

CHALLENGER

2006 DODGE

Is this car a sneak peak at an updated 2-door

ON A SNOWY, SLEETING DAY IN MID-DECEMBER, A MONTH BEFORE THE 2006 NORTH AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW (NAIAS), WE WERE USHERED INTO A HUGE ROOM BURIED DEEP INSIDE THE CHRYSLER TECHNICAL CENTER AT THE DAIMLERCHRYSLER HEADQUARTERS IN AUBURN HILLS.

On a snowy, sleeting day in mid-December, a month before the 2006 North American International Auto Show (NAIAS), we were ushered into a huge room buried

deep inside the Chrysler Technical Center at the DaimlerChrysler headquarters in Auburn Hills.

We were in the inner sanctum, the

Styling Dome where senior Chrysler Group executives review and sign off on future production vehicles. We were there to view, up close and personal, the Dodge Challenger



CHALLENGER R/T

CONCEPT

pony car coming in the 2009 model year?

Concept, a car that promised to be the hit of the upcoming NAIAS. But we didn't come empty-handed; we asked Dwayne Buckner, a Chrysler employee himself, to bring his 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T to the Styling Dome where, for the very first time, the old and new Challengers would be photographed side-by-side.

Best of all, if the reaction to the Challenger Concept at the NAIAS is as expected, you are, in all likelihood, getting a sneak peek at a not too thinly-disguised version of a reincarnated, Charger-based Challenger due to hit your local Dodge Boys showroom sometime in the Spring of 2008 as an early 2009 model, about 28 months from now.

Even if there wasn't a 1970 Challenger R/T in the background, the first time you lay eyes on the Challenger Concept, you know exactly what it is; a thoroughly modern update of one of the most beloved Mopar musclecars. It's immediately apparent that designers Michael Castiglione (exterior) and Alan Barrington (interior) have truly captured

BY RICHARD TRUESDELL / IMAGES BY THE AUTHOR AND DAIMLERCHRYSLER





the essence of the original, rendering it in a combination of metal, aluminum, carbon fiber, leather and rubber that will get any musclecar enthusiast's blood pressure to rise.

Like another iconic shape brought back to life, the Ford GT, there's not a single line on the Challenger Concept that's an exact match to the original. But upon our initial view, the design execution is about as perfect as one can expect in cars whose birth is separated by some 35-plus years.

To see just how the new Challenger might fit into the marketplace, a look at the key specifications of the 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T, the 2006 Mustang GT and the 2006 Dodge Challenger Concept (see sidebar), is very illuminating.

When looking at the new Charger-based Challenger next to the original, one is struck by just how much more massive the new

car is. It dwarfs the original, which, in its day, was one of the most macho musclecars on the road.

EXTERIOR DESIGN

When the Challenger Concept project was started in late 2004, the design brief was simple; the team based at Chrysler's Pacifica Advanced Design Studio north of San Diego, California, knew that they had an obligation to "get it right" and that the foundation would be the existing rear-wheel drive LX platform and its Hemi engine. The idea of reinventing the highly-collectible Challenger quickly came to mind, something with a bold performance image in keeping with the current values of the Dodge brand. This included attributes like mega horsepower, pure, minimal, signature lines, an aggressive air-grabbing grille and bold colors and graphics.

"Challenger draws upon the initial 1970 model as the icon of the

series," said Tom Tremont, Vice President-Advanced Vehicle Design. "The 1970 model is the most sought after by collectors. But instead of merely recreating that car, the designers endeavored to build a Challenger most people see in their mind's eye—a vehicle without the imperfections like the old car's tucked-under wheels, long front overhang and imperfect fits. As with all pleasurable memories, you remember the good and screen out the bad. We wanted the concept car to evoke all those sweet memories...everything you thought the Challenger was, and more."

As the design developed, primary responsibility for the exterior was handed over to designer Michael Castiglione. "During the development of the concept car we brought an actual 1970 Challenger into the studio. For me, that car symbolizes the most passionate era of automotive design."

Being key to the image, getting the right proportions was critical. The Challenger concept sits on a 116-inch wheelbase, six

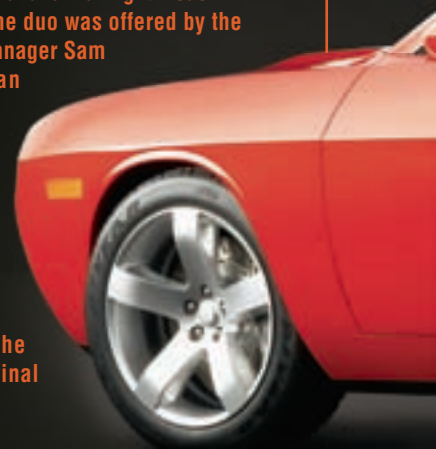


Getting a sneak peek at a concept, any concept, is always a treat and the Challenger was no exception. And we made the most of the opportunity by inviting Dwayne Buckner, the owner of our Woodward (January 2006) cover car to the Chrysler Technology Center, for the Challenger Concept photo shoot. Dwayne, who works at Chrysler's Chelsea Proving Grounds about an hour west of Detroit, was only too happy to accept our invitation. He was probably the first "civilian" enthusiast to get a chance to get an up close and personal look at the new Challenger.

"I can't get over just how massive it is," say Dwayne. "Especially when parked next to my Challenger, the contrast between the two cars is astounding. But the first time you see the new Challenger,

you know exactly what it is. And I really like it. The designers did a great job in translating the original and making it modern."

The chance to photograph the duo was offered by the Chrysler Group's Design PR manager Sam Locricchio. We jumped on an overnight US Airways redeye from Los Angeles, endured a three-hour mechanical delay in Las Vegas, and horrific December weather upon landing in Detroit. We were finally ushered into the Styling Dome, where senior Chrysler Group executives had, just the day before, signed off on its final approvals for the NAIAS.





a wonderful element but one where cost would probably preclude it from being incorporated in a final production version. Both the grille and the front and rear lamps are set into carbon-fiber surrounds; this is an effective use of carbon fiber, much as argent was used on the original.

Bumpers are clean (no guards), body-color and flush with the body. "This is something we would have loved to do on the original Challenger," said Jeff Godshall, who was a young designer in the Dodge Exterior studio when the first Challenger was created, "but the technology just wasn't there. With the Challenger concept, however, the Pacifica Studio designers are able to realize what we wanted in our perfect world."

The hood reprises the original Challenger "performance hood" and its twin diagonal scoops, now with functional butterfly-valve intakes. Designed to showcase the modern techniques used in fabricating the car, what look like painted racing stripes are actually the exposed carbon fiber of the hood material.

The Challenger Concept is a genuine four-passenger car. "You can sit up in the back seat," said Castiglione. "Compared to the original, the greenhouse is longer, the windshield and backlite faster, and the side glass narrower. All glass is set flush with the body without moldings, another touch the original designers could only wish for. The car is a genuine two-door hardtop—no B-pillar—with the belt line ramping up assertively at the quarter window just forward of the wide C-pillar."

Exterior details one might expect, like a racing-type gas cap, hood tie-down

inches longer than the original. But its width is two inches greater, giving the concept car a squat, tougher, more purposeful persona. In a profile view of the new Challenger, the key element is what Castiglione calls the thrust line, which is higher up on the body, running horizontal through the fender and door and kicking up just forward of the rear wheel. "We wanted to stay pure," said Castiglione, "with simple, minimal line work, but with everything just right."

In the side view, the wheels play a critical element in the overall design. The five-spoke chrome wheels—20-inch, front; 21-inch, rear—are set flush with the bodyside, giving the car the powerful muscular stance, even more pronounced than on the original.

If the original Challenger had a signature design element, it was the exceptionally wide look of both the front and back ends. To achieve this the designers increased

both the front and rear tracks to 64 and 65 inches respectively, even wider than on the existing LX platform, even wider than the 1970 model. To realize the long horizontal hood the designers deemed essential, the front overhang was also increased when compared to the existing LX cars, which feature very short overhangs, front and rear.

Both the hood and the deck lid of the Challenger concept vehicle are higher than the 1970 in order to lift and "present" the front and rear themes. The front end features the signature Dodge crossbar grille and four headlamps deeply recessed into the iconic car-wide horizontal cavity. Diagonally staggered in plan view, the outboard lamps are set forward, the "six-shooter" inboard lamps slightly rearward. At the rear, the car-wide cavity motif is repeated, encompassing a full-width neon-lit taillamp,



MEASURING UP

	'70 CHALLENGER	'06 MUSTANG GT	'06 CHALLENGER
Length	191.3 inches	187.6 inches	197.8 inches
Wheelbase	110.0 inches	107.1 inches	116.0 inches
Width	76.1 inches	73.9 inches	78.6 inches
Height	50.9 inches	55.4 inches	57.0 inches
Curb weight	3,801 pounds	3,488 pounds	4,000 pounds*
Engine	V8	V8	V8
Displacement	383 cu. in.	281 cu. in.	370 cu. in.
Horsepower	335 HP (gross)	300 HP (net)	425 HP (net)
0-60	6.5 sec	5.1 sec	4.5 sec
Top Speed	121 MPH	141 MPH	174 MPH
*Estimated.			

pins, louvered backlite and bold bodyside striping, didn't make the "cut," the designers feeling such assorted bits would detract from the purity of the monochromatic body form. But tucked reassuringly under the rear bumper are the "gotta have" twin-rectangle pipes of the dual exhausts.

INTERIOR EXECUTION

If the exterior doesn't excite an original Challenger owner, then maybe the interior will and it's here that we pick up some clues that Dodge is giving the car a serious evaluation for production. The first clue is the most obvious, the seats. While many Chrysler Group concept cars feature fanciful design elements incorporated into the seat design, these seats look as if they were lifted directly from the Charger SRT8, the main difference being the upholstery pleat pattern, which looks as if it was lifted intact from the original.

"Having direct access to an actual Challenger from 1970 right in the studio was a huge benefit," says interior designer Alan Barrington. "First, you got to see what was done and what was cool about it but

second, you got to see what you could do differently. We didn't just want a copy or 'me too' design, we wanted a statement as to recognizing what today's driver/occupants would appreciate...such as more interior room, particularly in the back seat, which is a typical concern for vehicles in this format."

When we sat in the Challenger Concept we noted that the instrument panel had a very production-ready look with the exception of the cluster-mounted computer. But even the computer display mimics the larger speedometer of the original Challenger and by 2009 this type of display should not be beyond the realm of possibility.

"We designed the in-your-face gauge holes to appear as if you are looking down into the engine cylinders with the head off," relates Barrington. "With its thick, easy-grip rim, circular hub and pierced silver spokes, the leather-wrapped steering wheel evokes the original car's 'Tuff' wheel, as does the steering column 'ribbing.' The floor console, its center surface tipped toward the driver, is fitted with a proper 'pistol grip' shifter shaped just right to master the quick, crisp

shifts possible with the six-speed manual transmission.

In another historical reference to the original Challenger, Barrington noted that as the original Challenger was the first car to have injection-molded door trim panels (now a common practice), the doors received special attention in the concept. "We imagined that the door panel was a billet of aluminum covered with a dark rubberized material," Barrington relates. "Then we cut into it to create a silver trapezoidal cove for the armrest."

CRYSTAL BALL GAZING

While both designers (and the Chrysler Group PR team) went to great lengths to emphasize that this Challenger is just a concept, with no specific production intent, concept cars such as these represent multi-million dollar investments and have a singular purpose, to gauge public reaction to potential future designs, which represent future spending programs.

Based on a shortened version of the LX platform (with an expected mid-cycle refresh coming in 2008/2009), it would seem that a mid-2008 model year introduction for the Challenger is a distinct possibility, maybe as an early 2009 model.

Certainly, if looking at the Charger's current prices, it would seem that a V-6 Challenger, with the advantage of the Magnum/Charger's independent rear suspension, could be offered at \$22-23,000, in today's dollars. Add about \$7,000 for the R/T version with the 5.7 Hemi and you have a Challenger Hemi for less than \$30,000. And don't expect Dodge to wait two years or more to offer



a convertible; expect it within 12 months of the coupe's launch for about \$4,000 more, following Ford's successful strategy with the Mustang.

And what about an SRT version? With the SVT Shelby GT500 already announced for 2007 and with a Mustang refresh also scheduled for 2008, Dodge could follow the 300C/Magnum/Charger blueprint and offer a 6.1-liter SRT version quickly (this is the engine that powers the concept).

But there's an added twist. Remember that the Magnum is offered with all-wheel-drive as is the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT-8, the world's fastest SUV. This means that all the hardware is already in place to offer an

all-wheel-drive version of the Challenger at a price comparable to the current Grand Cherokee SRT8.

What the Chrysler Group product planners will be looking at over the next 90 days is if potential buyers, like readers of publications like *Musclecar Enthusiast*, will be willing to part with their hard-earned money to purchase a reborn Challenger. Our read is that the average Challenger would be priced probably north of the

Mustang and south of the GTO, with an SRT8 on the high end. If they get an affirmative answer, and believe that 30,000 to 50,000 buyers can be found annually, then we're almost certain that the Challenger will get the green light for production, if it hasn't already. When looking at several clues in the Challenger Concept, it looks as if the decision has already been made (in advance of the NAIAS) and the answer is a resounding YES!

As with any concept, to get an inside look to the design process, it's always illuminating to talk with the designers, in this case Michael Castiglione on the exterior design and Alan Barrington for the interior design

Musclecar Enthusiast: As is obvious from the photos of the old and new Challenger together, the new Challenger is a substantially bigger car than its predecessor. Working with the LX large car platform as a base, as a designer, how difficult was it for you to translate and update the classic Challenger proportions and iconic styling elements, to a modern idiom?

Michael Castiglione: Using the LX platform was the key to allowing us to 'kick the door open' as it were for making the Challenger Concept reality. This wasn't due to having an available format, but it also allowed for great public acceptance. The vast success of the Hemi, the popularity of the 300, Magnum and Charger made this latest move a logical step than just 'retro design' — which is clearly not the case.

The original Challenger gives us heritage but the 2006 concept gives us the best of both worlds to produce a vehicle that existed in everyone's mind eye. Technology gave us an advantage to produce a higher quality vehicle with an upgraded powertrain. The exterior — when you look at the 1970 vehicle next to the current concept — has a more powerful stance with attitude — very bulldog-like. In addition, it looks like a member of the Dodge family because of the grille.

MCE: After you got this assignment and before you started sketching out the concept, how deeply did you research the original Challenger?

MC: The great advantage of working at the Chrysler Group is you are in a nest of



car fanatics. As a result, we had folks on the staff that owned the original and they brought them into the studio as we evolved sketches. It gave us more than just an internet view of the original — it gave us the world at our fingertips. So immediately you look at the original and say "OK... that's great... it's amazing... now, if I have the chance to do it for the present, what do I change? What would be the perfect addition? How do I build on everything else but take it to another level?"

MCE: Of all the elements that you incorporated into the exterior of the Challenger Concept, which one do you think stands out the most?

MC: The stance in terms of the width — there's a toughness about this vehicle that contributes and enhances the image. The grille, the hood with the exposed carbon fiber, is striking. The rear, which gives a nod of recognition to the original but because of today's technology, allows for a lightning of the tail lamps that goes straight across.

MCE: As there is a great deal of speculation as to the production possibility of the Challenger Concept (to us on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being pure fantasy, 10 being absolute pre-production, we rate this concept as an 8.5), did this factor in at all on the direction you took with the Challenger's overall design? If so, how?

MC: As this is purely a concept (and when we do any concept) it gives us a lot of

freedom by not worrying about feasibility and more on focusing on an expansion of the brand. Clearly, we understand the speculation based on use of an existing platform. But in reality — that provides us more with efficiency than anything else; we have budgets in these times as much as any other company. The key is using our creativity to take us beyond being frugal and efficient in cost while still expanding the brand and taking the vehicle to new heights.

MCE: When readers have an opportunity to view the car in the flesh, say at an auto show, as the designer, what elements do you suggest that they look closest to?

MC: The interior points I mentioned above but Alan's interior is great — its recognition of the original but the orange accents from the exterior is minimalist but more than delivers on the promise of the exterior. You gawk at the car when you first see it, but your immediate reaction is "man, I have to get into this car." And, that interior doesn't disappoint because it fuels that... it pulls you in."

MCE: What insights can you give as the design evolved over the last 12 months?

MC: The most obvious is color choices; but you can also see how the vehicle the vehicle got more and more athletic, muscular as it developed. It was like it went to the gym and worked out...but didn't get muscle bound. It got tough, lean while retaining appropriate levels of muscle. ■