

Performance Re(de)efined

If you used the three-pointed star as a Rorschach test, the typical associations forthcoming might start with “Prestige... Engineering... Safety... Quality...Durability... Luxury... Value” Though while not as obvious a part of its public image, Mercedes offers the owners of its cars “Top Gun” performance in albeit a very discrete package.

For buyers with a tad more aggressive psyche, now Mercedes is offering as a limited option its “Sport” line. These enhancements add a full measure of visual excitement to the already exceptional driving dynamics inherent in all its vehicles. In packages designed by the renowned German performance tuning house, AMG and aimed at the driving enthusiast, Sport Line enhancements are available on all this year’s SL roadsters, the new generation E420, and the C280 sedan.

Standard SL Roadsters already are sturdy and solid as a bank vault. Yet they move with stomach-sucking acceleration, stop confidently with great brakes, and ride on the best suspension in the business. Sport package SLs come swathed in swoopy skirts around the front air dam, side sills, and rear apron, smooth and luxurious as a ankle-length fur coat. The trim is made of the same plastic-rubber compound used in all Mercedes products. Therefore it matches and fits the car better than any available aftermarket kit.

But while the lower body work is as eye-catching as a party dress, the new special wheels and tires that are included in the upgrade package are as sinewy and muscular as a personal trainer. The sport package offers “Z” rated tires capable of safely handling speeds over 149 mph mounted on handsome 18 inch AMG monoblock alloy wheels. Replacing the standard 225/50 16 inch tires with high speed rated 275/35 ZR18s in the rear and 245/40 ZR18s in the front means that the tire treads are ten inches wide in the front and over 11 inches wide in the rear. Not bad for a car with a five feet wide stance!

The larger contact patch, that part of the tire where the rubber meets the road, means easier, more assured acceleration, steering and braking. The more radical profile, the shorter, stiffer tire sidewall, means tighter, more nimble turning. Firmly ensconced in the deeply bolstered leather seats and protected by the ESP Electron Stability Program standard in all three SL models, a driver of the Sport line version can carve breathtaking turns rather than merely steering through them.

The limited edition E420 sport package also offers aerodynamic enhancements similar to those found on the SL roadsters. Included are a deeper front air dam with integral fog lamps, side skirts under the door sills and a deeper rear apron. Its steering and suspension, already designed for road responsiveness, have not been modified. However, the handling of the E420 Sport is enhanced by 17 inch monoblock alloy wheels and 235/45ZR17 high performance Dunlap radial tires. As with the SL, the Sport option significantly amplifies road feel. Driving over stretch of freshly paved asphalt feels delightfully dreamy. While you certainly won’t set the land speed record in a E420 sport, it looks as if you might and carry five passengers at the same time.

Like its sisters, the C280 Sport starts as a standard model which is then shipped to the AMG

production facility at Alfalterbach near Stuttgart, Germany. There it is carefully modified over the course of several days by the hand of a single master craftsman. Unseen changes are made to tighten and tune the suspension. Firmer (35%) shocks are added along with a larger, stiffer, solid upper control arm to make the platform rock solid.

A new steering box with fewer lock-to-lock (15.41:1 versus 15.85:1) turns makes the steering faster and more responsive. Along with the one half inch wider Pirelli P6000 205/60R-15 summer tires replacing the standard P195/65R15 all-season, the net effect of the chassis changes is a sportier feel and a better cornering grip without giving up the ride comfort for which Mercedes is known. The C280 Sport is a car that handles with the same subtle assurance at 110mph as most other production cars handle driving a double nickel.

The C280 Sport package adds distinctive appearance to athletic performance. The side moldings are monochrome keyed to the body color. All metal chrome (except the grill and the key locks) is blacked out. The center B pillar and dash instrument console are given a graphite fiber appearance for a sportier look. Inside, the driver gets black or gray leather Keiper Recaro seating with sport bolsters, a small, thicker sports style steering wheel, that manually telescopes, and a special shift knob.

Each option package is priced below what separate features or aftermarket alternatives would cost. Perhaps that explains 35% of all buyers have opted for them even when manufacturing capacity is limited to only a fifth of production. Or then again, it might just be that today's buyers are looking for that extra measure of overt performance in a refined package of poise and elegance