

ECONOMY SEDANS: We compare 10 nonpenalty boxes

CAR AND DRIVER

NOVEMBER 2002 • CANADA \$4.99 UK £2.95 US \$3.99

Power Players

500-hp Viper SRT-10 roars to 60 in 3.9 seconds



470-hp
Dinan
BMW M5



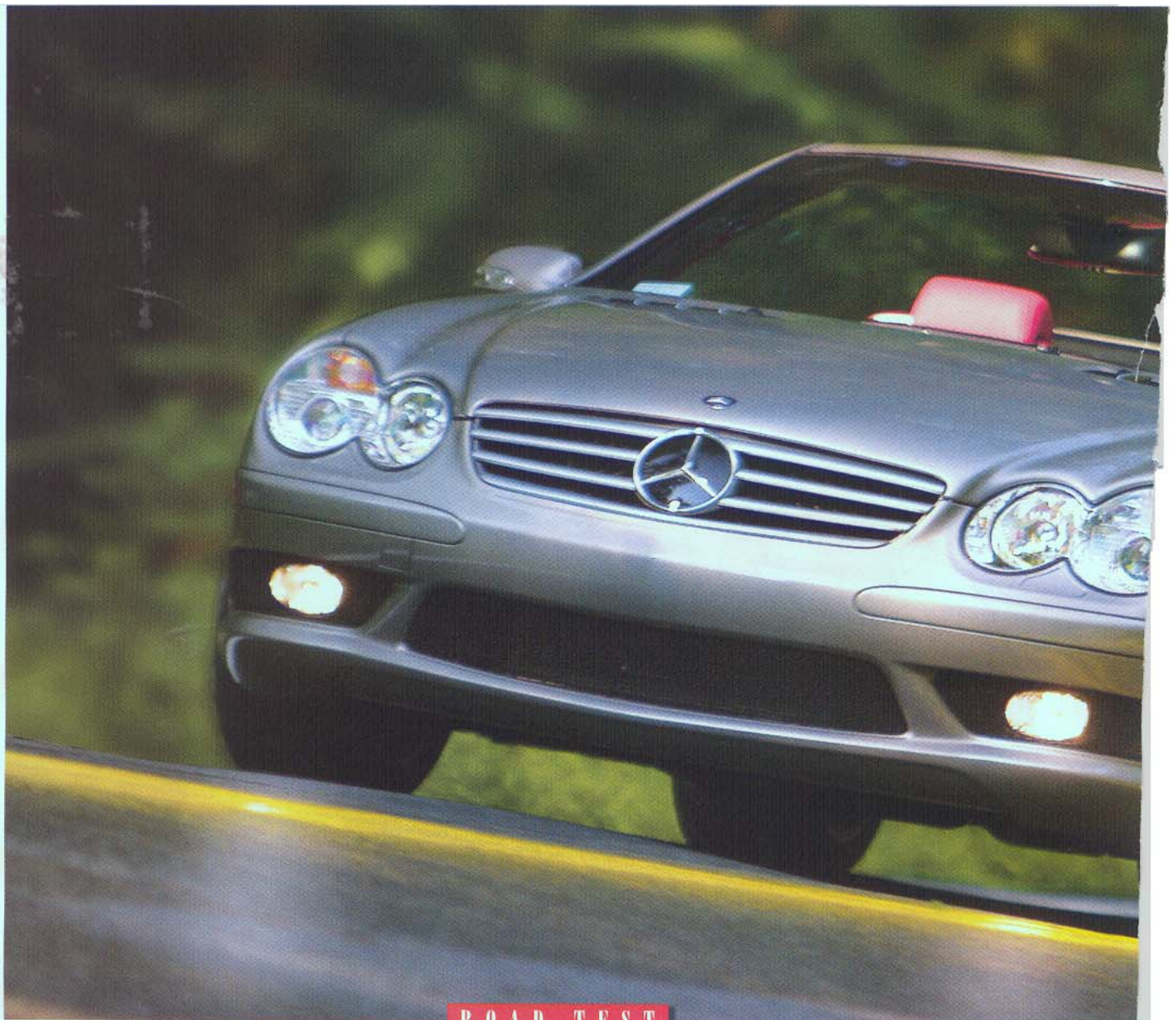
385-hp
Maserati
Coupé

**493-hp
Mercedes-Benz SL55 AMG**

NEW: Honda Element, Infiniti G35 coupe, Porsche Cayenne, Toyota 4Runner.

TESTS: Land Rover Discovery, Maserati Ghibli, Mercedes-Benz E500.

PLUS: The speed kings, the last Cannonball, Caddy-car-show jitters.



ROAD TEST

A funny thing happened at the 1934 Eifelrennen race at the Nürburgring. Alfred Neubauer, the Zeppelinesque chief of the Mercedes team, directed his crew to grind off all the bone-white paint that distinguished the Benz factory racers.

Hence the origin of silver as the German color for racing. But that's not the point. Neubauer's motive had nothing to do with aesthetics. In those days, the competition weight regs specified a *maximum* limit, rather than a minimum. Neubauer's paint trick was designed to get the cars down below the max. The rulemakers set an upper limit, because they saw weight as a dynamic asset. A bigger car would have a bigger engine, and thus go faster. The objective was to slow the cars down. Ha.

This story came to mind early in our first lap of Wisconsin's Road America racetrack in the new Mercedes SL55 AMG roadster. The Neubauer parable flickered in my mind's eye like a prewar movie as I hit the rumble strips on the exit of Turn Five and started up

Mercedes-Benz SL55 AMG

How do you say
'formidable' in German?

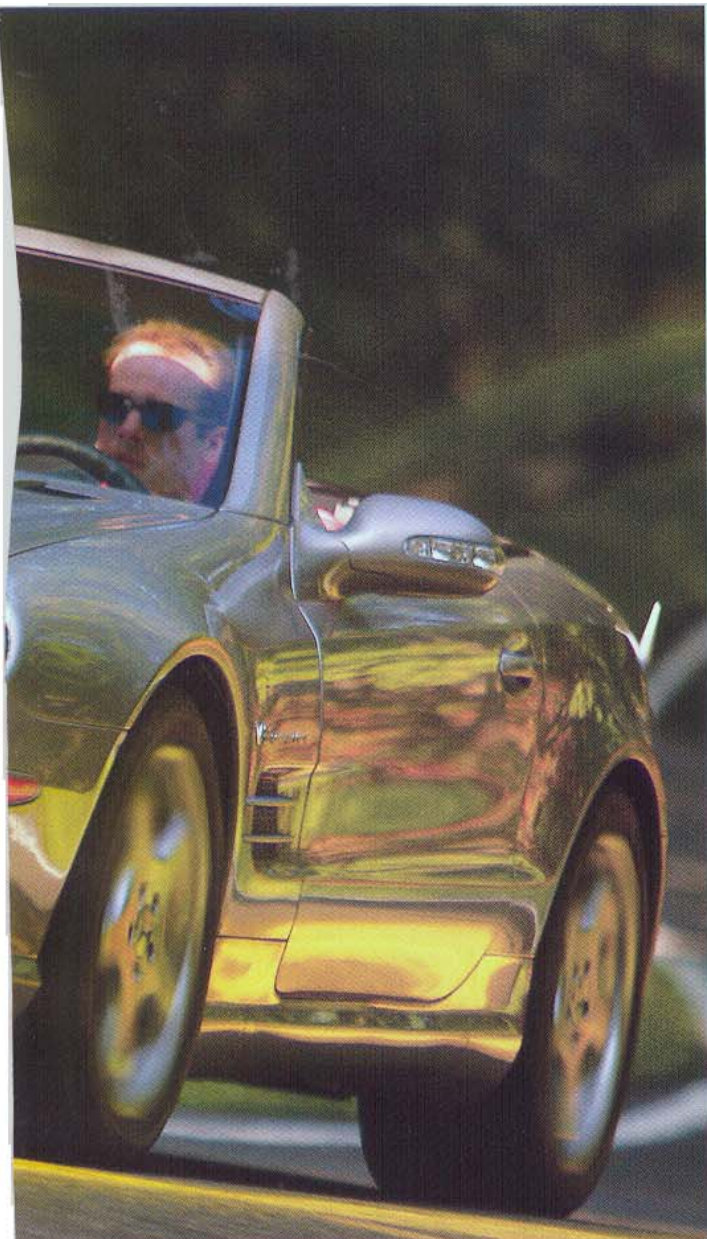
BY TONY SWAN

of pro road racers to demonstrate those capabilities as dramatically as possible. The demos came after we ordinary mortals had done a few laps, and with a light rain at the end of the session,

the hill. Wow. *Was ist los?*

See, getting out there onto the exit curbing was *not* the intent upon entering the turn. First lap in a new car—and an expensive one at that—lots of power, cold tires, etc. Easy does it. But when the throttle went down at the apex, the car was across the track and onto that alligator curbing before you could say, "*Götterdämmerung!*"

This little tableau, reinforced by other examples of mass exerting its relentless influence, emerged as the overriding impression of an all-too-brief Road America experience, laid on by Mercedes-Benz as the finale of its North American SL55 AMG press launch. Given the car's capabilities, it was certainly the right venue—long straights punctuated by hard braking and generally uncomplicated turns. No esses, no tricky transitions. Moreover, Mercedes had enlisted a platoon



this became quite dramatic, indeed.

But as we strapped on a new SL55 to head home, the nagging question persisted: What's up with all this *avoir-dupois*? The standard SL500 we tested last April was certainly no wraith. When the readouts on the *C/D* scales finally settled, the tally for that one stood at a resounding 4172 pounds. That's SUV territory, but even so, the AMG version is heftier: 4411 pounds. What's the deal? Weight is the enemy. These guys *must* know that.

Make no mistake, this is a formidable automobile, Moby Dick mass notwithstanding. Check the motivational specs: 493 horsepower at 6100 rpm, 516 pound-feet of torque manifesting itself along a wonderfully flat curve from 2650 to 4500 rpm. It's the most potent Benz ever offered in North America, according to the manufacturer, and also the quickest factory Benz



we've ever tested: 0 to 60 in 4.5 seconds, 0 to 100 in 10.9, the quarter-mile in 13 seconds flat at 110 mph.

In contrast, the SL500 tested in our April issue hit 60 mph in 5.8 seconds, 100 in 14.5, and covered the quarter in 14.3 seconds at 99 mph. The disparities seem minor on paper, but the real-world distinctions are dramatic. Crack the throttle, and this posh heavyweight lunges forward like a shark that's been invited to nibble a chunk of Britney Spears. It dissects traffic like a superbike and exudes a sense of mechanical resentment when a soulless microchip arrests the rush at 156 mph.

There's a corollary to the traffic-sorting prowess, incidentally. This car seems to stir up civilians like few others, and not always in a delighted (read "Lookit *that!*") way. All too often we'd cruise past some joker only to find him angrily attached to the Benz's rear bumper, somehow offended at being overtaken. We believe a similar emotion animated the people who divided Marie Antoinette into two unequal portions in 1793, and we furnish this observation as a public service to potential buyers: *Caveat emptor*.

But we were discussing the SL55's power and its increased mass, and in fact the two are directly related. There is, for example, the weight of the AMG car's supercharger and its air-to-water intercooler, the latter designed with its own separate supply of fluid. Made by IHI, the belt-driven supercharger is of the Lysholm type, with a Teflon-coated screw-style impeller delivering boost up to 11.6 psi. Quietly, too. No supercharger whine.

Although this is basically the same SOHC 24-valve aluminum V-8 used in the SL500, there are significant differences. The hand-assembled AMG version is stroked from 84 millimeters to 92, increasing displacement from 4966cc to 5439, and the forged aluminum pistons drop the compression ratio from 10.0:1 to 9.0:1, an anti-detonation measure. There are heavy-duty bearings with cross-bolted mains at the bottom end, plus a new sump and a more powerful oil pump. Top-end mods include double valve springs, reprofiled cams, and bigger intake and exhaust plumbing.

The supercharged eight feeds its power to a five-speed automatic transmission that incorporates an updated edition of the Mercedes SpeedShift manumatic. This one offers three modes—normal, winter, and manual. Its basic function is essentially the same as Chrysler's AutoStick: Waggle the lever, and you can shift up or down, or operate in full automatic mode. Unlike AutoStick, the manual mode allows shifting via rocker switches mounted on

the backs of the steering-wheel spokes. And unlike the other modes, selecting manual allows the driver to hold a particular gear right up to the rev limiter.

Consistent with the law of opposite and equal reactions—that which goes must stop—there's also extra mass associated with the SL55's braking apparatus. The rotors are big enough to double as manhole covers—14.2 by 1.3 inches in front, 13.0 by 0.9 in the rear, vented and cross-drilled at both ends. The diameters are bigger than the garden-variety SL's, and the fronts are squeezed by eight-piston calipers.

Oddly enough, braking distances failed to match those recorded by the SL500, and by a bunch: 155 feet from 70 mph for the SL500, 175 for the SL55.

Moreover, although we didn't record any brake fade during our testing, we did encounter a squishy pedal while lapping Road America, even with all the electronic enhancements (Sensotronic

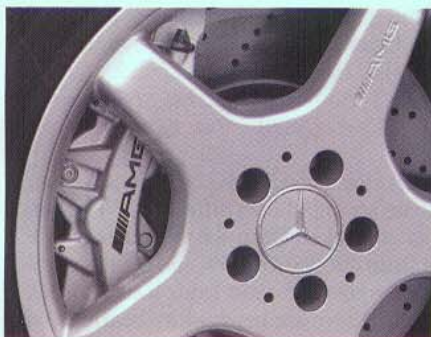
Brake Control) incorporated into this system.

Grip doesn't seem to be the problem. Although the SL55's footprints are essentially the same as the SL500's—the only difference is a slightly lower rear-tire profile (285/35ZR-18 versus 285/40ZR-18)—the AMG edition's Pirelli P Zeros pulled a higher skidpad number: 0.91 g versus 0.88. So the SL55's added mass seems the most likely braking-distance culprit.

Which brings us to this car's all-around dynamics. Mercedes refers to its "catlike handling reflexes," which is true—if you envision a cat the size of a Siberian tiger. The key to the SL55's level cornering attitudes is the corporate Active Body Control electro-mechano-hydraulic almost-active suspension, recalibrated in this

application for firmer responses without compromising ride quality. Although this sophisticated system can't erase weight—it's always there, always tangible—it manages that weight amazingly well, whether the car is clawing the pavement in a fast sweeper or unkinking a set of switchbacks. This kind of activity is abetted by the SL55's speed-sensitive rack-and-pinion steering, which seems to deliver a little more tactile information than the SL500's system, and by the availability of all that torque for blasting off corners.

As you'd expect, the SL55 is posh-plus inside, with all the hedonistic goodies that distinguish the SL500, which is far from a torture chamber itself, plus some AMG fillips such as a sport steering wheel, aluminum interior trim, Alcantara suede atop



THE VERDICT

Highs: Prodigious thrust, execujet style, execujet comfort.

Lows: Full-size-SUV curb weight.

The Verdict: Proof that heft and passion are not mutually exclusive.



COUNTERPOINT

Hmm, let's see here. Supercar horsepower, a shape to die for, the trickiest top in the land, and active suspension. Sounds like a study-hall dream car, and for the most part, it is. But why did Mercedes leave out an automatic-shifting manual gearbox? You know, the tranny you can get at the Ferrari or BMW store? For a slushbox, the SL's automatic tranny is fine. But it'll never provide the control or response that a manual tranny would. I can understand the omission in the standard SL, but the SL55 is supposed to be the supercar that packs the best of Mercedes' vast engineering talent. Am I wrong to think a \$123,000 car should have it all? —Larry Webster

Behold the German Ferrari. We didn't think those buttoned-down, left-brain Deutschers had it in 'em, but this latest AMG accurately captures the otherworldly rocket-propelled acceleration and Gravitron cornering effects and even some of the charming quirks of a small-line Italian exotic. What corporate engineer could okay white-on-white gauge legends, for example? Sure, they're invisible most of the time, but they look so cool when you can see them. And the driver's vanity-mirror lid that obscures the mirror's overhead light—that's to prove this is a serious sports car, not a boudoir, right? Message received, through all four bellowing exhaust tips. —Frank Markus

A few years ago, I likened the Mercedes 500SL to a Duesenberg SJ because it occupied a nexus of performance, style, and luxury that seemed beyond modern, more narrowly focused cars. This new SL55 takes that SL concept into overdrive. Motivated by its velvety and vigorous blown V-8, the SL55 doesn't just accelerate from one speed to another, it gobbles velocity in leaps and lunges. Despite its fleetness, this SL feels as substantial as any convertible on the market. And its swashbuckling styling, bolstered by AMG musculature, instantly conveys its patrician bloodlines to even the densest bystanders. What's not to like about this 21st-century Duesenberg?

—Csaba Csere

the instrument binnacle and in the headliner, a superb 10-speaker audio system, silver-face AMG instruments with red needles, and, the most seductive interior element, deep leather-clad power bucket seats with serious torso bolsters, for those moments when the owner feels moved—probably rare—to rub up against the limits of adhesion.

Why rare? Check the bottom line. With a base price of \$118,295, including luxury and gas-guzzler taxes, the SL55 AMG starts \$30,340 north of the SL500. Start adding extras such as Distronic auto-distancing cruise control (\$2950), Parktronic proximity warning (\$1035), the Panorama sunroof (\$1800)—an interesting touch on a retractable hardtop convertible—and the tally escalates rapidly. All of which makes this an unlikely toy for young guys prone to red mist. The SL55 is an executive hot rod for folks with lots of disposable income and Kevlar-clad portfolios. So even though we wonder what this car could do if it shed about a thousand pounds, it's probably irrelevant. Lose the sander, Herr Neubauer. Scraping the paint off this one ain't gonna make much difference. ●



MERCEDES-BENZ SL55 AMG

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger, 2-door roadster

Price as tested: \$122,791

Price and option breakdown: base Mercedes-Benz SL55 AMG (includes \$2280 luxury tax, \$2100 gas-guzzler tax, and \$665 freight), \$118,295; Panorama glass sunroof, \$1800; Parktronic parking assist, \$1035; high- and low-beam xenon headlamps, \$900; tire-pressure monitoring system, \$630; luxury tax on options, \$131

Major standard accessories: power steering, windows, seats, and locks; A/C; cruise control; tilting and telescoping steering wheel; rear defroster

Sound system: Mercedes-Benz/Bose AM/FM-stereo radio/CD player, 10 speakers

ENGINE

Typesupercharged and intercooled V-8, aluminum block and heads
 Bore x stroke3.82 x 3.62 in, 97.0 x 92.0mm
 Displacement332 cu in, 5439cc
 Compression ratio9.0:1
 Engine-control systemBosch Motronic ME2.8.1 with port fuel injection
 Emissions controls3-way catalytic converter, feedback air-fuel-ratio control, auxiliary air pump
 SuperchargerJHI, Lysholm type
 Waste gateinternal
 Maximum boost pressure11.6 psi
 Valve gearchain-driven single overhead cams, 3 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters
 Power (SAE net)493 bhp @ 6100 rpm
 Torque (SAE net)516 lb-ft @ 2650 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission5-speed automatic with lockup torque converter

Final-drive ratio	2.82:1, electronic limited slip	
Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm
I	3.59	7.3
II	2.19	12.0
III	1.41	18.6
IV	1.00	26.2
V	0.83	31.6

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase100.8 in
 Track, F/R61.8/61.1 in
 Length178.5 in
 Width71.9 in

Height51.0 in
 Frontal area21.5 sq ft
 Ground clearance4.7 in
 Curb weight4411 lb
 Weight distribution, F/R51.0/49.0%
 Fuel capacity24.0 gal
 Oil capacity9.0 qt
 Water capacity13.7 qt

CHASSIS/BODY

Typeunit construction
 Body materialwelded steel stampings, aluminum stampings, magnesium castings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat51 cu ft
 luggage space, top down/up8/11 cu ft
 Front seatsbucket
 Seat adjustmentsfore and aft, seatback angle, front height, rear height, lumbar support, upper and lower side bolsters, thigh support
 Restraint systems, frontmanual 3-point belts; driver and passenger front, side, and knee airbags
 General comfortpoor fair good **excellent**
 Fore-and-aft supportpoor fair good **excellent**
 Lateral supportpoor fair good **excellent**

SUSPENSION

F:ind; 1 control arm, 1 lateral link, and 1 diagonal link per side; coil springs; 2-position cockpit adjustable, electronically controlled, automatically leveling hydraulic springs
 R:ind; 2 diagonal links, 2 lateral links, and 1 toe-control link per side; coil springs; 2-position cockpit adjustable, electronically controlled, automatically leveling hydraulic springs

STEERING

Typerack-and-pinion, power-assisted
 Turns lock-to-lock2.5
 Turning circle curb-to-curb35.7 ft

BRAKES

F:14.2 x 1.3-in vented and cross-drilled disc
 R:13.0 x 0.9-in vented and cross-drilled disc
 Power assistelectrohydraulic with anti-lock control

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel sizeF: 8.5 x 18 in, R: 9.5 x 18 in
 Wheel typeforged aluminum
 TiresPirelli P Zero Rosso Asymmetrico;
 F: 255/40ZR-18 95Y, R: 285/35ZR-18 97Y
 Test inflation pressures, F/R35/36 psi

C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION

	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	1.8
40 mph	2.5
50 mph	3.4
60 mph	4.5
70 mph	5.7
80 mph	7.2
90 mph	9.0
100 mph	10.9
110 mph	13.0
120 mph	15.8
130 mph	18.7
140 mph	22.4
Street start, 5–60 mph	4.9
Top-gear acceleration, 30–50 mph	2.3
50–70 mph	2.6
Standing 1/4-mile	13.0 sec @ 110 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	156 mph

BRAKING

70–0 mph @ impending lockup175 ft
 Fadenone light moderate heavy

HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad0.91 g
 Understeerminimal moderate excessive

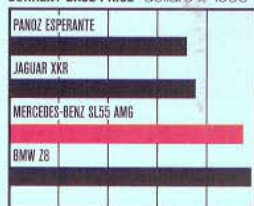
FUEL ECONOMY

EPA city driving14 mpg
 EPA highway driving20 mpg
 C/D-observed16 mpg

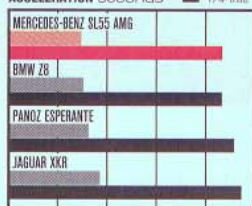
INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle55 dBA
 Full-throttle acceleration78 dBA
 70-mph cruising67 dBA
 70-mph coasting66 dBA

CURRENT BASE PRICE* dollars x 1000



ACCELERATION seconds



BRAKING 70–0 mph, feet



ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g



EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg



*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and all applicable luxury and gas-guzzler taxes.