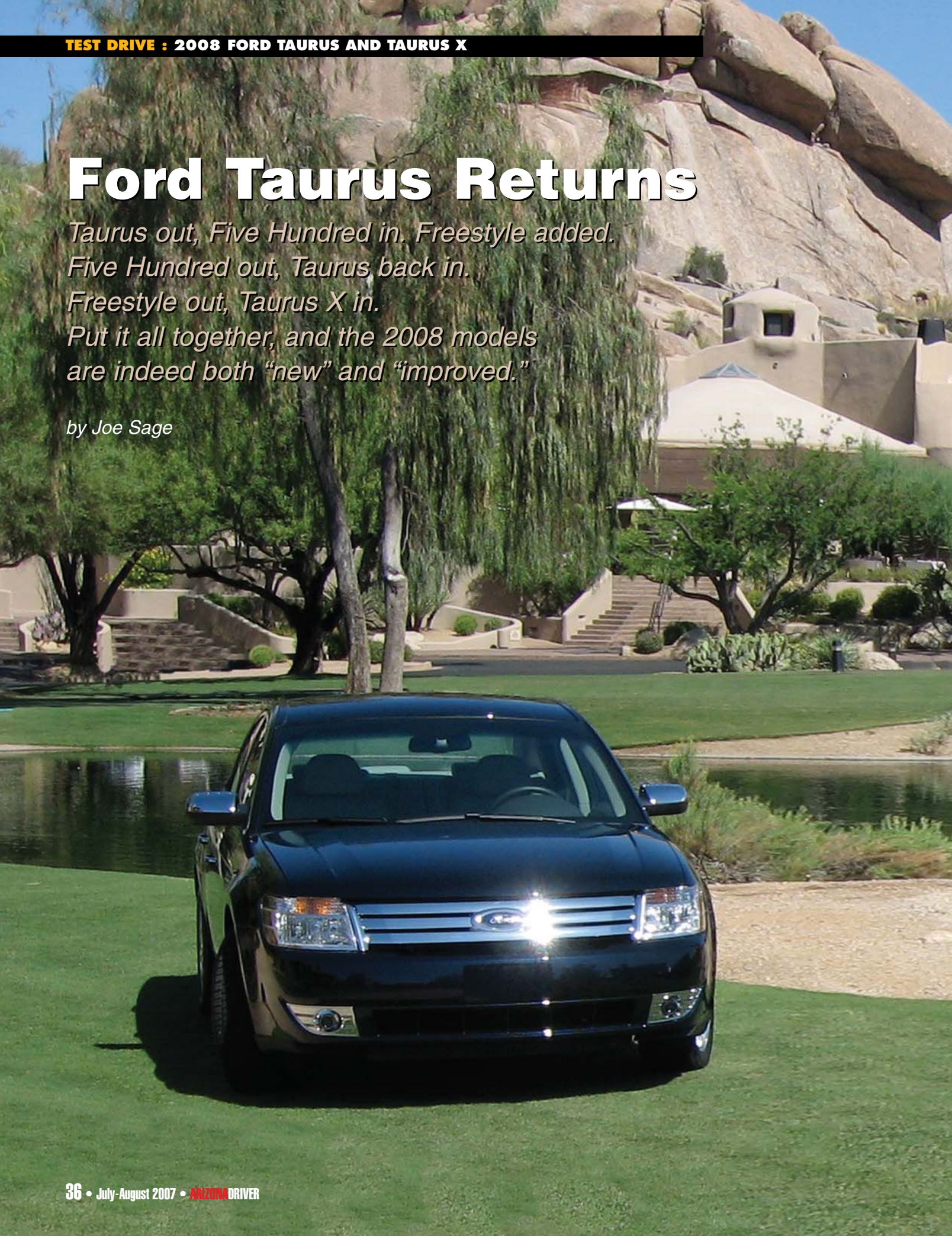


Ford Taurus Returns

*Taurus out, Five Hundred in. Freestyle added.
Five Hundred out, Taurus back in.
Freestyle out, Taurus X in.
Put it all together, and the 2008 models
are indeed both "new" and "improved."*

by Joe Sage



Extra touches of bling on lighting and trim provide an element of what Ford calls "eyeball."

The Taurus X provides ease of third-row seating entry through easy folding of the second row.

When Ford introduced the new Five Hundred sedan for 2005, it was slated to essentially replace the venerable Taurus in the company's product lineup. Ford kept producing the old Taurus as a rental and fleet vehicle for awhile (explained as an accommodation to the marketplace, but largely geared around the complexities of multiple plant changeovers and reassignments—much like production of a dual-purpose new-body F-150 and F-250 in the early '90s, a prior-body Super Duty before the F-250 changed over, and a "heritage" F-150 when the new 2004 F-150 was introduced).

The Ford Freestyle was introduced at the same time as the Five Hundred, as Ford dabbled in the category then just beginning to be known (and debated) as the crossover. Both were sound vehicles, though a little underpowered for their mass, and the availability of all-wheel drive widened their potential appeal considerably. Sales, however, never set the world on fire. On the heels of the Taurus being the world champ for years (then fighting off, and finally losing to, Toyota), this was painful for Ford.

The solution? Despite the fact the Taurus had lost ground to its competitors, and despite the name being off the public's radar for three model years, Ford has identified deep and wide brand equity in the Taurus name. Ford tells us

that Taurus is the third-most-recognized model name in Ford history (following the F-Series and Mustang). With 1500 brand name choices in the marketplace, and studies pegging the Five Hundred name at just 40% recognition, this was all too much to ignore. So with this foundation, Ford is bringing the Taurus back for 2008, as well as a companion Taurus X.

Is this new Taurus the Five Hundred, rebadged? Is the Taurus X a rebadged Freestyle, and/or is it the former Taurus wagon, but with that currently unfashionable word not appended? Or has Ford created all-new vehicles that just happen to be very similar to the Five Hundred/Freestyle team, which are leaving the lineup just as the heritage Taurus also fades from view? The company clearly presents these as all-new vehicles, and in many ways they are, but the lines of evolution are clear.

2008 TAURUS STYLE

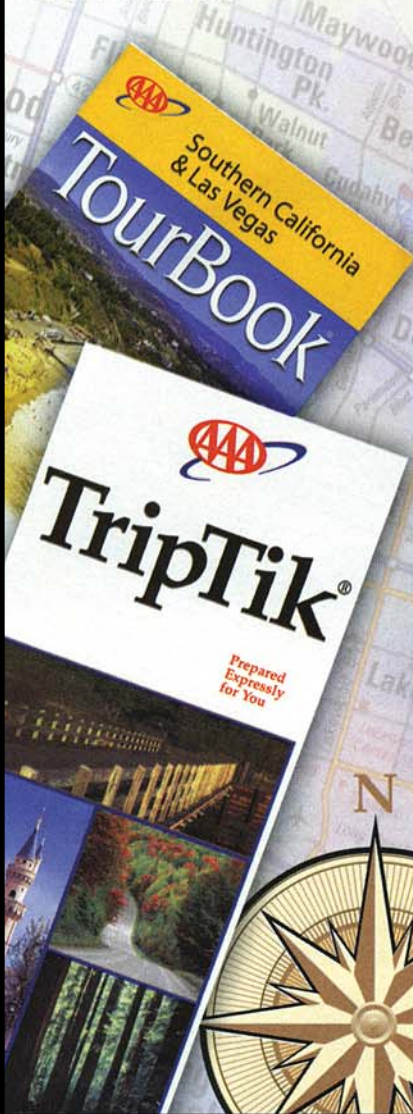
You will not have any trouble spotting the newbies on the road: both sport Ford's latest signature grille, as applied on the Fusion, the Edge and several concept vehicles for the past couple of years. Other quick visuals include an emphasis on eye candy, what Ford calls "eyeball," from the grilles themselves, to the lenses,



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Lead Crash Safety Engineer Rob Randolph shows off the energy-absorbing shell that directs crash energy away from the cabin (see arrows in yellow zones) and has brought Ford four 5-star crash ratings for the new Taurus.

The Taurus instrument panel and cockpit are among the most elegant to be found in a domestic sedan, rivaling the best German brands.

Tim Stoehr demonstrates (by unloading) the prodigious trunk capacity of the Taurus, which Ford promotes as having SUV-like utility.

buckets and refractors of new lighting fixtures, to dual chrome exhaust tips, simple but elegant badging and more. Both also sport fairly aggressive air intakes below the front bumper.

THE SAFEST FULL-SIZE CAR IN THE US

What's going on here, however, is far more than skin-deep, although not all of that is new. The Five Hundred has already become a star of Ford's safety engineering, as proudly pointed out to us by Lead Crash Safety Engineer Rob Randolph, who joined us for the Arizona press launch on June 18. The 2008 Ford Taurus earned a top safety pick by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) and the government's highest available five-star ratings in all crash test categories. The IIHS "Top Safety Pick" rating can only be earned by vehicles that achieve the best-available safety performance in frontal, side and rear collisions and offer electronic stability control. In addition to being the only large family car to merit IIHS' Top Safety Pick rating, the new 2008



Taurus stands alone for having already received *four* 5-star (front, rear, front side, rear side) crash ratings from the the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Minor upgrades have been made to the Five Hundred shell for its evolution to Taurus duty, such as reengineering cross-members to accommodate engine changes, but the fundamentals are essentially the same for the '08 Taurus. The Taurus is promoted as the safest full-size car in the US (based on independent agency tests).

In addition to the energy-redirecting safety cage at the heart of the vehicle, there are adaptive load-limited seatbelts, side curtain airbags which add a full 6 seconds of rollover protection, a collapsible driveshaft and much more.

Electronic stability control (ESC) is an option on the Taurus and standard on the Taurus X. This feature, which is a few years ahead of anticipated industrywide government mandate, is engineered in response to the fact that half of accidents are solo/one-vehicle incidents, and ESC cuts their occurrence in half.

ENGINEERING AND PERFORMANCE

John Heider, in charge of drivetrain and vehicle dynamics for the new Taurus and Taurus X (as well as the Edge, Fusion, the upcoming Flex and the next Lincoln sedan), also joined us in Arizona. Whereas Randolph had already given us a clear indication that safety has been tops for quite awhile, only to be improved as applicable for this changeover, Heider makes it clear that much else has been readdressed, fine-tuned and reinvented for the new Taurus and Taurus X. To perfect ride, steering and performance, the new vehicles underwent exhaustive testing and tuning at Ford's new \$15 million Whitman, Arizona, proving grounds (recently moved from Florida).

We've already mentioned that the Five Hundred and Freestyle were short on power. The new vehicle boasts the same 263hp V-6 as the Edge and the Lincoln MKZ, which provides a 60-horsepower boost from its predecessor. This is mated with a 6-speed automatic, also from the Edge (and developed in cooperation with GM). Put these together, and the new Taurus not only offers a more potent performance package, but also achieves a 2mpg fuel efficiency increase.



The Five Hundred had been set up as more of a "driver's car," with a solid road feel communicated through the steering wheel. The Taurus market, however, has been deemed to prefer a softer sedan ride. Five Hundred owner feedback had indicated that a perceived harsh ride ("not like my Crown Vic" or "too European"). The new Taurus V-6 and 6-speed changes help with this. Newly engineered front strut tower braces, pendulum engine mounts and general chassis/suspension and other improvements combine to provide noticeably lower noise/vibration/harshness (NVH) figures.

Power steering has been reengineered with efficiency in mind—the system is off until ready to turn, which saves significant fuel—yet it provides the feel of high-end variable assist steering as a bonus.

All-wheel-drive models will follow, with a different front suspension.

WE HIT THE ROAD

Ford set us up with an excellent test drive, starting near Carefree, covering the back roads via Rio Verde to Fountain Hills, up the Beeline Highway (AZ 87) to Payson and back via the urban grid of the upper East Valley. Standard tires for these vehicles are a Continental riding on 17" wheels, but our vehicles were equipped with the optional 18" Pirelli P6 fitment.

To make sure we appreciated the changes applied to the new Taurus, versus the Five Hundred, we broke into teams of two, each team getting plenty of opportunity for each driver to experience each vehicle. We started with the Five Hundred. Most is as expected, with a spacious, modern and intuitive cabin,

presenting clear controls and instruments and a comfortable and effective HVAC (heat/vent/ac) system. Seats and adjustments are great, and there is plenty of backseat room for adults (which we successfully challenged on about three-quarters of the test drive, with different Ford engineers and executives joining us for some stretches). The ride difference is immediately noticeable; the Five Hundred was very sensitive to road surfaces (new pavement, older pavement, even some dirt), which can be a nice thing for a performance driver, but the Taurus was much more pliant. When we first changed over, we might have thought this ride was a little too soft by comparison, but that was forgotten within probably about a hundred feet. The new Taurus gobbled up the twisties and significant climbs of the Beeline with enthusiasm. We were able to pass and navigate the RVs and semis even on the curviest stretches and definitely at highway speeds.

Tim Stoehr, in charge of Ford sales for Arizona, New Mexico and Las Vegas, reminds us again that the new Taurus represents "way more than a name change." Ford has taken what they and their market consider the best of all attributes from Taurus heritage and the Five Hundred years, fine-tuned and upgraded throughout, and yet preserved the value status of the Taurus brand. The new Taurus enters the market with about a \$24,000 base price, and statistics show it should have a residual value 11% higher than the prior model. The new 2008 Taurus went on sale on June 17, and the Taurus X arrives in dealerships by late July. ■