



**1983-1988  
Mercury Cougar**



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## Sizing Up 1983-88 Cougars

By Eric Dess

If you find one day that you'd like to step up to a more modern Cougar but don't like the new front-drive layout, then you might consider the mid-1980s Cougars for your solution. The shape of the 1983-88 Cougars is certainly tantalizing, to say the least, and they're not just all style.

Whether for a daily driver or show car, these Cats are the perfect blend of performance and luxury, and they're about the perfect size: not too big, not too small. Over the past 15 years I've looked at plenty of these Cats—new, used, and wrecked—and I've discovered ways to shop for a good used 1983-1988 Cougar.

### Electronics

Before you even look at a Fox-chassis Cougar, you must be aware of the electronic systems used in the cars. In 1983, the EEC-III (electronic engine control, third generation) was used. While it was adequate, it didn't really control many engine functions. Starting in 1984, Ford switched across the board to EEC-IV, a much better and more efficient system. It also controls most of the car's systems, which involves a lot more sensors. While the thought of modern electronics might scare you at first, remember that things were much simpler back then. They're not as difficult to work on as you might think. Still, there is literally no equipment to diagnose problems with an EEC-III system. You probably will be better off with a 1984-88 car because of this. Be aware that original 1984-85 computers were prone to failure around 50,000 miles. New replacement computers are less than \$200, or even less at salvage yards. So the electronics involved should not hinder you in any way from considering a Fox Cougar. Over time, they've proved reliable and a great contributor to decent fuel economy.

### Build Quality

There is a huge difference in quality between the 1984 and 1985 model years, and, similarly, between 1986 and 1987, when the body style was changed. Better insulation, thicker carpeting, greater use of structural adhesives, and added bracing went a long way to improve the cars. Most enthusiasts agree that the 1987-88 body style is the best constructed. But that's also a matter of personal opinion. No matter how you look at it, the Fox Cougars were light years beyond the quality of competing GM cars and still hold up well to this day.

### Parts Availability

Of course, when any car has been out of production for at least 13 years, you wonder about parts availability. With the sheer number of cars produced (near or greater than 100,000 cars annually from 1983 to 1988), finding most parts is simple. Most of the motor, braking, steering, and axle parts are all still available in the aftermarket. The 3.8 V6, 5.0 V8, and 2.3L I-4 engines can all be bought remanufactured. Body panels have been discontinued from Ford for some time, but are still available through aftermarket supply warehouses. About the only parts that are difficult to find are those found in the interior. A simple trip to the salvage yard usually takes care of that.

### Ever Wrecked?

One of the first things you'll probably want to know when looking at a Cougar is whether it has been in an accident. Fortunately, there are a few places on Fox Cougars that are telltale signs of an accident. First and foremost, open the hood and look immediately to the sides. There is an air inlet hole on each side of the engine compartment, just before the strut tower. On some cars, such as the 1983-85 5.0 engine, that hole was occupied by an air inlet duct. Beginning in 1986, however, the air cleaner assembly had a new home (due to the new fuel injection system) and that hole was no longer used, so it was capped off. When any kind of front end or side damage occurs to these cars, this front end crumple zone will distort badly. If the metal there is not totally straight, the car has almost certainly been in a wreck.

Another sly trick is really simple: Take the cap off the base of the antenna. You'll need a Philips screwdriver to remove the antenna on non-power units; unscrew the cap and lift for power antennas. If you see a different color under there, then that's a replacement fender. Now that's not a 100 percent guarantee of damage, as the panel could have been replaced due to rust. But if you have suspicions about a wreck, this could provide good reason to look for further evidence. When hastily replacing body panels, a lot of people will tape off and paint around the antenna rather than remove it; that's why this trick works so well. Overspray on windows and window trim can at least indicate new paint, if not a repair.

Check the rocker panels, under the doors. A side impact will dent or crinkle a rocker panel. While usually more cosmetic than structurally damaging, this could indicate a pretty hard hit. Look up under the bumpers at the metal core supports. If you see anything but a straight reinforcement, there has been at least a bumper bash in this Cat's past, if not more. On the interior, look under the seats really well for broken pieces of glass. Make sure you check under the back seat—a place often overlooked when cleaning up after an accident. Other signs: non-uniform gaps between body panels, a leaky trunk and excessive creaking.

Note: Physical indications of a wreck do not always tell the entire story. A simple low-speed front

collision could have bent the crumple zone, simulating a more severe hit. And again, just because a front fender has been replaced does not mean it was damaged. With the major rust problems associated with these cars, that's probably as likely an explanation.

## Sheet Metal

Unfortunately, these cars are known for lots and lots of rust. Generally, the steel used in most mid-1980s cars from all automakers was prone to rust, because galvanized steel rarely was used in vehicles back then. But there are some really prime examples of even older Cougars and Thunderbirds out there. Yet there are some key areas on the body that are a dead giveaway for Bondo and rust. So where do you look? Here's a list of common rust-prone areas:

- Under the doors
- Inside the door jambs
- Underneath the trunk lid
- Under the front and rear quarter panels
- Rocker panels
- Wheelwell lips
- Underside of the hood
- Behind the taillights and rear license plate

## Paint

Starting around 1983, Ford Motor Co. began using the then-new basecoat/clearcoat paint system-now the industry standard. The 1983-88 Cougars were fortunate enough to have a state-of-the-art laser guided paint system installed at the Lorain, Ohio, plant where they were built. As a result, the finish of the cars was truly remarkable. Cars with the base/clear paint generally hold up better over time than those with enamel finishes. There were only a few base/clear colors offered for each model year, though, and those included all metallics and some other solid colors. It is rare indeed to find a Cougar with matching, coherent paint that isn't oxidized. If you happen to find one like that, put it at the very top of your buying list; you'll save hundreds (maybe thousands) of dollars on a paint job. A few colors, like the charcoal grey metallics, had problems with lifting and exposing the primer underneath. While this was common with comparable GM cars of the time, it's been known to afflict a few Cats, too.

## Interior

Ford interiors are among the best of the industry, and 1983-88 Cougars are prime examples of this. Due to the excellent quality materials used, most Cougar interiors still will be in nice shape, no matter the mileage or age. Obviously extreme wear and sun fading cannot be controlled so the telltale signs of this will become readily apparent. Most of the time the carpeting is the first to wear out or fade, followed by the driver's seat and the leather-wrapped steering wheel (if so equipped), and the infamous dashboard cracking. The good news is, with a little shopping at the local salvage yard, most of these items are cheap fixes. Remember, you're going to be spending quite a bit of time inside the car, so make sure it meets your standards or can be repaired inexpensively.

## Air Conditioning

Chances are the air conditioning system on a used Cougar will not work. If it does, consider yourself lucky! Because the old R-12 Freon is no longer produced, you can use R-12 substitutes in your existing system with no problems. In the long run, you may want to convert your car over to the new R-134 system. Retrofit kits are available nationwide at good parts stores. Be aware that R-12 and R-134A oils do not mix. There are universal oils that work for both systems, and that would be your wisest choice.

## Cooling System

Most of the time the cooling systems in Fox Cougars operate well. Most notorious for going bad is the water pump on 3.8 and 5.0 cars; I've known them to fail under 50,000 miles. Fortunately, it's fairly easy to get to and replace. All radiators are two-row from the factory with fan clutches (only the '87-'88 Thunderbird Turbo Coupes had electric fans and an auxiliary oil cooler from the factory). If any hose ends or middles are swelled, cracked or soft to the touch, it's ready to burst and needs replacement soon. Coolant should be green and rust-free; brownish fluid indicates excessive rust inside the radiator, and possibly a few clogged rows. If the car is equipped with a temperature gauge, be sure to notice how long it takes to reach normal operating temperature. Normal length of driving time, depending upon weather and barometric conditions, is about five to 10 minutes. Any longer indicates a problem inside the cooling system-a bad thermostat, clogged radiator, bad fan clutch or, perhaps, a coolant leak. Thermostats generally are a pain to change in the 3.8 and 5.0 cars. A 180 degree unit can be installed with no harm (stock is 195). One should never use a 160 degree thermostat, as it will not allow the engine to achieve proper operating temperature. Finally, the heater cores in 1985-88 cars are a royal nightmare to change; the dashboard must be removed to get to it. Be sure to find out if the previous owner had the heater core replaced and if it was a genuine Ford unit.

## Power Steering

The power steering system in Fox Cougars is infamous for its leaks. In fact, if you find a Fox car that doesn't leak power steering fluid, it's a miracle. Usually the leaks occur either at the junction on the steering rack or at the coupling at the power steering pump housing. As a result, this is considered "normal" for these cars. Most 1983-86 Cougars had the power-assisted low-effort 20:1 ratio steering rack installed. Only 1984-86 XR-7s, and all 1987-88 cars (LS and XR-7 alike) had the high-effort 15:1 rack. Any sloppiness in steering, or loud noises when the steering wheel is turned to the extreme ends, indicates a bad steering rack. Tie rods are not very expensive; lower ball joints are and require major work. Be aware that during this era Ford chose "sealed for life" tie rods and ball joints, meaning no grease fittings. While this was great from a marketing standpoint, in real life it eventually causes sudden failure of the parts if you're not careful.

## Suspension

If you find a 1983-86 Cougar whose rear springs do not sag, they've either been replaced or the owner has been very lucky! But the 1987-88 cars had better rear springs and keep the car up to normal ride height. Front springs need to be compressed to be removed. That's a dangerous job and, unless you really know what you're doing, one that should be left to a professional. But unless they're broken, front springs are generally fine for 200,000 miles or more. The front A-arms need only occasional lubrication.

Lower control arms (rear) should both be straight; if they bend inward, the car was either hit or abused. The rear axle likes to twist up lower control arms like a pretzel. Torque boxes should be crack- and rust-free. Upper control arms, unless abused, should be fine. Bushings might be the only other suspension concern. Over time all bushings crack, and this means a sloppier feel and excessive body roll. This can lead to loss of control in emergency swerving or braking, but only in cases of extreme wear.

## Shocks/Struts

Again, normal-wearing items. Rear shocks are inexpensive. Struts are a little pricey at about \$50 each, but at least the front spring does not need to be compressed to remove them. Some cars (1984-88 XR-7s, for example) have a set of horizontal stabilizer shocks (a.k.a. "Quad" shocks) mounted from the rear axle to the rear subframe rail. These shocks help control the behavior of the live rear axle and are not under the pressure normally associated with shocks, so they last a long time.

## Exhaust

No 1983-88 Cougars had factory stainless steel exhaust systems, so prepare for occasional part replacement. Some cars have only one catalytic converter; others have two or three, depending on engine and model year. Like all catalytic converters, these are not cheap to replace. Only 1988 5.0 cars had factory dual exhaust. The entire system on all Cats is pretty straightforward and is of traditional rear-drive layout (Y-pipe, intermediates, mufflers, over-the-axle tailpipes). It is possible to retrofit either a Mustang or a custom exhaust system on these cars, with modifications. Long the forgotten part of the exhaust system, the oxygen sensors can be found in the stock exhaust manifolds. Some cars have only one sensor, while most have one on each side, and they're expensive to replace.

## Brakes

Believe it or not, the braking systems used in 1983-88 Cougars are pretty reliable. All front rotors are 10 inches; most cars had 9-inch rear drums, while cars with the optional towing package, and the 1988 XR-7, had 10-inch drums. Most people agree the 10-inch rotors, while adequate, could have been bigger, given the Cougar's weight. Replacement brake parts are affordable and easily found. Regarding 1985 Cougars, be aware Ford recalled the brake master cylinder; make sure it was replaced.

## Transmission

Throughout this era, the C-3, C-5, AOD, and A4LD were the automatics; the T-5 was the sole manual. Only the 1984-86 2.3L turbo XR-7s used the A4LD and the T-5; But it's becoming popular to swap out an AOD for a T-5 in a V8 car. Known for their lukewarm performance, the Ford transmissions used in these cars are notorious for simply giving out with no advance warning. That's why it's so important to check the transmission fluid in the prospective car, which should be pink and smell like oil. A burnt odor, milky or foaming consistency or brown to black color are sure signs of internal transmission failure. Most Ford owners do not think to have their transmission fluid and filter changed on a regular basis, so don't be surprised if you find some discolored fluid. Slightly brownish or burnt-smelling fluid is generally acceptable. Rebuilds, depending on location, can range from \$500 to more than \$1,000. The C-3, C-5 and AOD transmissions are generally of the same family-metric-and require special tools at rebuild time.

On test driving, be sure the shifts are not too sloppy. When the car is put into reverse, pay close attention to the time between shifting and engagement. It should be pretty quick; otherwise the flywheel may be cracked. Also, on AOD cars, with the car in overdrive, punch the gas pedal. The car should shift quickly into passing gear. If you give the car about three-quarters pedal in OD, you should notice the car gaining speed; if it doesn't seem to want to go, then the OD band is probably shot, indicating a rebuild in the near future. Remember: The overdrive band is a good indicator of internal condition, as it's usually the first thing to go. For those rare Cats with the T-5 five-speed, be sure the shifter works smoothly. Also, find out when and if the clutch and pressure plate was last serviced. The torque convertor should be replaced when the transmission is rebuilt; otherwise, when it goes, it'll take out the rest of the transmission with it.

## Belts

Early Fox Cougars (1983-85 in general) had multiple-belt systems: one for the air conditioning pump and one or two more for the other pumps and the crank pulley. Be sure that the belts are not cracked or cut up. Sometimes owners will only replace the belt that's easiest to reach, thereby neglecting the others behind it. The A/C belt will not need replacement as often as the others, as it gets used less. Beginning with the 1985 5.0 cars, Ford began using the one-belt serpentine system. While more expensive, the serpentine belt is a more efficient and more easily replaced piece than the older multiple-belt systems.

## Engine

Last and certainly not least, the engine should idle smoothly and should start on the first crank. Be sure to determine the date of the last tune-up and if the fuel filter was replaced at that time. Sometimes the fuel filter is included in a tune-up, sometimes not-it's up to you to find out. The fuel filter is in-line, underneath the car, on the passenger side and generally not easy to access. It should be changed yearly for optimum performance. Any smoke from the tailpipe indicates a leakage problem inside the motor, whether air, fuel, coolant or carbon build-up. A ticking noise indicates a bad lifter or sticky valve. The 3.8 and 5.0 engines have a normal "dieseling" sound to

them, so don't fear if you hear it-it's usually nothing to worry about. Pinging indicates the wrong timing, a bad timing chain or, possibly, a bad camshaft. An oil or "Check Engine" light, or abnormally low pressure, usually means the oil pump is on the way out, and believe me, it is not fun to replace. Now, it could also indicate bad oil leaks or internal engine problems. And it's common for 1985-88 5.0 cars to consume oil, usually about a quart between oil changes. This was due to faulty piston rings from the factory, and this also can contribute to cold-start pinging.

Acceleration should be fairly snappy with minimal pedal effort. A pedal that seems to require more force than usual when accelerating indicates a bad throttle position sensor, carbon build-up in the throttle body or, more commonly, a stretched accelerator cable. Hesitation in acceleration usually means an expensive fix (computer module, internal engine component failure, clogged fuel injectors, sticking valves, timing chain, bad sensor). If any aspect of your test drive doesn't feel right, your gut instinct is trying to tell you something.

## **Pricing**

Most "Aero Cats" are beyond 100,000 miles by now, meaning a reasonable price, but also the potential for major expenses and repairs. But that doesn't mean you'll always get a bad car. Prices range from less than \$1,000 (bad body, poor to fair running condition, high miles) to more than \$3,000 (good body, good to very good running, average miles). If the asking price is more than \$5,000, it should have an excellent body, no rust, be in top running condition and have less than 60,000 miles. These are more than likely one-owner cars. Rarer cars, such as the 1987 20th Anniversary cars, convertibles and fully loaded XR-7s with leather interior and power moonroof, will command varying prices, so you'll need to use your discretion. Since pricing is a judgment call, this guide should not be considered concrete. But it should give you a good gauge when checking out prices on used Cougars. An invaluable resource: [www.autotrader.com](http://www.autotrader.com). It's a great way to check current market pricing.

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