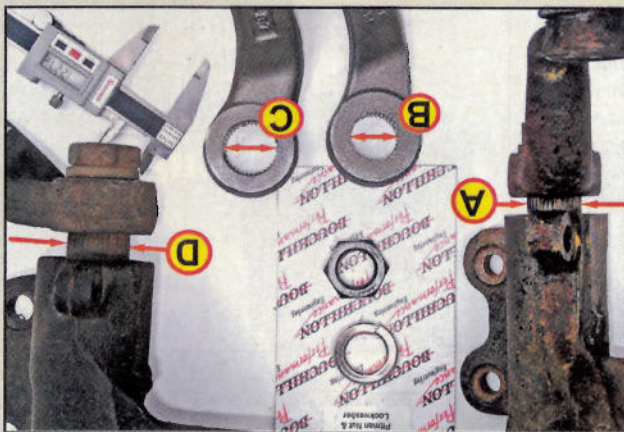


POWER UP

I remember it as if it were yesterday: I had spec'd out a daily driver 1971 318 Duster for my first (of many) mothers-in-law. 3.23 SG, manual discs, HD suspension, E-70/14 tires, etc. In short, it was a performance car in every respect except the engine. The dealer asked me to drive it home from the dealer, and my mind was blown. I expected good handling and braking, sure. But the steering—that was another matter entirely. It was precise, with great feedback, and none of that feathery "tiller" feeling that I grow accustomed to in Mopars, even brand-new recent performance cars. After a few miles, I had to stop and peek under the hood to see what the factory had changed so radically in the steering system.

Power steering boxes, '62-up, came in 2 basic flavors: Left, the large-sector box, used on C-bodies, B-vans, and everything after 1972. The small-sector box (right) was used on virtually all the muscle-era cars. They can swap as long as you use a matching pitman arm. See the matrix (right, above) for "swap meet gold" dimensions. Use this for identification only, splines are notoriously hard to measure accurately. Lost (or boogered) the oddball pitman nut and lockwasher? Think: Bouchillon!



Chuck	Small	Large
Pitman	(A) 1-1/8"	(D) 1-1/4"
Sector	(B) 1"	(C) 1-1/8"
Large		

But now I knew where the difference was: The box itself. It wasn't long before I had equipped several older Mopars with new cop boxes. While this meant some digging for new pitman arms (all '73-up Mopars used the larger "C-body" splines), the result was spectacular.

I began to research what was really different about Firm Feel boxes, which had actually been introduced in 1975. I came up with only two facts: (1) the reaction springs were heavier, and (2) they were "select fit assembled." This second fact pretty much told me why the Duster had been great: Blind luck in the box's assembly.

Today we don't have to trust lady luck. Two vendors, Firm Feel, Inc., and Steer and Gear, rebuild Mopar PS boxes to several levels of "firmness," the firmest being even significantly better than NOS factory stuff.

If you're thinking "I know where there's a junked cop car, I'll just grab the box," generally, forget it. Once a cop box has 50-60,000 miles on it, it's little better than your old non-FF one. If you're also thinking "I'll get a cheapo rebuild from AutoZone," that's another dead-end: Every "generic" rebuild we've ever tried has been pretty bad. For you daring types who wanna do it yourself, yes, you can swap the reaction springs and do a home rebuild (of sorts). But there's enough little nuances involved in steering box rebuilding that we'll shoot that idea down, too. Most home-rebuilds do "work" but have a very lousy feel to them. (Don't ask how we know this.)



(Left) Here's a box's myriad components blueprinted and ready for assembly at Firm Feel, Inc., with worn parts replaced, and Firm Feel's firm feel Stage II reaction springs (arrows) what separates the men from sloppy steering. (Right) It takes lots of balls—26 of 'em, to be exact, to build a fresh, tight Mopar recirculating-ball power box. FFI uses only 100% new, bearing-quality high-carbon aircraft (chromium) grade E52100 alloy steel balls.

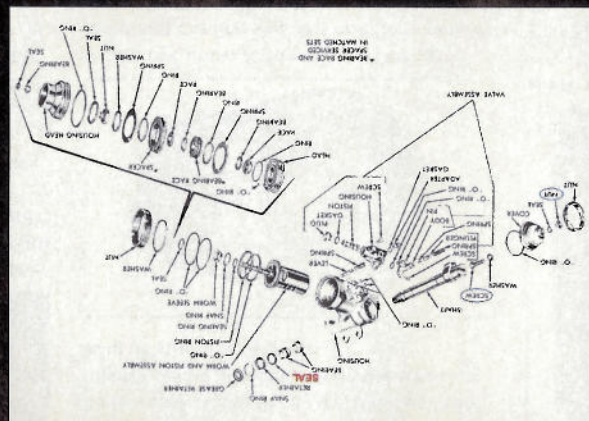


To my surprise, I saw nothing new. The same pump, box, lines, linkage, etc. Then I went to the dealer and poured over the parts catalog. Again, nothing had changed. Years passed, and I went on with other things—mostly, making

HP to keep the Chevys far behind in the stoplight wars. Then, in 1978, which was the tail end of the muscle car performance era, my ex-wife wanted a new ride, her green 6-Bbl Road Runner was getting a bit rusty (you can guess what became of

that car.) We spec'd out an Aspen sedan, with the A38 cop package. This included a component I had never been aware of: a firm feel steering box. And, sure enough, the car exhibited the same great road manners as her mother's Duster.

clean up the mess.) Thanks to Randy Bouchillon for this tip.



This factory exploded view pretty much explains why we advise leaving power chuck rebuilds to the experts. One thing you can do yourself, however, is to change out a leaky sector shaft pressure seal (called out in red here). The factory spec'd all manner of Miller special tools for this. Hal Check this: In the car, remove the pitman arm. Pry out the lower seal. Remove the snap ring and retaining washer. Start 'er up. Turn the wheel against the stop—hard—in either direction, with engine revs at a fast idle. Blam! That she blows! Just carefully tap the new one in, then reinstall the washer and clip, then the dust seal. Done in 15 minutes. (OK, yeah, another 15 to