



The Houston Star

MBCA Houston Section Newsletter



*July
2005*

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Late August/ Early
September (Hopefully)
Technical Session @ MB
Sugar Land

Late September
Election Dinner

Mid-October
Oktoberfest @ TGA

Fall Autocross

New ML declared "Fabulous SUV"

On Friday, May 20, I was fortunate to attend the Mercedes Benz "M-Class Road Rally" at Gulf Greyhound Park. I went with a friend from Bellaire and it seemed to take forever to work our way down the Gulf Freeway to exit 15, but finally we arrived. We must have hit the Friday Houston exodus, everyone leaving early and heading out. Lucky for us, we got there at a slack time between shows and had the place almost to ourselves for a while, if you can imagine having two tracks and a fistful of new 2006 ML500s and ML350s to yourself. Unlike some test drives that I have attended where they really don't want you to DRIVE their vehicles, at the M-Class Road Rally DRIVING was encouraged so long as you didn't knock down their cones. (I actually got black flagged at a GM test drive, even though I did not even rattle any of their cones.)

Before I get into the test drives, a bit about the cars. There were many cars on display, but only the MLs to drive. I was anxious to sit in the back seat of the new four door coupe (I know that's an oxymoron, but that's what they call it) because of all that I had read about it. I sit fairly tall, possibly as tall as a normal six footer, but my legs are so short they barely reach the ground, so, overall, I am not tall. I still had headroom in the back seat, but one of the neatest things about sitting in the back seat of the "four door coupe" is the view out. From the inside, the narrow windows and swooping roofline had me reminiscing about some chopped and channeled rods of the 50s. There was a nice demonstration of the disappearing hard top on an SL. My only complaint with the new SL is that the steeply raked windshield goes so far back over the steering

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President's Message

I hope all of you enjoyed the 4th of July holiday and managed to keep out of the heat. I'm sure many of you have noticed that we haven't planned many events during the summer months... it's not by mistake, with the legendary heat of the Texas Summers and the early start of hurricane season we decided to try to schedule events during cooler times of the year.

We're working with Steve Williams and Charlie Johnson at Sugar Land Mercedes-Benz to coordinate a tech session at their wonderful (and AIR-CONDITIONED) facilities. Hopefully we'll get a date set for either late August or early September. Steve and Charlie are longtime supporters of the Houston Section and always put together an excellent event filled with some really nice door prizes and great food. So, keep an eye out for the August issue of "The Houston Star" for more details.

This is also the time of year where we nominate officers & board members to help run the section. Please feel free to either attend a board meeting (1st Tuesday of odd # months @ MB Greenway), or call any of the board members or officers listed on the back page. We welcome input and suggestions from our members and are always looking for additional board members to help coordinate events. We will be holding our annual election dinner in late September and will choose the slate for the coming year.

Hans Richter of Texas German Autohaus has once again offered to host the annual Oktoberfest tech session, TGA continues to out do themselves time and again with one of the most exciting and enjoyable events of the year. We've also got the fall autocross to schedule (likely in late October or early November), a Holiday Brunch, and possibly another tech session. So, as you can see we've taken some time off to escape the heat, but the fall will be very busy with many events to choose from.

I hope to see ya'll at the next event.

Mike Haney - President
MBCA - Houston Section



Side view of the new M-Class, it's easy to see why it is getting so much attention!

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wheel that when I have the seat adjusted for my short legs (that just barely reach the ground - remember) I can't get out. The attendant was kind enough to point out that the seat could be programmed to go back upon opening the door. Problem solved? The SL isn't the only modern sports car that I have entry and egress problems with. I found the new Corvette even worse. I might have been able to contort around it's windshield but since I couldn't figure out how to get my feet out between the front of the seat and the door hinge pillar, I didn't have the opportunity, so I had to slide the seat rearward.

There were many other models on display, but, alas, no SLR McLaren. I was blessed to see a real live SLR McLaren at the Greenway Mercedes Benz dealership on May 3rd. Necessarily, my encounters with the MLs were brief, but some of the things I noticed follow. The new MLs are all wheel drive with 4-wheel Electronic Traction System (4-ETS+) and lots of other alphabet soup features. The MLs come with a driver-adaptive seven speed automatic transmission with the shifter moved to a stalk on the right side of the steering column, "to make room for bigger cup holders" according to the pre drive talk. I, of course, couldn't care less about cup holders. However, I do like the shifter on the column because it keeps your right hand at the wheel. Alas, the shifter seems to have limited function. Forward, reverse, and park by pushing down, up, or in. No gear selections. Gear selection is by paddles on the back of the steering wheel. This is all well and good, but these paddles are never where you want them to be when you need them whereas the column mounted shifter is always easily accessible and is always in the same place. (Yes, I know the floor mounted shifter is always in the same place, but it is not nearly as accessible as the column mounted shifter.) The right and left paddles (actually rocker switches) are wired parallel so that you can use either of them at any time (if you can find them when you need them). Hey, I kind of ranted on about that, didn't I? But that's the way I see it. Watch out for more rants later in this article. The ML500s had the optional electric tilt and telescope steering columns, but the ML350s, though non-power, were still easily adjusted. Both the ML350 and the ML500 come standard with independent double wishbone front and independent 4-arm multilink rear suspensions. The Airmatic air suspension is optional and offers a range of settings including the ability to increase ground clearance by three inches (up to 77 MPH). All of the test drive ML500s had Airmatic suspension but the ML350s did not. More about that later. Seating was good and decently supportive during aggressive driving (Hey - I said they wanted us to DRIVE their cars, so I did) but were luxurious and comfy enough for all day tours, almost to the point of coddling. The electric seat adjustments were flawless and superb. The electric windows with their one touch up or down function were handy. To stop them midway, you just touch the button again. If you want to see if the safety works, just stick your head out the window and hit the up button. The window will gently nudge you then retract back into the door. (No I didn't. I used my hand.) I know there are lots of bells and whistles available on the new Mercedes seats and everywhere else and suspect that these vehicles, particularly the ML500s, were appropriately equipped, but time constraints prevented further investigation, although I should note here that all MLs come with drive by wire throttle. Besides, it was time to DRIVE.

As I said earlier, there were two courses. One was very short and included an inclined plane to get a feel of what the vehicle feels like when leaning. This consisted of a longitudinal ramp of about 45 degrees that you put both right side wheels up on to give an effective tilt of about 20 degrees or so. Not too exciting, as I am sure the ML's maximum tilt angle is much greater than that. Next up was a section with right and left alternating bumps about 6 or 8 inches high. This, to me, was an excellent demonstration of torsional rigidity of the new unibody chassis (as opposed to the original ML's body on frame). I can truthfully say that these vehicles appear to have incredible torsional stiffness. Not a hint of any torsional stress whatsoever. I was impressed, as most vehicles that I have driven would definitely have expressed their discontent in such shenanigans by uttering a few creaks and moans. The third and last obstacle on this short course was

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essentially an orderly pile of railroad ties about two ties high with the top layer running crosswise and spaced so as to make tire traps. No way to go over this smoothly, but through a process of the throttle and brake modulation, it was a piece of cake for the new ML. Then I learned of the longer course.

The longer course started out with a rubber sheet that had been doused with soapy water. This was a straight line test of traction control. Departing at wide open throttle (WOT) ("pedal to the metal" for you rodders) there was a little lumpiness, but who in their right mind would make such a start on a soapy rubber mat anyway? Driving off of the end of the slick rubber, still at WOT, there seemed to be a bit of decision making going on by the computer before it was sure that it had suddenly found dry hard pavement at all four wheels. Zoom Zoom (no, I'm not trying to sound like that car commercial). A quick, short straight ending in a hard right then a long straight ending in another hard right. Going full bore, the ML500 used all of three gears here, almost into fourth, seamlessly shifting at or near redline, so it seemed an excellent opportunity to try out the antilock brakes. I'm pleased to say that they worked flawlessly in all the MLs that I drove. The brakes on these cars are very self assuring with their hydraulic and vacuum power assist, anti-lock control, and 13 inch discs front (vented) and rear. Somewhere about the middle of this long straight was a series of what appeared to be cables across the track to simulate tar strips and demonstrate the suspension's ability to absorb those annoying little jolts. I didn't feel them at all. But then I was at WOT and thinking about that upcoming hard right hander, so maybe I'm not a good judge of this. Further down the course after a right hand sweeper was a slalom and even an accident avoidance section where a deer jumped in front of you. (One of the course marshals accused me of trying to take out her deer. Well, I figured a miss was a miss. After all, I didn't knock down a single one of their cones, did I?) There were enough sharp right and left hand turns that the brakes and everything else got a proper workout and worked properly. The engines on both the ML500s (5 liter 24 valve SOHC 90 degree V8, 302 HP and 339 ft-lb torque) and the ML350s (3.5 liter 24 valve DOHC 90 degree V6, 268 HP and 258 ft-lb torque) were flawless, smooth, and quiet (even when bumping up against the rev limiter).

Now for some nitty-gritty. The first ML I went took out on the long course was a gorgeous black ML500 with Airmatic suspension. My first impression was "whoa, something's not right here." When I got back to the staging area I expressed my concerns. It turns out that the air suspension was set on "boulevard" (my term, not theirs) which is the softest setting. Not something I wanted, or would ever want, for that matter. Although this gives a wonderfully cushy ride it comes off quite poorly in spirited driving. The Airmatic suspension has several settings, the best of which, to me, is "sport". I should rant here about air suspension. Although air suspended cars tend to have wonderful ride quality, I personally have never liked them because of all the extra hardware (and now extra electronics). Extra hardware generally means extra maintenance. I will say that, after getting everything set up better, the Airmatic ML500's ride and handling did seem better than the ML350's (none of which had the Airmatic option). But maybe that was just the five liter engine talking, I don't know. Of course, with all the intertwined electronics and controllers in today's vehicles, air suspension maintenance may no longer be a major concern. Speaking of electronics, one thing that really bothered me was the drive by wire throttle. (My only other encounter with drive by wire throttle was on a BMW, and it was weird.) You mash on the accelerator and nothing particularly happens, then all of a sudden it seems that the computer wakes up and realizes that something is supposed to be happening. By then, if you are used to the instant response of a normal throttle, you have almost given up (or your heart is in your throat if an eighteen wheeler is barreling down on you). Then, surprise, surprise, it goes. OK - I expressed my concern about this, too, and found out that there are two switches on the dash, one for ascents and one for descents, and that if you activate the ascent function it tightens up the response somewhat. I was also

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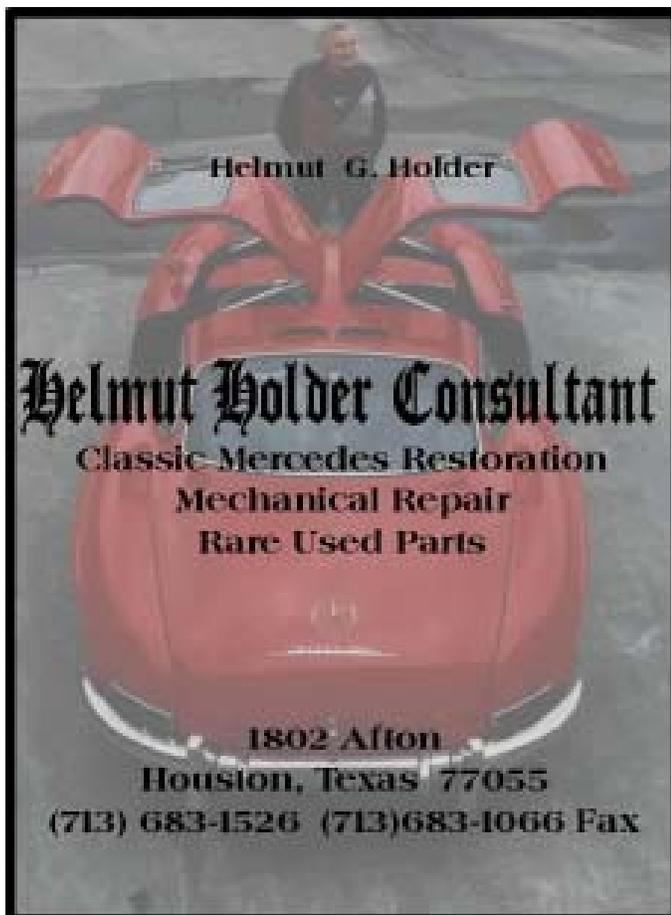
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told that if you disabled the traction control you could get instant (what I would call normal) throttle response. The course marshals nixed doing this, though. Another first time out concern was that the seven speed transmission occasionally seemed to be somewhat undecided, more so on the ML500 than on the ML350 which I drove later. Remember, earlier, that I said the transmission was "driver-adaptive?" Well, the combination of my driving the cars several times, setting the suspension on sport and activating the ascent switch seems to have pretty well solved the problem here. I'm not particularly enamored with the idea of "driver-adaptive" systems as it seems to me that when one wants maximum performance, one wants the same maximum performance as had been previously experienced. I suppose this would be most noticeable if you have been piddling around town and then go to an autocross or some similar situation arises (remember that eighteen wheeler I mentioned earlier?).

Well, I've mostly talked about the ML500, haven't I? The ML350s, though not trimmed out as nicely, were essentially the same but with noticeably less power and not quite as good a ride quality since they were not equipped with the Airmatic suspension. Therefore the ML350 did not have all the suspension settings available on the Airmatic equipped ML500, but it did have the ascent and descent switches, and the power difference might not be so noticeable in normal driving. (Zero to 60 times are around 7.0 seconds for the ML500 and 8.4 seconds for the ML350, a noticeable difference.)

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I went twice around the short course, once in an ML500 and once in an ML350. However, I must have gone around the long course at least a dozen times, one of which was in the front passenger seat. Purely by accident, my preference seems to have migrated to the gorgeous black ML500s with their extra brightwork and more luxurious interiors. I wish they had had an ML500 with steel suspension and an ML350 with Airmatic so that they could have been driven back to back. However, I am sure that, on a test drive of this sort where the invitees come from all walks of life, that would have created more confusion than was acceptable. My last drive was in an ML500 with the suspension set on "sport", the ascent button pushed, and the transmission in D3 (if left in D2 it would have hit the rev limiter on the straight). I didn't want to go home, but they were turning the lights out. The show was over. It was a great outing. I was all smiles. Ear to Ear.

Somehow, in all of what has gone before, I missed a very important observation about the transmission. I don't see where to work it in, so here it is: In the paragraph above I mentioned having the transmission in D3 with a comment about hitting the rev limiter in D2. Before startoff but after putting the transmission into drive, you can select the gear range with the steering wheel paddles, thus you can start off in D1, D2, D3, etc., which limits the top gear and seems to assure starting off in first gear. In this situation, of course, the paddles are easily located because you are sitting there with your foot on the brake and the steering wheel is most likely straight forward.

About pricing: According to the June issue of Motor Trend magazine, the base price for an ML350 is \$40,500.00 and for an ML500 is \$49,250.00. Motor Trend talks about their "full-tilt \$64,000.00 ML500" which was undoubtedly optioned to the max. Of course, most buyers won't check ALL the boxes, so could end up ten big ones less. One of the options that Motor Trend was not particularly fond of was Keyless Go which features a proximity sensing system for most things for which you would use the key and remote. Also, quoting from Motor Trend, "The 2006 W164 M-Class is new from the ground up. Its optional 5.0 liter V8 is the only major component that carries over from the 2005 model with power upped from 288 to 302 horses. Mercedes has further added four inches to the wheelbase and six inches to the overall length for better everything..."

I think it appropriate to close this report with a quote from the June issue of Car and Driver magazine: "An SUV that finally deserves to wear the three-pointed star." I couldn't agree more.

Disclaimer: I may not have all my facts correct. I'm not even sure those two switches should be called ascent and descent, but one has a pictogram of an ML going up and the other has a pictogram of an ML - oh, you guessed it, didn't you? - going down. Technical specifications were taken from Motor Trend, Car and Driver, or from information supplied by MBUSA.

Still all smiles.

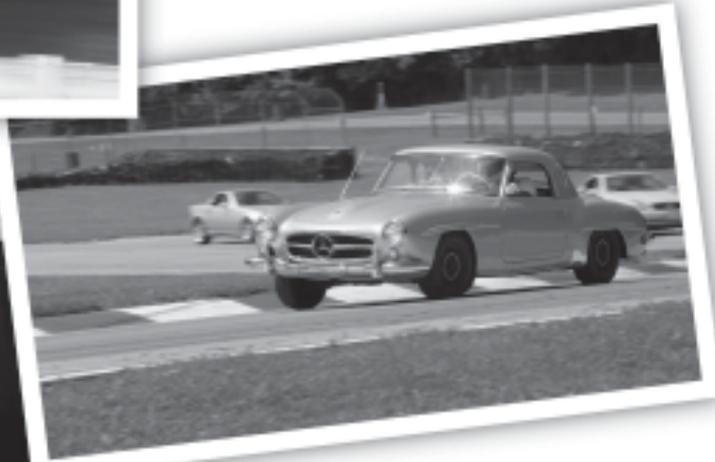
Richard Wilkins - Houston Section

Editors note: Richard is normally rather quiet. So when a car gets him this excited it's gotta be impressive.



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2005 Calendar of Events

Late August / Early September

(Hopefully)

Tech Session @ MB Sugar Land
Check August Issue for details

Late September

Election Dinner
Check August Issue for details

Mid October

11th annual Oktoberfest @ Texas German Autohaus

Fall Autocross

Kingwood College

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