

The Return of the Ford Bronco | How It Made Its Way Back

The Bronco Sport is already upon us and its stouter stablemates, the 2-door and 4-door Bronco, will be arriving soon. As it's been about 25 years since the model last graced showroom turntables before being navigated toward adventures, one might wonder just what forces converged to prompt Ford to bring the Bronco back after such a lengthy hiatus.

Unbeknownst to virtually anyone, a sizable and long standing push to re-introduce the model came not from a letter writing campaign or some other type of public demand, but from inside the Ford company itself, in the form of a group of die-hard Ford employees composed of enthusiastic off-roaders and known as the [Bronco Underground](#).

Lending both their own considerable skills and free time to their Bronco passion, the group took it upon itself to conjure up a multitude of sketches, formulate plans to bring the retro-futuristic model to the public and even carve out unsanctioned factory floor space for early mockups of the iconic model.

Despite the Underground's enthusiasm, it would take quite a while for their project, helmed by respected Ford designer Moray Callum, to get traction. This intrepid group always believed that there was plenty of life left in the Bronco brand and actually began their efforts all the way back in 1999, just a few years after Ford had shelved the Bronco.

THE LONG ROAD BACK

Prior to its departure, the Bronco had previously held court in the automotive world for a 30-year plus stretch, debuting in the mid-'60s as a truly revolutionary vehicle — many consider it the first true SUV ever introduced, as it paired off-road capability and ruggedness with a relatively driver-friendly experience. But as most of us know, the American car buying public's tastes can and do change and by the mid-'90s the once coveted model had lost quite a bit of its commercial luster, prompting Ford to give the Bronco what would then be its final bow in 1996.

Sidenote: While there has always been conjecture that O.J.'s infamous slow speed exploit had tarnished the brand, Ford has always maintained that it didn't really factor into their decision to bench the Bronco.

In the years that followed, the entire SUV segment continued to shift markedly, veering toward an increased emphasis on sedate comfort while taking the emphasis off obstacle-conquering ability. Ford had almost immediately replaced the Bronco with the Expedition, a plenty capable vehicle in its own right, but one that was clearly geared toward more civilized pursuits.

Whereas the last edition of the Bronco featured a 104.7" wheelbase and a curb weight a little over 4500lbs, its replacement rolled out more than a foot longer and nearly 300lbs heavier. Then, there was also its 4-door configuration, as the arrival of the Expedition marked the first time Ford would offer a full-size SUV in that form. These specifications were fairly clear indications that despite its more than respectable ground clearance, the Expedition was intended largely for everyday driving — as lighter SUVs tend to be more agile when navigating obstacles and are generally easier to control over rough terrain.

This, of course, left a void in the Ford lineup that its competitors — namely Jeep — were able to take advantage of, with Ford now finding itself on the outside looking in where adventure-centric, off-roading was concerned.

Despite the continued demand for a vehicle that could ably navigate rough terrain but still offer appealing road manners on the asphalt, Ford kept any future plans it might have had very close to the vest. It wasn't until negotiations in 2016 between Ford and the United Auto Workers that came in the immediate aftermath of Ford's decision to move production of both their Focus and C-Max models down south to Mexico that the prospect of rekindling the Bronco brand was first discussed. This was already a full 17 years after the Bronco Underground began formulating the brand's return strategy.

Even then, Ford hadn't gone so far as to finalize its plans, so when it made the announcement that the Bronco would be returning at the [2017 North American International Auto Show](#), it came as somewhat of a surprise even for the UAW. The Wayne, Michigan plant that had been focusing on two compact cars would shut down for five months in mid-2018 to retool for production of the Ford Ranger pickup truck, as well as a revitalized entry into the Ford lineup that caused an immediate stir — the all-new Ford Bronco.

From the start, the Bronco was intended to go head-to-head with the Jeep Wrangler, which had enjoyed nearly unchallenged supremacy in the off-road SUV market segment. Sure, there were plenty of other SUV options on the road, but most had been refined to the point of being thoroughly out of place once departing from the asphalt. By contrast, the Wrangler had held firm to its adventure-centric roots and retained a loyal following as a result. This made it a worthy target, brought clearly into firing range when Ford elaborated that it would be offering both 2-door and 4-door versions of what would be the sixth generation of Broncos, both featuring an overall style that would borrow heavily from their pivotal first-generation forefather that had debuted in the mid-'60s.

The relentless efforts of the Bronco Underground had thoroughly prepared the auto manufacturer for the next step, and a prototype of the Bronco was readied to show to one of Ford's dealership groups by March of 2019. Encouraged by the thoroughly enthusiastic response, just eight months later Ford made the announcement that it would be unveiling a production model of the Bronco in March of 2020 that would be part of their 2021 model year lineup — by automotive brand development standards, this represented moving at warp speed.

This video, heralding the arrival of the Bronco, emphasizes its back to nature, adventure-seeking heritage. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v1urlWR5zg&feature=youtu.be>

Of course, by that time the Covid-19 pandemic had emerged, causing several delays to Ford's ambitious timeline, and the actual unveiling of the new Bronco took place on July 13, 2020. As it would turn out, the last of those related delays worked out in Ford's favor, as it pushed the unveiling four days later from its intended July 9th date, which also happened to be O.J. Simpson's birthday — definitely not a mental association Ford wanted to create.

A series of Covid-related delays have further impeded the Bronco's eventual rollout, which is now slated for the middle of this year.

Those professionals at the Bronco Underground showed some serious resolve in maintaining their tenacity for more than 20 years. It makes for a captivating story that's likely to appeal to any true off-road enthusiast and it's ably chronicled in [this multi-part podcast](#) — along with quite a few other key milestones in the Bronco's storied history.