

Mercedes shows what a sweet job it can do with the sports car



AROUND THE BEND

By **SAM MOSES**
for *The Tribune's*
Accelerate section

Mercedes-Benz has finally decided it was time to show us what it could do with sports cars, after years of watching its SLK320 be overshadowed by the Porsche Boxster, BMW Z3 and Z4, and the Audi TT.

The all-new 2005 SLK350 is a huge leap in development from the SLK320, and Mercedes is pretty proud and optimistic right now.

They held an introduction last week here in Portland, inviting automotive journalists from around the country who stayed at Hotel Lucia, ate at a couple of restaurants in the Pearl and drove out the Columbia Gorge Highway in 10 of the new SLK350's, returning in time to spend two hours turning hot laps around Portland International Raceway.

Let's skip to the chase: I had a Porsche Boxster on the track at PIR last summer, and the SLK would drive circles

around it. Maybe not the Boxster S, but soon there will be an AMG SLK55 version of the SLK350, with a whoppin' V8 engine and AMG's famous suspension tuning, and it's pretty clear that one will be the new all-around king.

Here's the other most important thing about the SLK350: It looks sensational.

Unlike the BMW Z4, whose styling is controversial, I suspect that the SLK350's almost radical looks will be universally well-received. It has a totally new nose, unmistakably Mercedes-Benz but very different from all the other Mercedes sports cars on the road except the \$450,000 SLR supercar. Which is no accident. A baby SLR for one-tenth the price. Quite a selling point.

The SLK350 isn't a big sports car, but its lines give it presence and significant dimensions. It's got a strong wedge that makes it look conspicuously sleek with its retractable hardtop raised. The nose is defined by a narrow bulge running from the windshield down to the front bumper, with a large chrome Mercedes emblem, the three-pointed star, separating two wide horizontal slots that make up the split grille.

It's very bold: Mercedes has

stolen BMW's classic design and applied it more dramatically.

The SLK350 is 3 inches wider and 1.5 inches longer than the SLK320. It uses a new 3.5-liter V6 engine with a lovely little growl. It makes a healthy 268 horsepower, an increase of 53 over the SLK320.

There's a new, tighter six-speed manual transmission and a seven-speed (that's right

Mercedes makes the smoothest V6 engines in the business, and this one is at least as silky as the others.

— seven speeds) automatic with a manual shift mode, adding steering-wheel paddles with the optional Sport package. It's a completely new design, so the suspension is totally changed, and there are massive 13-inch brake rotors with four-piston calipers in front.

The AMG SLK55 will use a 5.5-liter V8 making 362 horsepower. It will be a killer of a sports car.

I drove a red roadster with the automatic transmission

out to The Dalles and back, stopping in Mosier at the eclectic Route 30 ice cream store and garage run by Porsche restorer Stephen Demosthenes.

For this event he pushed his Porsches to the back of the garage and put a special Mercedes up front, a 1955 300SL gullwing coupe owned by Mosier local Bob Ulrich, who bought the car from singer Pat Boone in 1956. Some may remember that back then, Boone was to saddle shoes what Elvis was to ducktail haircuts.

As for the moves of the SLK350, the new seven-speed automatic shifts exceptionally smoothly and quickly, best felt when flooring it for passing trucks on Washington's Route 14 coming back into Portland. The engine is even smoother, and really fast; Mercedes claims a time of 5.4 seconds from 0 to 60, faster than the Boxster, Z4 and TT. I've said before in this column that Mercedes makes the smoothest V6 engines in the business, and this one is at least as silky as the others.

On the curves and straights of PIR, I chose a silver six-speed SLK with the hardtop up, for additional protection over and above the fixed roll-bars. The manual transmission

made a big difference on the track, especially under braking where it could be used to help slow the car down; I got 16 or 18 laps, taking three or four laps at a time, and the brakes never faded although they did smoke, of course.

Mercedes uses soft material in the brake pads for better stopping power. Some people don't like the black dust that appears on the alloy wheels, but it's a small price to pay for better brakes, and the dust is easily sprayed off.

As for the transmission, I banded a lot of hard downshifts from fifth gear at 115 miles per hour down into second gear at about 30 for the Festival Curves, and it shifted beautifully every time.

But the most impressive thing was the precise and well-balanced handling. I remember being surprised and disappointed that the Boxster wallowed under acceleration through the fast, bumpy bend at the beginning of the back-straight, but the SLK raced over that section with nary a ripple, taking advantage of its optional stiffer sport suspension, which might be a bit harsh on bumpy city streets. But maybe not; it depends on a driver's priorities and tolerance.