects it.

1.2 The Falcon foundation

The Mustang's secret was the Falcon: Ford's compact donated its unibody architecture, front suspension design, steering, and many running-gear components to the Mustang program, which is how Iacocca's team went from approval to production in eighteen months and how Ford could price the car at \$2,368. The 170 six and the 260 V8 were Falcon/Fairlane engines; the transmissions were existing Ford units. For the restorer this is the permanent interchange map: when a Mustang-specific part is unavailable or absurdly priced, the Falcon and Fairlane parts bins often hold the same component. But the map has limits — Mustang-specific sheet metal, interior, trim, and the performance hardware were never Falcon parts, and the early-production details (section 3) are Mustang-only. Interchange the mechanicals with confidence; verify the appearance parts against the register.

2. Model History: What '1964½' Actually Means

Here is the single most misunderstood fact about these cars: Ford never built a '1964' Mustang. Every car this guide covers was officially a 1965 model — titled, warranted, and VIN-coded as a 1965 (VIN year code 5). '1964½' is the enthusiast world's name for the early-production cars: those built from the March 1964 launch through the July 31, 1964 scheduled-build cutoff, before the running changes that define the 'regular' 1965. When you order parts, decode tags, or talk to a judge, lead with the scheduled build date on the data plate — it determines which version of a part your car takes.

The launch lineup was deliberately narrow: hardtop coupe and convertible only, on a 108-inch wheelbase unibody. The fastback (2+2) body would not arrive until the fall of 1964, as part of regular 1965 production. Early advertising sold the dream — European-style long hood, short deck, bucket seats, and a long options list that let buyers build anything from a \$2,368 six-cylinder secretary's car to a K-code 289 High Performance street machine. That options-list strategy is why two 1964½ Mustangs are rarely alike, and why the data plate matters more on a Mustang than on most cars of the era.

Production ran at Dearborn, Michigan (code F) and San Jose, California (code R) during the early period. Published references put early-production volume at about 121,500 cars — a large number that still represents a small fraction of first-year Mustang output, which is why the early features command attention and premiums today.

2.1 The launch: April 17, 1964

The Mustang's launch remains the benchmark for automotive introductions. On April 17, 1964, Ford unveiled the car at the New York World's Fair while a coordinated blitz ran across television and every major magazine — an unprecedented simultaneous reveal. Dealers opened that morning to lines of buyers; Ford's first-year forecast of 100,000 cars was shattered within months, and the first-year total would exceed 400,000. The frenzy matters to the restorer for one reason: the early cars were built in a hurry, by plants still learning the car, with running changes issued constantly. That is why no two very-early cars are quite identical in detail, why the running-change register (section 3.5) exists, and why survivor-car archaeology — studying unrestored early cars — is the highest form of research for the 1964½. The assembly plants were inventing the car's details as they built it; your restoration should reflect what your car's build date actually got, not what the brochure promised.

2.2 The options-list strategy

The Mustang's commercial genius was the options list. The base \$2,368 hardtop was deliberately spare — the profit and the personality were in the checkboxes: V8s, 4-speed, air conditioning, power steering, Rally-Pac, wire wheel covers, convertible top in contrasting colors. Two Mustangs with consecutive serial numbers could be entirely different cars, which is why the data plate matters more on a Mustang than on most contemporaries: it is the only factory record of how this particular car was equipped. For the restorer, the options list cuts both ways — it means the car's configuration is documented on the plate, but it also means every added accessory needs verification before you pay an 'original options' premium. Dealer-installed accessories were common and period-correct, but they are not factory options; value them as accessories.